

# Christopher Nolan's postmodernism

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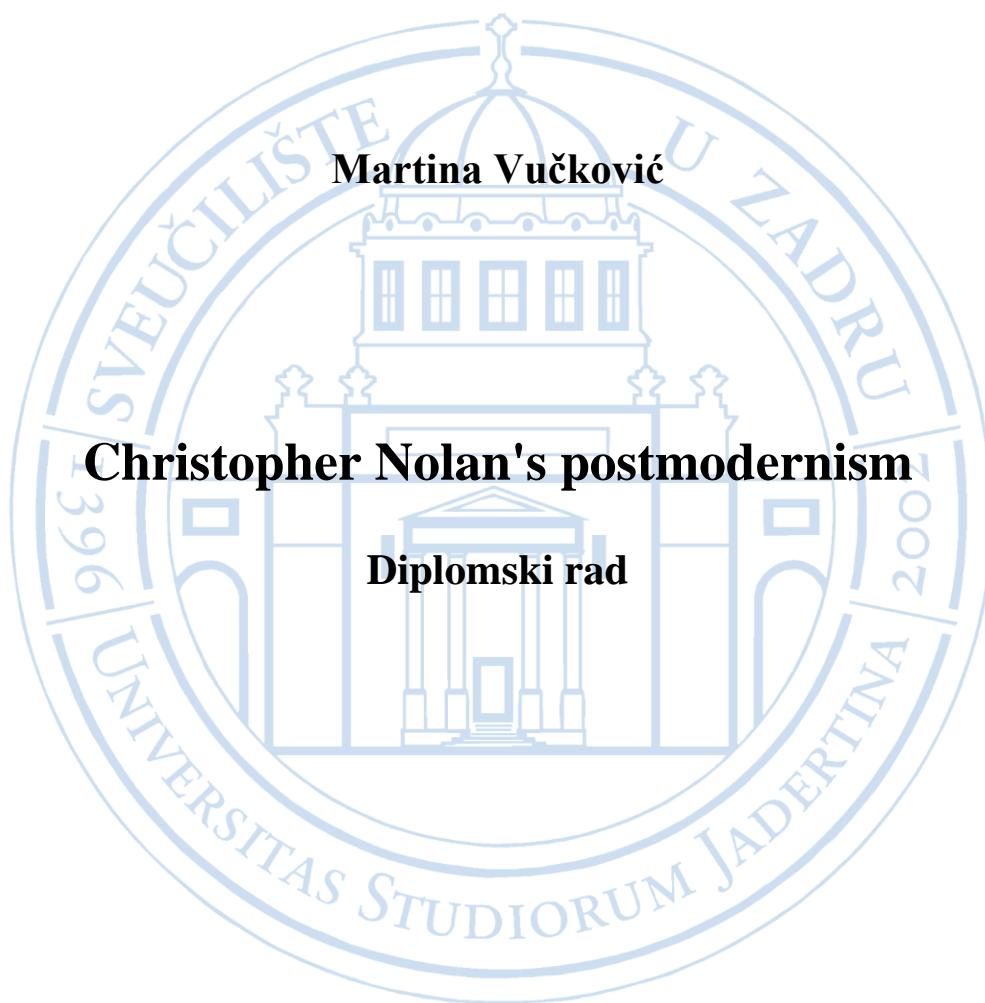


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**Martina Vučković**

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Christopher Nolan's postmodernism

**Diplomski rad**

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Zadar, 29. rujna 2023.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, Christopher Nolan has stood out as one of the most famous film directors in Hollywood. From 1998 until 2023, he directed twelve different films of various genres (psychological thrillers, historical films, biographies, etc.), and developed a film style characterized as purely his. Nolan directs films with an ambiguous and open-ended plot that includes the audience in the cinematic experience, i.e., the viewers are invited to create their conclusions based on everything that happened throughout the film. Furthermore, the techniques that he uses to achieve this are various as well, but the one that stands out the most is the chronological narrative of the films that is, in most cases, distorted. Additionally, Nolan often uses time to hide the truth, hence the audience is forced to act as an investigator to comprehend what they just witnessed. What is more, Nolan's films are often considered to be *film noirs* because of the elements and type of characters that can be found in them. But Nolan took those features and twisted them in a way that would fit his narrative and the idea he had while incorporating them in his work. Among other things, Nolan often deals with the character's identity, trauma and philosophical questions that make the basis of his filmography. Consequently, this paper will deal with these and other aspects of Nolan's style that are apparent in *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010).

*Memento*, the film that brought him Hollywood fame, was released in 2000, and in it Nolan immediately showed his appreciation for inverted chronological order, confusing narrative, and *film noir* characters. The backwards narration confuses the viewers and forces them to pay close attention to the details, and there is also the inclusion of characters who resemble the ones that can be found in *film noir* but are altered to fit the narrative. Their memories are twisted, and the audience is invited to form new opinions about them and the plot as the film progresses. Therefore, *Memento* is considered to be the first film to showcase this specific style connected to Christopher Nolan.

Secondly, there is *The Prestige*, a film released six years after *Memento*, which is perceived as one of the best Nolan has directed. Here, the plot is interwoven with duplicity, magic tricks, and filmmaking, as well as an ambiguous ending that challenges various themes and even morality. While using the two main characters, Angier and Borden, who are in a feud caused by the death of Angier's wife, Nolan is once again making viewers guess, predict, and conclude with the use of diaries that are filled with details but are also deceiving the viewer in

fully believing them. Additionally, there is also the fact that the usage of magic in this film is frequently compared to the filmmaking style of Christopher Nolan.

Finally, there is *Inception* (2010), a film in which Christopher Nolan used dreams and reality as the basis for the deception of the audience trying to find a barrier between the two. In this film, dreams and reality are two elements that Nolan incorporated to deal with the main character's consciousness and memories, but also to showcase their effect, as well as the reaction of limbo on other characters' behaviour. Consequently, *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception* will be analysed based on their structure, the inclusion of audience and philosophical questions, and in addition to this, a comparison depending on the above-mentioned, and other facts, will be made between these three films.

