

Christopher Nolan

INTERVIEWED BY RENFREU NEFF & DANIEL ARGENT
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Thirty-year-old Londoner Christopher Nolan gained critical notice in the U.S. with his debut feature *Following*, which premiered at the 1999 New Directors/New Films co-sponsored by The Film Society of Lincoln Center and New York's MoMA. Picked up for distribution by the aptly named Zeitgeist, it went on to successful engagements in New York and Los Angeles. Nolan returns now with *Memento*, an ambitious "dis-linear" (Nolan's term) thriller dealt to us in reverse chronology by a protagonist (Guy Pearce) coping with a trauma-induced condition that prevents him from making new memories. *Memento* also stars, in abrasive counterpoint, Joe Pantoliano as the wily Teddy, who's capable of conjuring up enough memories to go around; and Carrie-Anne Moss in an uber-noir touch, a babe who forgot to play either dumb or blonde.

Based on a short story by his brother Jonathan ("Memento Mori," published in the March 2001 issue of *Esquire*), Nolan wrote *Memento* as a film that could be shot on a low budget, and principal photography was completed in twenty-five days. The script made quite an impression while circulating in Hollywood, but Nolan never intended it as a writing sample. As he told interviewer Debra Eckerling in *Script* magazine, "A lot of people in town were very interested in the script, but were afraid to make it.... It was always intended as something I absolutely had to make." *Memento* would be accepted into dramatic competition at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, and at press time Nolan had won the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award.

Since moving to Los Angeles three years ago, Nolan has written one screenplay on assignment: an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's novel *The Keys to the Street* for Fox Searchlight. And then, of course, there's *Insomnia*. Nolan is directing Hillary Seitz's adaptation of the 1997 Norwegian thriller, which will once again plunge Nolan into noir territory. This time the director is follow-

ing sleepless homicide detective Will Dormer as he tracks a murderer in Alaska. When Will makes a fatal mistake, he soon finds himself blackmailed by the very man he's trying to catch. Nolan has also co-written *Batman Begins* (with David Goyer).

Having already stirred up a vigorous barrage of chat room discussion through a cleverly manipulated promo web site www.otnemem.com (mememem spelled backwards), and generating a lot of positive buzz at the 2001 Sundance film festival, *Memento*—though something completely different—is the first thriller since Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* to qualify for the “smart and smarter” genre category. Like Singer, Nolan began his career with homemade mini-epics at the age of ten. Later, while studying English literature at University College in London, Nolan experimented with numerous three- or four-minute 16mm films. Of *The Usual Suspects*, Nolan says, “I enjoyed it a lot. Actually, it's a film that my brother and I have had many spirited debates about. I was surprised that so many people have compared *Memento* to it, until someone explained what it is: it may not be the same type of story, but it's the kind of film that you see with friends and want to talk about afterward.” We'll all be talking about *Memento* for some time to come.

Bryan Singer has said of The Usual Suspects that he'd cross-referenced his characters' interactions and plot twists on a computer. How did you keep Memento's complicated plot under control?

I tend to do most of it in my head. But what I found particularly useful—since I had read the script in the order that everything appears on the screen, because I wanted it to have a somewhat conventional underpinning beneath the complex structure, or actually wanted a fairly conventional rhythm to what happens when—I wrote it from page one to page 125, and when I finished it to my satisfaction, I would go back and reorder it the way it is on screen to check the logic of it. Then when other people got involved, particularly the actors, they provided a very tight logic filter on the script. Guy Pearce in particular, because he's an incredibly meticulous performer. He won't do anything that doesn't make sense to him, so if there was anything that didn't quite add up he would question it, and if we discovered an illogicality, we would come up with a solution for it together. He helped enormously with the detail of the logic of the piece.

Well, it's so tightly wound, and there's the narrative displacement.

There's certainly the unreliable narrator.

What about the short story that it was based on?

The short story was written by my brother Jonathan. I think he had a rough draft of it, but he told it to me verbally while we were driving from Chicago to L.A. I asked if I could go ahead and write a screenplay of it, while he kept writing his story, because it was taking him a long time to get it into the form he wanted, and he said fine. We both agreed that the most interesting

approach to his concept by far was to tell the story from the first person point of view, putting the audience or reader right into the mind of the protagonist. My solution to that, which took a while to come up with, was to tell the story backwards so that it denied the audience the information that the protagonist is denied. I asked myself how do I tell a first person story through the eyes of someone who, when he meets someone, does not know when or how they've met [before] or whether that person should be trusted? The answer was to put the audience in that position.

Jonathan's short story takes a slightly different approach and makes for an interesting comparison to the screenplay. In narrative terms, one of the things that I found very satisfactory with what we've done together was convincing him to do the web site for the film and to try to provide some further information for the world of the film, a kind of three-dimensional narrative where people can view the information in whatever order seems most interesting and follow threads of thought, using items and objects from the film and incorporating some of the ideas for the backstory from the short story that we weren't able to use in the film. The web site provides an interesting link between the world of the film and the world of his short story.

