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(Memento and Donnie Darko)

E. Anna Claydon

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# Representing the Mind: The Psyche on Film (*Memento* and *Donnie Darko*)

E. Anna Claydon, University of Leicester, Leicestershire, UK

*Abstract: The film industry has long been known as a 'dream factory' which permits audiences to escape, and challenge, reality. However, cinema also has a long history of representing the mind, from the very first silents which explored ideas of perspective and meaning to the complex reconstructions of hallucinations, memory and the metaphorical 'doors of perception'. How films have represented these issues is central to this paper but also key is the way in which film theory has approached how the mind's articulation is represented and this paper will employ two seemingly jarring theoretical approaches in discussing the impact of pop-psychology on cinema's visual frame of reference: Freudian psychoanalysis and cognitive theory.*

Keywords: Film, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Cognitive, Cinema, Memory, Imagination

## Introduction

**T**HE FILM INDUSTRY has long been known as a 'dream factory' which permits audiences to escape, and challenge, reality. However, cinema also has a long history of representing the mind, from the very first silent movies which explored ideas of perspective and meaning to the complex reconstructions of hallucinations, memory and the metaphorical 'doors of perception'. How films have represented these issues is central to this paper but also key is the way in which film theory has approached how the mind's articulation is represented and this paper will employ two seemingly jarring theoretical approaches in discussing the impact of pop-psychology on cinema's visual frame of reference: Freudian psychoanalysis and cognitive theory (and its cognate, phenomenology).

Cinema theory is frequently concerned with ideas of subjectivity and perspective, how audiences engage with characters and why this engagement can sometimes be problematic, or, in contrast, rewarding. This article discusses two key approaches (one mainly theoretical, one mainly text-based) to analysing the mind in film through the examination of two films: *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) and how these representations can create an amalgam of frameworks which enables cinematic devices themselves (editing, use of the camera, composition and so on) to articulate another pathway towards understanding the mind of the character: a pathway which is about the brain as intertext, the product of audience, filmmaker and narration.

## Deleuze and *Memento*

The theoretical approach which I am going to use in this part of this article is that of Gilles Deleuze as applied to analysing *Memento*. What this permits is a route into analysing the process of representing the mind through a phenomenological avenue because it is concerned with cause and effect (classically non-classically framed) and how meaning is perceived.

As such, *Memento* in italics is one of the most satisfying approaches to the representation of the mind, and comes from the intersection of Deleuze and Bergsonian perception theories as manifest in Deleuze's two cinema books, *Cinema One: The Movement Image* (published in French in 1985 and English in 1986) and *Cinema Two: The Time Image* (1987 and 1988). My interest in Deleuze's work on cinema is chiefly centred on his second book because it opens out ways in which complex cross-narrated stories can be analysed through considering how memory functions or fails to function.

*Memento*, of course, is one of the best films to use amnesia to structure a developmental discovery process within a narrative and the core feature which most viewers noted and many who haven't watched film always cite first, the movie deconstructs the normative concept of development by opening up the narrative in reverse. Rather than using the classical, typically chronological, cause and effect method, what Nolan does is to show the spectator the effect, which raises the enigma "why has he done that?" and then backtracks to reveal the cause, aided along the way by the protagonist's, Leonard Shelby's, use of aides de memoires. Unlike, probably, the other best known film amnesiac, Gregory Peck's character in *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1944), who's brain is unravelled and reassembled via Freudian psychoanalysis and hypnosis, Shelby's amnesia (which is, in fact, recurrent short-term memory loss in which he knows exactly who he is up to a given point) is made comprehensible through a distinctively more cognitive approach tinged by hermeneutic psychoanalysis. How he forgets what he knows and then attempts to create divides to counter this forgetting is the real fascination of the film's structuring and Guy Pearce's characterisation of Shelby. This is then coupled to his, and the spectator's, desire to read meaning into the signs with which he surrounds himself and how he litters his own story-telling with interpretation and subliminal imagery. This story, which underpins most viewers', and Shelby's, hermeneutic analysis, concerns yet another amnesiac, Sammy Jenkiss, who, by the end, or rather the beginning, of the narrative, is suggested as a metaphorical residue of what has actually happened to Leonard Shelby's mind.

