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The Ever-Expanding Unreal Cinematic World of Christopher Nolan

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Abstract: Christopher Nolan is among the most successful and revered directors of Hollywood, who wants to tear up the whole mechanism of cinema so that he may rebuild it while learning its nuances. Nolan secures a place in the tradition of directors like Georges Méliès who see cinema as magic, and for him, the real accolade comes with the silence of the audience that follows the end of his movies. Then only he realizes whether the trick was done right or not. With every movie he comes with a new trick, adding onto the ones that he has learned through his previous ventures, with flaws or holes embedded within, as he wants his audience to watch closely, to come and have repeated viewings so that they can understand his riddle and the chances are, the closer you look, the more you lose yourself in the loop. He wants his audience to explore cinema in the singularity that comes from the amalgamation of diverse factors to bring out the cinematic experience. This paper wants to explore the ever-expanding world of Christopher Nolan by drawing parallels between his films and Baudrillard's concept of reality.

This paper presents three phases of Simulacrum.

1. The film *Following* is a *Perverted Form of Reality* (First Phase of Simulacrum)
2. The films *Memento*, *Insomnia*, *The Prestige* are *Masking of Reality and Feigning as One* (Second Phase of Simulacrum)
3. The *Batman* trilogy is a representation of the *Hyperreal where the copy becomes the reality* (Third Phase of Simulacrum)

They form a chain from real to hyperreal to Real, a thread of singular vision, a dream (Nolan's) that manifest itself in different stages of his cinema.

Keywords: Christopher Nolan, Hollywood, Simulacrum, Hyperreal, Reality

You never understood why we did this. The audience knows the truth: the world is simple. It's miserable, solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder, and then you... then you got to see something really special. You really don't know? It was... it was the look on their faces.

- Robert Angier (*The Prestige*)

When it comes to cinema, Nolan is all about old school, a classicist. He invested his childhood with a Super 8 camera, thanks to his father, from where he gathered the sense of using images to weave the stories (or dreams) that he wants to tell. Currently, he is among the most successful and revered directors of Hollywood, learned his way through shooting in Super 8 to 16 mm to 35 mm feature films to IMAX, still the inquisitiveness of the child within him has not dried, who wants to tear up the whole mechanism of cinema so that he may rebuild it while learning its nuances. Nolan comes in the tradition of directors like Georges Méliès who see cinema as magic, and for him the real accolade comes with the silence of the audience that follows the end of his movies because then he realises that the trick was done right, something that he experienced while screening *Memento* in Venice film festival where the crowd is usually upfront with their views. “The film ended rather abruptly, to a black screen, and for a few seconds, there was silence. Nolan had no idea what was about to happen. “I kind of liked that,” he recalled. “I was very frightened, but I felt proud of that emotion” (“Christopher Nolan: the man who rebooted the blockbuster”). With every movie he comes with a new trick, adding onto the ones that he has learned through his previous ventures, with flaws or holes embedded within, as he wants his audience to watch closely, to come and have repeated viewings so that they can understand his riddle and the chances are, the closer you look, the more you lose yourself in the loop. He started the process of tricking his audience from his first feature film *Following* whose main theme can be summarised as how objectively you can follow a story without realizing about the moment it becomes subjective for you and consumes you, snatching away the concepts or philosophies or ideas that frame you and leaves you with the realisation of the value of what you had and with what you are left; that is, you don't follow a story, a story follows you. Nolan treats himself by seeing

his audience acting the same as his characters – from “because I know” of Will Dormer in *Insomnia* to “how can you not know?” of Robert Angier in *The Prestige* – as they hunt for the meanings dribbling between images and convoluted narrations of his movies. He does not want his audience to be passive, receiving all the data without effort. Something that Quentin Tarantino said about *Memento* reverberates for all of Nolan’s works that ‘as opposed to *The Sixth Sense* and *The Fight Club* where you first watch it and then re-approach it to find holes, Nolan invites you, in fact, challenges you to do that. If you find a hole in it that’s almost as much fun as not finding a hole’ (“Christopher Nolan: the man who rebooted blockbuster”).