Let's go back and talk about your previous film, Following. Did you have a completed script when you started shooting that film?

Yes, I did. One of the differences between the two films was the approach I took, because they're both non-linear, or dis-linear, structures if you like, because *Memento* is pretty linear, it's just backwards. With *Following* I determined the structure that I wanted to use, then I wrote the script chronologically and reordered the scenes according to the structure I wanted. One of the reasons I wrote *Memento* differently was that I had to do a tremendous amount of rewriting in order to get the flow that I wanted within its fragmented structure. With *Following* I had a pretty tight script in terms of dialogue, but if you compare the original script to what we filmed, the script was developing all along to accommodate the way we had to shoot it. We knew this going in, the film was shot sort of documentary style: 16mm, using mostly available light, and we shot one day a week. It took us about a year to finish all of it. The dialogue is very close to the finished film, but a lot of the stage directions and indications of locations have been changed because quite often we wouldn't find out where we'd be shooting until the day before. So it's kind of fun to go back and look at the way the script was written to accommodate that production method. I guess you'd call it a modular script, since it was very easy to cut scenes from it because they didn't connect in a conventional way, but that was always my intention in putting the film together: to accommodate the spontaneous way that we were going to have to shoot.

What was it that attracted you to the story of Memento? And is Leonard's "condition" a real condition?

It is a real condition—anterior grade memory loss—but there are other names

for it. What attracted me to the initial concept was the metaphorical potential that this condition provides, where you have someone who can't make new memories but knows exactly what he's looking for and what he's trying to do. And the concept of revenge; what the inability to remember does to the whole idea of revenge. To me, it raises all kinds of very interesting ideas about whether revenge exists in any real sense outside of your own head, or whether it's your own personal satisfaction and whether it has any value outside of that.

I was interested in taking this extreme situation and using it as a filter or prism through which to view some familiar tropes of film noir, because, as you say, it's very difficult to write a fresh thriller these days. Combinations have been done, but I felt that we had a situation here that would allow us to freshen up and re-awaken some of the neuroses behind the familiar elements. You know, the betrayal, the double-cross, the femme fatale—all of these things function very powerfully in the way they were intended in the old film noir by exaggerating our fears and insecurities. I felt that by taking this particular approach and filtering it through this concept, we would be able to reawaken some of the confusion and uncertainty and ambiguity that those types of character reversals used to have, but lost because we've come to expect these kinds of surprises. I think what we've managed to do, certainly what we were trying to do by using that structure, was to try to see things through that perspective. I think that allows us to exaggerate the confusion and fear and uncertainty that any good noir protagonist needs to go through. Allowing that to be created by his own mind was a very exciting concept to me.

You've talked about Memento being about the futility of revenge. That theme is brought to the forefront when Leonard asks, "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?" Can Leonard heal, or is he trapped in the cycle?

I think maybe the answer to that is contained in the question itself. To a certain extent Leonard can feel time, but not consciously. One of the more challenging aspects of the film is that while it embraces Leonard's view of his own condition, the events of the narrative question those as well. His view of the narrative is very, very simple. It's the one-line pitch you would give of the film: the difference between short-term and long-term memory. Short-term memory you absorb an habitual behavior that you translate into unconscious routine. The story presents Leonard's view of these things as being simple, but then the events of the narrative call those things very much into question.

The issue of his feeling time is very much one of those areas where it's probably not as simple as he's saying, or as certain psychologists would say, about how the brain works, because at some level he is able to feel a certain staleness to his situation. If he is aware on some level of the degree to which he is tattooed and not completely surprised by this, there must be some awareness of the passage of time, even though consciously he has no awareness of exactly how much time has passed which is why he's an interesting character. That's one of the challenging areas of the film: the disparity between his view of his

own condition—which is how we present it in the film—and what we see unfold, and the tension that creates. Which suggests a more realistic degree of complexity to his situation and to these issues of memory and identity.

If Leonard Shelby can't form new memories since his head injury, how does he know he has "this condition"?

He knows he has this condition through what he refers to as conditioning. In the course of my research, I found out that there are all these different types of memory in different parts of the brain, used to store different types of information. One of the most powerful is habitual memory—learning through repetition. Somebody like Leonard has to have enough focus to make himself continually and habitually concentrate on the idea that he has no short-term memory. That's where the "Remember Sammy Jankis" tattoo comes into play, in order to remind him of that story. [Protagonist Leonard investigated Jankis's insurance claim prior to becoming injured.] It was very important that the tattoo be in a place Leonard was constantly seeing, so it was on his hand rather than on his body as the other tattoos are.

