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Author(s)	Dennis Yeo
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The Mindfreak: Monstrous Memory in McGrath's *The Grotesque* (1989) and Nolan's *Memento* (2000)

Dennis Yeo

Introduction

Marked by difference, the freak does not conform to natural, social, or scientific norms. Whether monster, mutant, or undead, the abhuman body retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different. According to Patrick McGrath, the 'New Gothic' foregrounds the workings of the psychotopia. This 'turning inward' of the gothic from landscape to mindscape places the emphasis on 'minds and souls haunted by the urge to transgress and do evil, crippled with distortions of perception and the moral sense, and obsessed with death and morbidity', all in instances of 'interior entropy — spiritual and emotional breakdown'.¹ The mind is entropic as it cannot think outside of itself and constantly reinforces what it thinks, resulting in psychosomatic states like obsessive compulsion, claustrophobia, neurosis, paranoia, schizophrenia, and psychosis.

The New Monster of the gothic is the psychopathological freak, or 'mindfreak'. The perception, reception, and conception of our reality are products of one's state of mind, from which there is no escape. This essay analyses Patrick McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* (1989) and Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000), and examines the existential incarceration that both their narrator-protagonists suffer.² Although they are set in different contexts and are expressed through different forms, both texts study the interior entropy of aberrant mental states in the act of re-membering narrative. In *The Grotesque*, Sir Hugo, after a 'cerebral accident', becomes a quadriplegic who suffers from locked-in syndrome.³ Although he continues to possess the faculty of memory, imagination, thought, and will, he has no

¹ Patrick McGrath, *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (New York, Toronto: Random House, 1991), p. xii.

² This article will cite quotations from McGrath's novel and Nolan's published script. References will also be made to *Memento*, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Summit Entertainment/Newmarket Films/Team Todd, 2000) [on DVD], and to some of the extra features available on the Limited Edition DVD release (Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2002). It will not make reference to the 1995 movie of *The Grotesque* (also known as *Grave Indiscretion* and *Gentlemen Don't Eat Poets*) directed by John-Paul Davidson, as it is not an accurate adaptation of the book.

³ Patrick McGrath, *The Grotesque* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 8.

expression or psychomotor ability. He is ‘able to see, know, and evaluate the world, yet lift not a finger, nor even *blink* at will’ [emphasis in original].⁴ *Memento* is about Leonard Shelby who wants to remember the motivation for his actions but suffers from anterograde amnesia, meaning that ‘[he has] no short-term memory [and] can’t make any new memories’.⁵ Both *The Grotesque* and *Memento* are thus inherently interested in the workings of the brain, particularly the faculty of memory.

Both mindfreaks are doomed to repeat indefinitely the cycle of their warped perspectives. From Edgar Allan Poe to Neil Gaiman, the New Gothic perceives the mind itself as ‘a kind of supernatural space, filled with intrusive spectral presences’.⁶ *Memento* is a gothic film because ‘Gothic is the terrain on which we are never sure what — if anything — we have remembered’.⁷ Similarly, in the fiction of McGrath, ‘we find a mordant glee in the failings of taxonomic classification and the futility of all attempts to establish an objective, orthodox version of reality.’⁸ To Botting, ‘the internalization of Gothic forms represents the most significant shift in the genre’ as ‘psychological rather than supernatural forces became the prime-movers in worlds where individuals could be sure neither of others nor of themselves.’⁹

With no reference point to anchor any interpretation, the uncertainty of self and reality threatens to reveal the fictionality of one’s being, compelling a fabrication of some semblance of coherence and credibility from shreds of imposture, assumption, and speculation. Trapped within the entropy of their mental states and its self-conceived simulacra, the isolation of both their conditions requires Sir Hugo and Leonard to devise coping mechanisms to make sense of their world. They re-create, re-present, and recover the narrative of memory by imposing order and stability on their histories and allowing the past to be rewritten ‘in a fashion acceptable to the conscious mind’.¹⁰ This loss of a sense of history results from an inaccessible past that has become a ‘multitudinous photographic simulacrum’, a contrived

⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

⁵ Christopher Nolan, *Memento and Following* (London; New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 114.

⁶ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 164.

⁷ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 208.

⁸ Christine Ferguson, ‘Dr McGrath’s Disease: Radical Pathology in Patrick McGrath’s Neo-Gothicism’, in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. by Glennis Byron and David Punter (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 233–43 (p. 242).

⁹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 92, 12.

¹⁰ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day — Volume Two: The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 48.

text that is open to indeterminacy, misinterpretation, and self-deception.¹¹ Thus what the viewer or reader has to accept as the only historically accurate point in the narrative is also thrown into question. With all of this in mind, this article will examine the mindfreak and the subjectivity of narrative in the self-invention and self-correction of memory, truth, and history. To the mindfreak, the distortion of perception that results from the dissolution of boundaries of time and space is necessary to stabilise the mental structures that make the world liveable.