## 2. Christopher Nolan's Film Style

Christopher Nolan was born in 1970 in London, England, where he spent a part of his childhood, and he also lived in Chicago because of his American mother. From the early years, Nolan has shown interest in filmmaking, and directors such as Ridley Scott and George Lucas influenced his work. After studying English literature at University College London, where he directed training videos and short films, in 1998 Christopher Nolan released his first full-length film, *Following*. *Memento*, Nolan's breakthrough into Hollywood, was released two years later. In the subsequent years, he directed *Insomnia* (2002), the Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)), *The Prestige* (2006), *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), *Tenet* (2020) and *Oppenheimer* (2023)

During his career, Nolan has directed films in various genres: *film noir* (*Memento*), science fiction (*Interstellar*), historical films (*Dunkirk* and *Oppenheimer*) and films about DC comics (the Batman trilogy). In many films Nolan worked as a director, writer, producer, and co-producer, and he participated in the post-production process. Christopher Nolan is well known for being obsessive about certain filmmaking methods, refusing to shoot digitally, preferring to use 70 mm, detesting CGI effects and alternatively opting to use numerous cameras to capture actual action sequences (Goh 13-14). Additionally, over the years, he has worked with some actors more than once, e.g., with Cillian Murphy, Tom Hardy, Anna Hathaway, Michail Cane, and many others. His team on every film also tends to be the same: his wife Emma Thomas as a producer, his brother Jonathan as a writer, David Julyan and Hans Zimmer as composers, Lee Smith as an editor, Nathan Crowley as a production designer, etc. (*Joy, Dreaming a Little Bigger* 6).

Furthermore, the narrative of Nolan's films is complex, dense, and well-told. Through creative writing, narrative structuring, and cinematography techniques, he places the audience in extraordinary circumstances that are far removed from their everyday viewpoints and do not give them the luxury of passive viewing. Following visual cues, the audience must unravel the plot alongside the main character. Nolan's use of time manipulation is one of his most potent strategies. In his first films, *Following*, *Memento*, and *The Prestige*, Nolan avoided narrating stories in chronological sequence and, in the case of *Memento*, even shifted the narration of shots, starting at the end and concluding at the beginning. Subsequent films, like *Inception* and *Interstellar*, flipped the idea of time by depicting parallel stories that were happening at the same time, but at very different speeds (Brislin 3). Since Christopher Nolan plays with time and chronological order of the scenes in most of his films, it can be said that it became his trademark which he continues to use even in his most recent work. As a result, Nolan's latest film, *Oppenheimer*, consists of two narratives: one that reflects the period before the creation of the atomic bomb and the other one that follows the trial afterwards. What is more, one is shown in black and white, while the other is in colour sequence, just like in *Memento*.

Additionally, Nolan's choice of genre is often associated with *film noir* because his Hollywood films recreate the genre with characteristics that appeal to audiences. This is evident in his Batman trilogy, where Nolan approaches Batman mythology as a serious examination of the causes of fear rather than continuing with his cartoonish origins. But unlike the *film noir* endings, Batman does not pay for his sins, i.e., police investigate his conduct, but the crowd applauds him. Therefore, Nolan provides the audience with a resolution that both adheres to the fundamental principles of *noir* and fulfils their expectations of traditional Hollywood cinema. Moreover, Nolan makes a fruitless suggestion by demonstrating that Batman's actions can eventually be more harmful than beneficial. In his take on *film noir*, Nolan uses its themes, such as corruption and surrealist crimes, but strips them of their social relevance in favour of a narrative that would satisfy the audience (Labuza 39-40). Elements of *film noir* are also evident in *Inception* because the bulk of the story takes place on the psychological level, so existential anxieties might materialize as physical dangers, which is the cornerstone of *film noir*. What is more, Mal, Cobb's wife, is a type of *femme fatale*, a threatening feminine character who represents the protagonist's concern. In the end, Cobb elects a subjective reality in which he remains a hero rather than confronting the fact of his existence (he will eventually accept what he has done throughout the film, i.e., Nolan will give the audience this happy ending, never letting them wonder if Cobb has "paid" for his crimes or if his new reality is valid) (ibid. 40-



41). Nolan's work seems to operate outside of the usual American cinematic paradigm that perceives it as either Hollywood or not Hollywood. This has allowed him to build a reputation as a director who can adhere to Hollywood norms while also maintaining some degree of independence and communicating his distinctive vision.

Film critics have compared Christopher Nolan to Stanley Kubrick because of his profound curiosity in the nuanced relationship between character development and storytelling, which is one of the main themes in *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception*. Just like Kubrick, Nolan has kept his private life a secret, and he rarely discusses the intricacies of his job, favouring to preserve a level of secrecy that highlights the films' essential contradictions (Joy, *Dreaming a Little Bigger* 2-3). Additionally, Nolan often leaves the audience without a proper explanation of the ending, e.g., the final scenes of *Memento* and *Inception*. Nolan has since said that he has his interpretation of those final scenes, but he decided not to share them with the public. The reason behind this is Nolan's desire to let the ending's uncertainty inspire others to generate their meaning (ibid. 3-4). Over the years, the critics have developed a persona around Christopher Nolan, a director who asserted himself as the single cinematic creator of his films. A new generation of filmmakers has evolved as a result of recent changes in the American film business, from analogue to digital technologies, and therefore, Nolan has become an iconic personality for this group (ibid. 7). After all the films Nolan directed, it is impossible to expect that any of his future films will be anything less complicated. One could think that films such as the Batman trilogy would be less ambiguous, but the third film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, also finishes with an unexplained shot, i.e., did Bruce/Batman actually survive, or is the final scene a part of Alfred's dream? By doing this, Christopher Nolan has shown that he can include his techniques even in blockbuster films based on comic books.

The formal framework of Nolan's films causes the audience to misinterpret events that happen. The films' plots intentionally mislead viewers about the significance of the scenes they witness. This is frequent in the beginning of Nolan's films, e.g., *Memento* begins with a scene that leaves the spectator believing that he knows who the killer is, which gets revoked as the film progresses. Furthermore, the plot of Nolan's films plays on the viewer's faith in the concept of truth, but this conviction always leaves the viewer feeling tricked, i.e., Nolan's films deceive the audience to the extent that they believe what they see. The concept that reality is only that which is immediately apparent makes the viewers blind to the fictional framework that mediates and gives meaning to the visible world (McGowan 1-3). Nolan deceives viewers into initially believing a notion that the films later disprove, i.e., in contrast to the conventional order of truth

and deceit, Nolan argues that the search for the truth begins with a lie, just as cinematic fiction itself provides a setting for truths to be discovered (ibid. 10). Because of the representation of cinematic fiction as reality, film deceives the viewer to some level. So, when the audience mistakes this fantasy for reality, they become oblivious to the margins of the picture, disregard the outside world and act as though it does not exist (ibid. 15). Films such as *Following* and *Interstellar*, in the first thirty minutes, show the scenes that will be crucial for the comprehension of the ending of the film. So, for example, *Following* starts with the Young Man talking to the police officer about everything that has happened up until that point, but until the final scenes of the film, viewers do not know that he is there to confess his crimes, nor are they aware what may be the consequences of his actions. On the other hand, in *Interstellar*, the audience gets acquainted with “the ghost” early on, but they cannot comprehend who he is and how he got there until the final part of the film when it becomes evident that the one trapped in the bookshelf is not a ghost, but Cooper.