For example, if you have no short-term memory it's possible to learn how to play the piano—you just wouldn't remember taking the lessons. And you wouldn't remember you knew how to play the piano. You would just sit down and start to play. What we aimed for in the film was a balance for when Guy [Pearce, who plays Leonard] takes his shirt off and sees the tattoos. There is this moment of discovery, but it's not totally fresh. He kind of knows the tattoos are there: when he's in the bathroom and he sees that it says "THE FACTS" on his wrist, he kind of knows what that is. But he doesn't know how he knows. What I liked about having that assumption of instinctive behavior, that assumption of knowledge, is that it implies quite a lot. It implies that what we're seeing is a later stage, a later cycle, in his story.

Do you think the genre allows for more three-dimensional characters?

Certainly the crime story does. Looking back on, say, the novels of Jim Thompson and how that's been applied to film, for me, there's a very strong form of characterization in the noir/thriller genre. It relates back to the historical model of character always having to be defined through action. In all other genres of cinema it sort of comes down to people expecting characterization to come through dialogue, or, you know, characters talking about who they were ten years before, or what's happened to them in their lives. The thriller is the one genre where it's absolutely demanded that character be defined through action. You want to be surprised by certain characters. You want to be finding out through what somebody does who they really were. To me, that's a strong approach to characterization and it's quite attractive.

What about the non-linear structure? Do you find that better suited for the noir and thriller genre than others?

It's funny; that's another reason I've worked in this genre. Certainly the

thriller is the genre in which the audience is most accepting of non-linear devices such as the flashback, such as a character sitting down to tell a story and flashing back within that. It's familiar in that genre and it works very well there, so the audience is very accepting of it, whereas it's probably harder for an audience to accept it in, say, a love story or a drama just centering around a person's love life.

I've seen Betrayal on stage but not the film made from it, and I know that certain things can be done in theatre that would put a movie audience to sleep. Betrayal isn't fragmented or non-linear. It's simply told in reverse chronology, and it works very well on stage.

In film terms, I think the thriller audience is looking for that kind of unconventional structure or experimentation more than in other genres. I can't speak for other filmmakers, and I've no idea how it would apply to someone like Bryan Singer, but I know from my own point of view, I'm only thirty years old, so I haven't experienced all that life has to offer. The thriller provides a very effective genre for someone a bit younger to work with, because you can take the fears, insecurities, and hopes from your everyday life and make them interesting enough to write about, and you can elevate it to a more universal audience by pushing it into the realm of melodrama and into the thriller genre by exaggerating all those fears that you feel.

How did you keep Memento's complicated plot straight? Talk some about your writing technique here.

Unlike *Following*, I wrote *Memento* on a computer, which certainly made it easier to keep things in check as to how it would read in the chronological sense. Basically I felt that the strongest approach I could take, once I'd figured out the structural conceit, was to sit down and imagine what I wanted to see on the screen, as it would appear on the screen. One of the reasons I was able to do that was that even though the film is seemingly very complex, the story is actually very simple, and that's part of the point of the movie: we're taking a relatively simple story and filtering it through somebody's very unusual way of perceiving the world. That perceptual distortion of not being able to make new memories was always very interesting to me, far more so than a conventional amnesia story whereby somebody is making new memories, but they don't know who they are. They could be anybody and they don't know what's happened in the past. This is kind of a complete new version of that, where you have someone who knows everything about himself, all the objective information that's supposed to tell us who we are, but he can't connect that with his present self. That was a fascinating conundrum, something I hadn't really seen before. So the whole dynamic of the script is aimed at taking a really very simple story and putting the audience through the perceptual distortion that Leonard suffers, thereby making this simple story seem incredibly complex and challenging, the way it would be for someone with this condition. Which isn't to say that

there aren't all kinds of complexities at the end of the story, but the basic plotting is actually very simple.

At what stage did you start showing it to producers?

I had a very long first draft. I wouldn't even call it a first draft because it wasn't really something I was prepared to send out. This working draft was very long, about 170 pages, and it was a lot more complicated.

This was based on what your brother had told you while driving cross-country?

Yes. He'd sent me an early draft of his story, a very short draft, but I sat down and wrote the script from it. I showed it to my wife and brother and a few people, and a guy named Aaron Ryder, who works for Newmarket Films, which actually wound up making the film. He's a good friend of mine, and I showed it to him, saying this isn't the real first draft, but can you give me your thoughts on it. He gave me some fantastic notes, which made me realize that it definitely had to be a lot shorter. I kind of knew this anyway—shorter and simpler. I got it down to about 127 pages before I officially showed it to any agents and producers. I got an agent through it and talked to various producers, but then Aaron stepped in and New Market optioned the script just as *Following* was being shown at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1998.

Then you've been working on it a long time.

It seems like a long time. Actually, compared to most films, it all happened pretty fast. I moved to LA in July of 1997, that was when my brother told me the story in the car. I then took another six months to kind of think about it and start writing, then I guess we first optioned it in 1998 and started looking for who we could cast in it.

It must have gone through a few drafts. Talk about the rewrite process.