Nolan is undoubtedly a gestalt entertainer and thinker, who gives due respect to cinema as a frontrunner among all other art forms, potent with areas unexplored within its structure and grammar:

I think film is first and foremost entertainment. But, all forms of entertainment throughout history have always produced works that last and transcend the concept of entertainment. All entertainment can take many different forms. It can be serious and intellectually stimulating, and it can also be a temporary way to forget our everyday worries. There is a whole spectrum of possibilities encompassed by the word entertainment, but I do believe that film has developed into the most important story-telling medium of our age. I am certain about that statement. (“ONFILM Interview: Christopher Nolan”)

He definitely is a man of his words who gives due respect to cinema as a medium influential enough that can entertain and enlighten its audience at the same time. Watching his movies give us an impression on him that he does not desire his audience just to be a passive spectator losing themselves within the chimera he has created (that’s what people do in Yusuf’s basement in *Inception* who come to dream so that they can escape their depressing reality). He wants us to actively participate in the maze that he creates so that we can’t only feel what his protagonists feel, but can become one like them,

“if you picture the story as a maze, you don’t want to be hanging above the maze watching the characters make

them wrong choices because it's frustrating. You actually want to be in the maze with them, making the turns at their side, that keeps it more exciting."¹

He wants his audience to explore cinema in the singularity that comes from the amalgamation of diverse factors that brings out the cinematic experience, which comes when we watch movies in theatres. That is why he loves to shoot on films because the images that it carves out keeps us to the other side of the slash (unreal/real, story/real, dream/real) from where we get the sense that whatever we are watching isn't reality, but a story functioning akin to dreams, but at the same time we can immerse ourselves into the story world: "There is a special excitement that comes from sitting with a group of strangers watching a great story unfold on a big screen. It engages the imagination and transports you to another world" (ONFILM Interview: Christopher Nolan). And he attempts to do this, to capture his audience's imagination and engulf them in the world he creates. But at the same time, the riddles that he leaves for his audience hints that he does not want us to think of his movies as an alternate form of reality where they can come to escape. This is not his purpose. He wants to create an alternate universe for his audience so that they can contemplate over the questions about the real world. One may never get to receive the exact answer, but the least he can get is the pleasure of thinking and self-debate. This he certainly must have learned from the movies of greats he grew up watching;

I have always been a huge fan of Ridley Scott and certainly when I was a kid. *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, just blew me away because they created these extraordinary worlds that were just completely immersive. I was also an enormous Stanley Kubrick fan for similar reasons. ("Christopher Nolan: Quotes" IMDB)

So, like the greats he adores, he too works onto the details of the world he creates, framing his rules and restrictions much like a maze. Now, if we follow the development of his movies, we can see a pattern evolving. The protagonist of *Following* (the young man) becomes the victim of his own story and finds that he was played all along by Cobb, of whose crime he got branded with. In *Memento* we find the protagonist, Leonard Shelby, creating and recreating his own reality so that he can

bear his life ahead. In *Insomnia*, the protagonist when finds his morality questioned by a criminal who believes that they both are similar, struggles to justify his acts and loses the sense of right and wrong by the time we reach the climax. In *The Prestige* Nolan doubles the game with two protagonists where one (Robert Angier) is obsessed with finding the answers of what the real trick is, the other (Alfred Borden) has hidden it by creating his copy. In *the Batman trilogy*, we see Bruce Wayne creating his alter-ego, an alternate reality, so that he can be what he really is, an outlaw. In his magnum opus *Inception*, reality has been overthrown by different stages of the dream and the protagonist, Dom Cobb, is toiling with dreams so that he can build a better reality, but by the end of the movie we feel as if nothing was ever real and what we witnessed was a grand dream (of Dom Cobb or maybe of Nolan). Now, when we reach to *Interstellar*, we see its protagonist in the midst of higher truths of the cosmos that transcend minutiae of human worries.

Hence, his ideas are expanding with each work he is moving forward with. Taking cue from Baudrillard, who in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) formulates the four successive phases of image that hence, corresponds with reality: “it is the reflection of a profound reality (Symbolic Order); it masks and denatures a profound reality (First Phase of Simulacrum); it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever (Second Phase of Simulacrum); it is its own pure simulacrum (Third Phase of Simulacrum)” (13); the chart of his movies will develop something like this:

Following } Perverted Form of Reality (First Phase of Simulacrum)

Memento, Insomnia, The Prestige } Masking of Reality and Feigning as One (Second Phase of Simulacrum)

Batman trilogy } Hyperreal where the copy becomes the reality (Third Phase of Simulacrum)

Inception, Interstellar } Both of these movies symbolically reflect over as how Nolan maps out his cinematic world. Whereas *Inception* journeys us to the different levels of dreams (or reality), journeying from real to hyperreal to again back to real (which maybe a dream). In *Interstellar*, Nolan creates a utopian world devoid of war and “useless machineries” where people are devoted to farming. In a way, taking us back to the first phase of reality as per Baudrillardian terms. However, the reality within the movie grows from personal to cosmic, creating a

simulated Real in the climax where time and space lose their meaning, proxying an alternate version of Symbolic Order (via cinema) that may aid us to understand our *reality*.