The New Monster — Going Mental

Marked by otherness and difference, the freak is a threat and disruption to our notion of human identity and social normalcy. Sir Hugo describes his monstrous self as ‘humped and cadaverous’ with ‘clawlike’ hands and eyes that ‘gaze blankly from a bony, sunken head’.¹² He is wheeled out like a freak show before doctors who, unable to diagnose his malady, choose instead ‘to gloss over the gulfs in their knowledge with jargon’ and merely label him for their convenience.¹³ Sir Hugo finds himself ‘in the grid of a medical taxonomy. My identity was now neuropathological. I was no longer a man, I was an instance of a disease.’¹⁴ As a specimen of an undefined disorder, Sir Hugo is medically categorised in order to contain and define his monstrosity. Like a ghost, he is ‘a man without a body’, an absence present in the halls of his property, Crook.¹⁵ He concedes that ‘to be a grotesque is my destiny’; by ‘grotesque’ he means ‘the fanciful, the bizarre, the absurdly incongruous’.¹⁶

As ‘Gothic novels, all contain, as a main theme, the depiction of an anxiety with no possibility of escape’, the gothic dis-ease is the paralysis of entropy.¹⁷ At the start of *Memento*, Leonard explains his illness and, indirectly, the structure of the film as being ‘all ... backwards [...] you gotta pretty good idea of what you’re gonna do next, but no idea of what you just did’.¹⁸ Each self-contained segment of time in his life is entropic, an ‘eternal present tense’ within which Leonard is encased as he continually seeks to discover the

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Versa, 1991), p. 18.

¹² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 4.

¹³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 7.

¹⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 109.

¹⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 107.

¹⁶ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 8, 61.

¹⁷ *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 145.

¹⁸ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 115. To Natalie, Leonard is the ‘the memory guy’, the ‘idiot’, ‘retard’, ‘stupid fuck’, the ‘freak’ who is ‘blissfully ignorant’ of all around him. *Memento*, pp. 185–97.

identity of a man he knows as John G, whom Leonard believes attacked and killed his wife.¹⁹ Leonard is even a monstrous spectacle to himself, as is evident when he discovers his ‘freaky tattoos’ in the mirror, which in the gothic acts as a reflection of identity definition and doubling.²⁰

The menace of the gothic *mise en scène* is brought closer to home when its conflict, crisis, and chaos take residence in the geography of an individual’s troubled mental space. The French term for Sir Hugo’s condition, *maladie de l’emmuré vivant*, literally translated as ‘walled-in alive’ disease, suggests the gothic motif of being buried alive. Sir Hugo uses the Latin etymological origins of the word ‘grotesque’ in his description of himself as a fossil ‘locked in the grotto of his own bones’.²¹ Since ‘in the absence of sensory information, *the imagination always tends to the grotesque*’ [emphasis in original], the grotto is actually a mental ‘experience of isolation’.²² This analogy is evident when Sir Hugo refers to himself as being ‘trapped in the dungeon of my own skull’.²³ ‘Cocooned in bone’, he is imprisoned in both mind and body.²⁴

In *Memento*, Leonard’s mindscape is represented by the transitory ‘anonymous motel room’ he occupies.²⁵ Nolan likens the claustrophobia of being confined in the room to being a ‘rat in a box’, fed with ‘different stimuli’.²⁶ The rootless world Leonard lives in is ‘stripped of any cultural specificity and historical marking’.²⁷ Nolan wanted ordinary, realistic, anonymous places to evoke the ‘dead end nowhere sensibility of classic *film noir*’.²⁸ The world conjured up in the film is as compartmentalised as the limited scope of Leonard’s memory, and is encapsulated in microcosm in a mind-map of locations and characters that he hangs up on the wall. The coordinates of this map, like the neurons in Leonard’s brain, are his Polaroids of people and places. The geographical displacement and mental dislocation of the protagonists of both the novel and the movie demonstrate that the entrapment of the gothic is not just physical or psychological, but existential.

Both Sir Hugo and Leonard Shelby are acutely aware of memory’s tendency towards fabrication, and that the fictionality of any history necessitates a location that functions as an

¹⁹ Chris Darke, ‘Mr Memory’, *Sight and Sound*, 10.11 (Nov 2000), 42–43 (p. 43).

²⁰ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 123.

²¹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 126.

²² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 61, 8.

²³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

²⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

²⁵ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 109.

²⁶ Director’s Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento*, [1:09:37].

²⁷ William G. Little, ‘Surviving Memento’, *Narrative*, 13.1 (Jan 2005), 67–83 (p. 77).

²⁸ ‘Anatomy of a Scene’, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento*, [13:00].

anchor of stability and permanence for their narrative. Sir Hugo's mindspace is a laboratory where he puts together the fragments of his narrative and recounts to the reader the circumstances surrounding his accident 'by going backwards, step-by-step'.²⁹ He admits that the artificial order imposed by memory is inevitable and inaccurate, and notes that 'retrospection does yield order [...] but I wonder if this order isn't perhaps achieved solely as a function of the remembering mind, which of its very nature tends to yield order'.³⁰ Instead of gaining more control over his memory, however, the biased nature of retrospection falsifies experience and makes him a prisoner of the simulacrum of his own making.

