

# MementoVision™:

*Re-imagining A Conversation*

1

I probably first encountered these projects on the DMI website, then in person at the *If/Then* exhibition of student work in April 2009, which took place a few days after my interview (which I basically bombed, as I do most interviews), and then subsequently in introductory class sessions, shown as sort of lay-of-the-land examples of the work being done in the program. These projects seemingly involving either *The Perfect Human* or *Twelve Monkeys* or *La Jetée* or a combination of the three and seemed collectively humbling and vaguely exciting, the same sort of way seniors make you feel when you're a freshman in high school.

2

Meaning all ten (at the time) of us in *Design Studio I*.

3

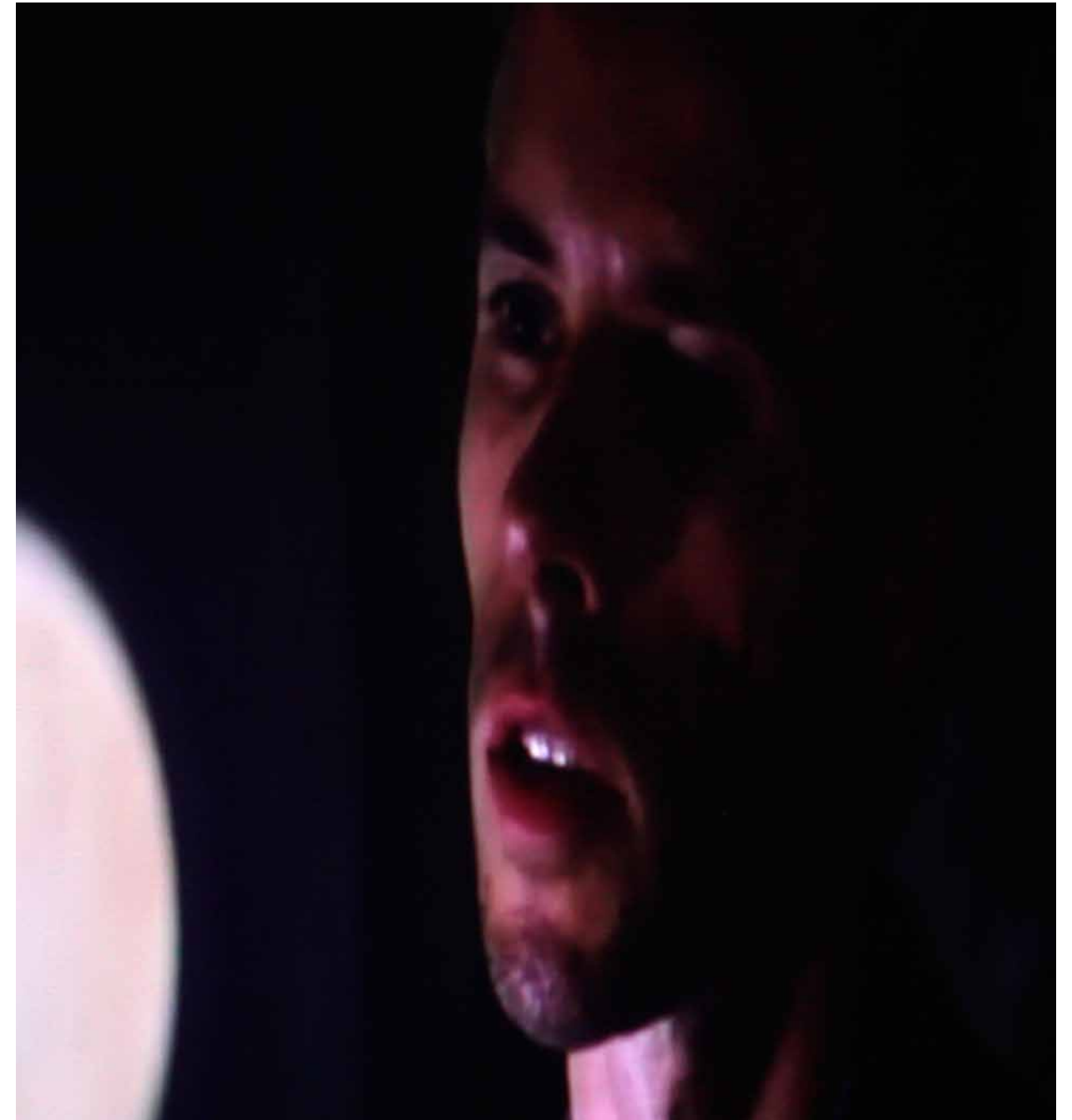
I would usually start projects by figuring out what I didn't want to do, rather than latching onto to an idea from the get-go. This process is sort of like asking someone what they want for dinner, and having them say, "Well, I don't want pasta. And I don't want quesadillas." Not that I've ever been known to behave in such a way.