By doing this classification we can see Nolan playing along with the different ideas of reality with his each instalment by creating different space and time for his characters which his audience can experience within the space-time of that movie. Since time is a concept that stands relative to individuals with their space, so is truth. Therefore, we see his characters struggling within the thin strand of the relativity of reality devoid of any conclusive answer, subjected to personal choice and taking a leap of faith, something which Rachel Clement mentions to Will Dormer in *Insomnia* on his decision of tempering with evidences so that a criminal can be brought to justice: “I guess it’s about what you thought was right at the time. Then, what you’re willing to live with.” That is why we never see a clear demarcation of extremes in his movies and one gets weaved and emerges out from another (real/unreal, sane/insane, ethical/corrupt, Will Dormer/Walter Finch, Batman/Joker).

Another thing to watch for in his works is that he never creates a perfect model. He architects a world which palpates with a sense of loss and people are always suspicious of their surroundings. Currently, Nolan enjoys such a position in Hollywood (thanks to his filmography) that he can walk into a studio and can come out with Two Hundred Million Dollars to make a movie, and he does not disappoint us with the faith audience and studios bestow on him. He believes in creating practical effects and leaves CGI as the last possible option. Gideon Lewis-Kraus mentions about the sets that he prepares for his movies,

He tries to build maps the size of the territory, whole cities from the ground up in disused airship hangers (. . .) even if he’s going to shoot just a few street-corner scenes. Sue Kroll, the president of worldwide marketing of Warner Bros., told me she once got actually lost in the ersatz rain falling on an ersatz Gotham. Nolan learned the value of such sweep from Ridley Scott. The genius of “Blade Runner,” he told me, is that “you never feel like you’ve gotten close to the edge of the world.” (“The Exacting, Expansive Mind of Christopher Nolan”)

Is it not akin to Baudrillard's analogy in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) derived from Jorge Luis Borges' *On Exactitude in Science*? It mentions an Empire that had a map equal to the size of the empire. The map changed its features along with the expansion and destruction of the empire and later when the empire crumbled, all people were left with the map. Similarly, Nolan carves out a map with each of his movies equal to the size of an empire. But he doesn't do that to let us reflect over our loss, but on the ideas as to how we can compensate the loss.

Christopher Nolan: Weaver of Pessimistic Dream?

“If Hollywood is a dream factory, Christopher Nolan is its tour guide.”

Richard Broody (“The Guilty Tripper”)

The biggest complaint that comes regarding the movies of Christopher Nolan is that they are pessimistic in nature because of several reasons. First, the characters find themselves being suspicious of their surroundings. Then the discordant narrative structure that he often applies never lets his audience to settle down to comprehend on what is actually happening on the screen and that is why one needs to go through repeated viewings so as to grasp the story. And then comes the ambiguous ending, which leaves the audience with the desire to know more. So, usually people end with approving his movies of showing the pessimistic side of human nature. But is it a correct analogy? His movies, though linger onto the absurd condition of human beings yet to bash his movies as being pessimistic is incorrect. They are basically a gateway to optimism. First of all, if the comparison has to be made then his movies are more akin to games, as James Verini proposes: “Nolan's entertainments, the best ones, anyway, are games. I don't mean that they resemble puzzles or tricks (though they do that, too), I mean they are most satisfying when understood as games, not as novelistic narratives. They are contests with rules and phases, gambits and defences, many losers and the occasional victor, usually a Pyrrhus type” (“Christopher Nolan's Games”). Thus, Nolan basically invites us to play his game, and the more we play them, the more skilled we become. So, if we move from one movie to next, we shall feel as if we are moving ahead in the levels of the game (that is the way he has structured his movies). With each level we get to deal with newer levels of existential crisis, and the levels of reality grow from inclusive to exclusive (from Real to Hyperreal to REAL).

Such an effect he achieves basically by his unusual approach to narrative which he learned from the days he spent studying English Literature at University College London (UCL).

Sharing his experiences with Geoff Andrew, Nolan says,

“Well, the thing that fed into that was (regarding his narrative technique) probably my time at college, I studied English Literature. I wasn’t a very good student, but one thing I did get from it, while I was making films at the same with the college film society, was that I started thinking about the narrative freedoms that authors had enjoyed for centuries and it seemed to me that filmmakers should enjoy those freedoms as well” (*The Guardian* 2002).