In the same way, Leonard concedes that 'memory can change the shape of a room or the colour of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed or distorted and they're irrelevant if you have the facts.'³¹ Trapped in his vignettes of time, Leonard's only sense of continuity is provided by his mementos, his Polaroids and his tattoos, which serve as a dialogue between his past, present, and future selves. The nature of Polaroids also emphasises a moment of seeing and ensures that there is no digital mediation or manipulation of the image. He tattoos himself with what he perceives to be facts as notes for his future self to trust and act on, since he knows his present self is going to forget them.

Although both protagonists devise systems to guard against subjective perspectives, they cannot escape the fact that the act of re-membering past events is inherently delusional. Consequently, 'the inductive method' that Sir Hugo uses, which has 'guided [his] thinking for over thirty years', is revealed to be part empirical and part guesswork.³² He applies this process to his 'reconstruction of the entire skeleton' from the bones of a dinosaur species that he calls *Phlegmosaurus*.³³ He admits that, in his piecing together of the narrative, 'cracks have appeared, and from out of these cracks grin monstrous anomalies.'³⁴ His constant apostrophes to persuade the reader to accept his version of events also serve to convince himself of its accuracy. For example, he tells the reader,

You must forgive me if I appear at times to contradict myself, or in other ways violate the natural order of the events I am disclosing; this business of selecting and organizing one's memories so as to describe precisely what happened is a delicate, perilous undertaking, and I'm beginning to wonder whether it may not be beyond me.³⁵

²⁹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 62.

³⁰ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 113.

³¹ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 135.

³² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 78.

³³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

³⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

³⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

His self-awareness of the unreliability of his accounts testifies to the fleeting nature of memory and the potential for self-deception. It is this indefiniteness and invention of past narrative that render memory intrinsically monstrous.

The malleability of memory is compounded when one has to rely on a memory that cannot remember. Leonard relates the story of his client Sammy Jankis who, like him, suffered from anterograde amnesia. He feels contempt for Sammy, as Sammy's inability to remember things eventually resulted in him administering insulin to his diabetic wife and causing her death. While Leonard differentiates himself from Sammy and prides himself on his discipline and organisation, his reliance on impressions and the need to summarise his conclusions in bite-sized notes reveal the potential for his system to be undermined.³⁶ Although he asserts 'I use habit and routine to make my life possible', his readiness to rethink and alter one of the 'facts' with which he tattoos himself from 'ACCESS TO DRUGS' to 'DRUG DEALER' when prompted by a caller he does not even know exposes how relative his conclusions are.³⁷ Sibielski argues,

Both his past and his identity become entirely dependent upon a network of mediation which, it is revealed by [the] film's end, may in fact be closer to simulation than an accurate accounting, thereby casting doubt upon the 'truth' of both Leonard's identity and his experience as he conceives of them.³⁸

Leonard's condition and his belief in the accuracy of his notes render him incapable of perceiving that his quest for the truth is a mirage of self-deception. Because both narratives are founded upon memory, this state of unknowingness renders Sir Hugo and Leonard vulnerable to being manipulated and victimised by others, resulting in a state of paranoia which is further aggravated by their marginalisation from a life of normal human interaction. Sir Hugo's obsession is focused on his butler Fledge, and the gnawing belief 'that even before he entered the front door of Crook — even before he *met* me! — Fledge had conceived the ambition to usurp me' [emphasis in original].³⁹ Sir Hugo even preposterously attributes Fledge with the ability to manipulate his dreams, musing, 'I wonder, for example,

³⁶ It is significant that the tattoo that says 'Remember Sammy Jankis' is the first one that is presented to the audience and the only one that is returned to repeatedly throughout the movie.

³⁷ Nolan, *Memento*, pp. 121, 172.

³⁸ Rosalind Sibielski, 'Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as an Ordering Principle in *Memento*', *Literature and Psychology*, 49.4 (2004), 82–100 (p. 85).

