8 Patch and reboot in Memento

The artist or the philosopher is quite incapable of creating a people, each can only summon it with all her strength. A people can only be created in abominable sufferings, and it cannot be concerned any more with art or philosophy. But books of philosophy and works of art also contain their sum of unimaginable sufferings that forewarn of the advent of a people. They have resistance in common – their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

8.1 Chapter overview

This chapter sheds light on one of the knife-edges between breakdown and breakthrough in life. The edge explored here is the one that is trodden by anyone who has been fed a ‘just so’ story – a quasi-cause – explaining a situation or a scene that enfolds them, and who tries to escape the fold. The quandary is familiar to the part of the movement of movements that was the focus of chapter six, the part comprising the ‘Beas.’ The Beas go along with the Lockean social contract, while looking upon it as a charade or an imposture. Unlike their freewheeling companions the disubbedienti, they feign obedience; they make active use of the imposture of the state that claims to rule with the consent of the ruled.

I explore the quandary through the prism of a movie from the cycle of paranoia thrillers discussed in chapter seven. Memento perches its protagonist between two lives. On the one hand, he is in a ‘just so’ story, and he has a suspicion that the story is being used on him, and thereby on others, in a repressive manner. On the other, he senses that there may be a chance of putting an end to the repression while sticking (for the time being) to the ‘just so’ story. The film gives some sense of the surge of affect, in that cleft between a robotic existence and a revivification. The film is an entry point into the surge of affect, the better to traverse it.

Transcendent knowing has no place in the watching of Memento, just as it has no place in Memento’s storyworld. This chapter brings out the film’s immanent critique of transcendent knowing. An item of false transcendent knowledge, placed as a clue in the film, is the ‘fact’ of a past attack on the protagonist’s wife, which drives the protagonist to avenge the wrong. The impetus for the protagonist’s actions, as shown in the film, has two gestalts. In one gestalt, he is a man driven by the urge to avenge the past wrong that he remembers being done to him (namely the attack on his wife, in which he too was injured). In the other gestalt,
he is a man troubled by his repressed disgust for his own string of avenging attacks on others, and he acts to overcome the force that has goaded him into that mission of vengeance. The choice he makes between the two gestalts is based on the quality of power, and how much of it, he can muster. The choice as shown entails his making active use of the powers of the false, which he does by playing ‘non-cynic’. The choice is not, nor can it be, based on transcendent knowing of the truth of the matter.

The chapter connects Memento’s storyworld to the history of the Lockean social contract. To find a parallel between the two, as I explain below, one has to look at things from the standpoint of the film’s protagonist, or look from standpoints akin to that. One such is the standpoint of a citizen who wants to treat Locke’s doctrine of the social contract as a writerly text. (A writerly text, in this instance, is a ‘just so’ story in which the narratee has an active voice in the saying of ‘just so.’) The citizen could belong to a first nation, which is setting out in the postcolonial era to be recognised as elder polity to the settler state that is bent on containing and subjugating it. The citizen could also belong to the part of the movement of movements that regards the social contract as an imposture, but plays ‘non-cynic’ (the Beas). And Locke, were he alive today and no zombie, could equally be the citizen in question – he could be revivified with a touch of the Beas. That would be a good thing. We would have a transformed, poststructuralist Locke.

8.2 Introducing Memento

A humbler Sisyphus

Memento is a mystery thriller, with a flawed vigilante cum amateur sleuth as its main character. It is a bleak film, and yet, as I am about to argue, it also borders on being an evangelical film. It shows active force going to work in dire circumstances, and working a miracle. In that regard, it shares the agenda of the sci-fi thriller Gattaca (Andrew Niccol, 1997), an agenda that Alan B Wood eloquently teased out in an essay in Theory & Event. Memento is all the more powerful a film, for its dispensing with the legendary ‘winner’ spirit that drives the story in Gattaca. There is nothing exceptional about Memento’s hero, Leonard Shelby. He is a protagonist with no special fortitude or drive. (That point comes through in the casting: the actor who plays Leonard is Guy Pearce, best known at the time of the film’s release for his role in the television sitcom Neighbours.)

Leonard (‘L’) has been thrown by misfortune into a way of living within parameters set by a brain injury. Months or years have passed since his head’s shivering impact with a mirror, as he was tackling an intruder in his home. It was then that L lost the capacity to make new memories. He can hold his act together as what passes for a self, for just about ten

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1 A different film cycle of the nineties, in Australian cinema, takes up the issues of land, sovereignty and memory, viewed explicitly from the standpoint of a first nation and its settler state. Australian Cinema after Mabo (Collins and Davis, 2004) marks the beginning of an appreciation of that film cycle.
minutes at a time. When ten minutes are up, L’s grey matter has lost the thread of who he is, where he is, how he got there, and who are the people around him. What remains of L must pick up the pieces all over again, an imbecile Sisyphus.3

The main story of the film is a series of violent assaults and killings, prompting somebody to reduce Memento to a glib new Hollywood algorithm: ‘Think Groundhog Day with a gun.’4

Is it alive?