4

The 2000 documentary directed by Lars von Trier, in which LvT has fellow Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth remake his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times, each time with a different set of rules or limitations. Leth ends up using the set of "obstructions" as a tool or framework to enhance each film, rather than as a collection of limitations.

Having been peripherally aware of a good deal of DMI projects that dealt with the deconstruction or mapping of a film<sup>1</sup>, I think we<sup>2</sup> all knew a project involving such a process was headed our way at some point during our degree pursuit. Prof. Jan Kubasiewicz threw us the proverbial content curveball when, rather than assigning us one of the aforementioned films that had been the subject of the gradually familiar projects, he chose Christopher Nolan's 2000 neo-noir thriller *Memento*. It's a good/natural choice for a mapping/film deconstruction project, not only because the film has a non-linear structure, but also because it actually has a very specific structure, which reveals itself upon further viewing and inquiry. It's a film that rewards the viewer for spending time with it. I was excited to see what other students would come up with for project ideas, but, I personally didn't want to do another mapping project. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I chose to map the visual language of a specific genre of music videos for my *You Are Here* project, *which I had just finished*. I didn't want to delve into another video mapping project, and I didn't want to create an interface to navigate the film's structure<sup>3</sup>, which seemed to be what a lot of people wanted to do.

Jan, wily as always, did find a way to sneak *The Perfect Human* into the class—he showed us excerpts from *The Five Obstructions*<sup>4</sup> in preparation for the assignment. Something about seeing Lars von Trier's giggly and condescending demeanor in the film again made an impression on me, and I decided to use him as the sort of patron saint of my *Memento* project. At some point I imagined that he gave me the following obstruction: remake



*Memento* without using any video footage from *Memento*.

The notion of remaking something that's image-based *sans* image must have seemed perhaps contrarian and possibly a little bit smug when I presented it to the class. Also, having Lars' visage appear in my weekly required handouts most likely grew tiresome. But I remained committed to my original idea as time rolled on and I spun my wheels trying to figure out how to make something visual that didn't include footage from the film.

At the time, or MEANWHILE... as a good melodrama or cartoon might say, Krzysztof Wodiczko had an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Entitled, ...*OUT OF HERE: the Veterans Project*, a piece in the show contained videos of a British soldier's words being projected on buildings as the audio of the soldier's voice played through loudspeakers. This juxtaposition of the visual display of text and the sound of the words being spoken simultaneously added a level of weight and significance to the content. The speed at which the text was displayed also implied a sort of violence (I believe Wodiczko also added some sound effects of guns and explosions below some of the audio); each word only appeared for the moment it was spoken. It also called to mind the rhythm and speed of spoken language—something you don't realize is moving so fast until it's visually translated, like sticking your head into a stream of water.

The penultimate scene in *Memento* is basically the big reveal of what's been happening for the entire film. Guy Pierce's character, Leonard, kills Joe Pantoliano's character, Teddy, not before Teddy (possibly) explains to him (and the viewer) what's been going on for the last two hours. It's the scene that gives the viewer the most information in the film, or at least what *seems* like the most information. Leonard, the main character, has a memory condition that prevents him from retaining any information for longer than ten minutes<sup>5</sup>. As such, he spends most of the film seeking out information about his (dead?) wife, always on the precipice of solving a mystery that continues to elude him. I had the idea to deconstruct this particular scene and turn it into a somewhat immersive experience, using/yoinking Wodiczko's form of displaying text as the viewer is hearing it. Since there are two characters in the scene, it made sense to split their sources into two distinct feeds: the Leonard side and the Teddy side, each

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Whether this is a condition that legitimately occurs in the real world, or is something like the "Nic Cage can see five seconds into the future, but only five seconds!!" kind of screenwriter-friendly device is unknown to me and I would suggest, at the very least, worth investigation and/or up for debate.

represented by a screen, a projection and an audio source.