It was good, because I had a big bulky first draft, and I felt like I'd cracked a lot of the more challenging issues, particularly the structural issue, so I felt very solid in terms of the bigger issues. It was really a process of combining things, taking two scenes and putting them together. The film deals a lot with hotel and motel rooms, and I think in the first draft I had him staying at three different hotels and all the different rooms that he'd gone through and come back to. I wound up having to combine these and get it down to one motel in which he's been conned into renting two different rooms. That kind of simplification and continually trying to make it simpler and simpler, because as a writer, particularly in the thriller genre, you have so much advantage over the audience. You have a year to write the thing, whereas the audience has ninety minutes to digest it. You have such a tremendous advantage, you have to be a little careful about not putting too much in there. I mean, I think *Memento* is an incredibly dense film, and people are certainly finding it very challenging. The finished film is the simplest version I ever had.

Did the producers have any significant notes?

Yes, they did, particularly in regards to the end. We wound up talking a lot to the producers about how much exposition we really wanted at the end of the film and how much detail we wanted to go into in terms of the bigger questions, because in my brother's story and in certain earlier drafts of the screenplay, I did not go too far in addressing certain questions that the film does address at the end.

In talking to the producers it became clear to me that I could actually enhance the concepts I was dealing with by providing more information about some of the big questions—you know, who killed Leonard's wife and that sort of thing. What became clear to me in talking to the producers and the actors—I talked a lot with Guy Pearce and Joe Pantoliano about the final scene—is that because of the film's structure, because of the terms of the film in which the audience is really forced to make a lot of decisions and to question everything they're seeing, providing exposition at the end actually makes it less clear and more complex in an interesting way. At least to me, interesting, because the audience is being given potential answers to questions, but really isn't in any way able to judge the truth about any of it.

As a result of talking to the producers and thinking about the issues, the final scene between Guy and Joe became more and more like the conventional scene at the end of a thriller where the bad guy essentially says to the hero, "I'm going to kill you anyway, so I may as well tell you, et cetera..." To me, it's great because he can tell Leonard whatever he wants, because he's not going to remember it anyway. It's the perfect reason to give out all this exposition, because the audience is put in a position of hanging on Teddy's every word and saying, "Do I believe this or not?" What's interesting is that we take this character that Joey has done in other movies—the unreliable, mischievous friend: Do I trust him or not?—and he becomes the character the audience is focused on in terms of do we trust him? Do we believe what he's saying or not? For me that's a very frightening concept and really a kind of interesting one. It's a great way of taking those things you've seen in other thrillers and making them important. I love what Joey did in that scene, in a way that it's usually not played, and is absolutely crucial to the audience's interpretation of the end of the movie. He tells Leonard a lot of things he doesn't remember and isn't necessarily going to want to believe.

You also use a healthy dose of black comedy to leaven Memento's darkness.

These situations are inherently funny, in a very, very dark sense. And hopefully, in creating the reality of it, the things you might find funny about that situation will naturally emerge, without your really having to push them. I'm very pleased that people see the funny side of things. It seemed essential to me—and I talked with Guy a lot about this before we started shooting—that this had to be a guy with some sense of humor about his own situation, otherwise he just wouldn't be able to function. That seemed an essential survival mechanism. And that Guy is able to push us in that direction so that

we don't feel, ever, that we're laughing too much at him, that we're viewing him from a cruel perspective. We're laughing with him. That's very important. That makes it funny rather than tragic the whole time. You need that lightness in the script, because it's such grim material.

We're shown little of Leonard's past, other than the fact that he was an insurance investigator. We see little of his wife before she's killed. What is the drug-dealing connection? Is that just a red herring?

It's a question of putting the audience in sync with the protagonist because this is a criminal activity, a nefarious activity. [Teddy] is creating a suspicious appearance that Leonard is misinterpreting. He's questioning and misinterpreting connections between [others] that he can relate to his own story, but as we find out at the end, they probably don't. So it's kind of a red herring, but a very important one.

What does the use of repetition add to the story?

On a very prosaic level, we use it to express structure and try to orient the audience. As the film progresses, what I've tried to do with some of the repetition is try, either in a humorous way or in a more serious way, to show how the same situation can be viewed very differently, depending on what information you already know up to that point. One example of that would be where he's searching for a pen and Natalie comes in with a bruised face, and he offers to help her out. We see him searching for a pen and then reacting to her entrance in two very, very different ways. I felt that was an important way to express the absolute confusion and uncertainty that he's going through, because the same scene could be interpreted in so many different ways. This is where my interest in the why rather than what, or the relationship of why-to-what, is really fundamental to the movie. At the end of the movie you can show exactly the same thing that the audience has seen before and have them interpret it differently. Like when he skids to a halt in front of the tattoo parlor, and also through the repetition of content, like him looking at his tattoo "Remember Sammy Jankis": that can play very differently from the first time the audience sees it to the final time. And Teddy provides another interpretation of why he keeps referring to that tattoo from the one that Leonard has given us.