L faces the question of whether he has a life that can be called his own. That question is underscored in the film in several ways. One of the ways is by showing another character, a man called Sammy Jankis, whose path, as it happens, crossed L’s some time before L’s brush with the intruder. Sammy was an accident victim, afflicted with the same memory disorder that was later to claim L as a victim. Sammy is L’s double: the two are separated by a fissure of ‘supple segmentation,’ as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus.5

Sammy went through extensive tests and therapy, carried out by experts with the help of Sammy’s devoted wife. It was unclear whether his condition was physical or ‘all in the mind.’ There were tests for the presence of a material cause and, on the basis that there was such a cause, Sammy’s wife attempted to help him with coping devices. Cutting across that, there were measures to help Sammy recover, on the premise that the condition was psychosomatic. All the efforts failed to unwrap the enigma of Sammy’s condition, and only brought deeper anguish.

Sammy ended up in a home for incurables, vegetating. L has escaped such a fate. Someone took L out of institutional care, or he absconded, and the film finds him living on the run, with the help of a minder named Teddy (‘T’). Playing T – in another nice stroke of casting – is Joe Pantoliano, whose film roles earlier in the nineties include the traitorous comrade called Cypher, in the cult hit movie The Matrix. Carrie-Ann Moss, the female lead in The Matrix, plays a friend to L in Memento.

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3 Memento recalls the bleakness of the existentialist Sisyphus, the subject of a famous essay by Albert Camus. The essay concerns the mid-twentieth-century condition of mankind, facing the absurd and with each of the living still mustering what it takes to be alive (Camus, 1991 /1955 1942Fr).

4 Anthony Kaufman in (Nolan, 2000). Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis, 1993) is a tedious fantasy romantic comedy, which was a huge box office hit. It recounts a tale of how a man learnt, by trial and error, to grasp the chance to do what fits in with some benign master plan for the world.

5 Becoming aware that one has a double, or that one could well have a double, bestows freedom to play with roles as well as playing in them. Deleuze and Guattari explore that effect, and explore the relation between having a double and supple segmentation, in MP: Plateau 8 1874: Three Novellas, or “What Happened?” – see especially p 200. Elsewhere in MP (Plateau 9 1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity’), there is an extended discussion of rigid segmentarity and supple segmentarity in societies.
Patchwork narrative

The film gives us no bedrock information about L’s actions, nor about the actions of the persons around him. We are given bits and pieces of information by L, and we see him being told things by T and by Moss’s character, Natalie. The film’s narration is for the most part in the form of a novella – the central character and narrator, and the audience, wonder what happened, what could have produced the relations and deeds and conversation and voice-over that are unfolding. Clues emerge from the voice-over (spoken by L) and from L’s speaking on the telephone to a caller. The caller’s identity and reason for calling are unclear. There are several contradictions within the given information. All the clues come with the heavy qualification that L is an unreliable narrator.

A similar shadow hangs over the indirect narration by the other characters shown talking with L. The film raises distinct suspicions that the people around L – or some of them, and it is not clear which ones – may be taking advantage of him. In his condition, always losing the thread of what has been going on, L is a hyper-suggestible subject. To mitigate that problem, he ought to trust no one outside an inner circle comprising one person, himself. The catch is that he barely has a self to call his own and to trust. His brain injury splintered that pillar of support.

The film ports the audience into L’s messed-up persona by marking out the course of the narrative chiefly in visual signs. The standard fashion of telling a story is to have the flow of diegetic time aligned for the most part with the flow of extradiegetic time, with that relation being severed only in the instant of passing to and from a flashback (or flash-forward). In Memento, the convention of subordinating the direction of flow of diegetic time to that of extradiegetic time is set aside, and in its stead there is a visualised temporal schema. The film trains the audience to read the visual markers of that schema. The visual markers signal that the film comes in passages, which are strung together so that each passage’s end dovetails with the beginning of the passage that was seen immediately prior to the start of the current passage. Impelled by your instinct or desire to find a coherent plot in the film, you soon realise what you must attempt to do. You must keep deftly re-chaining the passages in your head, in the reverse order to the way they are unreeling on the screen before your eyes.

