Film as Philosophy in *Memento*:
Reforming Wartenberg’s Imposition Objection

For more than a decade *Film and Philosophy* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* have published a running debate as to whether commercial narrative fiction films¹ are capable of doing philosophy, perhaps even original philosophy, in their own right. This debate began with the appearance, in 2000, of Bruce Russell’s qualifiedly negative verdict on this question, “The Philosophical Limits of Film,”² and Stephen Mulhall’s very influential positive verdict a year later, in *On Film.*³ Since then numerous articles have been devoted to the issue, including the entire Winter, 2006 issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,*⁴ and a set of four articles appearing in *Film and Philosophy* two years later.⁵ Four more book length treatments of the topic have also emerged thus far: Daniel Frampton’s *Filmosophy* in 2006,⁶ Tom Wartenberg’s *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* in 2007,⁷ a second edition, greatly expanded, of Mulhall’s *On Film* in 2008,⁸ and Paisley Livingston’s *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy,* in 2009.⁹

One important constraint on films qualifying as suitably philosophical has been Stephen Mulhall’s ground rule, framed early in the debate: films do not count as doing philosophy in their own right if they merely lend themselves to philosophical interpretation through external application of theories. “Specific theoretical edifices (originating elsewhere, in such domains as psychoanalysis or political theory),” sometimes treat the target film “only as a cultural product whose specific features served to illustrate the truth of that theory—as one more phenomenon the theory rendered comprehensible.” (Mulhall 2001, 6-7) Whenever that happens, the film itself does no philosophy.
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In *Thinking on Screen*, Tom Wartenberg elaborated on Mulhall’s constraint, relabeled as the imposition objection: “only creator-oriented interpretations of a film can justify the claim that the film itself is philosophical.” (2007, 26) External appeals to philosophical theories (or psychological, historical, or political theories) are, in effect, audience-originated interpretations, ways of using films philosophically, but not uses that were originally intended by their creators (whether explicitly, implicitly, consciously or, to the extent unconscious intent makes sense, even those inadvertent products revelatory of creator contributions). External interpretations, reliant on none of these, are therefore in no sense components of the film, and the film is not thereby rendered philosophical with respect to its own content.

The Mulhall/Wartenberg imposition constraint is prima facie reasonable. Externally imposed theories do not make a film an exercise in doing philosophy, history, psychology, or political
theory in its own right. At best, such films serve as occasions for inspiring viewers to engage in philosophical reflections of their own. Such reflections may be provoked by aesthetic or cognitive elements of the film, but they are not themselves in the film, because the film’s auteur, its dominant artistic presence, never inserted them in the first place.

On this account, truly philosophical films must have auteurs—typically the film’s director, but sometimes an aesthetically cohesive creative team (e.g., director/producer/scriptwriter), possessed of a unified vision of the film to be executed. E.g., Ethan & Joel Coen count jointly as the auteur of the philosophically freighted films Fargo and No Country for Old Men. Perhaps Don Siegel, Daniel Mainwaring, and Walter Wanger count as such in creating the original 1956 version of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (assume here that philosophical content does not have to be terribly profound to count as a film’s doing philosophy).

The presence of auteurial consciousness in a film becomes, for Mulhall, Wartenberg, and other proponents of the imposition objection, a necessary condition for arguing that putative philosophical content is internal to a film. Thus, for Mulhall, it is because Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher, and Jean Jeunet possess distinctive philosophical visions of what they are each undertaking in their respective contributions to the Alien franchise that those four films count as doing philosophy. And for Wartenberg, John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance counts as a Nietzschan critique of Hegel’s views about historical progress, precisely because it’s John Ford’s vision that produced this result. So understood, the imposition objection bears a hidden and I think hitherto unexamined premise: if a philosophical theme provoked in some way by a film cannot be traced to auteurial intent, then it must always be externally imposed. But why should we believe this axiom to be uniformly the case?

Does philosophical content have to be intentional on the part of one or more of a film’s creators to be present in a film, as distinct from being imposed on it by some third party? While philosophical themes (and also psychological, political, and historical ones) are occasionally imposed on films externally—by viewers who come to a film with very different perspectives than the film’s creators—I cannot see why that precludes unintended philosophical themes from sometimes emerging from within the film itself. I have argued briefly (Nunan 2010, 145-151) for a similar position before, using Spike Lee’s Jungle Fever to illustrate the thesis. Here I offer a more detailed example: a novel reading of the personal identity theme in the 2000 psychological puzzle film Memento.