What happened to his body, however, is another matter. The "injury" which has caused Shelby's short-term memory loss is incurred when he is hit over the head, so it is implied and he believes, by the rapist who then murders his wife (played by Jorja Fox). Shelby's search within the film is then for the man he believes, by the time the spectator steps into his world, is the murderer: John G. Shelby knows his wife was murdered, he remembers that as the last definite fact (although the narration of certain flashbacks makes the spectator question the accuracy of this version of events) but the details of his quest, who he looking for and why, are only pieces of information and documents reinforced by the tattooing of so-called "Facts" and messages to himself onto his body, with "John G raped and murdered my wife" emblazoned most prominently from shoulder to shoulder, only legible when seen in reflection. However, as Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) taunts him, "How will killing John G makes things any better, you won't remember shooting him", to which Shelby's reply is that he will have had his vengeance for his wife, have meted out a kind of justice. Towards the end of the film, Natalie's question becomes potentially, to the spectator, how many John Gs might Leonard Shelby have killed? Has he become merely a serial killer whose "condition" wipes clean the murders at every juncture? If so, then Shelby's break with reality can be read positively rather than negatively (as in *Spellbound*) because every time he forgets he returns to a place of original innocence, not murderous intentions, where he simply acts out

what he is instructed to - a constantly re-programmable soldier or sorts but for whom sympathy is retained.

Thus, *Memento* is constantly shuffling between an anisochronic present, in which the past lies in the future and the future in the past, a seemingly accurate past in which Shelby exists pre-injury, and other layer of history where Shelby investigates Sammy Jenkiss' insurance claim and Jenkiss finally, accidentally, gives his wife an insulin overdose. All of these factors combine to produce a narrative which does not attempt to answer to the questions it raises, for the spectator, but instead offers clues to how different readings of the film can result in different answers - echoing Shelby's own deductive processes. Central to my argument about how we can read the film are two images, two shots, which pass fleetingly within the flashbacks in the film but which, nevertheless, can be both read as decisive for one version of understanding Shelby's amnesia and also assist in elaborating upon the core ideas to emerge from Deleuze's *Cinema Two*. These shots I will extrapolate later on but for the moment, before embarking upon that, it is helpful to return to Deleuze and discuss his conceptualisation of how the past, present and future can be present within one shot.

Leonard to 'Teddy': Memory can change the shape of a room,  
it can change the colour of a car. Memories can be distorted;  
they're just an interpretation.

Deleuze's 1985 book, *Cinema One*, is entirely concerned with what he calls the "movement-image". In this first text, he establishes the links between his work and Henri Bergson's (from *Matter and Memory*, 1896) and introduced the terminology, derivative of Bergson, which he has then reshaped to suit his own needs. At the heart of these terms is the "perception-image", what we see, and, in *Cinema One*, the "action-image", what we see as movement. For me, the key original idea, which stands out from *Cinema One*, is the potential of the single shot to be a montage because whilst perception and movement are indispensable parts of the cinematic image, as the illusion of action takes place before the spectator, Deleuze's philosophical journey is so rooted in exploring Bergson's ideas of perception of matter (via the cinema), that something of Deleuze himself is lost. In *Cinema Two*, however, drawing upon what might be called the memory half of Bergson's text, yet also beginning to deal with ideas which are specific to cinema and can be seen as part of Deleuze's wider interests in the body, Deleuze can be seen to be exploring some much more radical ideas.

As *Cinema Two* corresponds to the memory part of Bergson's book, whilst it is the "time-image", how the spectator perceives time as passing in the image, which is the focus, the framework upon which Deleuze builds the time-image is the Bergsonian "recollection-image": that is, the perception of memory. This is not the same as the memory itself but what can be labelled, in extremis, the 'false' memory; the recollection of an event or moment in which the details have been slightly altered or reshaped to encompass subjectivities, judgements, later information, assumptions, the completions of ellipses and other variables. Thus, as is often seen in courtroom thrillers, an event may be remembered from multiples perspectives, by different people, in which one subject may recollect one facet or emphasis of the event, whilst another may configure a variation upon that recollection emphasising something entirely contrary.