³⁹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 19.

whether he was responsible for that disgusting dream. And in retrospect I rather think he was.’⁴⁰

Leonard also displays an awareness of his vulnerability, and with good reason, as we discover when Burt, the clerk at the motel in which Leonard stays, confesses that Leonard is checked into two different rooms at the Discount Inn.⁴¹ Leonard’s gullibility makes him seem surrounded by evil, deceptive characters. His mnemonic aporia do not allow him to build any relationship of trust, and when the bartender Natalie advises him to ‘trust yourself’, we realise that this is equally futile.⁴² He can trust no-one and has to believe that he will ‘go on facts, not recommendations’, ‘facts’ which also prove to be unreliable.⁴³ His distrust of Teddy’s warning concerning Natalie and his misplaced faith in her are vital turning points in the narrative. Given his short attention span, Leonard is ‘acting on instinct’ when he is caught between trusting Natalie or believing Teddy.⁴⁴ As the movie is structured to simulate Leonard’s condition, the audience likewise encounters characters with whom we are unfamiliar. Unlike Leonard, who does not have access to earlier events in the narrative, the audience realises that their own tendency to rely on first impressions is seriously flawed when it becomes clear that Natalie only appears to be sympathetic and sincere in wanting to help Leonard, and that she has in fact previously manipulated Leonard’s debility. Likewise, the ambiguity of the character of the self-serving Teddy throws doubt on whether he is telling Leonard the truth about his wife’s death. The assessment of character thus changes as the reversed chronology discloses new back-stories to which the audience, like Leonard, does not have access.

The New Order — Organising Chaos

The gothic undercuts conventional modes of storytelling and even questions the ability of narrative to depict reality. ‘From its beginnings, the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge.’⁴⁵ As ‘a literature of psychic grotesquerie’, the gothic is an oneiric narrative

grounded on the terrain of hallucination: this would be another way of saying that it is a mode within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator’s perceptions, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are

⁴⁰ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 45.

⁴¹ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 130.

⁴² Nolan, *Memento*, p. 143.

⁴³ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 134.

⁴⁴ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 141.

⁴⁵ David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 273.

enjoined to participate in them or to retain a critical distance [...] one question here would be about what it might mean for a person in this ‘altered’ state to know something to be ‘true’. What, one might wonder, might truth actually mean when the senses have been changed.⁴⁶

The distortion of this aberrant state of mind is further filtered through memory, trauma, and invention, and the reader finds him- or herself inevitably trapped in a palimpsest of competing narratives.

This quest for order and empiricism is indicative of the severe anxiety caused by the fragmentation and dissolution experienced in both gothic narratives under discussion. Coupled with the narrators’ self-reflexive awareness of their own unreliability, the emphasis on the verification of facts paradoxically accentuates the very precariousness of the reconstruction of the narratives. The signification, interpretation, and accuracy of language and signs, essential aspects of both stories, are interrogated and revealed to be arbitrary. By simulating the subjective experiences of the narrators, the style and structure of the texts encourage our vicarious identification with the protagonists.

The realisation that one is reading a book that could never have been written and ‘listening’ to a narrative voice that could never have been heard contributes to the fantastic nature of *The Grotesque*. As the narrator is immobilised, the events narrated by Sir Hugo are all played out in the theatre of his mind. This is made clear from the start, as we are told that ‘All this I have *reconstructed since* being confined to a wheelchair’ [emphasis added].⁴⁷ Despite his insistence that he will ‘describe it just as it happened’ and ‘try to construct [...] as full and coherent an account [...] of *how things got this way*’ [emphasis in original], Sir Hugo does not attempt to hide the disjunction between fact and fiction, and has no qualms in admitting that the entire account is speculative and obsessive.⁴⁸ It is ironic that Sir Hugo does not realise that his criticism of scientists like Sykes-Herring that ‘they see what they expect to see and no more’ applies equally to himself.⁴⁹

His endorsement of ‘informed, imaginative speculation [...] to make the sudden brilliant intuitive leap to revolutionary truth’ hints at how he has come to some of his conclusions concerning Fledge.⁵⁰ He describes Fledge’s disposal of the body of Sidney, his daughter’s fiancé, as if he were present. ‘I saw him guide the bicycle over the edge, and I saw

⁴⁶ Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, pp. 293–95.

⁴⁷ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 45, 106.

⁴⁹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 35.

⁵⁰ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 35.

it tip, and fall, and splash to rest in the black water at the bottom. He stood there at the edge of the pit, framed against the moon, *and it was as though I were* at the bottom, gazing up at him' [emphasis added].⁵¹ The subjectivity of the process Sir Hugo employs in his re-creation of the event is evident when he relates how 'I allowed my mind to go blank, my thoughts to wander, and slowly, in my imagination, a picture began to form', yet insists that 'for some weird reason I felt certain that this indeed was what had happened'.⁵² He admits, 'In fact, I began to find that the only events that I could record with any real precision were not those that happened outside myself but, rather the operations that my own mind performed upon the fragmentary stimuli that now constituted reality for me.'⁵³ As he sits confined in his wheelchair, Sir Hugo imagines his gardener George, who is in prison because he has taken the fall for the murder. He describes his visions of George as being 'entirely illusory, at the same time, they appeared quite real: they felt real. But they were hallucinations, merely, symptomatic of the sort of slippage, or dislocation to which [his] mind was increasingly subject.'⁵⁴ Although he warns of 'the distortions to which the passive and isolated mind is prone', this is the only reality on to which he can desperately cling.⁵⁵