8.3 An art of self-resuscitation

The sowing of confusion in the audience is part of a strategy, and the first step in appreciating the strategy is to note that Memento does not mediate between its author and the audience. Instead, the gymnastic routine of reading the film yields an unmediated appreciation of L’s plight. So, if one were to take film, by definition, to be a medium, then this ‘film’ would escape that box.
In a sense (which is approaching trite, as new Hollywood churns out movies designed as accessories to theme park visits), *Memento* puts you through boot camp. To watch it is to go through a stint of training, with the film taking hold of your habits of attention to the storyline and brushing those habits the wrong way. *Memento* thereby trains you in a fresh way of handling the comforting buffer of false consciousness. It trains you in living with a radically untrustworthy sense of recall, and in having your past life (save the last ten minutes) revealed to you by witnesses, each of whom may or may not be trustworthy. When you are with someone, it is unclear if the person is abusing your trust or is trying to help.

What is more remarkable is that, in the stint of training, there is a palpable sense of realism. Strange as it may seem, *the film is training you to come alive to the life that you may be in the midst of actually living.*

I need to expand a little on what I have just said. Watching *Memento*, one is apprenticed, as it were, to L, the man whose memory disorder makes him a near-zombie. Thinking in ten-minute grabs, L has equipped himself with basic tools: pens, paper, polaroid camera. He has thought about the fact of his grey matter being unable to register any new memories. He has scoured his ten-minute wits for a way around that hardware limitation. (I say ‘hardware’ because, in computer terms, the snag is just an awkward characteristic or quirk of the machine’s memory unit.) Being on the run, L has scant resources with which to work. His main resources are his body parts. He realises that the hardware in his constant possession is not limited to the grey matter. The hardware includes every part of his body, along with all the reflexes and persistent habits that are hard-wired in his body. Can some of that hardware be put to better use, given the stricken condition of the grey matter? The question is one of developing appropriate software, a patch.

L’s hard-wired mundane habits include checking his wristwatch for the time, and looking in the mirror on rising after a sleep. Added to that, L harbours an urge to kill the intruder who made a getaway from the incident in which L’s head crashed through the mirror. (L believes that the intruder caused the death of L’s wife.) Over a long period of thinking (in ten-minute bites) about the collection of parts that make up his body, a body that is imprinted with the mundane habits and harbours the urge for retribution, L writes some software. The code takes the form of tattoos going up his arm from the wrist, and onto his chest, forming a list of generic task instructions.

L has patched his brain by using his skin, the habits of his eye (the habits of checking the wristwatch, and scanning down a list of messages), and the urge to track down and kill the intruder. He marshalls input data: takes down a licence plate number, burns one man’s photo to ashes, obtains another man’s photo. The data will particularise the listed tasks.

L boots up the patched brain and launches the routine that will have him reclaim his life as his own. It is an act of self-possession that entails killing T (L’s minder, or handler). The near-zombie – L, the host of the parasitic minder/handler – mounts an attack on the force possessing it, and overcomes that force. The host eliminates the parasite.
The patched and rebooted L is seen only in the first minute or so of the film, because diegetic time is running in reverse. There are grounds to hope that L’s life after the patch and reboot may be of positive value. He has taken a photo of T’s body, to use as a reminder to himself that he has ‘tracked down and killed the intruder.’ In any case, it was T who had said things that fomented L’s lust for retribution, and now that T is out of the reckoning, there may be no need to look at the photographic reminder of the deed accomplished. L has created for himself some breathing space, in which he may be able to expand the repertoire of his patched brain. Having come alive autonomously and used active force in the invention of his path to freedom, he may go on to exercise his freedom with a healthy regard for active force.

In conveying an appreciation of Memento, I trust that my use of computer parlance does not seem out of place or contrived. I discuss the film in a manner that harmonises, as I see it, with William E Connolly’s dissection of, and praise for, a vastly different film: Jim Jarmusch’s Stranger than Paradise (1984). In the passage that follows (and elsewhere in his commentary), Connolly is discussing the process that I describe as writing one’s own software on the body and then rebooting the body and launching routines. As you watch the Jarmusch film, ‘What is experienced initially as a set of intellectual themes to explore,’ writes Connolly,

may gradually slide into a series of experimental techniques to recode your sensibility. That is the translation process by which the compositional dimension of thinking and acting comes into its own – the processes by which new pathways are forged in one’s sensibility. Suppose you now watch Stranger than Paradise again, paying close attention to the cuts and forks it portrays. Now, perhaps, your dream life can be drawn into play. The idea is to translate these intellectual themes into modest strategies of self-composition, even as you know that such strategies are both experimental in form and apt to be limited in cumulative effect.6

8.4 A ‘realer than real’ reason: Memento and the critique of transcendent knowing

It is worth having a closer look at L’s routine for organising himself to kill T.7 The routine works by using the power of the false. L feeds into his routine a piece of false data on T, viz the lie that T was the intruder. L knew the piece of data was bogus when he entered it; and he knew too that by the time he would be executing the routine, he would have forgotten that it (the datum) was bogus. (To be convinced of the above, one needs to watch attentively the film’s final chapter, which is titled ‘New identity’ in the DVD release. In that

6 (Connolly, 2002), italics added here. It is not surprising that my approach harmonises with Connolly’s, since both of us are drawing on Deleuze’s insights into cinema. The main difference between my approach to the study of film and politics and Connolly’s approach is explained in the section titled ‘Method adopted, or, Why I am not an auteurist,’ in chapter 7.

