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*Memento*: The Relationship Between Violence, Memory, and Unaddressed Trauma

Christopher Nolan's 2000 film, *Memento*, studies the specific effects of amnesia to expose the toll that unaddressed violence and trauma can take on both an individual and, on a larger scale, society. Leonard (Lenny) Shelby, the film's central character, suffers from chronic and debilitating anterograde amnesia following a blow to the head, leaving him unable to form long-term memories. Though the film works to unravel and cast doubt on his account of the events, Lenny maintains that this injury was sustained during a home invasion in which his wife was raped and murdered. Whatever the case, it is certain that the incident is a deeply scarring event for Lenny. His condition does not allow him to form a coherent timeline of his life after the injury; as such, he cannot come to terms with his trauma. It is eventually revealed that Lenny has killed countless innocent men in the never-ending hunt for his wife's murderer, his inability to process his trauma transforming him from a simple insurance investigator into a hardened killer. Through Lenny's amnesia, *Memento* establishes a direct link between memory and trauma, specifically the former's capacity to digest and limit the impact of the latter. Nolan's study of Lenny's violent nature is then expanded into a critique of America and its own troubled past. The setting, a nondescript American town in the desert, the lone male protagonist, and the themes of revenge and vigilante justice, so embedded in perhaps the most American of film genres, the Western, all work to establish a familiar aesthetic and plot for the audience. However, instead of settling neatly into the mold of the Western or the Action/Thriller genre, *Memento* highlights the ways in which America has failed to acknowledge its violent history. Thus, Nolan turns the

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question of unaddressed trauma onto the viewer, emphasizing societal whitewashing of violence, a form of collective amnesia, and its potentially devastating consequences.

The first modern study of anterograde amnesia was conducted in 1953 by Brenda Milner, a Canadian neuropsychologist, whose rigorous case study of man known to the scientific community only as H.M. lasted for nearly thirty years; it is regarded as the single most important study of the condition to date. H.M. suffered severe head trauma in a bicycle collision as a child, leading to progressively worsening epilepsy; by the age of twenty-seven, his condition had become intolerable, and he underwent a highly aggressive surgery in an attempt to relieve the epileptic attacks. The surgeon succeeded in curing the epilepsy, but in doing so had removed H.M.'s hippocampus and the medial-temporal lobes of his brain, leaving him completely unable to convert short-term memory into long-term memory. Eric Kandel, the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2000 for his research on memory, quotes Milner as saying that "[H.M.] couldn't acquire the slightest new piece of knowledge. He lives today chained to the past, in a sort of childlike world. You can say his personal history stopped with the operation" (Kandel 128). Though H.M.'s inability to form long-term memories was absolute, Milner discovered that he was still able to learn new tasks. She conducted an experiment in which he was asked to trace the outline of a star over a period of days. When questioned, he could not remember having previously traced the image; still, his tracing skills improved day by day. Milner had revealed an implicit memory, which "underlies habituation, sensitization, and classical conditioning, as well as perceptual and motor skills..." (Kandel 132), separate from explicit memory, or "the conscious recall of people, places, objects, facts, and events..." (Kandel

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132). Fascinatingly, H.M. retained the ability to form implicit memories even after the removal of brain structures once thought to be the sole houses of human memory.

*Memento*'s strength lies in its unflinchingly accurate portrayal of anterograde amnesia, and Nolan strategically uses those symptoms unique to the condition to reveal the subtle violence that contextualizes the film's, often brutal, overt violence. Lenny shocks the audience on multiple occasions with the ease in which he harms, abuses, or kills other characters. Indeed, the film begins with his execution of Teddy, an innocent man whom Lenny believes to be his wife's murderer. As the events leading up to the Teddy's murder are revealed, Lenny's violent nature becomes even more apparent. In Lenny's encounter with Dodd, yet another guiltless man whom he has implicated in the murder of his wife, Lenny exhibits his skill in hand-to-hand combat. While waiting to ambush Dodd in a motel room, Lenny succumbs to his amnesia and forgets why he is waiting in a motel bathroom with an empty bottle. Dodd bursts into the room and Lenny, bewildered by his surroundings mere moments before, quickly dispatches him with a series of well-placed blows. He then relieves the unconscious Dodd of his handgun, restrains him with duct tape, and throws him into a closet. Teddy soon finds Lenny and begins asking him about the incident in the motel room; a humorous scene in which all parties involved are completely confused ensues. Neither Dodd, Teddy, nor Lenny know why it is that Lenny was lying in wait for Dodd, and when questioned about the new handgun in his waistband, of which he now has no memory, Lenny innocently replies, "It must be [Dodd's]. I don't think they'd let someone like me carry a gun" (Nolan, 2000). Though the scene is presented in a comical manner, it still raises a puzzling and deeply disturbing question: how is it that Lenny, a former insurance investigator, is able to fight like a trained assassin? Later, Teddy confronts Lenny