The reliance on storytelling as a means to grapple with the surreal reality that confronts these gothic protagonists is constantly undermined by the dream-like intangibility of the account itself. Like Sir Hugo, Leonard employs narrative to concretise memory because it is his only source of solidity. In trying to convey the instability of his mind, the structure of *Memento* replicates Leonard's experience by literally structuring itself backwards. The movie adheres to the tradition of confessional, amnesiac, and paranoid investigative narratives in *noir* film but proceeds from back to front in brief, incremental, remembered episodes. Leonard tells his wife that 'the pleasure of a book is in wanting to know what happens next', but the pleasure of this movie is in finding out what happened earlier in the plot.⁵⁶

The opening three scenes (in Nolan's words, 'a sort of micro-representation of the structure of the whole film') literally instruct the cinematic audience how to watch the film by establishing the pattern with which the audience has to familiarise themselves in order to proceed.⁵⁷ Over the title sequence, a Polaroid print un-develops and fades away in real-time,

⁵¹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 77.

⁵² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 76, 77.

⁵³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 151.

⁵⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 155–56.

⁵⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 151.

⁵⁶ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Director's Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [1:02].

a graphic example of Leonard's lack of short-term memory where 'everything fades'.⁵⁸ The Polaroid then slides back into the camera, followed by a scene in which a murder is played in reverse. The reverse action is a defamiliarising technique, which nonetheless alerts the audience to the way in which the film is constructed. The sudden cut into extreme close-ups in black-and-white film stock extends this technique. The first line, 'So you're in some motel room',⁵⁹ is in response to the unspoken question 'where are you?' which echoes what an ideal audience might ask. Throughout the rest of the film, this recurring motif, of Leonard waking up in a strange environment and orientating himself, functions as a concrete experience of Leonard's lapses of consciousness, which is 'like waking. Like you always just woke up.'⁶⁰ The audience is made to experience his disorientation as there is a 'continual fresh moment of discovery' every time he regains awareness.⁶¹

This is further complicated by the concurrent dual narrative structure, the two strands of which are differentiated by the film stock used. The black-and-white sequences (which depict incidents prior to the events which occur backwards in colour) are shot from a more objective photodocumentary-like point-of-view. Unlike the first-person perspective in the colour sequences, the voiceover in the black-and-white segments is rambling, uncertain, and hesitant, and Leonard also refers to himself in the third person as if he is objectively studying his own condition.⁶² Coupled with a camera perspective that is shot, in a stark *cinéma-vérité* style, from a high angle, this serves to distance the audience.

By highlighting the threat of erasure of one's hold on reality and identity, these texts emphasise an awareness and appreciation of what could potentially be lost when these categories come under threat. The proclamation of his neurologist Dendrite that he is 'ontologically dead' irks Sir Hugo, who insists that he is 'the most ontologically *alive* person in that room' [emphasis in original].⁶³ This 'ontological instability' is the anxiety that, in his words, 'my identity were merely a reflection, or construct, of the opinion of others [so that he is] forced to assert my own self to myself and thus confirm that I was still, in effect, viable.'⁶⁴

Having lost his short-term memory, Leonard is terrified that what he does not remember loses its significance to him, including the revenge that he lives for. It is the memory of his wife dying, the last thing he remembers, that spurs him on to vengeance and

⁵⁸ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 114.

⁵⁹ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 114.

⁶¹ Director's Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [41:20].

⁶² Mark Olsen, 'Total Recall', *Film Comment*, 37.1 (Jan/Feb 2001), 62–63 (p. 63).

⁶³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 143.

action. He asserts, ‘The world doesn’t disappear when you close your eyes, does it? My actions still have meaning, even if I can’t remember them.’⁶⁵ The need for meaning and purpose is so compelling that Teddy suggests to Leonard that ‘You lie to yourself! You don’t want the truth [...] So you make up your own truth [...] to set yourself a puzzle you won’t ever solve [...] You’re living a dream [...] a romantic quest which you wouldn’t end.’⁶⁶

The drive for stability therefore supersedes the quest for truth. Any form of permanence is welcomed in this state of transience. Tattooing vital information ‘in all directions, some upside-down, some backwards’ on his body is, to Leonard, ‘a permanent way of keeping a note.’⁶⁷ The use of the body as a textual message board emphasises the importance he attributes to text as signifier. Leonard believes that ‘the present is trivia, which I can scribble down as notes’ and that by doing so, he can provide some continuity to his life.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Leonard’s faith in the written word is misplaced ‘because you’re relying on [words] alone. You don’t remember what you’ve discovered or how.’⁶⁹ Caught between knowing and not knowing, between forgetting and remembering, Leonard is not intentionally deceiving the audience. Instead, without a sense of context or memory, it is his reading of the situation that is faulty. In imposing a definitive order on events, narrative, whether written or oral, becomes arbitrary, deceptively comforting, and thus, inevitably entropic.