1. Wartenberg on the Imposition Objection

Although I’ve asserted that Wartenberg’s and Mulhall’s version of the imposition objection is too simplistic, it’s important to be clear on the precise sense of that criticism. Wartenberg in
particular is quite careful in his account of the details of the proper and improper application of the objection. He does not require, for example, that a film’s auteur be sufficiently well-versed in the history of philosophical traditions to be capable of articulating her cinematically conveyed insights in the language of philosophers. A filmmaker can make a philosophical statement through her cinematic work without access to the relevant vocabulary of philosophers. To the “skeptical reader” who attributes Wartenberg’s philosophical analysis of John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance to Wartenberg’s own ingenuity, Wartenberg replies:

[S]keptical doubts to the contrary notwithstanding, I do think that The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance puts forward the Nietzschean objection with which I credited it… [T]his does not entail that John Ford actually had to have Hegel or Nietzsche in mind. All that is necessary is that he was thinking about the philosophical views that we can trace back to these great philosophers. (Wartenberg 2007, 9)

Nor does Wartenberg make the mistake of assuming that, whenever philosophically-minded film critics happen to impose their own philosophical interpretation on a film, there could be no independent philosophical content internal to the film. He thinks this is exactly what happened with Noël Carroll’s “Wheel of Virtue” interpretation of Carroll Reed’s and Graham Greene’s The Third Man. The fact that Carroll imposed a moral thesis on the film—that ranking loyalty to a friend above loyalty to a cause is a bad moral principle—does not mean that the film itself fails to do philosophy in another (on this occasion, more sophisticated) vein. Carroll’s alleged principle under scrutiny was, in Wartenberg’s view, both inherently implausible as a philosophical principle (and absent from the history of philosophy), and implausibly attributed to the film. But Wartenberg goes on to argue that, in addition to Carroll’s imposition of bad philosophical analysis on The Third Man, this particular film does indeed do philosophy in its own right, both by illustrating a philosophical theory (some aspects of Aristotle’s theory of friendship, concerning the nature of occasions when it is morally legitimate to dissolve a friendship), and by conducting a philosophical thought experiment (concerning the relationship between epistemic fallibility and moral judgment). (Wartenberg 2007, 94-116)

This last claim introduces yet another aspect of Wartenberg’s analysis of the imposition objection: cases in which the imposition objection does not apply. Against Bruce Russell’s assertion that commercial films, as narrative-driven vehicles, can’t offer explicit philosophical arguments “by cinematic means alone” if they are merely “downloading an argument onto the soundtrack” (Russell 2008, 4), Wartenberg counters that Russell and his fellow-travelers are too insistent on philosophical content being explicit in order for a film to qualify as doing philosophy. On Russell’s view, a film’s content can become philosophical only through the intervention of a philosophical critic who renders it explicit. She then qualifies as doing the philosophy, not the
film itself. For Russell, a film can “do” philosophy explicitly on its own only by rehearsing a philosophical argument through a soliloquy expressed by some character on the screen, or via a Socratic dialogue between two or more characters. But that manner of conveying philosophical ideas isn’t inherently cinematic. A live recording of talking heads at an academic philosophy colloquium may achieve as much, but that doesn’t make the resulting digitized imagery and soundtrack a film in the relevant sense.

Against this view, Wartenberg maintains (2007, 25) that commercial films can be faithful to their narrative-driven aesthetic and yet do philosophy in substantive ways, implicitly rather than explicitly. The philosophical critic will, at least sometimes, be drawing out philosophical content that is implicit to the film itself, making explicit what is already there, rather than imposing her own novel philosophical interpretation from without. This is achieved in one of three ways: when a film is crafted to illustrate a particular philosophical view, or to concoct a philosophical thought experiment, or to devise a philosophical counter-example. Such counter-examples are themselves typically thought experiments too, ones that anticipate specific audience reactions. All three approaches lend themselves to cinematic presentation because they are already narrative-driven strategies in the writings of professional philosophers. The bulk of Wartenberg’s book is used to illustrate these claims through analysis of selected films.

Each of these modes of doing philosophy in films, even the illustrative mode, are, on Wartenberg’s account, not merely derivative philosophical exercises, but avenues for doing philosophy in substantive ways. Thus, Chaplin’s Modern Times does not merely serve up predictable illustrations of Marx’s theory of the alienating effects of capitalism, but creatively visceral ones, transforming an abstract metaphysical theory into a socially compelling vision.13

2. Two Unexamined Axioms in Wartenberg’s Imposition Objection Analysis

I think Wartenberg’s (and Mulhall’s) response to more conservative views about the capacity of films to do philosophy by genuinely cinematic means is quite right, but that it doesn’t go far enough, in two important ways. First, both Wartenberg and Mulhall share the conviction that an auteurial presence is necessary. For a film to have philosophical content, there must be someone responsible for orchestrating it. As Wartenberg puts it:

Often, as I notice a philosophical issue present in a film, I am amazed to see how the film focuses on the issue and I find it hard to believe that the filmmakers could not have intended to do so. So, for example, as The Third Man pursues its interrogation into the demands of friendship, the parallels to Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in books VIII and IX of the Nicomachean Ethics were so striking...that I could not help believing that the filmmakers had intended them.14

Second, and more specifically tied to Wartenberg’s account, the three anticipated modes for doing philosophy in a cinematic vein are all assumed to be derivative from pre-existing
philosophical theories; they are, in one form or another, elaborations or critiques of those theories, not wholly novel excursions into philosophy.

Both axioms are, in my view, too confining. But I suspect Wartenberg would respond to that charge by asserting that the alternative to the first axiom, an appeal to something like Daniel Frampton’s *filminds*, is just academic occultism. While I do think Frampton often overstates his case, the filmind concept is not without merit, a point which I develop in more detail elsewhere.\(^{15}\)

Wartenberg’s second axiom turns on his conviction that “philosophy is indispensable for film, but not vice-versa,” because “written texts are indispensable for understanding philosophy.” (Wartenberg 2007, 141) More strongly than that, Wartenberg asserts that written texts are indispensable for *doing* philosophy: “Without sustained concentration on the difficult and often obscure texts that constitute the Western tradition of philosophy, it is difficult to fully appreciate the nature of philosophical discourse and argumentation.” (141)

It’s clear from the overall tone of *Thinking on Screen*, and the fact that all of his cinematic illustrations rely on the prior existence of particular philosophical theories which inspire these cinematic responses, that Wartenberg regards those “obscure texts”, or at least their cultural impact, as *essential* to the maturation of philosophical discourse. Movies are a non-essential, but often worthy, philosophical enrichment program. They serve to illustrate how philosophy “is engaged with vital realms of popular culture.” (142) This sounds a bit elitist—films as philosophy made digestible for the untutored masses, but in Wartenberg’s hands it isn’t, because he believes the very best philosophical films are intellectually challenging for everybody. What they never are though, in Wartenberg’s account, is original philosophical research, because films are ill-equipped to articulate the sustained philosophical originality that sometimes emerges in those “difficult and often obscure texts that constitute…philosophy.”

While both of Wartenberg’s presumed axiomatic preconditions for films to bear substantive philosophical content are frequently true of philosophical films, their implicit claim to universal validity is not. There are cases, perhaps relatively rare, in which films exhibit philosophical content without relying on *auteurial* intent to do so, and there are cases, perhaps even rarer, in which films convey the cinematic equivalent of genuinely original philosophical ideas. To that end, consider the case of *Memento*.

3. The Standard Philosophical Reading of *Memento*

*Memento* is *prima facie* a poor test case for my critiques of both axioms. Christopher Nolan, *Memento*’s director, counts very much as a cinematic *auteur* in the traditional sense of being the cognitive presence that functions as the driving force with the cohesive vision necessary to pull together the disparate contributions of the broadly collaborative group necessary to execute any
even modestly budgeted commercial feature film today. In the case of *Memento*, Nolan might even be christened the film’s *author*, since, by doubling as the screenwriter, he exercises more control than some *auteurial* figures. There is also a standard understanding of the philosophical content of *Memento* among philosophical critics, one which Nolan himself quite likely had in mind, and one that is heavily invested in existing philosophical discourse—inventively illustrative of a particular historical debate about personal identity, but not philosophically original in any more robust sense.

There are however persuasive responses to both these objections. It doesn’t matter that a philosophically substantive film has an *auteurial* presence if, as I will argue below, the *relevant* philosophical content was not conceived by the *auteur*. And it doesn’t matter if, on one interpretation, a film illuminates only well-trodden philosophical ground in a novel way, provided that the film also generates a philosophical perspective that is genuinely original, an accomplishment with which I think *Memento* can also be credited.

On the standard understanding of the philosophical content of *Memento*, the film poses the philosophical question: does Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), the film’s protagonist (or anti-hero), still constitute a *person* in the Lockean sense (psychological continuity evidenced by a continuous string of memories), despite being afflicted with anterograde amnesia? Leonard’s candidacy for personhood comes into question after he suffers a blow to the head, inflicted by an unknown assailant. Reduced now to very brief post-trauma retention of short-term memories, with no hope of long-term retrieval (once out of mind, those memories are gone for good), does Leonard still qualify for Lockean personhood? To frame the issue another way: just how severe an anterograde amnesia case results in the extinction of personhood?