Consequently, Nolan’s characters operate in a social environment that is predominantly urban and capitalist, with competing interests. In this environment, epistemic doubts frequently result in violent conflicts between personal interests since there is no objective truth or order. The lonesome, mentally complicated, and sometimes obsessive and narcissistic characteristics of Nolan’s protagonists make them vulnerable, which leads to mistakes in judgment and hasty decisions that have serious repercussions. These protagonists, although praiseworthy in many respects and having a moral code, break that principle during a crucial point in their lives. And what is more, during this period, they also disagree with society (Goh 6). One example of this is Batman, who is Gotham’s hero but is also called a criminal, and there is Will Dormer in *Insomnia*, who uses illegal tricks to put criminals behind bars. But, while doing this, he raises the question of morality, because of which the audience must form its own opinion.

Most of Nolan’s films have sophisticated narratives, as well as a theoretical comprehension of the issue of “language”. *The Prestige*, which tells the stories of the two rival illusionists Borden and Angier through various timelines, *Memento*, which consists of two narrative threads, and the multiple embedded action sequences in *Inception*, are just a few examples of how Nolan is known for the narrative complexity of his storytelling. There are narrative flashbacks even in the Batman trilogy, where they serve to create tension and a complex environment. Letters and diaries, symbols like the spinning top in *Inception*, and tools like the Morse code communication in *Interstellar*, are just a few of the ways that Nolan uses to draw the audience’s attention to the ambiguous and frequently perilous nature of language

and its meaning (Goh 6-7). Additionally, in the Batman trilogy, in a couple of instances, Bruce Wayne refers to what someone said to him, i.e., he would repeat those sentences, and they would now have a fuller meaning. But this is something that one may not notice, especially when considering the number of years between the releases of all three films.

One of the most fascinating aspects about Nolan as a director is how he weaves philosophical concepts into films where suspense, action, and even violence, play a significant role. Therefore, the most common themes of Nolan's films are the questions of morality, society and the individual, impression, and reality. However, Nolan's films also have elements of a blockbuster: big sets, colossal action, and a constant focus on keeping the audience interested and captivated, but compared to the usual consumerist action film, Nolan's films are more purposefully analytical and self-reflective. Finding a single philosophical theme that drives Nolan's work is far more difficult. These themes in Nolan's films are broader and do not have a clear distinctive line. Nevertheless, it can be said that most of his films deal with epistemological themes, e.g., uncertainty in films such as *Following*, *Memento*, *The Prestige*, *Inception* and *Interstellar*, where characters get acquainted with the elusiveness of truth and ambiguity of knowing (Goh 2-3). As a result, in *Following*, there is a character who starts questioning his acts (theft and violent attack), in *Memento* and *The Prestige*, characters deal with vengeance and dead wives, *Inception* introduces a character responsible for his wife's death, and in *Interstellar* there is a controversy about who gets to live.

These characteristics of language ambiguity, epistemological uncertainty and moral inconsistency combine to form a distinctly postmodern, cynical culture. Therefore, Nolan is regarded as a postmodernist director who uses modern aesthetics and clichés while favouring decentred narratives whose ambiguities prevent exposing the truth of someone's place in society. Because of the usage of strange narrative structures that play with causality, time, and order, he is often compared to other directors, like Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers, Ridley Scott, and Gary Ross. He aims to present a picture of the core realities of current postmodern society as well as the status of the person within it. This vision is complex, and rather than expressing it in a moralizing manner, it serves as the intellectual foundation for each of Nolan's films (Goh 7-8). Many of Nolan's films include moral affirmation, a hope in human nature (despite their postmodernist aspects), depictions of epistemic ambiguity, and moral conflict. The postmodernist perspective of Nolan as a director has undoubtedly stuck around because of the postmodernist features and the pessimistic worldview they inspire, neither of which provide a conducive environment for moral affirmation. In some films, like in *Insomnia*, a character

surrenders, and to maintain his moral integrity, he risks his reputation. Moreover, Nolan also uses love to affirm this morality, not just romantic love but also the love between the father and his children. This goes by the idea that despite unreliability and immorality, the truth will surface, as well as the redeemed act of sacrifice. This moral affirmation tends to be more apparent in his later work, like in *Tenet* and *Dunkirk*, while in his earlier films, Nolan's trademark elements of narrative intricacy and epistemic doubt make morality hard to see (ibid. 9-11). How the different components of his films interact with one another to produce open-ended stories is how Nolan functions as a philosophical filmmaker. That includes the plot, the camera focus, the *mise en scène*, the character's actions, and what is, and what is not said (ibid. 16).

Moreover, many of Nolan's films consistently explore trauma in a complicated way, even if they frequently delay the viewer's need by not providing a satisfying conclusion. For example, *The Prestige* teases a secret aspect of the film that the viewer is supposedly blind to, in *Inception* the audience never gets to find out if the wheel stopped spinning, and in *Memento*, it is never revealed whether Leonard killed his wife or not (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 1). The time in these films denies the closure, so the audience is confronted with their role in the reception and comprehension of the film. This hypothesis finds support in previously mentioned films, whose plots blatantly support the feeling of deficiency that deprives the audience of its authority. To understand their ambiguities, possibilities, and sometimes inconsistencies, these films take multiple viewings. Fundamental concerns are frequently unaddressed, fundamental problems are often neglected, and inquiries are mainly left unanswered. The audience is intrigued by the process of filling in these holes in the story because everything gets concealed from them, and this suggests the prospect of some hidden satisfaction. But seeing a film again does not give the pleasure one needs. This is because revealing the secret always diminishes the appeal, requiring the search for a possible replacement. Therefore, it can be said that the connection between desire and pain is frequently highlighted in Nolan's films in ways that suggest the viewer plays a more active than passive part in the viewing experience (ibid. ch. 1).

Finally, it can be said that this is the appeal that Christopher Nolan's films bring to the audience. They are deceptive, they raise various questions, and the viewers will want to watch them again to understand. But that may not be possible since there is not one solution that will explain the plot fully to the audience, i.e., it is ambiguous: no one can say that they have found the real explanation. Consequently, Nolan is building a circle around himself full of people who

enjoy watching films because of which they leave the cinema with different thoughts, conclusions and explanations.

### **3. *Memento* (2000)**

*Memento* (2000), the film whose plot was based on “Memento Mori”, a short story written by Jonathan Nolan, Christopher’s brother, brought Christopher Nolan into Hollywood. The film follows Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), who is suffering from anterograde amnesia and cannot shape any fresh memories, while he searches for his wife’s killer. The final thing he remembers is his wife (Jorja Fox) dying, so finding and murdering her killer became his life goal. *Memento* begins with the final chronological scene of the film, and the plot goes backwards, i.e., it explains how Leonard got there. During this quest for vengeance, Leonard gets help from Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) and John Edward “Teddy” Gammell (Joe Pantoliano). Leonard’s story is interwoven with the life of Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky), who suffered from amnesia like Leonard. Additionally, the narrative connected with Sammy is depicted in black and white, while the part that goes backwards is in colour.