7 The concept of organ-isation is discussed in chapter 6 of the thesis, in the section on agonistic democracy (under the heading ‘Micro components of freedom as political struggle’).
chapter, it clicks into place for the audience that T was not the intruder and that L, in the moment of decision on which the film pivots, knows that T was not the intruder.)

The film offers an underlying reason for L’s killing of T. T is a corrupt cop who works in the drug-dealing area. For a long time, he has been posing as L’s minder and friend, while reaping benefits from L’s hyper-suggestible state. More than once, when T has wanted someone killed, he has tricked L into being the hit-man.

The brain-patched L, knowing that he will be operating with T at his elbow, realises that he cannot organise to keep bearing in mind the underlying (real) reason for him to kill T. He seize on an ersatz reason, which will do the job – a ‘realer’ reason. The realer reason allows for the actual, far-from-ideal circumstances in which L finds himself, and in so doing, it enables active force to work through L, overcoming the mean dominative force that T has been exerting on and through L.

Already, an earlier scene in the film has shown that attempting to act on the basis of an underlying (real) reason can be a bad thing. Sammy’s wife, Mrs Jankis, is tormented by doubt as to whether Sammy’s condition has some material cause or is all in the mind. She seeks out L (this is prior to L’s being injured) and asks for his opinion on Sammy’s condition. In this poignant scene, where L is ‘the subject supposed to know’ (see below), Mrs Jankis begs L to tell her what he knows about the nature of Sammy’s memory disorder. The situation as shown brings vividly to mind Jacques Lacan’s critique of psychoanalysis.

Lacan makes a case against seeking out transcendent truth, when one is dealing with questions of the expression of power in life. In the consulting room, he says, analysand and analyst should work together. The pair should explore the expression of power in life as a problem that has brought them together for clinical work. The standard relation between analysand and analyst forbids that transverse clinical practice, since it designates the analyst as ‘the subject supposed to know.’ The standard set-up grants the analyst a position of authority, from which to state the truth about the expression of power in the analysand’s life. There is a sanctioned pattern: the analyst takes the analysand’s talking as a symptom of the problem; the analyst – it is assumed – correctly interprets the symptom; therapy proceeds.

The scene in *Memento* where Mrs Jankis consults L, and all that follows in its wake in the film, amount to an object lesson based on Lacan’s critique of the analysand/analyst relation. When one is dealing with the expression of power in life, and with the problems attending that expression, it is best to meet those problems by co-building with others a

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8 The expression ‘realer than real’ comes from an essay by Brian Massumi on the power of the false (Massumi, 1987). The essay teases out points from Deleuze’s and Guattari’s writings, concerning the play of power through mimesis and through representation. The focus is on unfaithful copies, possessing a strength that lies partly in their flaws as copies.
strong fiction (a strong ideology). And one must take precautions to stop the strong fiction from being mislabelled as transcendent truth.

As a coda to the above, consider the question of why, in *Memento*, we see before us the familiar faces of the actors Moss and Pantoliano. Surely, it is to remind us of a central lesson from *The Matrix*: that ‘[t]here is no spoon.’

8.5 Ethics and enlightened false consciousness in *Memento*

The case against pursuing transcendent truth does not stop at the point I have just covered. It extends, as one would hope, to an ethics for using the power of the false (or renouncing/denouncing its use), in given circumstances. The ethics derives from certain principles that apply in general to the valuing of different uses of power. The principles, which are due to Deleuze, are touched on earlier in the thesis (chapters three and seven).

The use of power by L and by T in *Memento*, including the power that is trained on the audience through the two characters, is instructive. It provides a glimpse of Deleuze’s ethics being put to work, in a setting where the cynical use of power, and the act of disavowing cynicism, engage with each other.

First, for ease of reference, here are a few words on Deleuze’s ethics, recalling the passages on it earlier in the thesis. The organising of human affairs tends to proceed on a higher plane, the freer rein it gives to life’s creative power. The release of creative power calls for an ethics of prizing certain uses of power above other uses. The uses that are highly prized are those that beckon life toward forms that will exert active force. Active force is defined as force that supports a disposition of life to connect with what life can do, where the disposition is present across the spectrum of life and at all levels of disaggregation. Alan B. Wood points out that active force is what the philosopher Henri Bergson calls genius.