The New Vision — Seeing Double

Within this context, the presence of the gothic double serves further to interrogate the constitution of identity in both texts. The projection of repressed emotions or memories onto their doubles, Fledge and Sammy Jankis, raises the suspicion that Sir Hugo is implicated in the murder of Sidney, and that Leonard shares more with Sammy than he is willing to admit. Sir Hugo observes that Fledge ‘maintains [him] with his hatred’ and contemplates ‘the irony of [his] existence, that [he has] come to require the hatred of a bad servant simply to *be*’ [emphasis in original].⁷⁰ His fear is that he will be usurped by Fledge, who takes over Sir Hugo’s wife Harriet, Crook, his clothes, and his identity. ‘Dressing in a manner very similar to [his] own now’, Sir Hugo suggests

⁶⁵ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 124.

⁶⁶ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 222.

⁶⁷ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 119; Director’s Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [10:56].

⁶⁸ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 144.

⁶⁹ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 135.

⁷⁰ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 80.

I am his grotesque double; he reads in me an outward sign of his own corruption, I am the externalisation, the manifestation, the fleshly representation of his true inner nature — which is a deformed and withered thing [...] his shrivelled conscience [...] a sort of inversion of himself, the negative to his positive.⁷¹

Sir Hugo projects his self-disgust onto Fledge and argues instead that ‘the irony is that in truth he is the negative of me [...] Fledge is the grotesque — not I!’⁷² His suspicion and antagonism towards Fledge is further fuelled when Fledge allegedly attacks him. Yet what Sir Hugo interprets as an attempt on his life can also be read instead as an effort to save him. Sir Hugo feels a pain before Fledge supposedly forces him to the ground. He ‘could do little but gaze up’ and was ‘powerless to resist’ when Fledge kisses him.⁷³ The sequence as described from Sir Hugo’s first-person perspective could easily be re-interpreted as Fledge coming to his master’s aid as he convulses in a stroke, supporting him as he falls, and attempting to save Sir Hugo with the ‘kiss of life’, or Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). Sir Hugo’s delusion and homophobia distort Fledge’s intention in order to throw suspicion on Fledge and away from himself.

It is also possible that Sir Hugo constructs a narrative in which Fledge pursues Harriet to distract the reader from his own lust for Fledge’s wife Doris. He alludes to this when he refers to ‘the dinosaur-bird connection, and the possibility of a kinship far more intimate’. He had earlier described Mrs Fledge as a crow, while he is associated with the dinosaur because of his research about dinosaurs.⁷⁴ His sexual appetite for Mrs Fledge is expressed in gastronomical terms. He is ‘well satisfied’ with her cooking, and enjoys her looking flustered as he asks what she plans to tempt him with at luncheon.⁷⁵ His repressed desires for Mrs Fledge find release in an act of masturbation, which he theorises as a displacement of the frustration at being prevented from presenting a lecture he was scheduled to deliver.⁷⁶ He later admits how Doris becomes his ‘source of life’ and how he had ‘come to crave and adore the touch of her hands on my body’.⁷⁷ What he defers telling us till later is that Fledge discovers him molesting Doris. This incident is also described in displaced sexual imagery. We are told,

⁷¹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 164–65.

⁷² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 165.

⁷³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 133–34.

⁷⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 11, 21.

⁷⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 15–17.

⁷⁶ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 42–43, 64.

⁷⁷ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 107.

Sardine tins, as you know, are opened with a sort of key with a slit in it, into which one inserts a small metal tongue that protrudes from the edge of the tin; by turning the key, one peels away the lid of the tin and reveals the oily treasures within.⁷⁸

With Sir Hugo turning the key to open a sardine tin, the blood on Doris's apron and the repeated mention of cocktail sausages, the imagery is obvious. What is less evident is the significance of the detail that this happens 'just after the first snow'; it was on the night of 'the first snow of the year', specifically dated 15 December, that Sir Hugo comments on the instinctual 'predilection we have for constructing effigies of ourselves' and expresses his hatred for Fledge and his 'secret lusts'.⁷⁹ It is telling that, in terms of the narrative structure, it is also at this time of the year that Sir Hugo begins fantasising about Fledge and Sir Hugo's wife Harriet.⁸⁰

While it is pertinent to the narrative of *The Grotesque* that the reader focuses on Fledge's scheme to take over Crook, this is a red herring, distracting the reader from Sir Hugo's involvement in Sidney's murder. If Sir Hugo could project his scandalous desires for his butler's wife onto an attraction that Fledge has for Harriet, it is equally possible that he might displace his murder of the spineless future son-in-law he abhors onto Fledge. His proposal is that Fledge kills Sidney because Fledge is being blackmailed by Sidney, as they are having a homosexual relationship. He conjectures, 'I *think* I'd seen Sidney taking Fledge into his arms to kiss him' [emphasis in original].⁸¹ On the one hand, his imaginative account of how Fledge takes Sidney's body into the marsh is uncannily described in great detail. He later dreams of 'a Mesozoic swamp' in which his *Phlegmosaurus* attacks a brontosaurus calf, a subconscious revelation of his part in the murder.⁸² The gradual decomposition of Sidney's corpse parallels the decaying infestation of Sir Hugo's *Phelgmosaurus* bones, which are indicative of Sir Hugo's own degeneration. On the other hand, there is little objective evidence to validate Sir Hugo's accusations against Fledge. Besides the sneers and looks that Sir Hugo imagines, he admits that Fledge shows little sign of his involvement in Sidney's murder.

