

Billion Dollar Noir: Christopher Nolan and the Reconstruction of Film Noir in Hollywood

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Near the opening of Robert Siodmak's noir classic *The Killers* (1946), young and naïve Nick Adams (Phil Brown) stares confusedly at Ole "Swede" Andersson (Burt Lancaster) as he warns him of the two men coming to kill him. The Swede lies smothered in shadows, lying flat, as if ready to enter his coffin. In protest to Nick's pleas, he mutters "I did something wrong ... once" as an explanation. What better line describes the fatalism often displayed in film noir? Our labored hero accepts his guilt and his inescapable fate. As Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton describe in their seminal text, the film noir protagonist is "often the masochistic type, his own executioner [...] through a morbid curiosity" (9).

Fatalism in film noir will provide the interesting hinge point in my own discussion—the films of Christopher Nolan and specifically his reimagining of certain aspects of film noir have shaped his career. Nolan emerged at the turn of the millennium as a celebrated independent director and is arguably now Hollywood's most powerful director, as a box office and critical favorite. As both screenwriter and director with significant creative control, Nolan's Hollywood films have traversed genre: period fantasy with *The Prestige* (2006), science fiction with *Inception* (2010), and of course superhero with his "Dark Knight" trilogy. But underneath the surface genre of Nolan's work is a deep thematic influence of film noir.ⁱ

This is both fascinating and problematic given film noir's history as a subversive genre. Other major Hollywood directors have shown their influence in more grounded and popular material: George Lucas and B-movie serials, Steven Spielberg and the writings of J. G. Ballard for example. Noir has always suggested something darker and disturbing, not the usual type of genre affair that bring in large audiences. However, Nolan isn't just making noir—he's making billion dollar noir. Nolan's reworking of noir has helped commoditize noir into something more digestible for mainstream audiences while appearing on its surface as subversive within the Hollywood mainstream. His new vision of noir—which notably emphasizes a subjective, anti-fatalist point of view, has configured the genre into a significant staple of Hollywood filmmaking. Nolan is certainly not the first director to take neo-noir as deconstructive revisionism, as we've seen in *Chinatown* (1974) or something a hybrid like *Blade Runner* (1982). Noir permeates through a number of the great commercial successes of the 1980s. We can think of particularly of the work of Michael Mann—*Thief* (1982), *Manhunter* (1986), and his television series *Miami Vice* (1984-90), as well as other films like Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1980) and Irvin Kershner's *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1979). But in the last decade, it is only Nolan's films that have been rewarded with significant financial successes: the independent feature *Memento* (2000) made a substantial \$25 million, while *The Dark Knight* (2008) made over a billion dollars internationally and *Inception* making \$825 million. Meanwhile films like *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (2005), *Sin City* (2005) and even Mann's new *Miami Vice* (2006) have only remained in discussions of neo-noir thanks to their ardent cult fans rather than their minimal box office numbers.ⁱⁱ

Nolan's two independent features—*Following* (1998) and *Memento*—directly engage with noir as deconstructions of the genre. Shot in grainy 16mm, *Following* uses a flashback structure told from the point of view of an unnamed character that is lured into a life of crime less by circumstance and more by desire to follow a great man named Cobb (Alex Haw). Eventually, it is revealed the Cobb is not just a double crosser but a triple crosser, and it is the fact that the protagonist has told his story as a confession that he is caught, allowing Cobb to go free. Or does he? In the film's final shot, Cobb appears among the crowd before disappearing himself, suggesting he may be part of the imagination of the protagonist. This begins a running theme that will be essential in how Nolan will commoditize film noir: his protagonists always view themselves subjectively as the heroes of their narratives rather than objectively face the truth.

It is no coincidence that Leonard Shelby, the protagonist of *Memento* (Guy Pearce), is an insurance investigator; the same profession comes up both in Siodmak's *The Killers* as well as Billy

Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). In *Memento*, we watch the film in alternating sequences heading towards the "middle" of the narrative, as defined where the end of the first half finally transitions to the beginning of the second half, as noted by the frame turning from black and white into color, as if the past of film noir finally morphs into neo-noir.