Properly understood, ‘genius’ or ‘active force’ can refer not only to a human being, nor does it even refer to any particular human being in total (a person is at best only part genius) but to a quality of open multiplicity, of the world of

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9. (Lacan, 1981/1973Fr: ch 18). See also (Grosz, 1990: p 18). There is another aspect of *Memento* that bears out my seeing the film as (among other things) a critique of the analysand/analyst relation. A drug-dealer named Jimmie is L’s penultimate kill – the kill preceding T. The killing of Jimmie is spoken of, in the film’s final chapter, as one of a series of such killings; T has put L up to do them all. Thus, Jimmie’s body, which is hidden in the basement of the building where L confronts T, symbolises the repressed truth of L’s past as a killer (according to literary and film convention, the basement or the space beneath the floor symbolises the unconscious). T alludes to that past, knowing that the shared secret helps to keep L under his sway.

10. ‘There is no spoon,’ the child who has just bent a spoon by telekinesis explains, in an iconic scene from *The Matrix* (Cavagna, 2001). The statement sums up *The Matrix’s* critique of the conventional concept of being. To say ‘There is no spoon’ is to be addressing the whole world, from within the world, and saying, ‘You shall become what you are.’ (See my earlier comments on Nietzsche’s aphorism, ‘You shall become the person you are,’ toward the end of chapter 6.) Unfortunately, in constructing its critique of the concept of being, *The Matrix* builds on a surface that is highly unsuited to the purpose. The film’s premise is that the world is produced from a bedrock device, the eponymous matrix, and the film contains no autocritique of the matrix. Thus, the film says, in effect, ‘There is no spoon. Oh, but there is the matrix.’
becoming which hides and reveals genius/genesis everywhere. "Let there be" this and this and this and this... recurrently.11

What of the less valued uses of power? Those are the uses in which power marshalls life toward forms that will exert repressive force, which is the kind of force that keeps part of life separated from what it can do.12 Repressive force can be directed outward, or it can be reflexive. It includes the force of dominative relations, as commonly occur in workplaces and in families, in education systems, in welfare programs, in many social groups, and of course in prisons. It also comes into play through social mores, where the social mores are based on transcendent knowing; such mores are a source of inhibition and psychic repression. In addition, the various forms of eugenics – from the softer matchmaking kind, through to the more rigid measures to help get rid of ‘faults,’ and in the extreme genocide – are instances of repressive force.

A parasite – and T in *Memento* is an example – expresses power in a process that weakens other living systems. Parasites and their hosts are best studied in terms of material and semiotic assemblages (discussed in chapter three). If the host has the means to get rid of the parasite, but the parasite is still on the host, then it is likely that the parasite is a quasi-cause of some effect that benefits the host. In other words, there is a repressive application of realer reason, with the parasite passing itself off as a symbiont of the host. Thus, in *Memento*, the apparent help T provides to L, in looking after him, is the quasi-cause of L being able to survive on the run. T’s ruse of acting as helper is the realer reason, masking the manipulative game that is the real reason for L doing what T wants.

As long as L believes the realer reason offered by T, ie the quasi-cause story, L stays where he is in relation to T. L stays – the two of them stay – on the micro *miraculating grid* that puts T in charge of the pair. (As noted in chapter three, ‘miraculating grid’ is a term that comes from Massumi’s essay, ‘Realer than real: the simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari.’ Massumi reminds his readers that Marx described capital as ‘a miraculating substance that arrogates all things to itself and presents itself as first and final cause.’13)

I can now rephrase the material from a few pages back, where I sketched how L writes himself a software patch and reboots. The patch and reboot can equally well be scripted as a case of affirmative will to power, expressing itself in L. Thus, the will to power lifts the parts of L’s body off the micro miraculating grid that puts T in charge. Down the parts fall onto a new grid, and hence organ-ised differently. Thanks to the affirmative quality of the will to power in this instance, the new grid is one where L is autonomous.

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12 In this brief account of Deleuze’s principles for valuing uses of power, I use the term ‘repressive’ for the negative quality of the will to power, where that negative quality has devolved to forces in their encounters with other forces. (See also chapters 3 and 7 of the thesis; and for much more on the topic, see chapter 2 of Nietzsche and Philosophy (Deleuze, 1983 /1962Fr).) The expression ‘death-dealing’ could be substituted for ‘repressive,’ it being understood that, more often than not, death occurs by degrees.
13 (Massumi, 1987). (The words quoted here are Massumi’s, where he is paraphrasing Marx.)
The miracle, or patch and reboot, is achieved through the killing of T, and admittedly, killing is always a use of repressive force. But in this instance, the repressive force or murder is being used expressly to take out another repressive force. The deed done, there is cause for hope (as I noted above) that L’s days of killing are over.