Being one of the brightest students of the cinema of the contemporary era, he certainly is enjoying and learning the minutia of cinematic language. Unlike other arts, cinema is still fresh, a hundred years old, and still much can be learned as what can be done with and in this medium. Nolan is very adamant to take his movies to the basic core of cinema, from where it has originated and the palpable effect it had on people at its initial stage,

The term ‘genre’ eventually becomes pejorative because you’re referring to something that’s so codified and ritualised that it ceases to have the power and meaning it had when it first started. What I’m trying to do is to create modern equivalents that speak to me of those tropes that have more of the original power. So hopefully you feel more like you’re watching one of those films in the Forties. It’s not a question of being retro, it’s about finding the things that really made the genre tick – not the style of them of the stale formal elements that have emerged through repetition. (*The Guardian* 2002)

His movies, therefore, shock people because it strips the comfort of the ‘genres’ they have got used to, promenading them through the basics of the ‘movement-image’ and ‘time-image’ of the cinema. Now, usually when we go to watch a movie, we believe that by the end of it we will come out with a certain conclusion, an objective reality which we shall be enlightened with. We always believe that there remains an objective

truth which, if discovered can unlock the doors of knowledge that we desire. Movies usually help us with that idea, hiding us within the darkness of the theatre, contemplating upon the events transpiring before our eyes, searching for a definitive ending – as Will Dormer does within the darkness of his room, losing his sense of reality and fiction – believing we will get to a ready-made truth. Nolan takes that comfort of ready-made truth away from us and contrives a scenario where, if we want to know about the reality, we have to go through the lies he creates,

Characters in Nolan’s films constantly find themselves deceived by others and often caught up in a vast web of deceit that transcends any individual lies (. . .) . The typical Nolan film has the formal structure of a lie designed to deceive the spectator concerning the events that occur and the motivations of the characters (. . .) . Nolan’s films do not abandon the idea of truth altogether, but they show us how truth must emerge out of the lie if it is not to lead us entirely astray. (McGowan 1)

It is something similar to the anecdote of Theo’s father in the *The Dreamers* (2003), “before you can change the world you must realize that you, yourself, are part of it. You can’t stand outside looking in”; that is, before we can talk about truth altogether in its purest form, we have to understand first the seduction of lie:

The point is not that we are misled by a mistaken idea of truth but that the very conception of truth’s priority relative to the lie leaves us unable to recognize the way that deceit structures our reality. In the filmic universe of Christopher Nolan, truth is neither relative nor non-existent. There is truth, but one arrives at it only by passing through the lie. Lies establish the path through which one discovers the truth, and one can make this discovery only by accepting and investing oneself in the lie (. . .) for Nolan’s cinema, the link always remain clear: if one wants to discover the truth, one must first succumb to the fiction that seems to obscure it. (McGowan 4-5)

He doesn't make movies with different stories but deals with an 'idea' in its different manifestations. His movies are anything but patterns, patterns which if decoded right, can answer the riddles that he presents us with; or maybe there are no riddles, there are no definite answers to them, they are just his vision that unfolds through his movies. The words of Albert Camus seem so true when analysed within the context of Nolan:

The idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false. In opposition to the artist, it is pointed out that no philosopher ever created several systems. But that is true insofar, indeed, as no artist ever expressed more than one thing under different aspects. . . . For the work of art likewise is a construction and everyone knows how monotonous the great creators can be. For the same reason as the thinker, the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work. (Camus 70-71)

Thus, it can be said of Nolan that he is an auteur committed to his vision, to analyse the convoluted ideas of reality and lies and how they affect us individually and communally. The most fascinating part of his storytelling is the way he provides his viewers with the information. They are very much like the information we get in our daily lives and we combine those bits and pieces to make a wholesome story, an objective effort, though we don't realise when and how our subjectivity succinctly enters and frames the 'reality' of the events. Regarding the complex narrative structure of his films, Nolan says:

My most useful definition of narrative is that it's a controlled release of information. You don't feel any obligation to release that information on a chronological basis. What's interesting about doing this is trying to expand the story in all directions. To me, that's the way we receive stories in everyday life. A newspaper gives you a headline, and the process of reading the article is a process of expanding the story. The follow-up story next day would then increase your understanding further, and I wanted to take that approach to the structure of the film. (*Memento and Following* 97-98)

And this process of ‘controlled release of information’ or information provided in packets becomes a definitive structure of his cinema, as the experience of his protagonists, the sense from a loss to revelation, from lies to truth (if there is one at all), is transferred to the audience as well.

If one wants to understand the cinema of Christopher Nolan, one needs to explore his cinematic universe from its onset, especially *Following*, *Memento*, *Batman trilogy*, *Inception* and *Interstellar*. They form a chain from real to hyperreal to Real, a thread of singular vision, a dream (Nolan’s) that manifest itself in different stages of his cinema.

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