In the noir detective mysteries, there is always an unknowable truth, something that the protagonist must risk everything to discover. Those who do walk away—Philip Marlowe in his various iterations, Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944)—walk away forever scarred. But that is not the case with Leonard. His problem is that the only way he can walk away with pain if it is tattooed on his body. Leonard rests every ten minutes, and thus the simple truth becomes just as unknowable. The *femme fatale* can show her cruel and evil side one minute, then revert back to innocent victim minutes later, while Leonard will never know the difference. Nolan here is clearly playing with the guilty past, which not only does not exist for Leonard, but as we learn by the end of the film, can be edited by those around him, as well as himself. Teddy Gammell (Joe Pantoliano) reveals to Leonard that perhaps he is responsible for his wife's death. It is here that Leonard thus changes his fate once again by burning the photos and deciding to make his target Teddy. Leonard thus represses any guilt he may have—the kind that would lead him down the same path as Burt Lancaster's Swede in *The Killers*—to fade along with his memory, so in this new "colorful" world, he can continue to be the hero, something Leonard doesn't just think, he knows because he presents himself with a reality of tattoos and photos that confirm it. Erin Hill-Parks argues:

By intentionally constructing ambiguous endings Nolan further shifts power to the individual viewer [...] Nolan actively encourages the audience, on some level, to participate in the struggle for power over the meaning of his films (7).

But while this exists on the textual level, tonally, Nolan will suggest this reconstruction of identity as a necessary progress for the evolution of his characters. Instead of succumbing to their fates as film noir protagonists, they emerge victorious by constructing new identities that deny the objective world.

While both *Following* and *Memento* textually engage with the history of film noir, Nolan's Hollywood features reconstruct the genre into audience-friendly elements.ⁱⁱⁱ To use the phrases developed by Rick Altman, Nolan keeps many of the semantic features while eschewing the genre's syntactic features (Altman 33). Taking a franchise that had gone from gothic horror under Tim Burton and camp under Joel Schumacher, Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) instead offers a noirish glimpse of Gotham City. Beginning again with a flashback structure, Nolan's film is packed with dense visuals of Gotham that offer shadows and criminals, dirty cops and greed. Psychologically, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) rejects his fear that he may have been inadvertently responsible for the death of his parents instead to confront and then become his fear of bats. He abuses the power and wealth of his father's company to become a vigilante fighter, while being criticized by Rachael Dawes (Katie Holmes), a close childhood friend, for his lack of aid to the city as billionaire Bruce Wayne. In the same way Bruce exchanges the guilt of his parents for his fear of bats, Batman avoids the real problems for his own fantasy that his vigilante methods will bring peace to the city. Like the greatest of noir heroes, Bruce Wayne is not driven by heroism but by guilt, whether he realizes it or not.

This psychological complexity brought to the screenplay by David S. Goyer and Jonathan Nolan (Christopher's brother) is certainly part of the deep attraction to what makes Nolan a noir director. Instead of sticking with his cartoonish origins, Nolan takes the Batman mythology as a serious investigation into the roots of fear. His interests as a director here connect the psychological to the physical worlds, where Bruce must defeat the external to save his internal soul. As Kim Newman notes: "Fear (phobos), the limited realm of the bat-phobic Bruce and phobia-expert Crane [Cillian Murphy], has been subsumed by the world of terror (deimos)" (21).

But in the end, there are no sins Batman must pay for. His actions are scrutinized by the cops but praised by the public, (and more importantly the audience paying to see him). Nolan gives us an ending that at once plays into the central structure of noir but also meets our expectations of classical Hollywood cinema, as Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman) reveals the calling card of the Joker. Nolan suggests something futile by showing that Batman's actions may be ultimately more dangerous than

helpful. However, the ending also suggests the idea that the film franchise must continue in order to reach resolution—you will have to pay for the sequel in order to know how the narrative ends.