Another example of my use of repetition is Leonard's constantly saying that he never said that Sammy Jankis was lying. The first time he says it, it clearly relates to feelings of guilt, and we interpret those feelings in a particular way relating to the story. Later, when he says it to Teddy, we interpret his feelings of guilt rather differently. Repetition helps to highlight the cyclical nature of the story, and to me, that's what the film is aiming toward. It's a way of emphatically pointing something out within the story to help prepare the audience for larger repetitions relating to the murders. [The idea is] to draw the audience to an understanding of the story as being essentially cyclical in nature, so there are exact repetitions, and then there are echoes which suggest the cycle, and

they are intended to work together so that what happens at the end doesn't come as a complete surprise, but seems logical given the terms of the story.

What about the story of Sammy Jankis? Aside from providing us with information about Leonard's past, what is the purpose for the use of this device?

I had always seen the Sammy Jankis story as providing a parallel to Leonard's. It also provided Leonard with the information he would need to cope with his condition. When I conceived this character to exist as he does, it seemed to me that Leonard would need a lot of knowledge about his condition before he actually succumbed to it. So I constructed the a character who had investigated somebody else claiming to have it, and, therefore, had researched it and had knowledge relating to what it was somewhere locked up in his memory.

There's a quote early on in the film regarding memory not being perfect or even reliable. What does this set up for the audience?

For me, it sets up things that come into play later in the film, which is that it's a very bald statement from the protagonist whose memories we are trusting. He himself sits there and says "You can't trust memory. It's an interpretation, not a record." I felt that as the script was almost bound to start calling into question certain aspects of memory, including his long-term memory and his visualization of things, which blurred the distinction between visualization and memory. To play fair with the audience, you had to have somebody say this in a bald way—not just to have somebody else say it, but to have Leonard himself say it. Which is a nice irony, because once again, it's the disparity between his awareness of himself and his reliance on his perception of the world, so [it seemed like] a nice way of playing fair with the audience, in a sense. Just saying here it is: he's saying it himself.

You've studiously avoided giving away what I call the "objective truth" to the questions the film raises (i.e., Who killed Leonard's wife? Has Leonard found the murderer? What, if anything, of what Teddy discloses at the end of the film is true?). Is there an objective truth in the film that can be derived using strong logic and/or repeat viewings? Or are there only subjective truths?

It's very important for people to understand that I had to know, in my own mind, what the supposedly "objective" facts were, and that I be able to talk to Guy about that. I wouldn't be able to create a subjective experience that contained multiple interpretations without hanging it on a consistent story. But—and we felt this very strongly—the ideas, the terms of the storytelling, are very extreme. They have to be justified, and have to be supported, by the entire film. The terms of the story are that we try as hard as possible to put the audience in the position of somebody with no short-term memory. I felt very strongly that we had to remain true to that for the whole story, and not do what so many films succumb to: twenty minutes before the end of the film they sell out the terms of the storytelling and resolve things in a conventional sense, however daring they've been to that point.

It was very important to never fully depart from the subjective terms of the storytelling that we set up at the beginning. What that means is, the film does not present objective truth. It presents subjective experience. And the audience is left very much in the same position as the protagonist: the audience is in possession of all the facts by the end of the film, but it's very much open to subjective interpretation. Just like real life. What's interesting about that is that films in general are so often used for the cathartic experience of seeing a universe, or experiencing events in a controlled universe, where the objective truth is presented in a way that we never have access to it in everyday life. In everyday life, all trust and objective truth is a complete leap of faith, as it has to be for Leonard. And that's what makes Leonard interesting: he is all of us, and he is a very useful character for highlighting this very human dilemma. We have to take so much in life on trust. We have to trust our own assessment of what objective truth is. Films are comfortable to watch because the filmmaker plays God and presents the objective truth of everything—if not the whole way through, then certainly at the end. And what we were trying to do was not do that. Present the facts, but present them in such a fashion that you have to interpret them very much through the eyes of the protagonist.

You've mentioned that you have a visual memory, and sometimes the truth in Memento is the matter of action versus words. Is this visual vs. verbal aspect something that you consciously brought to the script while you were writing it?

It was probably subconscious. By the time I finished writing *Memento*, it was apparent that the different devices I was using to make up for Leonard's memory were either visual or verbal, either written or photographic or tattoos. So you present those to people when the devices are at odds with each other and see what people choose to believe. What divides people along the question of whether Teddy is lying or not is whether they favor their visual memory or their verbal memory, if you like. By visual I mean you've spent the whole film seeing this photograph that says, "Don't believe his lies" underneath it. That's continually hammered home to you. What he says at the end [about Leonard's quest, and Sammy Jankis] is clearly at odds with that. It's a question of which type of memory you favor, which you think has more weight. It seems to be an element in the way people sift through the information of the film.