Deleuze's analysis of the "recollection-image" is his route into considering the nature of the flashback and, more generally, how the past is present within film. It is at this point that

the idea that the shot has the potential to be a montage becomes more clearly defined as being both a result of movement within the shot and what Deleuze calls the “crystal-image”.

The easiest way to visualise what Deleuze means by the potential of the shot to be a montage is to consider a fairly lengthy shot in which the camera pans, for example, from left to right. At the beginning of the shot, in frame 1, the camera and spectator perceives a movement that can be seen a ‘present’, recording a ‘nowness’. As the camera moves from one frame to another, the spectator will see a ‘nowness’, an immediacy, and the movement through from frame 1 becomes the past, whilst the movement to the next frame and the next, implied in the continuous motion, alludes to the future. Thus, suspending our perception of the moving image as one continuous image, the shot becomes a series of images, the frames, and thus a montage, linking the past (frame 1) to the future (frame 3, 4 or 5 etc...). Consequently, Deleuze encourages that the spectator looks more closely at the syntagm of the shot and the component frames to establish the cinematic image as both movement and time manifest. As a result of analysing the shot which becomes a montage, the shot can therefore, he argues, take on crystalline properties - where the single shot contains many reflections of a single point and the facets all take on slightly different significance - just like the variable “recollection-image”.

“The image”, Deleuze writes, “has to be present and past, still present an already past, at once and at the same time. If it was not already past at the same time as present, the present would never pass on. The past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it coexists with the present it was. *The present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror*” (p79). The image which contains the simultaneous past and present, the shot (as a single unit) which is a montage, is constitute of the ‘reality’ as the interpretation or the ‘unreality’: this is the “crystal-image” with its facets and perceptions of the moment on film.

How we, as spectators, comprehend this crystalline past as present and the present, past, as we watch is difficult to rationalise but if the concept is thought of as an intellectual property of the shot as montage then it becomes a more concrete, yet abstract in its scale, theory. The example which Deleuze uses, which best expresses the “crystal-image” is the hall of mirrors moment from Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) as Kane leaves his departing wife’s bedroom.

Using the imagery of the mirrors, Deleuze is able to literalise his argument surrounding the double function of the “crystal-image” but the mirror should also be understood metaphorically as chiefly the “virtual-image”. In memory, the “recollection-image” is virtual, a reflection, potential distorted. On film, the memory can be represented as being possibly the contradictory object it is through the use of formal devices such as changes in perspective, framing or subliminal content. This, the “recollection-image” on film, the analepsis, however objectively or subjectively filmed, is one of the most interesting ways in which to see the tension between the virtual and the “actual-image” in the “crystal-image”. Deleuze notes that in the “crystal-image”, “since the past is constituted not after the present but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as past and present” - and this process can be perceived in Shelby’s flashbacks to both his pre-injury life and his recounting of Sammy Jenkiss’ tragic mistake.

To examine this, I am going to consider the moment when Shelby is telling Jenkiss’ story. Shelby is talking to, the spectator eventually realises, a policeman on the telephone (or so he says, the anonymous caller is possibly ‘Teddy’ but it is never confirmed or denied). This

is flashback layer one within the film - a layer of linked flashbacks where Shelby is describing his situation, his process of detection, and retelling Jenkiss' story. Flashback layer two directly relates to this as the visualisation of the Jenkiss investigation; and layer three is purely concerning Shelby's wife - as Natalie says "No, really *remember* her", when Leonard begins to recite a description of his wife that seem rehearsed, learnt. Subliminally, within the telling of the stories, fleeting glimpses of Shelby acting out Jenkiss' actions are seen and, rather like the flashes of Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), if perceived by the spectator do encourage a questioning of the 'truths' within the film narration.