⁷⁸ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 128.

⁷⁹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 127, 64–65.

⁸⁰ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 69.

⁸¹ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 48.

⁸² McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 92. The mammal-dinosaur comparison alludes to the relationship between Fledge and Sir Hugo. The account of Rupert Brooke's death from a mosquito infection and the anecdote of the pike and the cow have analogical significance to the narrative.

Sir Hugo also evades the topic when Cleo tells him that Sidney is missing.⁸³ His description of George as having a ‘strong uncomplicated nature’ characterises him as a devoted lackey who would dutifully dispose of the corpse.⁸⁴ Despite facing death at the gallows, George does not retract his final confession of Sir Hugo’s role in the murder. By extension then, the plot weaving together homosexuality, blackmail, and murder implicates Sir Hugo, and not Fledge. Sir Hugo projects his own frailties onto Fledge, calling him ‘a monster [...] a doubly inverted creature [...] a paranoid schizophrenic [...] [and] a homosexual’, who is ‘clinically insane’ and ‘suffers from an acute sense of inferiority’.⁸⁵ This train of thought is self-referential, especially since it follows immediately after Sir Hugo’s lingering description of Fledge’s penis. It appears that his repressed jealousy of the blossoming relationship between Fledge and Sidney may have caused him to commit murder. By living in self-denial, Sir Hugo attains some sense of equilibrium as he now only has himself to live with.

A similar destabilising of narrative authority occurs in Nolan’s film. The audience is faced with a crisis of belief as our interpretation of events hinges on whether Teddy, arguably the shadiest character in the movie, is trustworthy. At the end of the movie, which is the chronological beginning of the plot, Teddy reveals that Leonard’s wife survived the assault and that it was Leonard’s wife who had diabetes, and not Sammy’s, as Leonard had previously believed. He then reveals that he ‘was the cop assigned to your wife’s *death*’ [emphasis added] and that the real John G had already been killed, except that Leonard no longer remembers it.⁸⁶ Teddy’s propensity to modify his version of events for his own purposes causes further uncertainty. If what Teddy is saying were true, then Leonard resolves to kill Teddy because he wants to continue living in his world of make-believe, which is the only stable reality he knows. Unwilling to exchange sanity for truth or fact for instability, in this version of events, he has to do whatever it takes to maintain his hold on reality. As Teddy says, ‘So you lie to yourself to be happy. Nothing wrong with that — we all do. Who cares if there’s a few little details you’d rather not remember?’⁸⁷

As a result, his present self creates a situation for his future self to solve when he says to himself as he records Teddy’s license plate number, ‘Can I just let myself forget what you just told me? You’re a John G? Fine, then you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be

⁸³ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 37.

⁸⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 26.

⁸⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 131.

⁸⁶ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 221. In the movie, Teddy says he was assigned to ‘your wife’s case’ which makes it more uncertain whether Leonard’s wife dies in the assault.

⁸⁷ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 218.

happy? In your case, Teddy ... yes, I will.’⁸⁸ The presumption is that he intentionally does this knowing full well that he will not remember his actions. Like Sir Hugo, Leonard turns in on himself. As Tubrett argues, ‘Leonard’s way of coping with his past is to dis-member it (as opposed to a remembering) and to reconstruct it according to a paradigm that minimizes his accountability and maximizes his motivation.’⁸⁹ His paranoia that ‘someone’s fucking with me. Trying to get me to kill the wrong guy’ is vindicated — but that ‘someone’ is himself.⁹⁰

The layers of simulacra in *Memento* promise a sense of closure but only present a mirage of reality that persistently defers definition and conclusion. Leonard’s drive to deceive himself is demonstrated when he hires a social escort to re-create the night of the attack, complete with props. Besides this being a vain attempt to relive and reaffirm the last memory of his wife, it opens up the possibility of altering the outcome of that night, using the social escort as a stand-in for his wife. Our understanding of the murder is further complicated by the way in which the movie blurs the boundary between objective reality and subjective imagination in its depiction of Sammy as Leonard’s double. In the earliest scene, Sammy is sitting in a mental institution and for a split second he is replaced by Leonard. As Teddy presents his version of events at the end of the film, the audience is first shown a frame of Leonard’s wife opening her eye, presumably after the attack, suggesting that she may have survived it. The audience is unsure if this is a reconstructed memory, fantastical imagination, or a visual representation of Teddy’s narrative. We then see a shot of Leonard’s wife sitting on the same couch on which Sammy’s wife sat earlier in the film. A shot of Leonard administering insulin to his wife appears to indicate that Teddy is telling the truth but in a later scene, Leonard is seen merely to be pinching her thigh. The audience is no longer sure which scene, if any, depicts the truth.