Does following one of these paths (visual vs. verbal) lead to the objective truth in Memento?

[Laughs] I hope not. Certainly we were trying to construct it in a way so that it isn't that simple. I guess that's all I would want to say on that.

There seems to be no deciding evidence one way or another.

Yeah...we've tried to keep that balance. Personally, I think the way the film sits is this: there's a lot of factual, or supposedly factual, information in the

denouement of the film that suggests different interpretations to different people. It's become clear to me that my view of what happened is definitely contained in the film. Certain people watch the film and tap into that very easily. It was important that, on some level, my view of the facts be in there, but that the terms of the storytelling be such that it never supersedes the viewer's own interpretation. So it's not a question of anything can happen—something did happen [laughs]. And that's a crucial distinction. The degree to which you believe it's imperceptible to the protagonist affects the degree to which we wanted to present it to the audience. My view is in the film, but I as the filmmaker never attempted to put any authoritative stamp of approval on that one view.

That sounds like something that you picked up in your work as a cameraman on the corporate training videos, when you told Newsweek that the videos taught, "The first rule is you never lie. Obfuscate? By all means."

[Laughs] Yeah, well, that's absolutely true. No, you can't lie. That's just the thing. You have a narrator who is questionable, and the terms of his storytelling are questionable. That's fascinating. But it's only fascinating if he is unreliable for an interesting reason, and for a reason that's organic to the story. In the case of Leonard, that's very much the case. If I as the filmmaker am lying to the audience—if the protagonist is lying or dreaming, and that's the reason for his unreliability—that's not really very interesting. But in the case of Leonard, he can't form new memories, and he's been cast adrift in this very peculiar way, and that's what distorts his narration.

There is a touch of the potential dream in the "I've Done It" shots toward the end, which you've said may or may not be something that Leonard is imagining.

Dream and imagination are very different things, you know? It's not presented as reality, necessarily. We were very careful with this. All the images like that are presented very clearly as things that pass through his mind. Which is an important distinction: they're not scenes in the film, they are presented as mental images. It was very important that the film be clear about the terms of the storytelling.

I'll give you an example. Toward the end we present the same image two different ways: we present the image of him pinching his wife's thigh, and injecting his wife's thigh with insulin. And both, cinematically, are given the same weight. They last the same length of time, they're shot in exactly the same way, they're cut in exactly the same. So we quite explicitly specify that we're showing a mental image. They can't both be true [laughs]. We're pretty clear about our terms. If you view the film with that in mind, you come up with some interesting relationships between the mental images in his mind and how they're used there in the story. Particularly the images of his wife.

In one of the last shots of Leonard he's bare-chested and looking in a mirror and has just a few tattoos—that's the end of the film, the beginning of the story. The

tattoo reads "I've done it," but this tattoo doesn't seem to exist in the rest of the film. This has caused a lot of chat on the Internet, a lot of discussion about the tattoo, and what's interesting is the different ways people interpret it. What interests me is that [many of them] in their own minds, have put together two different parts of the film, which, in a way, is perfect, because what actually happens is that earlier in the film he's bare chested looking in a mirror with Natalie, and she says, "What's that space on your chest?" There's no tattoo, and he says, "That's for when I've found him." At the end, we see an image of Leonard with his wife on the bed. He's not looking in the mirror—it's completely different. And there's a tattoo saying "I've done it." I don't want to go into too much detail about what that is, but different arguments have centered around whether or not it's in his mind or whether it's a memory.

What layers did you add as a director that you felt shouldn't or couldn't go in when you were writing the script?

Some of the mental imagery to which I was referring was specified in the script. But it was very clear to me that it was going to require a good degree of experimentation in the edit suite to determine exactly the rhythm and the frequency of those visual elements that represent Leonard's attempts to remember things, or his flashbacks, or imagination.

We also did quite a lot of experimenting with how we shot those little moments—his wife, for example—because we were looking for odd spontaneous details, and things that you might remember. In films, all too often the concept of memory is represented in a very unrealistic way. I was looking to my own memories and trying to determine, if you remember a person, what is that process? What do you call to mind? As far as I was concerned, it was these odd little moments that were hard to predict. It wasn't necessarily the important moments, or the key moments in a relationship, it was odd little details. We did quite a lot of experimentation in terms of how we worked that into the fabric of the film. There are visual elements that suggest a relationship of Sammy's character and Leonard's recall of that story and his relationship to that character, and those aren't really specified in the script. That was a slightly more experimental thing I needed to do, in terms of presenting those things visually. So there are details like that that aren't necessarily in the script.

The script does have the basic structure. We didn't go too far from that, ever, and we couldn't; it's a very rigid structure. One thing we didn't specify is whether the repeat footage [the shots that provide the beginning- and end-of-scene overlaps in the reverse chronology] would be an identical repeat or would be slightly different in some way. What I wanted to do was present the same thing in a slightly different fashion, because the context in which these repeats are presented is very different—they're either starting a scene or ending a scene—and it seemed like they should have a slightly different approach as to the way they're being used. So some of the repeats are identical and some aren't. That was something that was too detailed to incorporate into the script.

