

## ***Memento* and the Haussmannization of Memory – or, The Rat Man’s *destinerrance***

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In this paper, I offer a reinterpretation of Christopher Nolan’s neo-*noir* revenger’s tragedy, *Memento* (2000), drawing on Lacan’s (1979 [1953]) framing of obsessional neurosis (*Zwangsneurose*) in terms of the ‘individual myth’ of the subject; which in turn draws on Lévi-Strauss’s (1963 [1958]) application of mathematical group theory (which deals with algebraic transformations) to develop a ‘canonical formula’ for myth. An underlying aspect of loss driving the film, and the limits to the sense in which a mapping impulse serves as a proleptic response to being lost, is assessed in this light.

Nolan’s *Memento* runs partly in reverse in order to chronicle a series of events in the life of Leonard Shelby; a man afflicted, we are told, by ‘severe anterograde memory dysfunction.’ This debilitating condition, triggered by past trauma, sees Shelby unable to form new long-term memories. A semblance of the resulting disorientation he experiences is created for the viewer by the reverse chronology shaping the narrative. The audience constantly finds itself ‘dropped into situations *in medias res*, which is, of course, the condition of Leonard’s life,’ as Carroll (2009, 136) puts it. Shelby cannot recall what has just happened and neither can the audience – although the audience, in fact, has yet to witness the events about to unfold in the reverse-chronological presentation. The viewer’s consequent ability to piece together the bigger picture entails that *Memento*’s primary narrative device necessarily delivers a false approximation of Shelby’s situation (something Carroll is not alone in neglecting). Recalling Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, variously translated into English as ‘deferred’ or ‘delayed’ ‘action’ or ‘interpretation,’ which captures the way in which memories are perpetually subject to retrospective revision, the film’s narrative structure reveals the way in which *Nachträglichkeit* supports the ego’s sense of mastery, lending Shelby’s amnesiac disorder a role that resonates not only with Lacan’s interpretation of obsessional neurosis but also, more surprisingly, with Engels’s (1935 [1872]) account of the ‘housing question.’

Lacan’s (1979 [1953]) reading of Freud’s (1955 [1909]) Rat Man case-history centres on the less dramatic aspects of that case, focusing not on the torture supposedly practised in the East but on the convoluted story of a lost pair of spectacles and an unpaid debt, which requires a map to make sense of it. ‘Yet,’ as Leader (1993, 35) notes, ‘the map is a pointer to the nature of the problem itself: obsessional neurosis is nothing less than a map designed to mislead.’ Shelby’s memory loss compels him to repeat the act of avenging his wife’s apparent rape and murder – the traumatic incident responsible for his amnesia – as ‘a way of confronting an impossible situation by the successive articulation of all the forms of impossibility of the solution’ (Lacan, 1994 [1956–1957], 330). ‘Everything happens as if the impasses inherent in the original situation moved to another point in the mythic network, as if what was not resolved here always turned up over there’ (Lacan, 1979 [1953], 415).

Precisely the same situation obtains, for Engels (1935 [1872], 74) in his critique of the bourgeoisie’s answer to the housing problem, which, as he points out, entails that matters are only ever resolved ‘in such a way that the solution continually reproduces the question anew:’ ‘No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is always the same; the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else.... The same economic necessity which produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place also’ (Engels, 1935 [1872], 74–7).

The parallel structures of obsessional neurosis (Lacan) and capitalist urban development (Engels) articulate insuperable moments of crisis, revealing the extent to which ‘crisis tendencies are not resolved but merely moved around’ (Harvey, 2010, 117). Lévi-Strauss’s (1963 [1958], 216) account of

myth expresses its purpose in terms of the articulation of a relationship between two self-contradictory structures: 'The inability to connect two kinds of relationship is overcome (or rather replaced) by the assertion that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way.' Irresolvable problems are offset against corresponding contradictions elsewhere, generating an imaginary resolution by transposing the original problem onto different terrain. It is not without a certain irony that, in suggesting that *Memento* points up the common structure of obsessional neurosis and capitalism, this paper replicates the structure expressed in Lévi-Strauss's canonical formula: capitalism and obsessional neurosis are self-contradictory in similar ways.

## References

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