#### **3.1. Perplexing Narrative**

When he made *Memento*, Nolan wanted to create a film in which the audience would not be able to follow the plot, so he developed a story like a dream. In this fantasy, the main character, Leonard, suffers from amnesia, and while he knows his past, Leonard is lost in the present without knowing who he is. By telling the story backwards, Nolan intended to place the audience inside the protagonist’s head while keeping information both from them and Leonard (Nathan 30). The narration’s complexity gives the impression that the viewer’s recollections, like Leonard’s, are untrustworthy. This feeling is made worse by the fact that, with each subsequent colour scene, the spectator is put in Leonard’s shoes: because of the film’s reversed chronology, the viewer has not yet seen the moment, while Leonard has forgotten all about it (McGregor 62). Nolan did this successfully because immediately the viewer becomes aware of how the film will progress. Consequently, a certain amount of time will be needed for the viewer to comprehend everything that has happened because when the plot goes backwards, it becomes hard for the viewer to remember what he saw in the previous shot. Therefore, one may need to watch *Memento* a couple of times to fully grasp everything that has happened, as it is very likely that after one viewing, the viewer will still feel lost about certain aspects of the film. Nevertheless, it is still questionable whether it will be comprehensible even after numerous viewings.

As previously mentioned, for Nolan, *Memento* was the film that brought him from the world of amateur films to Hollywood-style filmmaking:

“(...) *the biggest leap I ever made in my career was from Following to Memento. It was from working with friends, spending my own money, and then risking our time and effort, to spending millions of dollars of somebody else’s money and having a proper crew there with trucks and trailers and all sorts of things going on.*” (Mooney 16)

Furthermore, *Memento* was released in a period when there was a market for daring non-linear storytelling, and a format that allowed a proper analysis of the film was developing. This became a pillar of Nolan’s filmography, and his fans became anxious to dissect and evaluate the work he was turning out (Mooney 20-21). Therefore, *Memento* became one of the many Nolan’s films that ask the audience to watch carefully because that is the only way to understand a specific aspect of the film. The period from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century up until today has shown to be a fruitful period for ambiguous films that are not as straightforward, i.e., the audience is looking for a more complex way to watch the films, so Nolan goes by this notion. Consequently, *Memento* was made to adhere to those people’s wishes, and the whole construction of the film is so intricate that even 23 years later, there is still an audience wondering what happened at the end, who Leonard is, and what his actual motifs are.

*Memento* is also considered to be a puzzle film in which viewers have a large role because it is expected of them to use their mental abilities to successfully watch the film. How *Memento* is constructed goes against the ordinary way in which people watch films. Therefore, it is challenging because the audience is not adequate to form a convincing fabula during the watching, i.e., it is like a puzzle that needs to be solved. Because of its atypical composition, which interferes with some essential memory functions, *Memento* underlines the crucial role that viewers’ participation plays in the film-viewing process. As the film progresses backwards, the spectator is gradually required to order the scenes correctly. However, it can be challenging to follow the action while simultaneously remembering previously witnessed events and organizing everything into a logical sequence (Ghislotti 87-88). Furthermore, the fun is not just in solving the riddle, it is also in the puzzle’s absence throughout the entire film. This creates the “surprise element” of the core mystery’s final disclosure; the clues have always been there, but viewers have been enticed, at least on the initial viewing, to mistake or misinterpret them (Fhlainn 152).

Therefore, even though the whole film is constructed as a puzzle, the fact that it cannot be solved adds something more to the feel of the film. Here, all shots have significance, i.e., with every new revelation, the viewer forms a fuller picture of *Memento*. The film consists of one puzzle, but the solutions could be various, everything depends on the viewers and their understanding of the plot. Nevertheless, there is still a question of whether a viewer can solve this puzzle that is the plot of *Memento*. Since it cannot be said that there is one accurate solution, a viewer cannot know whether his resolution is suitable or not. But, in a way that is the whole point of *Memento*, according to Nolan, who wanted to create a cinematic experience that would fully include the audience. Still, it will be left unfinished because there is no one, as no character can be trusted, to tell what caused all the actions in the film and how all that affects the final scenes of *Memento*.

Except for the two segments, i.e., the one in black and white and the other in colour, there is also a section of the film that deals with Leonard's memory (from the murder of his wife, up until the memories he forms after Teddy tells him what happened). These memories can be divided into three groups: the first group consists of images that depict Leonard's memory of his and his wife's everyday life, the second group is concerned with the memories from the night she was raped and killed, and the third group comprises the memories that are surprising and ambiguous. Additionally, this third group consists of the scene in which Leonard remembers first pinching his wife's thigh and then injecting insulin in her, and there is also the scene with Leonard in the bed with his wife in his arms, with the sentence "I've done it" written on his chest. All these scenes appear at the end of the film, and as a result, they show the audience how unreliable Leonard is, even though this happened before the plot of the film. If *Memento* was constructed chronologically, the viewers would immediately know about Leonard's mental state. Nevertheless, they find out at the end, which gives something to the appeal of the whole film (Ghislotti 102-103). Still, that third group of memories can also affect someone's interpretation of the film. There is always a possibility that a viewer will not think that those are ambiguous, but real memories. If the audience is inclined to accept those scenes that support what Teddy said about Leonard killing his wife, this means that they have solved their puzzle, i.e., they believe that they know what happened. They can even use the previously mentioned scenes as a subconscious affirmation that they are right. Consequently, Nolan was successful in affecting the views of one group of the audience. Those viewers watched the film, developed their scheme, and based on it, accepted certain groups of scenes that, in the end, influenced their understanding of *Memento*'s plot.

In this film, Nolan played a lot with the perception of time, i.e., the audience never knows how much time has passed between the scenes, because in each shot it seems as if Leonard has just woken up. No one can tell how many minutes, hours or days passed between them (Nathan 32). Because of this structure, various filmmakers, such as Steven Soderbergh, were amazed at how Nolan played with this aspect of filmmaking. *Newmarket* shared his belief and started distributing *Memento* in cinemas after many turned Nolan down because they believed the audience would not understand the backward concept (ibid. 34). Additionally, the unconventional formal structure of the film undoubtedly disturbs viewers' expectations of temporal consistency and continuity, assumptions developed by the dedication to linear storytelling in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. The audience learns by the end of the film that, in terms of the chronological order of the action, the point in the plot where the black and white portions disappear is when the colour parts of the film start (Little 67).