The Dark Knight builds on this approach to noir by furthering certain tropes while eliminating their textual significance. Despite being a direct sequel and featuring numerous characters from his original film, Nolan drastically changed the palette of his film to reflect Michael Mann's neo-noir *Heat* (1995). The film is set in Gotham by name only, as Nolan emphasizes the architectural iconography of Chicago, a city known for its history of corruption. Moreover, the film's narrative shifts from a focus on Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) to Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), a character not so far out of line from the detectives of late 50s noir such as the Glenn Ford vehicle *The Big Heat* (1953). In Dent, we literally see the pains of fighting crime as it manifests itself on the scars that cover his face.

Bruce Wayne, however, still walks away still a hero. A sequence of direct political allegory involving cellphone tracking seems like a bold statement on the Patriot Act, but the film never faults Wayne for this, and instead becomes essential to the Joker's (Heath Ledger's) defeat. Batman monologues near the end of the film, "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough, sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." What makes Nolan's adaptation of noir both fascinating and troubling is that he is willing to take on these major themes and motifs—city corruption, physical scars, inexplicable, almost surrealist crime—but cleanses them of their social significance and replaces it with narrative and audience satisfaction. Batman's speech may be less a speech to Police Commissioner Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), but Nolan to his audience that he rewards those turn a blind eye.

The Dark Knight Rises (2012) becomes even more complex in its re-appropriation of noir, as it attempting to bring in an entire ecosystem under the lens. Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) returns after eight years of both physical and mental pain to fight off Bane (Tom Hardy), a lumbering masked figure who wants to destroy Batman's soul (a figure whose immense power suggests the God-like figures at the beginning of *The Killers*). Nolan's film again recontextualizes political events (here the financial crisis and the Occupy Wall Street movement) while removing their actual politics, similar to Sam Fuller's use of communism in *Pick Up On South Street* (1953). But *The Dark Knight Rises* is probably the least noir-like of Nolan's entire filmography—its bombastic plot is deep-rooted in its comic mythology and less interested in either social realism or expressive psychology that defined the previous entries. And once again, Nolan sets us up for a hero that must pay for his past, going as far to send him into a nuclear holocaust, only to save and reframe his hero in the last minute.

The apex of Nolan's career, his \$200m dollar sci-fi spectacle *Inception*, certainly shows his most self-conscious attempts to bring out noir motifs. It is no coincidence that the heist genre has been celebrated in works like John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1958), both of which feature a one last job, as the protagonist Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) has here. Nolan certainly shows a craft is subverting some of the main tropes—Cobb's job is not stealing something but instead putting something inside a vault. Additionally, the significant portion of the narrative takes place inside the psychological plane, where existential fears can manifest themselves into physical threats (the basis of film noir). The central threat, and perhaps the most unique character Nolan has put on screen, is Mal, the dead wife of Cobb (Marion Cotillard). Cobb is overwhelmed by guilt of leading his wife to suicide, one that he feels responsible for enough that she becomes a dangerous and malicious figure whenever he enters the dreamscape. She literally becomes the *femme fatale*, a dangerous female that is the manifestation of the anxiety of the protagonist. As Mark Fisher notes, she "represents a psychoanalytic Real—a trauma that disrupts any attempt to maintain a stable sense of reality, that which the subject cannot help bringing with him wherever he goes" (42).

And while Cobb will admit to what he's done by the end of the film, he, like all other Nolan protagonists, chooses a subjective reality, in which he remains a hero rather than face the truth of his existence. That final shot of *Inception* is not about whether the totem falls but the fact Cobb chooses to ignore it—he has decided, like Leonard choosing his to change his reality, or Wayne lying to Gotham, to be a hero in his own subjective world where he remains the good father and the genius con artist than one where he is the bad husband and trapped in his own nightmares. Nolan presents

this ending to us in a hopeful, sunlit drenched palette, never allowing his audience to question whether Cobb has indeed “paid” for his sins, only whether his new reality is indeed reality.