I went about cutting the scene into two discrete short films. One would include only Leonard's audio and text, in black and white, and one would include Teddy's, and they would play simultaneously, being projected onto their respective screens. I made these excerpted movies in *Final Cut Pro*, taking great pains<sup>6</sup> to make the display of the text sync up with its respective audio source. I did some test experiments with both streams playing on two laptops. It was interesting to see the text as it was heard, but the overall experience lacked the conceptual depth that I thought was necessary for the project. And it was basically still just a Wodiczko rip-off. I could make the argument that the project was basically a deconstruction not only of *Memento* but of the two-person dialogue scene, literally taking each character and assigning them a screen and subsequently a presence in physical space, devoid of camera angle, editing, and image, as an investigation into the language of cinema. Actually, that's not bad.

And so, with the heat on, and my imaginary von Trier peering down at me, condescendingly, of course, I had the sort of good idea that springs into one's mind at just about the moment that one has given up trying to conjure up good ideas. And, it made the project interactive<sup>7</sup>, to boot: What if the person experiencing the installation wore glasses with a sensor (infrared?) that could detect the direction in which they were looking? And what if the screen at which they were looking displayed the text feed, while the screen at which they weren't looking showed footage from the film? The screens would be positioned in such a way so that the viewer could only see one at a time. This would conceptually mimic the condition of Leonard, always "looking" for information, but never able to actually glimpse or retain it, using the cinematic image as a metaphor for knowledge.

I cut together additional versions of the scene that mimicked what it might be like if someone were looking back and forth between the two screens. I did a sort of canned live demo of this system at end of semester reviews, explaining the project only minimally before heading into the demo<sup>8</sup>. The reaction was mixed; some hadn't the vaguest notion of what I was attempting to do. Some felt that I had done something really interesting with the space<sup>9</sup>. Some left for the bathroom.

6

One of the side effects of doing heavy editing to this sequence was that the entire scene's dialogue is now committed firmly to memory, whether I like it or not, most likely due to Joe Pantoliano's signature/trademark gratingly nasal delivery driving the words deep into the farthest depths of my cerebrum. Ask me sometime and I'll do it for you: "I du-nno. Your wife surviving the assault. Her not believing your condition. The pain and anguish and torment tearing you up inside. The *in-SU-lin*."

7

A concern, always, let's face it, at the back of one's mind as a DMI student.

8

To Explain or Not to Explain is one of the great DMI Reviews conundrums. After having presented at seven reviews (thus far) and having tried both ways of going about things, my conclusion is that you should just go ahead and explain your stuff to the best of your ability, leaving very little up to the viewer/listener/audience. Again, I'm just talking about reviews here.

9

That being the DMI Headquarters classroom, in and around which every DMI student spends most of his/her first year.

IDEA





Things and new projects happened, as they do, and I moved on to other pursuits in my second semester. Something about the project continued to linger in my mind, though, as I worked on other things. This spring, I decided to document it properly, so I set it up in an empty gallery. Having never advanced *MementoVision™* past the conceptual stage, the set-up was still very much a simulation of the re-imagined conversation between Leonard and Teddy. There was no interactivity or programming, only two DVD players, two projectors, and two sets of speakers. Still, there was something in the two streams of projected light, rarely simultaneous but always in sync, moving through the dark of the gallery, and the text, wall-sized and strobing, punctuating every breathless word of the dialogue, that left me dazed and more than a little bit entertained, looking for answers and maybe wondering why I never completely finished the project. I have no reasons. Call me Leonard.

**INSULIN**

**AMPHETAMINE**