Standard readings of the film’s response to both questions parallel Walter Ott’s analysis of the central plot device of *Being John Malkovich*, in which various non-Malkovich consciousnesses (other characters in the film) enter through a portal into John Malkovich’s head, sometimes controlling his body, sometimes merely sharing his sensory experiences. Ott argues that this fantasy functions as a parody of the Cartesian ensoulment view of personal identity, illustrating the more ridiculous implications of mind/body dualist (and endurantist) theories of personal identity. Temporally durable mental ghosts occupying Cartesian bodies turn out to be philosophically unruly creatures, capable of bizarre mental gymnastics that create unhelpful havoc with our intuitions about personal identity.

The lessons of the emergent deficiencies of Cartesian theories of personal identity may then invite better, less deficient theories of personal identity, such as a Lockean psychological continuity theory (as Mary Litch reads the philosophical moral of *Being John Malkovich*), or
perhaps a definition of personal identity in terms of “the will as agent acting on the body as instrument,” which yields “a kind of existential theory of personal identity: we are what we do, and the real identity of Malkovich is defined by what he does, and by the reasons and values that explain why he chooses to do what he does.” (Shaw 2006, 115)

*Memento* is typically conceived as another such cinematic intuition pump, or as Wartenberg would put it: a thought experiment in service of a particular philosophical argument by counterexample. Just as *Being John Malkovich* subverts the Cartesian ensoulment view of personal identity, *Memento* exposes the limitations of John Locke’s memory-based psychological theory of personal identity.19 So understood, the argument is, in effect, an elaboration on Thomas Reid’s brave officer who remembers been beaten as a boy for robbing fruit from an orchard, and whose achievement of taking the enemy’s standard in his first battle is remembered in turn by the old general he later becomes, but who has now mercifully forgotten his actions as a juvenile delinquent.20

The problem with Reid’s criticism of Locke, relying as it does on discrete person stages marked by distinctive sets of memories, is that Locke’s memory-based foundation for personal identity is open to a charitable reinterpretation. Different person stages are best understood as demarcated by overlapping rather than discrete memory chains, sufficient to sustain (Lockean) personal identity over at least most of a lifetime. Personhood continuity is thus rescued much as bodily continuity is immunized against ship of Theseus objections concerning cell replacement over time by defining bodily identity in terms of bodily continuity (overlapping chains of body parts).21

*Memento* presses hard on the upper boundary of the Parfitian/Lockean conception of memory continuity. It provides a kind of multiplier effect on Reid’s example, the weight of which, on the standard view under discussion here, becomes overwhelming in Leonard’s case. He no longer counts as a person, or at least not as one particular person, because his overlapping memory sets have become too disjointed, owing to the radical decoupling of one episodic unit of recent memories from the next. The next step for most of these critics is to respond as Ott, Litch, and Shaw did to the dismantling of Cartesian personal identity models of in *Being John Malkovich*: ask what theory the film’s viewers are being invited to consider instead. In the most straightforward responses of this sort, Litch 2002 and Bragues 2008 each contend that *Memento* advocates instead that viewers adopt Hume’s bundle theory: personal identity is a kind of psychologically sustained fiction, aided by the contiguity of bundled memories.

4. An Alternate Reading of *Memento*
In standard and nonstandard readings alike, we are disposed to regard Leonard as remaining enough like the rest of us to sustain at least the illusion that he’s still a person, despite his disability. For if Leonard is too transparently a degenerate case, with experiences too alien from our own to reside recognizably in a single person, then he can hardly count against anyone’s favorite theory of personal identity.

While watching Memento, we do tend to regard Leonard’s claim to personal identity as robust as most people’s. Perhaps this phenomenon is a testimony to the stubborn durability of bodily theories of personal identity (Guy Pearce’s buff form, sustained through all his memory shifts). Or perhaps it’s a testimony to Plato’s view about the manipulative power of the arts, especially the power of star personas (something Mulhall discusses a little in On Film). These two hypotheses certainly aren’t incompatible. But the film itself incorporates two other strategies to support a projection of sustained personhood.

First, the film relies on a conceit, expressed by Leonard, that “conditioning” enables him to cope more effectively with his disability: cultivating habituated unconscious responses to various stimuli as a substitute for his missing cognitive awareness.22 His conditioning is aided by what amounts to an appeal to the extended mind hypothesis23—Leonard’s reliance on his photos, tattoos, and notes.24

Second, there is the length of time for which he is capable of remembering anything. Although it is on just this point that most critics concede Leonard’s alien nature, Leonard is actually remarkably like the rest of us with respect to one part of his memory; its short-term failings in him are just a matter of degree. Its long-term failings are another matter. In having no ability to retrieve any of his post-trauma experiences in his long-term memory, Leonard is quite unlike the rest of us. In that respect his attenuated Lockean personhood is sustained only to the extent that his pre-trauma memories remain commonly shared by his various briefly existent post-trauma person stages.