I have mentioned evidence from the film, to support the reading of it that I am presenting here. Nevertheless, like a Necker cube, the film draws its audience into an oscillating mode of understanding; one cycles through multiple valid readings of what is being screened. In the case of Memento, there is an open multiplicity of readings (gestalts). Registering and alive to the pulse of ambiguity, I am in L’s skin, as he makes the decision to deceive himself into killing T. (He deceives himself by feeding into the routine in his software the bogus piece of data on T, viz that T was the intruder.) At that pivotal moment, L suspects that he could win his freedom by killing T. He is far from sure of it, but he embarks on the act, impelled to believe in it as his act of self-determination.

When L disavows the feeling that he is hopelessly cornered, he could be walking off the edge of a cliff. It so happens that his weight is miraculously held aloft by the false consciousness of walking on something solid. In the fleeting moments when he may remember the disavowal, he possesses an enlightened false consciousness. L’s enlightened false consciousness differs in kind from the malaise that Peter Sloterdijk probes in his Critique of Cynical Reason.14 L’s disavowal is a performance: he does not have the mind to be a true believer, so he plays ‘non-cynic.’ The performance is of the kind Roland Barthes finds being produced by writerly texts. (Barthes defines writerly texts as texts in which those addressed by the text – its implied readers – have an active role in the storytelling.) On occasion, Barthes signals the performative effect of writerly texts by these words: ‘Je sais bien … mais quand même …’.15 Readers are saying: ‘We know very well that the entire story or theme has already been committed to paper; we know that the ending must be so-and-so. But all the same, we believe (the author’s proposition) that what we are reading is far from cut and dried, and in it there are fresh secrets that are ours to unearth.’

Barthes points to the pleasure – it is jouissance, as opposed to plaisir – that readers may find in a writerly text. It is the jouissance of the act that the text evokes, viz the readers’ performative act of disavowing that the ground is all mapped out. That disavowal deliciously affirms the readers’ life and vigour. It is not a panicky escape from a death-like state. Nor is it a reactive strike of prisoner (captive audience) against captor. It lifts its performers into a creative game, which they pursue, against the odds, in the midst of an absurd predicament of what-ifs.

Everybody is waiting for the end to come, but what if it already passed us by? What if the final joke of Judgment Day was that it had already come and gone

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14 Sloterdijk’s insights into political cynicism are touched on in the prologue to my discussion of agonistic democracy, in chapter 6 of the thesis.
15 See (Modleski, 2002, especially p 269). Modleski cites a passage from pp 48-49 of The Pleasure of the Text (Barthes, 1975), where Barthes uses the well-known tag for the disavowal in fetishes. (The tag comes from a 1969 essay by Octave Mannoni.) In The Ticklish Subject, Slavoj Žižek takes up the question of cynicism, citing two types of disavowal, one cynical and the other non-cynical, both of which can be phrased ‘Je sais bien … mais quand même …’ (Žižek, 1999: p 387).
and we were none the wiser? Apocalypse arrives quietly; the chosen are herded off to heaven, and the rest of us, the ones who failed the test, just keep on going, oblivious. Dead already, wandering around long after the gods have stopped keeping score, still optimistic about the future.

The quotation comes from the novella, titled ‘Memento Mori,’ which inspired the film *Memento.* A memento mori – for instance, a death’s head – is a material reminder of mortality. At the same time, it is a reminder of the death/life disjuncture: the sight of a death’s head may revivify the seer. In the novella ‘Memento Mori,’ the protagonist has in his pocket a small bell, which serves him as a memento mori.

One thing needs to be added, about the readers who can participate in creation, through acts of disavowing that the ground is terminally mapped out. As can be gathered from the paragraph I quoted earlier, from Wood’s essay on *Gattaca,* the readers are bio-machinic constructs. They are life-forms as ‘readers’ of code. They are not limited to human forms, and they never include the form of ‘a particular human being in total.’ Life is a vast enterprise of textmaking, where creative events occur in the textmaking (in the expression of genes through bodies, as much as in the expression of thoughts through gesture, images, cries and words). From within life, then, one apprehends creative events in a way that is at odds with humanist thinking. The creative event is not a matter of choice and free will. It is self-determining, but it is not an existential act, any more than it is an act of divine grace.