There's also such an enormous element in the performances, particularly in Guy's performance, that you couldn't get into the script. I wanted to leave the script a little more blank, if you like, to allow him to interpret on which level he would be presenting different aspects of the dialogue. As it turned out, he was able to present all the various levels I had in mind, which was great. If I'd specified too closely in the script how he was meant to be, saying how he was meant to be thinking about something, then it would have limited him. He was able to get much more into the performance than was suggested on the page.

One of the key elements in Memento is that Leonard can lie to himself, as first seen in the prostitute scene.

It always felt essential to demonstrate in an extreme manner that Leonard can manipulate himself. It was interesting, talking to Guy about the character, because once you start thinking yourself into the mindset of somebody who is living with this condition, fairly early on it occurs to you that there's a liberating element to it. It allows you to forget, as well as makes you forget. We all have things we'd very much like to forget, so it's a blessing as well as a curse. As soon as you start thinking along those lines, you realize that [self-manipulation is] a key element in somebody who is so adept at living with this condition, and has been doing it for some time. They can forget any behavior. They can lie to themselves. In "Memento Mori" my brother very strongly gets across that notion [of the "dialogue" between the present self and the future self]. Right from when he first told me the story, that was very clearly an element. Any time you have a character leaving notes to himself, you very quickly come to the idea of "How much do we trust ourselves? Do we lie to ourselves?" Of course we do. This is a character who can make this really incredibly clear, through his story.

Leonard can make the lies truth, in his particular world.

He can take that to its extreme, taking it beyond the notion of subjective truth and specifically misinform himself for a deliberate purpose.

Following came out of your personal experience of being burglarized. Did you draw upon any personal experiences when writing Memento?

Everything, really. It was very important that Leonard not be a character who is a medical freak. The whole thing that's interesting about the character is that he's such an Everyman. He's a wonderful means of examining our own process of memory. Research gave me a grounding in memory and the way it works. Then I just looked at myself, and the way I store things in my mind. Once you start examining that process, you rapidly realize how inefficient that system is, and how interpretation is involved; how many different devices you use, such as notes and photographs. It's one of the things that people who enjoy the film tap into, because it makes them think about that in themselves. I realized I use habit and routine. I always keep my keys in

the same pocket. I write things on my hand. Leonard is very much an extrapolation of my own behavior.

These would be the tactics we'd take, the reflexes we'd develop, to adapt if we were struck by this condition.

You would if you'd seen the film [laughs]. If you go to the doctor after suffering a head injury, one of the things they will suggest you do is to systematize your life, to use different types of memory to replace the deficient ones.

With an American mother and British father, you've said you've spent your whole life "trying to be both." You grew up in England, but spent years eight through eleven in Chicago. How did this kind of dual identity and early uprooting inform your philosophies about things like friendship and trust?

I'm not sure, to be quite frank. Growing up in two countries and having parents from two countries has had me think more than I would have otherwise about notions of identity, particularly notions of how we identify ourselves in relation to other people. Certainly *Memento* is very concerned with that notion: somebody looking at the things around him and the places he finds himself in order to identify himself. When my brother told me the notion of the short story, that was one of the things that I was immediately drawn to: the notion of somebody who knows all this objective information about himself—by which we identify ourselves, we're supposed to be able to identify ourselves—but he can't. Viewing the faults in that system, the exceptions to those rules, seemed like a fascinating jumping-off point.

I understand you read magazines backwards, back to front.

Oh, yeah, that's true. I read magazines left-handed. That came up in a conversation I was having with somebody for an interview for a magazine. I'd never really thought of it until that moment, but they said, "Well, that could be an explanation for the whole structure." I thought, "That could be quite right." Because I'm quite used to leafing through magazines back to front, and piecing it together.

The dual national identity, the different ways of processing the world, these seem to define a sense of "otherness" for you.

It's definitely the case that I'm drawn to characters who have an outsider status in the story. They don't quite fit in with the world in which they're functioning, which is very interesting. That may well come from some sense of dislocation; I don't know.

*Subjective truth, in one fashion or another, seems to be your forte. With *Following*, *Memento*, and now *Insomnia*, you've focused on shifting allegiances and, sometimes, shifting identities, as well as the slipperiness of the truth. Why investigate those concepts through noir, instead of another genre like drama?*

The noir genre has several key elements that interest me in terms of present-

ing a strong point of view. I'm interested in storytelling that takes place with an intriguing or interesting point of view. What I find about the film noir genre is that it really lends itself to a more extreme storytelling approach. Flashbacks, subjective truth, the genre's not just tolerant of those things, it demands them. You have to be able to present subjective truth to the audience so that you can turn it on its head and surprise people. What that also means is that character winds up being defined by action, which to me is the strongest form of characterization. That's much stronger than a more modern psychological characterization, where you treat your characters as wind-up toys, create a psychology for them, and go off and see what they do. It's more interesting to have character defined through action. And it's more like real life. We don't judge people in everyday life by what they say so much as what they do. So noir is a very strong genre. Narratively it's a fascinating genre, because it allows you to be a little trickier with things. In character terms, film noir demands a very strong form of characterization.