Most critics regard Leonard’s short-term memory as almost equally impaired. His amnesia “prevents him from remembering anything for more than a few minutes.” (Litch 2002, 97) “Leonard’s personal identity lasts only for about ten minutes,” and he “ ‘wakes up’ and comes into being as a new self every ten minutes.” (Baur 2005, 95, 97) Leonard can only retain memories “for ten to fifteen minutes,”25 or he “possesses a memory window of mere minutes,”26 or “he seems to have lost the ability to retain new event memories for longer than five minutes,”27 or “Leonard incessantly experiences the world as a new and different scene…; he is the Humean bundle of perceptions in its starkest form.” (Bragues 2008, 73)
If Leonard’s memory simply evaporates whenever the kitchen timer goes off, so to speak, then he really is altogether alien from the rest of us. This is the Leonard we see desperately ransacking Natalie’s house for a writing instrument to record the mean-spirited tirade with which she provoked him to hit her, before exiting only as far as her car in the driveway, waiting for his five minutes of lucidity to expire before she rejoins him with her yarn about Dodd having beat her up. If this were Leonard’s plight all the time, he would most assuredly not be a person, for he would not be capable of the level of cognitive processing and long-term planning (of a sort) which he exhibits in the rest of the film.28

Leonard as actually depicted in the film, and as intended by Nolan, is in fact nothing like these critics would have us believe. As Nolan puts it in his 2002 Director’s Commentary (over the ‘getting rid of Dodd scene, at 44:10): “People are asking me all the time how long can he remember things for. The reality is he can remember things, he can keep things in mind, as long as he pays attention, really. So, depending on how much is being thrown at him, in different ways, that time span can vary.” This is precisely how Leonard is depicted.

Under conditions of extreme stress (as in the aforementioned scene with Natalie) or extreme exhaustion (as when he forgets what he’s doing in Dodd’s apartment in the wake of the adrenalin-draining chase with Dodd), Leonard’s memory can evaporate with startling suddenness. But when he is focused and alert, or sometimes even in times of stress, when something sufficiently important to his life plans helps to keep him focused, he can sustain his short-term memory chain for as long as most of the rest of us.

The most dramatic example of this, where the centrality of the action to his own life plan helps to give him focus, is the sequence in which he meets Teddy at the Discount Inn, who informs him of Jimmy Grantz’s location (Leonard’s current target in his quest for revenge for his wife’s death, fingered earlier by Teddy, through his prior manipulation of Leonard). Leonard drives then to the abandoned building, at which he meets and kills Jimmy Grantz, after which he remains sufficiently aware of the preceding circumstances to have the wit to undertake a plan of action which he sustains until driving back into town, where his concentration is finally, and only partially, broken as he pulls up in front of the tattoo parlor. (“Now where was I?”) The real time required for all these events to transpire, allowing for two driving stints, appears to be approximately two hours. (The cinematic footage used to convey all this runs 17 minutes.)

What is most remarkable about this example, apart from its cognitive complexity, is how very much Leonard’s memory is like our own. We too remain focused only for limited periods, get distracted by philosophical reveries, or by daydreams. Some of us (I wonder how many, really?) may be able to sustain focus for significantly longer periods than Leonard did on this
occasion, but we too are capable of short-term distractions, and of forgetting plans that we just recently laid for ourselves. Viewed in this light, Leonard begins to look more and more like a person, although perhaps not very much like a Lockean person—just too many memories washed away by Leonard’s damaged cognitive capacity. So then, what kind of person? Why does Leonard still strike viewers as possessing a more cohesive identity than Hume’s bundle theory would allow?

The most plausible explanation, I think, has to do with Leonard’s residual skills at making life plans for himself. That does not suggest the appeal of a Lockean conception of personhood, but an Aristotelian one—Aristotle’s account, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, of the cultivation of virtuous character through habituating repetition of virtuous action. In this regard, *Memento* functions as a quasi-experiential thought experiment suggesting that popular Western intuitions about personal identity rely much more heavily on Aristotle’s account of personhood as character development than on Locke’s account in terms of linked partial continuity of memories. In fact, the film drives a wedge between these two views, demanding of viewers that they choose between Locke (in which case Leonard probably no longer qualifies as a person) and Aristotle (in which case he still qualifies).