Furthermore, the narrative in *Memento* is so intricate that it is incredibly challenging to recall both the presentation of the events' sequence and their actual order (McGregor 58). Time is one of the most confusing parts of *Memento*, i.e., the audience is unaware of how long it has been since Leonard's wife passed away, and how long Leonard has been in this particular city. As a result, the audience is as lost as Leonard, so it can be said that Nolan did everything to make this as ambiguous as possible. Therefore, it is on the audience to guess how much time has elapsed, they are the ones responsible for their interpretations. To guess how much time has passed, one should be aware that any conclusion he makes is subjective because Nolan does not give the time frame, i.e., since Leonard does not know, the viewer will also not know. Then again, there is also a question of whether it is crucial for the understanding of the film to know how time passes. The reason for this is the fact that in the sea of various uncertainties where everything gets questioned, time may seem to be a less noteworthy feature.

As in any other detective film, it is obvious that the events on which the film is based have already happened before the beginning of the film, so it is necessary to move up in time or move back along the causal chain to identify meaningful elements that can aid in understanding what occurred (Ghislotti 88). How *Memento* is constructed leads to a viewer who, just like Leonard, cannot form new memories. The viewer is lost in the plot so consequently, this backward narration has the effect of making it exceedingly challenging for the audience to understand what transpired (ibid. 90). While watching *Memento*, the audience can put the story's components into a logical order, but while thinking about a certain scene, it is hard for the viewer to understand whether it happened before or after. As a result, it is



expected that the audience will form, at the beginning of the film, a kind of scheme so they can understand how the film progresses (ibid. 92). Since viewers may develop different schemes, their understanding of the plot will be diverse, and that also depends on the shots on which they base their comprehension. This means that every scene of *Memento* may lead to a different conclusion, so it is imperative to note at what point of the film one constructed his scheme, as the perception of the plot and characters constantly changes. For example, the pattern one makes after the first scene containing Natalie, will not be the same as the scheme one makes after the scene in which it becomes clear that Natalie is using Leonard. Nevertheless, one needs this “plan” because, otherwise, he will completely lose himself in the plot full of manoeuvres that can take a viewer in numerous directions.

### 3.2. Film Noir in the New Century

*Memento* is full of *noir* motifs, but Nolan here uses them differently, as if looking through a glass, e.g., in the scene where Leonard is being chased by Dodd, Leonard for a moment does not know who is chasing whom. Then there is Natalie, a *femme fatale*, but here she does everything in the wrong order: first, there is betrayal, then there is manipulation, and in the end seduction (Nathan 33). But this is something because of which Natalie is special, i.e., her character is now more complex, and those acquainted with *femme fatale* will not be able to figure out her goal. And even though it can be said that Leonard is a *noir* detective, he is more of “a reaction projectile on autopilot” (Elsaesser 29), i.e., he is reactive and dissociative, and he reacts to certain situations that have been brought to his attention by Natalie and Teddy. Consequently, it seems as if all of Leonard’s deeds are a result of someone else’s effort while he waits on the sidelines to go into action.

Another element that makes *Memento* a *film noir* is the space, i.e., the usage of non-space in scenes with Leonard that are there to question his identity. Most of the shots in the film, Leonard’s motel rooms, parking lots, pub, and diner, all bring with them a sense of anonymity; therefore, it is hard for the audience to place those locations (Toth 76-77). Additionally, over the years, Christopher Nolan has established himself as a director who incorporates elements of *film noir* in his films but modernizes them in a way, i.e., Nolan transforms them so that they follow his manner of directing. *Memento* is already a complex film, full of puzzling scenes influenced by *film noir* segments, but those that, on the first look, do not seem to be *noir* at all. One of the best examples is Natalie as a *femme fatale* who, after the first couple of scenes, does not resemble one, since a *femme fatale* is supposed to be this seductive woman who does everything in her power to affect the actions of the main character.

But in *Memento*, Nolan reversed this by giving Natalie these characteristics in the later scenes of the film. Nevertheless, if *Memento* did not go backwards, Natalie would have represented a typical *femme fatale* character who seduces Leonard and then uses him for her own gain. Consequently, Nolan's way of directing made it impossible for the audience to notice this after the first viewing, so once again, it is on the viewer to comprehend this by himself. The same can be said for Leonard as a detective, whose goals at the beginning of the film may have seemed obvious, but as the plot went forward, it became evident that Leonard is as lost as the audience, i.e., his amnesia, as well as everything that Teddy told him, makes it unattainable for either of the two to decipher what is accurate.

Moreover, at the beginning of *Memento*, Leonard is a subject of knowledge, i.e., he knows what his goals are, and he will do everything to discover the truth, but by the end, he becomes a subject of desire – even though he thinks his quest is noble, he is doing everything in his power not to realize what is true. In other words, Leonard believes he is searching for knowledge, but at the same time, he is disregarding it (McGowan 43-44). Leonard emphasises, throughout the film, that memories can be false, that people need to follow the facts, and if one wants to discover knowledge, then he must, just like Leonard, give up on memories. Furthermore, Leonard's beliefs get tested by both Natalie and Teddy because, especially in Natalie's case, the audience is invited to trust Leonard's writing on the Polaroid and therefore trust her. So, when the viewers finally meet the real Natalie, it becomes obvious that Leonard's method is not as good as he claims it to be (ibid. 45-47). The two narrative lines of the film also support this quest for knowledge because the black and white sequence depicts what happened to Leonard, while the one in colour shows everything that Leonard has done to identify his wife's murderer. But, at the end of the film, when these two narratives collide, this idea of the subject of knowledge transforms into the subject of desire, and this becomes evident when Leonard decides to set Teddy up as his new John G. (ibid. 48-49). But Teddy already knew Leonard's motifs: *"I gave you a reason to live, and you were more than happy to help. You don't want the truth... You live in a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for, a sense of purpose to your life, a romantic quest that you wouldn't end, even if I wasn't in the picture."*

All of this can lead to the conclusion that everything happened because Leonard knew what he was doing. His actions were calculated, and Leonard knew what would transpire if he wrote a particular thing on his Polaroid photographs. At the end of the film, he may be arguing with Teddy because he does not believe what Teddy is saying, but Leonard consciously writes "Don't trust his lies" on Polaroid with Teddy because he knows that this will result in him

killing Teddy. Therefore, the theory that Leonard does not know anything may not be valid. While knowing that Teddy was there after every murder, since he brought Leonard there, one may say that he knows the real Leonard and that Teddy is not doing anything against Leonard's will when he sets him up against the wrong Johns. On the other hand, another question is why Leonard did not write anything on the Polaroid after he murdered the actual John G. Maybe he did not get a chance to do so before he forgot it happened, but it is also possible that Teddy did not allow him to do it. Therefore, perhaps Teddy led him towards this life of a killer, i.e., Leonard is not the only one responsible for that, even if he, in a way, knew what he was doing.