What motivates the spectator's reading of *this* subliminal moment (and another later where what has previously been recalled as Shelby pinching his wife's thigh becomes him injecting her, which supports the theory that Sammy Jenkiss is a projection of what actually happened to Leonard Shelby) is our own perception of his amnesia. The spectator, in effect, is encouraged to occupy Shelby's position as investigator and look not cynically but more objectively at the narrative unfolding. These subliminal moments, then, and the encouragement for the spectator to read *Memento* critically, mean that we become distanced from the narration and able to create our own judgements.

Yet, still, the spectator does retain sympathy, to greater and lesser extents throughout the film, with Shelby: he is, first and foremost, a victim in the narrative tradition of the righteous vengeance (for example in Westerns). He is also a victim whose original victimization re-imposes itself every time he forgets and, to use his phrase, keeps "waking up". The scars become re-written upon his injured mind, and his tattoos reiterate that he has been branded "victim". On the back of his photograph of Natalie, Shelby writes "she has lost someone too. She will help you out of pity". Regardless of Natalie's motives (which are suspect - 'Teddy' is the cop who has jailed her lover, the drug dealer, Jimmy), pity is one of the reasons why, as spectators, we become engrossed in Shelby's ever lose inscriptions of identity. As the film progresses, whilst we seem to develop, from our distanced perspective, more of an idea that Shelby may himself be his wife's killer, we are faced with the conundrum that, whilst, narratively, we want him to learn the truth in the generic tradition, we also want him to keep forgetting, to remain as the innocent.

Shelby marks his amnesia as being different to Sammy Jenkiss' because his was caused by an injury and Sammy's was psychological. This is a claim he clings onto and becomes an important area of definition for the narrative's representation of the process of forgetting and remembering. A key statement about these differences is when Shelby described the testing process Jenkiss undergoes. Jenkiss, it transpires, cannot form *new* memories but should be able to, whilst Shelby argues that he is physically incapable. This obviously counters the Shelby as Sammy argument but a later comment, that is heard in the earlier scene, about learning to fake recognition, can lead the spectator towards understanding Shelby: if he is Sammy, as using *cannot* as a coping mechanism which absolves him from guilt and has eventually become, ironically, the very kind of learnt response he claims he cannot perform or develop.

### **Socio-psychology: Donnie Darko**

The concept of the 'learnt response' is also at the heart of Richard Kelly's film *Donnie Darko*, in which Donnie's interaction with the world is largely based upon what people tell

him is the appropriate way to act and the tension between that and what he feels is more truthful.

One of the best ways to 'explain' *Donnie Darko* is to refer to its narrative as a 'magic realism'. This is not, per se, surrealism, but, like the root of the surreal, the idea of being able to access some level of understanding that is *more* than reality, is central. Although the precise nature of the 'magic realism' is not revealed to the spectator at the film's opening, on subsequent viewings it is evident that Kelly uses a number of highly filmic devices to signal an otherworldliness to the viewer from the first introduction to Donnie, as he awakens in his pyjamas on a road in the hills above his Californian town.

The first of these signals is one which most audiences will respond to as establishing an unreal angle upon the narrative, the use of music, in particular the slightly out-of-kilter piano melody which recurs and varies throughout the film. It cannot be described as atonal or challenging to the listener more used to the classical soundtrack but is certainly communicating two things: that this single piano melody, a somewhat plaintive, simple like with an indeterminate key, is to be associated with the young man on screen, Jake Gyllenhaal as Donnie Darko; and secondly, that the audience should not expect a conventional, classical narrated, film.

The second signal of otherworldliness used by Kelly is also musical but is rather more within the realms of electro-acoustic music, again emphasising the film's positioning as avant-garde yet, because the conventions in film genres' soundtracks in which electro-acoustic music is present link the sound world to fantasy films and make the broad musical style recognisable, also accessible. Film audiences are highly capable of reading genre through sound and not just how a film looks and, in this context, the opening of the film recalls scenes from 1980s children's science fiction films such as *The Flight of the Navigator* (Randal Kleiser, 1986) or even *The Neverending Story* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1984) – Donnie, the figure in the road, beside that other icon of 1980s children's films, the bicycle (*E.T. The Extraterrestrial* – Steven Spielberg, 1982), has experienced something of an adventure.