The confrontation that Leonard sets up with Teddy in the last scene of the film is crucial to our understanding of Leonard as a person. After Leonard throttles the life out of Jimmy Grantz, the drug-dealer half-sighs the name ‘Sammy’ before he finally expires. Jimmy’s last word compels Leonard to recognize that Jimmy knew a very intimate fact about him—his reliance on the tale of his former insurance investigation target, fellow-anterograde amnesiac Sammy Jankis, to remind himself of his own subsequently acquired condition. Because Leonard’s memories of Sammy were acquired prior to the home invasion which (allegedly) led to his wife’s death and his own amnesia, they are part of the stable memory set which Leonard still retains of his earlier life, those which help provide him with some semblance of an experience of continuity of personhood through the brief appearances of the serial “selves” which have occupied his consciousness ever since. Jimmy would have been unlikely to know about Sammy Jankis unless he had some prior close contact with Leonard.

This discovery now leads Leonard to suspect Teddy of manipulating him into killing Jimmy not for the sake of avenging the murder of Leonard’s wife during the break-in, but in pursuit of some hidden agenda of Teddy’s own devising. Leonard still remembers enough of his previous conversation with Teddy to retain the sense that Teddy had represented Jimmy as someone unknown to Leonard. To test out his new theory, Leonard feigns confusion when Teddy arrives within minutes of Jimmy’s death—pretending he has no idea who Teddy is while asking for his
help for the “injured” Jimmy. Teddy makes the ultimately fatal mistake of playing along, until Leonard slugs Teddy in the head with his Polaroid and demands to know what’s going on. After Teddy reveals that he has been manipulating Leonard for months, setting up multiple “John Gs” for execution by Leonard, both to satisfy Leonard’s desire to experience the fulfillment of his quest for vengeance and in pursuit of Teddy’s own nefarious motives, Teddy adds that even he himself is a “John G” (John Edward Gammel). In response, Leonard throws Teddy’s keys in the weeds bordering the building to buy himself time, and then asks himself, in a mental voiceover while sitting in his truck:

I'm not a killer. I'm just someone who wanted to make things right. Can I just let myself forget what you've told me? Can I just let myself forget what you made me do? You think I just want another puzzle to solve? Another John G to look for? You're a John G. So you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy..., yes, I will.

As he goes through this internal monologue, Leonard writes Teddy’s license plate on a 3x5 index card, for tattooing later, as a first step in hunting down Teddy as his next victim.

Why doesn’t Leonard simply shoot Teddy immediately? He is, after all, going to shoot Teddy two days later in precisely the same location (although he cannot now anticipate precisely how his plan to terminate Teddy will play out). Is Leonard’s response a last desperate ploy to maintain the masquerade of personhood a little longer, by using his quest for retribution for his wife’s death as a vehicle to imbue his episodic selves with meaning and purpose? Now that he has eliminated one target, he needs another, and Teddy, as a “John G”, is ready to hand. Killing him immediately would eliminate the opportunity to sustain the illusion of purposive selfhood a little longer. But for two days?

There are at least two problems with this analysis. First, if Leonard values the illusion, killing Teddy would eliminate a crucial source for sustaining it. By Teddy’s testimony, the fiction has already been maintained for over a year. (“The real John G, I helped you find him over a year ago. He's already dead.”) With Teddy’s death, the charade will quickly collapse, for Leonard will have nowhere to turn for new targets, new clues to the identity of John G. It won’t be long before he blunders his way into a home for the bewildered, or an incarceration facility for the criminally insane. Surely Leonard understands this as part of his current epiphany.

More importantly, consider Leonard’s prefatory remark, “I’m not a killer.” Leonard is furious with Teddy because, in a sense, what Teddy says later (but earlier in the film), when pleading for his life, is true. To paraphrase: “you don’t have a clue” who you are. Leonard Shelby, from San Francisco, is “who you were, not what you’ve become.” And that’s because, as Leonard now recognizes, Teddy exploited Leonard’s cognitive impairment to hijack his residual
capacity for personal agency, essentially transforming Leonard into an ambulatory version of Robert Nozick’s brain-in-a-vat “experience machine” resident, with the added twist that Teddy crafts Leonard’s desired experiences to have real-life consequences which further Teddy’s own ambitions. Like the hypothetical occupant of Nozick’s experience machine, Leonard rejects a life of experience without agency. But for Leonard, this repudiation also means dramatically curtailing his life as a “simulated” agent—to however long it takes him to off Teddy, before his life goes off the rails for good.