This desire that drives the plot in *Memento* is also a part of *film noir*. *Memento* goes beyond traditional *noir* in this regard by entirely marginalizing the crime. It is not the crime from the beginning that drives the rest of the plot, but Leonard's decision to deceive himself. Understanding the film requires the comprehension of its fundamental falsehood rather than the truth it conceals. So, this is how *Memento* repositions the viewer of the detective film, changing their function from that of a seeker of knowledge to a seeker of desire (McGowan 52-53). The final moments of the film, i.e., the scenes, in which Leonard finds out he has been used by Teddy, result in viewers rearranging what they have seen. Everything that has been revealed to Leonard leads to several obstacles to the spectator's preconceived notions of Leonard's history, ambitions, and morality. Therefore, this affects the whole narrative because every single character gets reevaluated, so the viewers realize that Leonard's urge to continue the search for his wife's claimed killer drives both his conscious and unconscious acts. Consequently, it becomes obvious that Leonard is not driven by the need to kill his wife's murderer but rather by a need to look for him, and because of this, he sets Teddy as his newest target. As a result, Leonard is a subject of desire because he, to continue experiencing the trauma that underlies his life, behaves in a way that would sustain rather than eradicate this desire. This kind of desire can also be found in other Nolan films, such as *Inception*, where the audience is expecting to witness Cobb's reunion with James and Phillipa, but they are left confused after the final scene in which the wheel does not stop spinning. Consequently, the key is that these films' narrative does not satisfy the viewer's aspiration for the object of their desire, but rather comprehends the motivation behind it, which is founded in the character's relationship to trauma (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 8).

Here, the audience and Leonard are on two different spectrums: the viewers are expecting a kind of resolution; they want to find out what exactly happened to Leonard's wife, who raped and killed her, while Leonard is satisfied only with the non-ending search for the

killer, not the outcome, i.e., it appears as if his main goal is not to murder him. Moreover, this is not enough for the audience, they are not used to this because the characters they usually watch achieve their goals. But Leonard is, just as Teddy said, happy while doing this. And even though he becomes aware of the consequences once he writes down Teddy's license and "Don't trust his lies", he goes for it and does not turn back, fully aware of the repercussions.

### 3.3. Characters, Their Motifs and Memories

People's conscious life is dominated by their beliefs and memories, which are fundamental for comprehending the world around which one lives. People base their knowledge on memories, so they act by them. But for Leonard, this is impossible because he cannot decipher which memories are true and which are a lie. To help himself, Leonard writes notes on the Polaroid photographs so that in the future he knows whether he can trust people. Moreover, the audience uses those same photos to form their own opinion of the characters. By doing this, on some occasions, like in the case of Teddy, Leonard deceives both himself and the audience because, until the final scenes, the audience believes that Teddy is the real killer (Knight and McKnight 108). The worry of letting go of the standards for determining when some memory is not legitimate is one of the fears that *Memento* installs in its audience. Since memory is partially socially constructed, it may prove challenging to establish a criterion for defining what constitutes an authentic memory. In the final part of the film, Teddy tells Leonard everything, so Leonard must choose whether he will believe Teddy, or he will continue with his belief, and therefore make himself happy, i.e., Leonard will lose the story he has made up for himself if Teddy's account proves truthful. As a result, he tells himself lies to support his account. Teddy provides Leonard with a challenge to his views, so instead of contemplating if Teddy might be telling the truth, Leonard kills him (LaRocca 183-184). All those writings on the photos and the tattoos serve as facts, but what *Memento* does is showcase what is not always true. And since he does not have memories, these "facts" are the only thing that drives Leonard, and he fully believes them: "*Facts, not memories. That's how you investigate. I know, it's what I used to do.*" Consequently, while using the facts he collected, Leonard fully accepts that Teddy is the killer, never once questioning it because he was able to mislead himself into believing so (Knepp 122-123).

Immediately at the beginning, *Memento* raised the controversy of whether memories can deceive someone, so one should only take facts into account. The viewer may believe to have an answer throughout the considerable part of the film, i.e., until the last couple of shots. But those scenes are crucial for the theory the viewer will develop because those moments

debunk everything they believed up until that point. This may also raise a type of dread amongst the viewers because even though it may seem that *Memento* is based on facts, the final revelation, in which it becomes evident how Leonard is manipulating them, and therefore, going against his own preconceived beliefs, puts aside every conclusion that has been made up until this point. But, since Leonard's state of mind is entirely ambiguous, it is highly impossible to discern anything based on his experience. Consequently, the audience is once more left to develop its assertion by themselves.

Furthermore, no character in *Memento* can be seen as trustworthy, and the same goes for Leonard. Even though he is the main character, since he suffers from anterograde amnesia, he cannot generate a persistent, logical story about any of the characters. What is more, Teddy and Natalie, who are using Leonard for their advantage, are in no better condition to explain anything concerning Leonard's behaviour. Leonard is a kind of missing person, a character with no recollection of and no remorse for the deeds he performs throughout the film, isolated in a terrain that is eternally foreign to him. As a result, the audience is forced to become a detective, whose job is to recreate a linear narrative to generate leads regarding the identity of this missing person. This search for a chronological narrative can be compared to the detective work Leonard is doing to find his wife's killer (Little 67-68).

When talking about the character of Natalie, it is on viewers to understand who she is and what her motifs are, i.e., in a way, it seems as if the audience is invited to do so, but on the other hand it is as if the plot of *Memento* makes it impossible (Weese 103). How someone will interpret Natalie depends highly on the backward order in which the film has been constructed. This happens because Natalie, whom viewers meet at the beginning of the film, does not match Natalie that they encounter later, i.e., they change their opinion of her based on the new information they get as they go back in time. As a result, many viewers and critics have concluded that Natalie used Leonard to make him kill Teddy, who previously influenced Leonard into murdering her boyfriend, Jimmy Grants (ibid. 106). And even though there were scenes in which Natalie seemed like a more positive character, specifically when she showcased her affection toward Leonard, the narrative structure and the importance of the scenes connected with Dodd make it clear what Natalie's goals were at that time, and this contributes to the understanding of this female character (ibid. 114). Nevertheless, Natalie becomes the biggest disappointment of *Memento*, i.e., viewers go from believing her to labelling her as the main antagonist who led to the killing of Teddy, who, to everyone's surprise, proved to be innocent in the end.

