Mindworks: Getting inside heads in fiction film

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Introduction

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 paper will discuss two key approaches to analysing the mind in film through the examination of three films: Memento (Christopher Nolan, 1999), Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) and The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004) and how these representations can create an amalgam of frameworks which enables cinematic devices themselves (editing, use of the camera, composition etc...) 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 first theoretical approach which I am going to investigate is that of Gilles Deleuze as applied to analysing Memento. What it 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, it 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 aids 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 Jorge 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 questions 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 wide 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 Bergson’s 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 mage, 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.” (page ref:   ) 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 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, Fight Club and The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

The concept of the ‘learnt response’ is also at the heart of both Fight Club and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. In the former, what is being debated is the feminisation of the post-war (especially post-Vietnam) generation and how a new masculinity can be created. At the centre of this is a critique of domestication and the “IKEA nesting instinct” which echoes throughout the film. It can also be epitomised by Tyler Durden’s response to Jack’s statement that this IKEA apartment made him “nearly complete, nearly perfect”:

Fuck Martha Stewart: I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect.
I say let’s evolve. Let the chips fall where they may”.

All of which is like a clarion call to the sleep starved ‘Jack’ left only with a suit and a suitcase. In this second part of my paper, I am going to examine how perception operates in Fight Club and The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind through the psychoanalytical and socio-political methods: society is what programmes the set of beliefs and consequently contributes to defining the super-ego function within any character.

IKEA, of course, is not an American phenomenon, as anyone here who has ever visited one will know: neither is it simply a shop or a catalogue, it is a way of turning shoppers into factory bred beast, coerced through the produce, the food, like sheep to
the slaughterhouse, the warehouse where you collect your goods. It can be argued that IKEA has created a space for itself within western society as and ideological

globalisation apparatus, to extend Louis Athisser’s 1969 formulation of State and

Ideological State Apparatuses. In IKEA, you are prevented from deviated by

labyrinthine routes and shelving blocking the line of sight and the pathways are

narrow enough that if you get stuck behind the ubiquitous noisy family out on a

Sunday afternoon you cannot circumnavigate around the various unruly family

members. So much for the “IKEA nesting instinct”, what IKEA is concerned about is

the herding instinct of humans: alongside the fact that what IKEA actually produces

tends to be rather ‘tasteful’. The IKEA instinct then, what ‘Jack’ (and Patrick

Bateman in American Psycho – Mary Harron, 2000) are trying to demonstrate, is a

concept of modern ‘taste’ which makes them appear to be part of society. What makes

the IKEA reference in Fight Club specifically American is the visual connection of

these images to magazine and lifestyle culture, which began in the US through Sears

and into the New Yorker and the obsession with the lifestyles of the rich and famous,

aka Hollywood. IKEA becomes contextually situated as the epitome of modern

American commercial taste and as powerful an icon for success as Frasier Crane’s

designer apartment in the Cheers spin-off.

There is a definite confrontation of the perception of ‘home’ also being explored

through the mise-en-scène not just of these scene but elsewhere in the film: an

explicitly American concept here which is satirised through its absence and which is

alluded to by the earlier reference to Martha Stewart and the dilapidated

Munster/Psycho home lived in by Durden: the ‘twee’, over-decorated home filled

with ‘Home Sweet Home’ embroideries and fathers who say “Honey, I’m home”; but

then this is also a film in which fathers are being debated and have abandoned their

sons. “Our fathers were models for God”, argues Durden to his apostles, echoing

Freud’s formulation of the father as super-ego: “If our fathers bailed, what does that
tell you about God?” This whole area of masculinity in the film is one which I do not

have time to go into in this paper but this ideology that the men of Fight Club are

without fathers and therefore without role-models, or gods, inflects the entire film

because it affects not just the characters interactions with themselves but those

interactions with the environment which lead to the soulless “nesting instinct” of

barren personalities.

The ‘Martha Stewart’, rather too perfect, model of the American home is also

noticeably alluded to my third film, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, a film in

which the interplay of the alternate realities is much more akin to an Orwellian

version of the world in which the thought police are fully armed. In Gondry’s film,

written by Charlie Kaufman (the mind behind Being John Malkovich and Adaptation),

what begins simply as a love affair gone wrong becomes a case of memories being

erased. The premise concerns the concept of being able to forget unpleasant events

and what would happen to your mind if you eradicated things that are a cause of

sadness: hence the title of the film. The narrative explores however, the way in which

the mind struggles against this and, in dong so, enters the surrealisms of memory in an

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the mind struggles against this and, in dong so, enters the surrealisms of memory in an

attempt to articulate how in the mind, memory can become “another country”. In the

scene you are about to see, you will see both the articulation of home through the

mise-en-scène and how the regression into the self is manifested through a position of

innocence (‘Jack’s’ position in relationship to Durden is also ‘innocent’ in that it is

one of an absence of responsibility for his actions but, here, you will see how Joel
(Jim Carrey) regresses to a place in childhood which, ironically, makes the very reason for bringing Kate Winslet’s Clementine to his past redundant.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Chapter 13.

