

The lack of any real feeling for the world

Memento, directed by Christopher Nolan; Sexy Beast, directed by Jonathan Glazer

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Memento, written and directed by Christopher Nolan, based on a story by Jonathan Nolan; *Sexy Beast*, directed by Jonathan Glazer, written by Louis Mellis and David Scinto

Sexy Beast, directed by Jonathan Glazer—formerly involved in making music videos and commercials—is one of the latest in a wave of British gangster films. It concerns a “retired” hoodlum, Gal (Ray Winstone) living with a former pornographic film star in the south of Spain. Called upon by his former associates in London to take part in another heist, he resists. Gal’s old boss dispatches a violent thug named Don Logan (Ben Kingsley) to Spain to coerce him into coming back. As we learn, Logan burns with a secret passion for Jackie (Julianne White), the lover of Gal’s friend Aitch (Cavan Kendall). After a violent confrontation with Logan, Gal accedes to the demand to return to England for one more job.

In *Memento*, Leonard Shipley (Guy Pearce) is a man in Los Angeles with an unusual condition: he has no short-term memory. He can’t remember anything after his wife’s apparent rape and murder and he can’t make “new memories.” Shipley, a former insurance investigator, has to write down each and every experience in the form of notes before the memory fades. The film is composed of scenes, overlapping and organized in reverse order, that last about as long as his memory. A few other individuals drift through the scenes: Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), who may or may not be a policeman, and Natalie (Carrie-Ann Moss), a waitress and the girl-friend of a drug dealer.

The two films, at least superficially, do not have that much in common, aside from British-born writers and directors. Each film’s creators would probably not

approve of the other. They are both, however, unmistakably stamped by the peculiarities of the present cultural situation.

A first test, to which almost no one submits a film these days, is that of dramatic or psychological plausibility. Both films have essentially preposterous stories, which do not stand serious examination. In *Sexy Beast*, supposedly topflight crime figures send out a raving psychotic to do their messenger work for them, thereby endangering the success of their million-pound enterprise. Why? And since, as it turns out, his particular role doesn’t seem to require that much skill or specialization, why do they have to have the retired Gal? An outfit that functioned with as much psychological dysfunction, vindictiveness and subjectivism as this one would not be able to organize a successful Christmas party, much less a brilliant and precise “crime of the century.”

In *Memento*, leaving aside the question of whether anyone would commit suicide (as Shipley’s wife apparently does) by having her “forgetful” husband inject her with an overdose of insulin, we are asked to believe that an insurance investigator could be transformed into a hardened killer and all-round tough guy simply on the instructions of one “bad” cop. Moreover, the policeman is obliged to hover around the forgetful man as he carries out his crimes or blunders around the city. The two would be nabbed within about a half an hour.

Beyond that, in order to justify its farfetched goings-on, *Memento* assumes the worst about the world in a particularly unpleasant manner. The filmmakers have dreamed up the most wretched circumstances for Shipley—his wife has been raped and (he thinks)

murdered, he seems utterly friendless and without family, he falls into the hands of a corrupt policeman who directs him toward an existence in a milieu of drug dealers and assorted lowlifes, etc. This is known as stacking the deck. And to what end?

The absence of psychological or dramatic believability is not accidental. In the final analysis, it stems from the filmmakers' lack of interest in the problem. Their concentration lies elsewhere. Endlessly cool and clever, mannered and empty, the works lack any real, sensuous feeling for the world. No one talks or acts like these characters. The irritating staccato dialogue of the gangsters in *Sexy Beast* is as silly and unreal as the would-be profundity of *Memento*'s throw-away lines. If the filmmakers were able to step back and extract themselves for a moment from their influences and ambitions, think about the world and how it operates, think about people they know and how they act, think about themselves seriously, they would quickly see how silly and unreal it all is. If they could only work honestly and directly.

Naturalistic detail is not the issue here. However the artist organizes it, there needs to be some point of contact, aside from the most superficial, between the fictional figure and life beyond the screen. But these are not films principally devoted to life. They are essentially the work of poseurs, individuals concerned with their reputations and status within the film world. The primary reference points for both works are other works, successful works, works that have made names for their creators.

And the "darkness" of both films is at once part of the pose and a genuine expression of the filmmakers' cynical view of things. It's difficult in such cases to distinguish the pose from a genuine expression; the artists themselves, unfortunately, don't know the difference.

Christopher and Jonathan Nolan may have intended a study of the "post-modern condition" in *Memento*, perhaps even a criticism of the absence of "memory" (history) in contemporary life and culture, but mostly they produce coldness and a general disgust for humanity. This is, so to speak, the default setting these days. In *Sexy Beast* too, the pervasive atmosphere is one of depravity, with hints of a sentimental streak.

Can anything be done about the recent love affair of British filmmakers with gangsters? Probably nothing

can be done about Guy Ritchie (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*; *Snatch*). But what about the rest? *Love, Honour and Obey*; *Circus*; *Essex Boys*; *Honest*; *Gangster No. 1* and so on. Can't somebody tell these middle class gentlemen (for the most part), who have never associated with such types, been anywhere near them, in their lives, that their fantasizing about men with guns is a little disturbing. What can one say?

In a few years' time, audiences and most likely many directors and writers themselves will wonder how anyone ever took the current mainstream cinema seriously. They will say: "This was what was going on in the world, and this was what the filmmakers were telling stories about? How is it possible? What were they thinking!" It may very well be that we are experiencing what will simply—and pityingly—be known as "on the eve" art, art on the eve of great upheavals.



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