It is curious then, of all places, that his most non-noir film is the one where he seriously considers the themes and significance of his reconstruction of film noir. *The Prestige* is Nolan’s only film that tonally confronts the frightening existential questions at the center of such a tradition.^{iv} The film follows two rival magicians, Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Borden (Christian Bale), who spend the entire narrative of the film attempting to discover each other’s secrets. *The Prestige*’s structure is the most curious of all in how Nolan deals with the idea of an unreliable narrator in film noir. The original novel by Christopher Priest was written in a series of diary entries. Nolan takes that idea and shows both Angier and Borden stealing and then reading each other’s diaries at parts of the narrative, leading us into long elaborate flashbacks. However, at the end of each of these, the writer reveals to the reader that he has been purposefully given the diary and tricked into reading it. This means the entirety of the narrative is not only subjective, but also delivered by a narrator with the intention to trick.

But what complicates *The Prestige* beyond its search its doubles and search for truth is its tonal and moral approach to the final implications of its narrative. While we root for Cobb, Leonard, and Bruce Wayne, we remain ambivalent and truly fearful of these two magicians. When it’s finally revealed—Angier has preserved his illusion by murdering himself every night, and Borden has lived his entire life as twins switching places to even his wife and daughter, and this is a secret he’s willing to preserve it to his death—it doesn’t have the astonishing effect that most magic tricks do. It’s instead unsettling and almost horrific to think about. These magicians lie to themselves and their public about their method in order to preserve the spectacle, to remain heroes. Kim Newman posits: “Their characters are monsters whose sole redemption comes in the revelation that each is willing to inflict grievous harm upon himself to achieve the illusion he needs for his act” (19).

In many ways *The Prestige* is Nolan’s most self-conscious film about performance, whether magic or cinema, as Michael Caine tells us in his closing voiceover narration about the structure of a magic act. His final line explains the audience’s relationship to the performer: “you are not really looking for the secret. You don’t want to work it out. You want to be fooled.” That statement might provide us with a clue of how to approach our relationship to Nolan’s ambiguous protagonists—we don’t know, and more than that, we’d rather not know. *The Prestige* is the one film that shows us the full devastation of what some people will do to preserve illusion, while sustaining a morally ambiguous ending. This is surprising, in view of the fact Nolan’s other films shy away from such complexity. Instead of complimenting them with a visual and tonal aesthetic that reinforces their own subjective viewpoint, he instead clashes with them, leaving the audience in moral chaos.

When we meet Burt Lancaster’s Swede in Siodmak’s *The Killers*, he acknowledges the fact that he must die for his actions. He did something wrong, and his fate has been sealed. But this is not what we see in the noir of Nolan. His protagonists escape their fate by changing their subjectivity. They see themselves as heroes, when they are perhaps only psychopaths. Nolan’s influence on Hollywood is already clear, with a number of major film franchises mimicking this noir-Hollywood duality, including the latter entries in the James Bond and Harry Potter series. With Nolan, we are seeing the emergence of a safer form of noir: less politicized, less radically self-conscious, and less subversive. With huge box office success, Nolan can make films almost any way he wants now, but is that way simply Hollywood’s way as well?

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ⁱ One can argue that there is certainly no such thing as a pure film noir, as the debate between it as a style and a genre needlessly continues. However, neo-noir filmmakers, including Nolan, have often discussed their work as expressively following the post-constructed genre of film noir, so the question holds little relevance here.

ⁱⁱ Box office information taken from boxofficemojo.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are some interesting of note in Nolan's *Insomnia*, a remake of a Norwegian noir of the same name in which the overarching visual motif is not darkness but the inescapability of light, but I am skipping a further discussion of it for purposes of length.

^{iv} There seems to be some similarities to John Brahm's film *The Mad Magician* (1954), a Vincent Price horror film that might qualify closer to noir.