Except for the *femme fatale*, a regular *film noir* character, there is also a home-builder character represented in Leonard's wife. But in *Memento*, this home-builder character is refashioned, i.e., her clothes make her innocent, she is nearly asexual and put on the margins in the narrative, but she is still a source of the protagonist's obsession and the driving force for the storyline (Toth 80). And even though Leonard speaks of his wife as if she were perfect, a detailed analysis of the scenes reveals that may not be the case. After her death, he created a wonderful picture of his marriage, and to fortify that idea, he destroyed everything that may say otherwise. For example, in the scene in which he burns her belongings, when he removes information from the police file about her assault, he says: "*I can't remember to forget you.*" Consequently, all of this may lead the audience to understand that their marriage was not a successful one (Content 38-39). Furthermore, one parallel may be made between Leonard and his wife in the flashback scene in which the audience witnesses him wondering why she reads the same book all the time, i.e., Leonard does not understand how she enjoys reading it when she already knows what will happen. Now, in the future, viewers see Leonard constantly repeating, and therefore reliving the same tale. Unlike his wife, who knows what is going to transpire in her book, every time Leonard reads those facts, it seems as if he is reading them just now, and additionally, they mean to him so much more because without them his life does not have a purpose (LaRocca 185-186).

It was previously mentioned that the characters in *Memento* are not reliable and that their actions tend to be inexplicable and have more than one explanation. Leonard seems to be driven by a noble quest whose deeds, as a result, should be honourable, but all revelations at the end beat that. Then there is Natalie, who is supposed to help Leonard, so in the first scenes of *Memento*, she is the helpful character; the audience believes that she will do everything in her power to help Leonard locate his wife's killer. Therefore, the viewers are fond of her because they want Leonard to find those who ruined his life. However, all this falls apart when the plot goes backwards enough to reveal her actual intentions. When it comes to Leonard's wife, throughout the whole film, she is an innocent bystander, i.e., she was raped and killed for no reason, and Leonard is ready to avenge that. But if their marriage was not as perfect as Teddy, and Leonard's memories suggest, then she is not this wonderful and kind woman, significantly if she influenced Leonard into overdosing her on insulin. And finally, there is Teddy, who for a sizable part of the film is a negative character but the final revelations soften that. Teddy, even though he has been using Leonard, did not kill Leonard's wife and in *Memento*, that is the main question.

Furthermore, the motif of a wife who was raped and murdered is common in Hollywood, and as such, *Memento* invites the viewer to embrace Leonard's plan for revenge as justifiable and moral. There are even characters who help with that, even though they use him for their own needs. Nevertheless, the question of morality arises in the end when it becomes discernible that Leonard killed people who did not have anything to do with his wife's rape (McGowan 59-60). Also, by never revealing to the audience in any detail who the target is or even if there is a right one, *Memento* rejects the satisfaction of retribution (ibid. 62). In the end, the viewers' perception of the film has changed completely, they have become aware that Leonard is not on an honourable journey to find the person who destroyed his life, but is instead looking for the man who dismantled this image Leonard had constructed, and as a result, he turns into a dark character; he is no longer someone who only cares about his wife (Lin 27).

To find the killer of his wife, Leonard adopts the well-known persona of the tough detective who values logic and evidence that will bring him happiness. Leonard's physical appearance can also be added to this new person he is creating, i.e., his tattoos, which can be explained as a technique through which Leonard wants to generate a person full of redemption. Furthermore, by taking the car and clothes of the drug dealer he killed at the chronological beginning of the film, Leonard takes on the personality of a murderer, as he morally declines and therefore reflects the idea that a new identity necessitates or causes a bodily alteration (Parker 2-3). This idea of a new personality goes by the postmodern belief that a person can choose their identity while denying their real nature, and additionally, it can be said that one does this to make himself happy, and Leonard is an example of this. He does this when he decides to write himself notes, which lead him to assume that Teddy is his wife's killer. As a result, *Memento* challenges Leonard's belief that inventing his reality will guarantee his happiness, but his identity is shaky, he must carve out a place for himself in the world, and no matter how hard he tries, Leonard is unable to establish a stable identity and is instead locked in an endless game (ibid. 4). Consequently, Leonard becomes one of the frontrunners for those who believe that they can form their identity based on some factors that they consider to be noteworthy. In these cases, it is easy to ignore certain aspects to support those ideas. The same goes for Leonard: he is basing this identity of a noble avenger who will do anything in his power for the "facts" he, and others, built for this role of his. Moreover, this new identity is even more effective for Leonard because his conditions prevent him from ever noticing that this identity may be fabricated.

Moreover, as the audience watches Leonard tattoo a note on his thigh, he explains to the person on the other side of the phone why they are important: *“For day to day stuff, notes are really useful... You do need a system if you're going to make it work . . . you kind of learn to trust your handwriting.”* And even though he does this, Leonard takes it to another level by tattooing them on his body: *“If you have a piece of information which is vital, writing on your body instead of a piece of paper can be the answer. It's just a permanent way of keeping a note.”* Therefore, his tattoos and notes are the main way for him to attain some semblance of normality. One tattoo on Leonard's body stands out the most, and that is the “Remember Sammy Jankis” tattoo, which has several purposes. First, it gives Leonard a standard against which to determine whether all other handwriting is actually his, and it also makes him think about how dependent he is on handwriting, which instantly makes him long for the days when he could function without it. But the biggest reason why he has such a tattoo is the fact that Sammy's story is like his current life, i.e., Sammy (if he is an actual person) is suffering from anterograde amnesia as well (Jackson 59-60).

How Leonard deals with his condition leads him to find a sense of purpose in this world. Society considers Leonard useless, but his amnesia enables him to look for utility, a sense of merit, and affirmation in this postmodern world (Deakin 88). But all these killings that Leonard does raise a question of morality, especially in the case of Teddy, because Leonard purposefully set him up to be his new John G. Some critiques claim that Leonard, who decided to kill Teddy, and Leonard who killed him, are not the same person. On the other hand, others believe that that is one Leonard, and as a result, he is not innocent in any perspective. The question that arises here is whether Leonard is guilty because, in the end, he killed Teddy while genuinely believing that he was his wife's murderer. Those “two” Leonards are the same body, but it is questionable if they are the same person (Eberl 21-23). Nolan leaves this decision for the viewers, i.e., it is on them to develop their stand on this topic, and this depends on their understanding of the film and its plot. Every single viewer is invited to do so, and since there is no accurate explanation, no one's opinion can be incorrect.