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again, saying, “You do not know who you are. What you've become since...the incident. You wander around playing detective. You don't even know how long ago it was. Let me put it this way. Were you wearing designer suits when you sold insurance?” (Nolan, 2000). If one looks to the specific disabilities associated with anterograde amnesia, the answer to Lenny’s dramatic shift in identity becomes clear. Since Lenny’s inability to form long-term memory has rendered him immune to instruction-based learning, the only way for him to learn new skills is through conditioning and habituation; aggression has been drilled into him through repeated exposure to violence.

*Memento* then engages in the exploration of another amnesic character: Sammy Jankis. Prior to the onset of his own amnesia, Lenny is tasked by an insurance company to investigate Sammy’s claim of brain trauma received in a car accident. After an experiment designed to condition Sammy, in the same way that Milner conditioned H.M., fails, Lenny is successfully able to argue that Sammy’s anterograde amnesia is psychological not physiological. Sammy’s health coverage is denied as he is not insured for mental illness, and his diabetic wife is left to pay for his overwhelming medical bills. Sammy’s wife, distraught by what she perceives to be a weakness of character instead of brain damage, decides to conduct her own high-stakes experiment. She asks Sammy to inject her with insulin, a task that he learned before the accident, every few minutes. These intervals of time are theoretically long enough for Sammy to forget that he has already given her an injection, but brief enough for the insulin to be fatal. The reasoning being that if Sammy were faking his illness, the risk of killing her would force him to drop the act. However, Sammy’s condition proves to be authentic and the repeated insulin injections kill her. Sammy’s matter-of-fact murder of his wife, though unintentional, is crafted to

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be as disturbing as possible to the audience. Throughout the scene, he smiles and exhibits no response to her obvious distress, becoming an unwitting accomplice to her suicide. Both Lenny and Sammy have been conditioned to kill; Sammy through mindless deference to orders, and Lenny by his inherently hostile environment. Their amnesia, having robbed them of the ability to learn conventionally, leaves them vulnerable to the violent undercurrents that permeate the world around them.

However, anterograde amnesia has dealt these two characters another, even more devastating psychological blow; unable to remember even a single event after the onset of their conditions, both Sammy and Lenny cannot hope to come to terms with the violence they commit. Sammy has no way of remembering that he killed his wife, or even that she has died, and Lenny instantly forgets that he has supposedly fulfilled his goal of finding and killing his wife's murderer each time he kills a man. Eric Kandel, in his 2006 book, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*, says this on memory:

Memory enables us to solve problems we confront in everyday life by marshaling several facts at once, an ability that is vital to problem solving. In a larger sense, memory provides our lives with continuity. It gives us a coherent picture of the past that puts current experience in perspective. The picture may not be rational or accurate, but it persists. Without the binding force of memory, we would have no awareness of our personal history, no way of remembering the joys that serve as the luminous milestones of our life. We are who we are because of what we learn and what we remember. (Kandel 10)

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Sammy and Lenny have no way of remembering the “joys that serve as the luminous milestones of [their lives], but their amnesia also leaves them oblivious to their traumatic histories. If memory serves to inform future actions, then with no way of re-living and attempting to understand their traumatic experiences, they will never recover from them.

These two characters, and their relationships to trauma, draw parallels between major examples of unaddressed, or ill-addressed, societal violence in the modern world. Sammy’s actions are particularly reminiscent of Europe’s struggle to address its role in the Holocaust. *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* details Kandel’s early childhood in Nazi-occupied Vienna, as well as his experiences in post-war Austria. In those chapters describing his trips to Vienna, Kandel focuses on Vienna’s decline after the expulsion or extermination of its Jewry as well as Austria’s failure to fully acknowledge its immense role in the Holocaust. He explains that:

Austrians made up about 8 percent of the population of the greater German Reich, yet they accounted for more than 30 percent of the officials working to eliminate the Jews. Austrians commanded four Polish death camps and held other leadership positions in the Reich: in addition to Hitler, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who was head of the Gestapo, and Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of the extermination program, were Austrians. It is estimated that of the 6 million Jews who perished during the Holocaust, approximately half were killed by Austrian functionaries led by Eichmann. (Kandel 405)

Kandel goes on to point out that Austrians often tends to “forget, suppress, and deny the events of the Nazi period...Austrian history books gloss over the country’s involvement in crimes