There is philosophical grounding for Leonard’s decision to opt for delayed gratification. It enables him to reestablish, however briefly, the kind of person he had aspired to be before Teddy began his campaign of manipulation. For killing Teddy carries with it the same crusade for justice which Leonard thought of as accompanying his quest for the real John G—not because Teddy is a convenient substitute for the real thing, but because Teddy himself deserves to die for having transformed Leonard into an unwitting killer in pursuit of Teddy’s venal purposes. Leonard is thereby acting, at last, with real conviction. He is restoring what he conceives to be the kind of person he should be, before total annihilation of his personhood, which is sure to follow.

What is most striking about Leonard’s solution to the dilemma in which he finds himself is the fact that the Leonard stage who actually kills Teddy will have no memory of the purposive intent of the earlier Leonard stage who sets him up to do so. Indeed, the last incarnation of Leonard mistakenly believes he is killing Teddy to avenge his wife’s death, once again killing someone innocent of the crime which originally motivated his vendetta. And the earlier Leonard stage who set this up knows this about the Leonard stage to come. But in another sense, the earlier Leonard really has reclaimed his agency, and, to the extent possible, his personhood. Memories don’t enter into it. But habituation to a certain pattern of behavior does. And the pattern which Leonard endeavors to “restore” is one of his own choosing, one which he could reasonably claim that the later Leonard would choose too, were he fully cognizant of the circumstances in which he was operating. This perspective is profoundly Aristotelian: there is a being who is a potential locus of the habits and dispositions that Leonard aspires to maintain. But that being is not at all Lockean: memories, and the kind of psychological continuity associated with memories, do not enter into the equation at all.

5. Conclusion

What does my reading of Memento suggest, with respect to the imposition objection? Not, I think, that I have simply used the film to illustrate a philosophical claim foreign to its content, because foreign to its intended content. The analysis, although innovative, emerges from the
content, is not imposed on it. I did not invent the sequence of cinematic events that inspired my interpretation. I acknowledge that it would strain credulity to suggest that Christopher Nolan had something like this analysis in mind. The film does also contain the philosophically more familiar conflict between Lockean and Humean theories of personal identity. And it is reasonable to assume that Nolan was conversant with that debate, at some level, when he was crafting this film—perhaps not in the historically-grounded terminology used above, but Nolan needed direct acquaintance with Locke and Hume no more than John Ford needed to have read up on Hegel and Nietzsche.

Where then, does the Aristotelian analysis originate? In my mind? Yes, and no. I do not believe I would have come up with this idea of the division between Aristotelian and Lockean conceptions of personhood without the presence of *Memento* as a cinematic provocateur. Commercial films are collaborative efforts not just within the confines of their production, but also in their connectivity with the broader culture of their audiences, functioning (poorly or well) as revelatory mirrors, magnifiers, or critiques, of some of our collective philosophical and cultural predispositions. They sometimes do this when we viewers, and even filmmakers, fail to recognize the details, cases for which no evidence of a self-conscious auteurial presence is available to ratify a particular interpretation’s legitimacy as a reading internal to the film. Like Wartenberg, “I am amazed to see how the film [*Memento*, in this case] focuses on the issue [the divide between Lockean and Aristotelian conceptions of personal identity].” But unlike Wartenberg, my amazement does not extend to “find[ing] it hard to believe that the filmmakers could not have intended to [foreground an Aristotelian theory of identity].” It’s implausible to think Christopher Nolan had such a project in mind, since not even philosophers discuss Aristotle as a competitor with Locke on personal identity in this particular sense.

So is my analysis simply an instantiation of Wartenberg’s alternative: an externally imposed philosophical reading of *Memento*? I am suggesting that there is some middle ground here. Films sometimes create their own alternate realities that reflect elements of our customary perceptions of reality in novel ways.

Those alternate realities then invite scrutiny on their own terms, thus provoking philosophical reflection in a vein not anticipated by the filmmakers, but nonetheless internal to the film. Not all unintended philosophical implications that can be found in a film have to be external impositions, ways in which philosophers choose to use particular aspects of particular films in service of clarifying, or reinforcing, externally-motivated views on topics like the intersection between personal identity and embodiment (as in William Pamerleau’s take on Stephen Mulhall’s philosophical use of the *Alien* franchise).
Even Wartenberg’s analysis of *The Third Man* in terms of an Aristotelian conception of friendship might be internal without being evidence of *auteurial* intent on Carol Reed’s part, or authorial intent on Graham Greene’s part. Greene is a very philosophical writer, but the fact that this film effectively self-generates the interpretation Wartenberg develops in *Thinking on Screen* does not thereby *entail* that this was Greene’s project. Perhaps in that particular case Wartenberg is right about his authorial attribution. But the larger lesson of his analysis of *The Third Man*, and mine of *Memento*, is that the philosophical content of a film cannot always be reduced to the choice between auteurial intent and external imposition. Films do sometimes exhibit philosophical lives of their own, distinct from either of these sources.