### 8.6 Ethics, enlightened false consciousness, and Locke’s coming undone

I now move back to the murkier side of the power of the false. I noted in passing, a little while back, that *Memento* gives us a parallel between T’s use of the power of the false – a use that instigates repressive force – and the way capital works in our society. In both cases, a parasitic order is sustained, with a quasi-cause playing a key role in the hosts’ acceptance of the parasites. The hosts are fooled, by spin, into thinking that the parasites are familiar symbionts.

The pattern that the two cases (T and capital) have in common is the exerting of repressive force, which is aimed at weakening the hosts (separating them from what they can do). The repressive force works by channelling the power of the false; and, at least for a time, it wins.

Apropos of that pattern, it is worth looking at some work by James Tully, which has to do with the history of the constitutional state and with the allied currents in political theory.

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A commentary by Tully, on Locke’s *Two treatises of government*, reveals an unbecoming side of Locke’s thinking and actions. Tully’s sketch forms a basis to cast Locke, and his successor Adam Smith, and all their lesser followers down to this day, as prototypes for the character T: cynics using the power of the false to sustain a parasitic order. Locke is widely held to be the first philosopher of the European Enlightenment; as I am about to show (based on Tully’s remarks), Locke also provides an object lesson in enlightened false consciousness. And Locke’s is not the laudable, creative kind of enlightened false consciousness that L possesses, or that possesses L, in *Memento*. It is instead – as I am about to show – the kind of enlightened false consciousness that instigates repressive force; which is to say, it is the kind that T has.

If one is to judge by appearances, no one is a more stalwart supporter of constitutional rule than Locke. Here is a man who reviles the absolutist state. He vigorously scotches the idea that kings may rule by divine right over their child-like subjects, with the subjects having no say in the matter.

So, one might well honour Locke, the father reasoner, who first codified the tests of legitimacy of the use of power in the public sphere. He set down the humanist basis for the wielding of state power. He ushered in a unifying doctrine, which was tidy enough to give state power, in due course, the stamp of normalcy. The new form of state, founded on reason and defined rights, would shield Europe against a return of warring, bloodshed and cruel repression such as were seen in the Thirty Years’ War and in the United Kingdom’s first eighty odd years.

Tully deftly brings to light the con in the constitutional doctrine that Locke propounds. A Royal Commission had produced a report in 1665, which addressed questions to do with Europeans’ dealings with the peoples of the New World. The report had concluded that Europeans, if they wanted to settle in America, would have to negotiate agreements with the Americans on the use of the land. In the ensuing years, the Americans (the first nations peoples or traditional owners of the land, as they are called today) had not agreed to allow European settlers to take up as much land as the settlers wanted, in the areas they wanted. It was against that contemporary background, as well as the Thirty Years’ War (which had come to an end in 1648) and the troubles of the early Stuart period and the Protectorate, that Locke wrote *Two treatises of government*.

Tully traces how Locke constructs the case for the doctrine of constitutional rule as it relates to the New World. Locke starts with the ‘stages theory of world history,’ which was a product of the ocean voyages of ‘discovery,’ beginning with Columbus. Hobbes’s notion of the progression from a state of ‘nature’ to a ‘civilised’ state enjoyed wide acceptance in Europe, from the mid seventeenth century on, and it was embellished by various writers over

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17 I am drawing upon the section titled ‘Examples of forging the seven features: Locke and Aboriginal peoples,’ at pp 70-78 of (Tully, 1995).

18 (Locke, 2003 /1690).

the next two centuries. (Notable among them were Condorcet and, as mentioned in chapter three of the thesis, Lewis H Morgan.)

Locke argues that the non-Europeans in America have yet to acquire a constitution. He does not entertain the thought that the growth and adaptation of traditions could serve the same function as an intentionally conceived constitution. Not having a constitution, says Locke, the non-Europeans have no protection of their person or property. And, as wild men in a state of ‘nature,’ they have no right to such protection, other than through their own strength and weapons. Hence, settlers have the right to hunt and kill the non-Europeans, or to punish them as in a lawless land (a land of wild beasts), if they put up any resistance to settlers’ occupying their land, or if they steal any crops or livestock from the settlers.

Locke also notes the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which was propounded some fifty years earlier.20 The doctrine of *terra nullius* states that, in the New World, non-Europeans have yet to graduate from the stage of the hunter-gatherer economy to the stage of an economy based on investing labour to subdue and improve the land. Not having invested labour in altering land-forms or biota, they have no property rights in land. They own the day’s catch or harvest that is already in their hands, and nothing more. The land that supports the hunter-gatherers belongs to no one, and lies waiting for the settlers to take it.