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against humanity” and “blatant Nazis continued to teach a new generation of Austrians after the war ended” (Kandel 408). Though some European countries have embraced aggressive campaigns educating their people on the Holocaust, many have failed to do so. The aftershocks of this failure run deep in those countries where Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust have not yet been fully addressed. As in Sammy’s case, life has ground to a halt in these communities, his blindly submissive attitude reflecting the mentality that allowed the Holocaust to occur. Vienna, once the cultural capital of Europe, the birthplace of Freud, Klimt, and Kokoschka, has never recovered from its wartime trauma; its Jewish population has continued to dwindle since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Conversely, countries who have tried to reckon with their pasts have witnessed a resurgence in their Jewish populations. Nevertheless, cultural trauma has had, and continues to have, real and lasting consequences for modern society. Over the summer of 2014, with Israel’s Operation Protective Edge drawing sharp criticism from the international community, Europe witnessed the massive and shocking resurgence of an Anti-Semitism once thought to have been relegated to the fringes of society. In France Jewish neighborhoods were looted, in Germany protestors chanted ‘Jews to the gas’; Jews were trapped by angry mobs in their synagogues, and religious attacks increased dramatically. The rise of a new Anti-Semitism in Europe is rooted in a variety of religious and political prejudices, but its relationship to the trauma of the Holocaust cannot be ignored. Europe must remain wary of falling victim to simmering violence, and strive to fully address the past, if it is to have any hope of healing the present-day fractures in its society.

Lenny’s character, on the other hand, speaks directly to an American audience. Nolan sprinkles quintessentially American cultural icons into his film to create a purely American

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context; Lenny's story, for the most part, takes place in the American West, in desert motels, and diners. Furthermore, the kind of violence that Lenny engages in is one which America has historically struggled the most with, state-sanctioned retributive killing, and the morality of the death penalty. *Memento's* broken and inverted narrative provokes an instinctual reaction from the audience in order to cause them to question their beliefs on "just" or "deserved" killings. Lenny's desire to bring the unpunished murder of his wife to justice is viewed as understandable, even noble. The brutal execution of Teddy in the first scene is met with tacit approval; however, this approval turns into horror by the end of the film, when it is revealed that Lenny's victims were innocent men. The killing of these men, even men who are perhaps guilty of other crimes, for a crime that they did not commit is repugnant, and Lenny's noble quest becomes a murderous rampage. The film's setting becomes particularly symbolic within the context of the death-penalty; Southern states, specifically Texas, have the highest numbers of death-penalty convictions and executions. In 2000, Texas executed 40 death-row inmates, the highest number in the country by 29 ("Capital Punishment" 2). Furthermore, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 2000 was the year in which the most inmates were executed since the 1976 repeal of the nationwide moratorium on executions, with the number of executions reaching levels not seen since the 1950s. Shockingly, the number of inmates under sentence of death also reached record high numbers; in 2000, 3,539 men and 54 women were awaiting execution on death row, the number of offenders sentenced to death having grown 52 percent since 1990 ("Capital Punishment" 1). Nolan works to draw public attention to the possibility of false convictions or executions taking place through Lenny's unjust killings, all at a time when the nation's decades long increase of capital punishment had reached critical levels. While conversing with Teddy on

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the inaccuracy of memory, Lenny states that "...memory can change the shape of a room, it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record (Nolan, 2000). Ironically, Lenny's own actions are what justify this opinion. His inaccurate memory, and the conclusions he draws from it, showcase the extent to which seemingly righteous actions can be corrupted.

*Memento* argues that memory and violence are inextricably linked; one always informs the other. Traumatic memories, individual or societal, of violence strengthen the root causes of that violence when left to fester. Nolan uses psychologically vulnerable characters, to expose the ways in which subtle and often unnoticed violence can wreak havoc on an individual's psyche. Though he offers no clear solution to this dilemma, we can once again turn to the study of psychology and the mind to formulate an opinion of what must be done. Kandel's groundbreaking research on memory was achieved through the study of individual nerve cells, the basic building blocks of the mind. Similarly, addressing the highly complex issue of societal trauma also requires attention to the most basic force that unites a community, what society is built upon: memory. Kandel writes that "learning and memory are central to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. After all, aspects of many psychological problems are learned, and psychoanalysis is based on the principle that what is learned can be unlearned" (Kandel 116). Trauma has forced itself into the collective consciousness through conditioning, and society must attempt to force it back out by the same means. Addressing and struggling to understand the causes of trauma not only allows for its effective neutralization, they also work to stem the flow of violence from the past into the present.

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