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1. Art films, aesthetically self-reflective experimental films, and documentaries are generally presumed to be potentially philosophically substantive enterprises.
On the potential banality of the philosophical content of films which may nonetheless be classified as doing philosophy, see: Noël Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” 
On the philosophical banality of art generally, see Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” 

It might come as a surprise to Wartenberg to see his name linked so closely with Mulhall’s, with respect to the imposition objection. In his own assessment of Mulhall’s position, Wartenberg (2007, 36-38) is uncharacteristically unsympathetic in his analysis, asking whether Mulhall, when speaking (on p. 2 of the 1st edition, p. 4 of the 2nd) about films as “thinking seriously and systematically” about philosophical themes, means that films must treat of the views of systematic philosophers like Kant and Hegel, rather than aphoristic ones like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Wartenberg also demands that Mulhall explain what he might mean by ‘serious’. These remarks are uncharitable. It is obvious from the context that Mulhall is using systematic in the non-technical sense of sustained and coherently organized.

Carroll 2002. Reed directed this 1949 noir classic, and Graham wrote the screenplay.


Wartenberg 2007, 139. I discuss Mulhall’s reliance on auteurial presence in more detail in “Film as Philosophy: Alien² and the Mythology of Auteur-based Philosophical Content,” forthcoming.

Nunan 2010, and “Film as Philosophy: Alien²: His script may have been inspired by the premise of his brother Jonathan Nolan’s short story, but that tale wasn’t even published until after the film had been produced, and is far less rich in narrative detail and structural sophistication than the film.


See McKenna 2009. The actual effectiveness of Leonard’s conditioning and his extended mind, as distinct from their diegetic effectiveness in the fictional cinematic world of Memento, should probably be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism. On this point, see Joe Levine, “Leonard’s System: Why It Doesn’t Work,” in Kania, 45-64.


Deborah Knight, & George McKnight, “Reconfiguring the Past: Memento and Neo-Noir,” in Kania 2009, 147-166, at 148.


It’s because Levine 2009 shares the ‘narrow window of lucidity’ assumption with the critics listed above that he can make a convincing case that Leonard is incapable of anything resembling long-range planning, or even cohesive short-range action. Even when Leonard has marshaled a body of relevant information in written form (his labeled photos, tattoos, notes, police file, etc.), in order to use the information, Leonard still has to assimilate it in his head. If the body of data necessary for effective cognitive processing is sufficiently complex (which doesn’t take much), he doesn’t have time to process the data before his sustained memories evaporate again. (See especially Levine, 56-58 for the core of this argument.)
Although I am assuming here that Leonard’s account of his pre-trauma past is accurate, *Memento* exhibits narrative ambiguity on this point, offering an alternate account from Teddy, reinforced by momentary flashbacks (possibly nothing more than transient effects of Teddy’s psychological manipulations on Leonard’s mind). On Teddy’s account, Leonard’s pre-trauma memories are also scrambled, with Leonard projecting parts of his own narrative onto a mythical version of Sammy Jankis. The ambiguity is quite deliberate on Nolan’s part, to the extent that he reinforces it with three alternate Director’s commentary endings on the *Memento* Limited Edition DVD (2002): one favoring Leonard’s account of reality, one favoring Teddy’s, and one neutral. But for purposes of the Aristotelian analysis of Leonard’s personhood being offered here, that ambiguity is irrelevant. What matters is Leonard’s subjective perception of what has transpired, how that informs his efforts to sustain his personhood.


31 Think for example of the disturbingly realistic urban dystopic setting which Ridley Scott created for *Blade Runner*, adding significantly to the philosophical freight already invested in Philip K. Dick’s novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which inspired *Blade Runner*’s Hampton Fancher/David Peoples screenplay.

32 William Pamerleau, “Philosophizing About Woody Allen: Do Author Intentions Matter?” *Film and Philosophy* 14 (2010), 17-26. Pamerleau introduces the interesting concept of *fair interpretation* of a film, although he treats candidates for this classification identically to Wartenberg’s externally imposed philosophical interpretations. Pamerleau does not reflect on what makes a (non-auteurial) interpretation *fair*. In a sense, that is the question I am pursuing here, but concerning an internal standard for fairness.

33 Wartenberg provides some added evidence for this claim in “Teaching Philosophy Through Film: Aristotle’s Theory of Friendship and *The Third Man*,” *Film and Philosophy* 13 (2009), 19-34.