

Memento

This crime drama, written as well as directed by British director Christopher Nolan, is set in the LA present--and time is what is all-important in its telling. The protagonist Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is an insurance investigator bent on revenge against someone who killed his wife and injured him so severely that he suffers from extreme short-term memory loss. Fully aware of his handicap--he remembers everything up to the murder--he painstakingly creates his own palpable memories by using Polaroid snaps, hand-written notes, and permanent tattoos all over his body in an effort to confront the people around him and discern their intentions and motives.

What is distinctive about *Memento* is that the film is told *backwards*. Honest. (A Harold Pinter play, "Betrayal," also told its story backwards, in three acts, both on the stage and in a 1983 film version). In discrete sequences, beginning with him waking up confused in a motel room, we see Shelby try to get a hold of what has just happened to him and consult his memory devices, then--after an intervening black-and-white scene in present time--we pick up the next novel sequence (in color), happening in the just completed past, which ends with a brief overlap with the previous sequence, thus picking up the thread of Shelby's recollections!

Trust me, this sounds utterly confusing and it takes some getting used to, but it is a fascinating experiment that basically comes off because of Nolan's beautifully conceived script and confident editing, seconded by Pearce's performance. The kick is that we, the film's audience, are discovering the world much as Leonard Shelby does; we have no more memory of what has befallen him than he does, but we learn--as he does--of the piecemeal nature of his past. We, of course, unlike Shelby, can remember each previous sequence and try to put them all together; we can see that what he thought has happened to him and his beloved wife may not have happened at all... And therein lies the pull of the film.

Looked at outside its time-bending elements, *Memento* could be seen as a rather conventional revenge thriller, not too different from what Bogie or Mitchum did in the 1940's. Yet here the lead role of Shelby demands the utmost concentration and discipline. Pearce (familiar from *L.A. Confidential*) is in every scene, must continually appear both knowing and confused, a man who can trust nobody and who comes to believe that "memory is treachery," that only his carefully garnered memory tricks matter. This acting is one kind of tour-de-force, and the actor's partly nervous, partly confident response to his befuddling world seems pitch-perfect.

Memento is essentially a thriller/whodunit (Nolan based his screenplay on an unpublished short story by his brother Jonathan Nolan), and while it hardly aims at philosophical depth, it does make one aware of how profoundly we need memory. Precisely because we do *not* see the world like Leonard Shelby, we come to realize that, far from being treacherous, memory may be one thing that makes us truly human.

("Memento" is rated R for violence, language and some drug content.)

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