The electronic sounds are resonant, ethereal yet somehow insistent with a kind of throbbing pulse within them. This effect is common in electro-acoustic music simply because of the naturally embedding pulse within electricity – one only has to listen to a theremin (the wining sustained sound heard in a number of 1950s science fiction film, for example *The Day the Earth Stood Still* – Robert Wise, 1951) for a short period of time to realise this, or to feel it bodily. Connotatively, at the beginning of the film, this ethereal music is less easy to read because it lacks a melody of key or instrumentation which can be read specifically but, with the preponderance of repetition and variation throughout the film, it can be connected with the kind of 'life force' discussion the film engages with; the pulse of reality, one might say.

The third signal is the thing which confirms, to whatever extent the viewers' reading has already taken them, that the teenager has experienced something or, at the very least, finds pleasure in waking in the middle of a hillside road: he smiles. This smile, an introspective acknowledgement, is a signal beyond the opening scene of the film because Donnie's facial expressions are central to communicating, as the film progresses, Donnie turned in upon himself and Donnie seeing the outside world. The most sinister of these expressions, in particular, evoke distrust of the character and become connected to Donnie's interactions with Frank, his imaginary friend.

Each of these signals is experienced cognitively by the film spectator and Donnie's responses in the film are also largely cognitive if lacking in comprehension. However, the



*analytical* framework of the film is largely a mixture of various pop-psychology and therapy theories seen in Donnie's parents, in his school and in Donnie's conversations themselves. Thus, just as the film is an amalgamation of nostalgic sounds and images of the 1980s, so too does it represent psychoanalytical and therapeutic theories fairly indiscriminately – itself a reflection of the 1980s as the decade in which 'seeing a therapist' became part of the socio-cultural landscape of the west (hence the inclusion of a therapist in *Star trek: The Next Generation* – 1987-1994).

*Donnie Darko* is typically, and accurately, described as a postmodernist film. What this means is that the film manifests a selection of traits which can be found in many postmodernist texts:

1. a fragmentation of reality
2. a questioning of reality (and time)
3. a game-playing or quest based structure
4. reference to other texts (intertextuality) and
5. an avowal of disorder and disavowal of order.

The way in which each of these manifests serves to help the film represent Donnie's relationship with his own imagination as represented through the silver-grey bunny-suited figure, Frank.

It is no accident that Kelly chooses a rabbit to function as Donnie's imaginary friend, and this is one of the key intertextual references of the film, but it is also a reference upon which the film *does not* depend, *Harvey* (Henry Koster, 1950). Like many postmodern references, it is almost thrown away amidst the film's collage of the 1980s but the irony is not lost on the spectator because, as in the original film, it is, quite simply, ridiculous. However, unlike James Stewart's imaginary companion, a white 'Easter bunny', the rabbit Donnie Darko befriends is of a much darker hue, as the clock begins to count down to Halloween: Frank is always a Halloween costume with a maniacal face, this is no Bugs Bunny, Frank looks rather more rabid than anything.

The first time the audience 'sees' Frank is framed from Donnie's perspective but he is actually heard before he is seen and the development of what we see and hear of Frank is important in both establishing the development of the link between Donnie and Franks but also how the 'event' comes closer as the film counts back "28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds". When Frank's disembodied voice is first heard it is asexual, almost artificial and, like Regan's demonic voice in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), sounds like it is a number of voices processed together. This has the effect of making the voice distant and mysterious as it says "Come close". Parallel to this voice, the audience hears the ethereal music heard at the film's opening, only in a variant form, connoting the unusual. On the first sight of the rabbit figure, it is difficult to make out any precise features – 'he' stands at some distance from the camera, under a lamp, yet the voice the viewer associates with the image seems closer. As the film progresses, however, two key things can be observed: the voice becomes less processed and more real; and Frank comes closer and closer to Donnie physically, until Donnie gets Frank to remove the rabbit mask (revealing James Duvall in face and voice, with a terrible eye wound):

Donnie: Why do you wear that stupid bunny suit?