Here the home is commended, is very late 1960s, is bright, clean and somehow unreal (unlike the working 1960s kitchen of a film like That Thing You Do, which also draws on a nostalgic relation to the past). It is, like ‘Jack’s’ IKEA filled home, artificial, signalling absence of life rather than its presence. This links, as in Fight Club to the perception of the home as connected to parenting.

In Fight Club, however, mothers are criticised as emasculating their sons but, in this scene from Eternal Sunshine, what is seen is how the lack of mothering rather than of fathering is a problem. Yet, unlike Fight Club where the lack informs the protagonist’s anger, here what is seen is only loss: and a sense of loss being confused by the juxta-positioning of a) Joel as a 4 year old b) Joel as the adult c) the mother as already absent d) Clementine trying to avoid being ‘lost’ e) Clementine as Joel’s mother’s friend and f) the fact that this is a memory entering another memory in the brain of someone whose mind is slowly deconstructing experience as he has previously comprehended it. In entering the memory, would Clementine’s ‘hidden’ presence ultimately mean Joel loses the memory of his mother from his 4 year old perspective? Would Clementine become trapped in this memory and so Joel the adult would never be able to retain the memory of looking at her crotch? The enigmas posed by this scene are substantial, as are those offered by the film as a whole: the weakness of Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, unlike Being John Malkovich is that it tries to hard to answer unanswerable questions instead of just leaving them for philosophical debate.

The mise-en-scène of the memories in Eternal Sunshine varies according to the cycle of repetition upon which Joel is caught but each cycle contains imagery which, like Scott Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby, echoes a specific kind of American landscape: one in which the somebody is always on the wrong side of the tracks, where there’s always a wooden clad beach-house aching with flotsam and jetsam and where bookshops are filled with uncut edges (in memory, why should the unread book have words within it – like Pleasantville [Gary Ross, 1998] the words are waiting to be remembered). However, again as in Fight Club, the American mise-en-scène is not perfect, not Hollywood, not complete and when it is, such as the kitchen, it signifies false memories and imperfection. The homes of Durden, Marla, Clementine and of Joel in the ‘real’, by contrast, are human spaces, spaces infected by the past which present the new American Gothic – grunge as a counter to the “IKEA nesting instinct”: and so too are the characters fascinating in their visual contribution to the post-modern American mise-en-scènes represented in each film; especially Marla and Clementine, whose images are particularly striking in their gothic and punk renderings compared to the ‘normality’ of Jack and Joel.

Marla is cast as the femme fatale, dressed in black and chain smoking in slow motion when the spectator first sees her but, rather like Bonham-Carter in real life, what is evident is that Marla has a grungy, second-hand quality which sees her at one point dressed in a little girl’s bridesmaid dress that she’s bought from a thrift shop – thus
revealing the fragility of the character in a way her attempted suicide failed to. Clementine by contrast is not quite so grubby but is clearly influenced by the gothic too, although more evidently expressed through her ever-changing hair she could be identified as belonging at the intersection of gothic and punk. Yet, Clementine too also has her little girl moment as she and Joel are seen as children within his memories. The strength of the images of both women in each film emphasises their centrality to the plots not in terms of time on film but, like most good female characters in male centred films, because they enable the protagonist to question his environment and his surroundings. When ‘Jack’ calls Marla and she calls him “Tyler Durden, Tyler Durden, Tyler Durden” three times (echoing, as in other places, Peter’s denial of Christ building up to the crucifixion), it is no coincidence that ‘Jack’s’ voice-over narration acknowledges this with “We have just lost cabin pressure”.

Both Fight Club and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, therefore, articulate a version of a subjective relationship with memory that is centred upon a critique of the past and a questioning of the present which implies an uncertain future. In both films, because the mind is fractured, the future identity is what is being questioned and the only answer ‘Jack’ can find is to destroy the mind capable of creating Durden whilst, for Joel, it is only in hiding Clementine as an adult from his mind, by placing her in his child’s mind eye as a child, that his future identity, containing her influence, can be saved; which it is. Both characters, ultimately need to find a ‘home’ for their minds, a safe place, in ‘Jack’s’ case, a cave, where his power animal is Marla whispering “slide”. The instability of physical homes is a metaphor for the instability of the normative family and the psychological homes forged by ‘Jack’ and by Joel are houses of cards ready to crumble and filled with allusions to incompleted maturation: the IKEA nesting instinct has to be challenged because it is entirely false, yet for both protagonists, the alternatives cannot be successful either because they have not completed the journey. Having one’s memory removed by choice is a childish action, a ‘take away the monsters’ desire which can only fail for Joel. Receding into a fantasy world within an entirely fictional friends reverberates of fear of reality for Jack. They can only grow up when the fiction and the reality collide: and this is how the film’s narration functions, as therapist, juxtaposing images which reality can never juxtapose.

Conclusion: The Amalgam of Frameworks

how these representations can create an amalgam of frameworks which enables cinematic devices themselves (editing, use of the camera, composition etc...) to articulate another pathway towards understanding the mind of the character: a pathway with is about the brain as intertext, the product of audience, filmmaker and narration.