With your most recent protagonists—Bill from Following, Leonard from Memento, and now Will from Insomnia—we're following them on this tragic trajectory. Do you find tragedy more interesting than a situation where the characters would have created or found their salvation along the way?

[Laughs] Well, I'm not sure I would necessarily put Leonard in that category—I think that is open to interpretation. I think there is a way of looking at the story as more positive than that, at least in terms of the notion of agency with that character. He's a very active character; he plays a very active part in his story. But yes, I am interested in the tragic side of things. I'm interested in these stories of increasing psychological intensity, increasing psychological pressure on the protagonist. That's very interesting as an underpinning for a narrative.

How long did it take to get financing and distribution for Memento?

To be honest, it actually came together very quickly. I was very fortunate, and I think a lot of that had to do with just sending the script to the right people at the right time, namely Aaron Ryder at Newmarket, and getting their enthusiasm. I think what was also fortunate was that actors found the script very interesting. They seem much more able to tap into the subjective nature of the story than producers and executives, because they read it from the point of view of a character that they would play. We got much more interest from agencies in terms of actors.

I'm told that Steven Soderbergh told an interviewer that if Memento couldn't find a distributor, the independent film movement was dead.

That's such a great thing for him to say. I know him a little since he saw my film and knew we were having some trouble getting it out there [at that point]. Without telling me anything at all, he phoned up a lot of studio people and told them they must see this film, which was great and really help-

ful to me. Soderbergh seems to have the incredible ability to straddle that line between the personal and the mainstream with his films.

*Your next project will be a remake of the Norwegian film *Insomnia* for Warner Bros. What attracted you to work on the American remake of *Insomnia*? And after you became involved, what changes did you and screenwriter Hilary Seitz make to tailor the script to your strengths?*

I was drawn to this very compelling, original situation, and I immediately saw the opportunity to take it in a somewhat different direction. Hilary had done a marvelous job producing a screenplay that translated the original very effectively into the realm that I was interested in exploring the story—the Americanization of it—and then the scale of it. It's on a bigger scale, and the character [Will Dormer] is very different. When I came on board, we saw eye-to-eye on the direction in which the project could be pushed. A lot of the changes that we made together—I supervised her writing, giving her notes, suggesting things—were along the lines of trying to get inside the character's head, to see the story from his point of view. That is the essential difference in what we're trying to do with the remake and what the original film was. We're really trying to keep the audience with him, keep them complicated in everything he does.

In what direction did you two push the story?

Of putting the audience into Will's shoes as he goes through the story, creating a more subjective experience for the audience. I pushed Hillary in the direction of allowing the audience to understand Will's actions more as he goes through the story, instead of keeping them as surprises. I wanted to take the audience with him more. You're introduced to Walter [the antagonist] very much from Will's point of view, for example.

Did you play with the structure of this script?

No. I thought Hillary had done a marvelous job with the structure. Really, it's the only way to tell a story like this. Structure to me is all related simply to what best suits the particular story, and this story very much is of this character who is on this descent, if you will. It's a very linear descent—because this is a guy who's not sleeping night after night—so you really have to follow that in a relatively straightforward fashion.

When did you start playing around with structure?

I always have, in a way. The short films I was making as a teenager didn't have any dialogue. They tended to be just images connected in an interesting way, crosscut, very often for their graphic relationship but also for their narrative relationship. That immediately is a structural relationship, in terms of parallel action. It's always been driving my filmmaking instincts, so I put that into my screenwriting. Even in *Insomnia*, it's a very linear project, necessarily so—because of the point of view of the character [who gets progressively more

exhausted as the film goes on]—but there’s a lot of parallel action, crosscutting, that I enjoy and drives what I do.

I know that the Following DVD is supposed to have a “linearized” version of the film, unfracturing its structure, but I was shocked to hear that the English Memento DVD would include a linear Memento. As reticent as you are to discuss Memento’s objective truth, you’d been even more zealous with your actors, asking them to refrain from re-ordering (“linearizing”) the script. Why a linear Memento now? This is the problem: once it’s done, all kinds of other people get their hands on it. The linear version is an interesting idea; it’s an interesting way to view the story. It was very important that we never do that while we were making the film, because there’s so much of the film [in terms of narrative momentum] that it’s essential to view the story in the way it’s going to appear on screen. But there’s such an obvious device there for the DVD to do that I can see why they would want to do that. It’d be interesting. I haven’t actually watched the film that way. It’d be a first for me.