Frank: Why do you wear that stupid man suit?

Donnie: Take it off.

As Frank becomes more humanised, so too does Donnie become more in control, culminating in him being able to challenge Frank and instruct him as above. However, an important factor in Donnie gaining control comes out of his struggle through Roberta Sparrow's book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel*. The very fact that Ms Sparrow is known as 'Grandma Death' also contributes to Donnie's comprehension of the ideas and the existential debate at the film's heart about self-determination and 'fate'. When being interviewed by Dr. Thurman, the psychiatrist, she says "Donnie, what did Roberta Sparrow say to you?" To which he replies, "She said that every living creature on earth dies alone". This revelation by 'Grandma Death' is crucial to Donnie's epiphany later in the film when he realises that he must sacrifice himself for the greater good in order to save Gretchen's life.

## Conclusions

The way in which *Donnie Darko* steers the spectator towards understanding Donnie and 'sharing' his imagination is significantly based upon combining a cognitive technique of film viewing (recognition of film quotations or allusions, of framing as metaphor (the skewed frame for the skewed perspective) and of ways of representing magic realism which are already filmic experiences, such as the 'time' tube which quotes the intelligent water which imitates Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in *The Abyss* - James Cameron, 1989). However, this cognitive process is bolstered by the parallel use of varying forms of medical or pseudo-psychology within the film. For the audience, this is also a cognitive process because the language of psychology litters all films which try to represent a 'flawed' mind. However, the psychology represented in the film, mainly through Dr. Thurman and the presence of 'therapeutic' language, is also represented as ineffective in healing Donnie, despite the revelatory quality of Donnie's scenes when he is hypnotised. The visibility of psychiatry and psychoanalytical theory in the narrative (story) of *Donnie Darko* when juxtaposed against the cognitive process being favoured in the narration (telling of the story) of the film demonstrates very efficiently the way in which cinema appropriates different ideas and, using concepts which are typically (but in my opinion erroneously) set in opposition, shapes both a representation of and understanding about the mind which is specific to film and greater than the sum of its parts.

The same can also be said of *Memento* because Shelby's process is fundamentally one which combines his cognitive reading of himself (and the voice-over can be read as a cognitive therapy conversation in that he is trying to explain not why he is motivated – a psychoanalytical way of framing cause and effect – but why he *acts* in the way he does – a cognitive, experiential way of connecting triggers and results) whilst characters around Leonard seek ways in which to *motivate* him psychologically, using his questionable memories about his wife to their own ends. In fact, it should not be forgotten that cognitive theory and phenomenology (Bergson's approach taken through by Deleuze in *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*) are theoretical bed-fellows and cognitive theory as we know it today grew out of the work of philosophers such as Bergson. The second reason why it is not surprising that film using cognitive concepts and psychoanalytical ideas in parallel is related to the twin development of these modes of investigating the human mind at the same time as the arrival of film in the late

nineteenth century. The language(s) of representing the mind in cinema, like the visual frameworks of cinema and the narrative conventions, cannot be seen as isolated from the arts and sciences which have existed and developed simultaneously.

So, in conclusion, what can be seen in both *Memento* and *Donnie Darko* is how film works with ideas of the mind but goes beyond these academic framings and towards something more of a bricolage of effects which add up, for the spectator, as a believable representation of the mind which, ultimately, elicits sympathy, empathy and/or the suspension of disbelief.

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## About the Author

*Dr. E. Anna Claydon*

I began working full-time as a lecturer in 2001 (having worked part-time during my PhD 1998-2001 at the University of Kent, Canterbury) and was Lecturer in Film Studies at Edge Hill University from 2001 to the end of 2005. In January 2006, I started my current post at the University of Leicester and teach film and music (plus a little on art) in the department. I am currently working on the representation of the mind in cinema, the representation of disability on film, the way in which the British rural landscape is presented in movies and the role of post-colonialism in HE teaching. I am also a trustee of Contemporary Music-making for Amateurs' (CoMA), which is the only charity in Europe which focuses upon amateurs experience of contemporary music, and play a number of instruments and compose music for ensembles.



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