Lastly, we see a scene with Leonard’s wife resting on his chest, again suggesting that she could have survived the assault. On his chest, there is a tattoo which reads ‘I’ve done it’ in the space which he was reserving for a tattoo that will remind him that he had taken his revenge. However, this space on his chest is blank throughout the film, implying that this scene is either a future event or an imagined one, thus throwing doubt on the reality of the other extraneous scenes we have seen. Leonard fears that he might have done something

⁸⁸ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 224.

⁸⁹ Dion Tubrett, “‘So where are you?’ On *Memento*, Memory and the Sincerity of Self-Deception’, *Cineaction*, 56 (September 2001), 3–10 (p. 8).

⁹⁰ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 143.

wrong that he cannot remember and alludes that he may have killed his own wife when he asks, ‘What if I’ve done something like Sammy?’⁹¹

The answer lies in a past narrative, a back-story, which is inaccessible to both Leonard and the audience. Anxious that the simulacrum of his mind will consume the reality of his world without him even knowing it, Leonard has to reassert his grasp on reality constantly, and concomitantly reassure himself of his sanity, even if it may mean blocking out the truth of the past. He assures himself, ‘I have to believe in the world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can’t remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world’s still there.’⁹² The constant need to take his bearings and re-orientate himself informs us that the question with which the movie begins and ends — ‘Where are you?/Where was I?’ — is not just a geographical question, but an ontological one.⁹³

Conclusion

Both Sir Hugo and Leonard are ‘trapped in a false world of shadows and phantoms [where] the borders and boundaries of the real and the fantastic have become blurred, unreliable, faulty [and] order is crumbling’.⁹⁴ Their narratives are in an ‘interstitial [...] in-between’ state between words and thoughts, fact and imagination, and truth and deception.⁹⁵ As Sir Hugo says, ‘It thus becomes my task to *allow for* this tendency [...] to doubt the possibility of constructing any version of reality that is not skewed in advance by the projections, denials, and impostures of the mind’ [emphasis in original].⁹⁶

Signs and language are subject to context, misinterpretation, indefiniteness, and slippage. The false resolutions of the texts open the narratives themselves to scrutiny. Is Fledge having an affair with Harriet in his bid to usurp Crook? Did he attack Sir Hugo? Who killed Sidney? Is George’s accusation of Sir Hugo reliable? Was Fledge homosexual or is Sir Hugo repressed? The same irresolution plagues *Memento*. Is Teddy telling the truth? Was Leonard’s wife killed in the assault? Is Sammy Jankis a projection of Leonard? Individual audience members may have pet theories but ‘this is all conjectural’.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Nolan, *Memento*, p. 200.

⁹² Nolan, *Memento*, p. 225.

⁹³ Nolan, *Memento*, pp. 106, 149.

⁹⁴ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 80.

⁹⁵ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 144.

⁹⁶ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 61.

⁹⁷ McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 69.

In *Memento*, ‘the colour narrative draws the viewer back through time with the misleading promise of arriving at a redemptive temporal and causal origin.’⁹⁸ Instead, the final scene problematises rather than solves the external trajectory of plot and the internal complication of character. A memento connotes loss, absence, and longing for an experience ‘which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup’.⁹⁹ Leonard’s entire body is a memento that exhibits how even tattooed text inscribed on the flesh of the human body is unreliable and unreadable. The irresolution of the text suggests that we will never know the answers. Rebecca Pope observes that ‘no matter how strong the appearance of closure, endings in gothic fiction rarely provide resolution; they are merely places where we begin to re-enter the text’.¹⁰⁰

In the end, any logocentric reading of *Memento* and *The Grottesque* is misconceived if seen as definitive. Encumbered by illusion, delusion, and allusion, the viewer or reader is uncertain ‘whether there is a core reality of “what really happened” under the layers of spectacle and fabrication’.¹⁰¹ Instead of revealing meaning, any interpretation of both *Memento* and *The Grottesque* is automatically undermined by the texts’ own problematisation of the notion of objectivity. Moreover, it reveals the reader/viewer’s own need for order and closure. In *Memento* and *The Grottesque*, the mindfreaks have divorced themselves from an unbearable reality, choosing instead to inhabit a reality which they have constructed. In creating a history that revolves around themselves, Leonard and Sir Hugo seek ultimately not to remember, but to forget.

⁹⁸ Little, p. 71.

⁹⁹ Little, p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ Rebecca A. Pope, ‘Writing and Biting in *Dracula*’, *Literature Interpretation Theory* 1 (1990), 199–216 (p. 214).

¹⁰¹ *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (New York: Arnold, 1997), p. 56.