Locke feels that the above does not quite pull off the job of legitimising the settlers’ taking all the land they want to settle, and hunting and killing any of the non-Europeans who resist. He turns his mind to ‘the oldest convention of constitutionalism: *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus comprobetur* (what touches all should be agreed to by all).’21 He admits that the Americans (the non-Europeans in America) are not agreeing to what is being done in America, but he points to their inadequate capacity for judgment in the matter. Benighted souls, they do not realise that it is in their interest to give up their land without any fuss. If they end up as day labourers in the new economy, they will all be as well off, or even better off, than their chiefs were in their pre-European way of life. The settlers positively owe it to the Americans (the non-Europeans) to drive them off their land, to punish the resisters, and to give the survivors the chance to offer their labour for what it is worth in the new economy.

Thus, Locke tears down the case for absolutist rule; and in the same stream of ink – knowing of the spilt human blood that will trail in its wake – he reasons that Europeans wishing to settle in the New World can be proud of dispossessing by force the traditional owners of land. It is tempting to say that of course Locke, like all Europeans at the time, was blind to the viewpoint of the traditional owners. But Tully notes that it was not so. Tully cites various writings, which aired the traditional owners’ point of view, and which were almost certainly familiar to Locke. For instance, Thomas Morton’s *New English Canaan* (1637) pointed out that the traditional owners valued their leisure, and that they had no wish to amass wealth in the form known to settlers. They were content with the goods their hunting and gathering yielded. Morton also made sharply satirical remarks on the Puritan

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20 Ibid., p 74.
21 Idem.
settlers, who made it their business to deprive all and sundry of pleasure, in the name of Puritan values.

Tully’s book, and writings in a similar vein by Paul Patton and other scholars in recent years, point to a nascent change in liberal constitutionalist thought. Those writings were touched off by a late twentieth-century resurgence of first nations, in which those nations asserted their presence as elder polities to the settler states that attempted to contain and subjugate them. The event of first nations’ resurgence could yet break apart the unified constitutional state, and give us in its stead a form of polity that is an open multiplicity.

### 8.7 Conclusion

In this chapter and the preceding one, I have discussed a cycle of films from recent mainstream cinema that fit into a certain frame narrative in popular culture. The frame narrative consists, at least in part, of actual events. Those events include political assassinations; infiltrating, and disrupting from the inside, groups that were active in the support of civil rights; and organised pushing of cocaine so as to keep an underclass down. It is the story of what was at first called the military-industrial complex, a system that acts behind the scenes and uses its vast power to undermine people’s freedom. With the passage of time, the lurking menace grew a new pair of tentacles or prongs to add to its existing pair, and became the military-industrial, surveillance and infotainment complex – the four-pronged complex.

Belonging in the cycle of films that plug into the frame narrative are films that tell stories about covert abuse of corporate power and state power. As is reasonably well known, the 1970s produced a flurry of such films, which played to large audiences. The cycle then went quiet, to re-emerge with a difference in the nineties, reflecting a heightened state of anxiety about the infotainment arm of the complex. I have mentioned about a score of mainstream movies, mostly thrillers with a few comedy-drama films, which air that heightened anxiety.

What I think matters about the cycle – and I trust that my discussion of the films has brought this out – is its ability, qua cycle, to show how a ‘community of the diegesis’ may hold together. In this case, the members of the community of the diegesis are cynics about the present form of state power, which is based on the fiction of the Lockean social contract. Some in the community play ‘non-cynic’: these are persons, or to be more precise partbodies politic, who act in the knowledge that they are penetrated by the four-pronged complex, and who disavow that this is a fatal condition.

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22 See (Patton, 2000: ch 6, especially pp 126-131) and references therein.

23 The term ‘community of the diegesis’ comes from a remark by Cubitt on late century realist films, notably films by Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Spike Lee (Cubitt, 2004: p 225). Cubitt notes that in these films, as spectators, we are ‘caught like rabbits in the exploration of [our] own fascination’ (Cubitt, op. cit., note 2 on p 395).
The relevant individual films do not show a community of the diegesis. If the film is a thriller, it is likely to have either a lone superhero or a lone antihero; and if it is a comedy-drama, it is likely to involve the forming of a couple. But the cycle, by pointing to the embracing diegesis of the frame story, shows how the community may hold together.

I have called *Memento* the capstone of the thrillers in the cycle, and I have devoted an entire chapter to the film, with good reason. Of all the films, this one shows most clearly how a partbody politic may work in a world where events have a surfeit of explanations. Having watched *Memento* (perhaps one needs to have watched it twice), the film sits in one’s memory much as the little bell sits in the pocket of the protagonist in the Jonathan Nolan novella, ‘Memento Mori.’ The film-bell conjures up other films in the cycle, and rallies the community of the diegesis. It is a liberty bell.