Leonard is also a character that is responding to the modern environment, e.g., when he cannot remember how to move around the place, he must write directions, maybe not because of his amnesia, but because the whole city has nothing memorable, it is completely sterile. What is more, his unwillingness to talk on the phone, but rather see the person in real life can be explained by his belief that that kind of communication assures to soften the situation, but in Leonard's example, this is not always the case since violence is frequent in scenes in which



Leonard speaks with others (Little 78). Furthermore, Leonard's goals that can be interpreted differently are there to describe his flawed memory: (1) he wants to vindicate his wife's rape and murder, (2) he attempts to suppress the memory of him killing his wife, or (3) Leonard uses his wife's murder as justification for his love of murder. Although there is evidence to support each perspective, the spectator does not have a personal stake in any interpretation to the point that this interest would cause them to manipulate their memories of events like Leonard's in the film (McGregor 59). Also, *Memento* serves as another evidence that outside suggestions and influences have a considerable impact on one's behaviour. Mrs. Jankis thinks Sammy is lying about his condition because of what Leonard told her, and Natalie shows interest in Leonard because Jimmy tells her about him. And there is also Leonard, who unconsciously listens to Teddy but is also affected by his own lies. Consequently, this leads to the idea that Leonard does not know who he is right now, just like Teddy has told him (Goh 44-45).

Finally, various motives and actions can influence and form a character, and the same can be said for Leonard Shelby, who was affected by different people, his amnesia and the story he had constructed for himself. Those were the things that pushed him forward; he had his explanations, and the same is expected from the audience. As previously mentioned, Nolan directed this film in a way so that the viewers would question every single scene and, as a result, come up with an interpretation that no one can dispute, i.e., it is something that makes *Memento* unique in this sense, it is one more Christopher Nolan film whose intention is to include the audience as much as possible.

#### **4. *The Prestige* (2006)**

*The Prestige* (2006) is a psychological thriller that deals with two rival illusionists, Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman), as they quarrel about a new magic trick that includes the transportation of a man. Both worked as shrills and helpers for John Cutter (Michael Caine), whose duty was the preparation of a stage for the magic tricks. After Julie (Piper Perabo), Angier's wife, drowns during one of the tricks, Borden and Angier separate as Angier believes that Borden is responsible for her death. Over the years, the two of them became the biggest rivals in London; Borden married Sarah (Rebecca Hall), with whom he had a daughter Jess (Samantha Mahurin), while Angier hired a new assistant Olivia (Scarlett Johansson). The colossal part of the plot primarily follows Angier in his quest to understand how Borden does "The Transported Man" magic trick, but also Borden as they try to sabotage one another.

*The Prestige* is as enthralling in its portrayal of trickery as it is emotional in its analysis of loneliness and dishonesty. It combines facts about the working of illusions with intriguing notions about the limits of science and the intricacies of human relationships. Furthermore, it includes an actual historical figure, Nikola Tesla, portrayed by David Bowie (Prescott). Additionally, the blurry border between Britain and America is a continuous theme in Nolan's films, and *The Prestige* offers another illustration of this, i.e., even though the plot of the film was set in Victorian London, England, Nolan filmed the whole thing in Los Angeles (Mooney 52). It is also important to highlight that this film was based on Christopher Priest's novel, who wrote it as a type of diary, which was then transferred to *The Prestige* when both Borden and Angier got their hands on each other's journals. But, when they finished reading the diaries, Angier and Borden realised that they had been fooled by one another. Therefore, the structure of *The Prestige* is highlighted by the inclusion of an unreliable narrator throughout the film, who is not subjective, i.e., his only goal is to trick both the audience and the characters (Labuza 41).

The inclusion of the narrator, who follows the plot and gives additional information about the characters and their actions, gives the impression that in this case, Christopher Nolan will not mislead the viewer. However, this is denied twice in *The Prestige*, i.e., both diaries proved to be a deception. In a way, it is fascinating how the viewers, after Nolan had fooled them once already, do not suspect that Angier's diary could also be a hoax. An explanation for this could be the fact that the revelation at the end of Angier's journal is something that no one could have thought of, as the possibility of him being alive seemed to be beyond the bounds of possibility. Consequently, *The Prestige* shows once more how talented Nolan is in misleading the viewers since he has done it in numerous films of his, but somehow what he did here is different, i.e., while tricking the audience he intertwined cinema and magic.

#### **4.1. A Magic Trick and Duplicity**

One of the main elements in *The Prestige* is duplicity, and there is a sense of it within Angier since that is not his real name; he is Lord Caldlow, but the audience does not know this until the final scenes of the film. He uses the name Angier because he does not want to bring shame to his family as a magician. And while he emphasizes that he has just changed his name, his wife Julia tells him: "*You are pretending to be someone else ... it's not just your name, it's who you are and where you're from.*" This becomes obvious when Angier takes back the identity of Lord Caldlow in the end but is still as obsessed with Borden as he was while he carried the name Angier (Goh 70). Even though Angier has two identities, it is hard to draw a line between the two because, in many cases, Angier exploits the fact that he is Lord Caldlow.

For example, all the money he gave to Tesla for the transportation machine could have only come from his family, i.e., it is impossible that he earned that from working as a magician. The audience can easily conclude that this money is his family legacy, but it is unlikely that the viewers will immediately comprehend that Lord Caldlow is Angier. Regardless of this, the viewers could have made this connection, but Nolan tricked them once more, so they did not realize what was basically in front of their eyes.

Borden and Angier had their version of “The Transported Man” trick. Borden’s proved to be extremely simple as it involved his twin brother, while on the other hand, Angier employed Nikola Tesla to create a machine that would transfer a person from one place to another. But this device does not do this; it rather clones both dead and animate objects, hence whenever Angier does this trick, he clones himself. This raised one colossal question whether the person who ends up under the stage is the real Angier, or the clone, i.e., who dies in the water tank: the clone or the real Angier (Brislin 12)? If the clone survives, this means he is conscious enough to do the trick, which will then result in his death again and again. However, if the real Angier survives and the clone dies, Angier is a killer, and his trick is superior to Borden’s. Additionally, there is also the fact that Angier was aware that Borden would want to decipher how this trick works, so he decided to frame him for his murder. Still, Borden is also not innocent, his biggest deception was his twin brother who had to be sacrificed, and there is also the fact that he is responsible for Angier’s search for Tesla (ibid. 12-13).

This previously mentioned question may be one of those that do not have an answer because both possibilities are probable. One could say that the clone version dies every time Angier does the trick because the first time Angier tried it, he killed the clone that appeared before him. But if this is correct, then Angier, who appeared in the prestige, must be a clone, and the real Angier is the one who drowned in the tank the first time he did the “Real Transported Man” trick in London in front of the theatrical agent. Others may say that the real Angier died already in America when he cloned himself for the first time, so every single Angier after that is a clone of a previous one. The plot of *The Prestige* does not give the audience an answer to this, it is left to the viewers to interpret it in their own way, which is something that those who watch Christopher Nolan’s film should already be acquainted with.

Before using his cinematic tactics, Nolan often explains and describes them. The audience is encouraged to see the outcome before the actual thing, just like in *Memento*. This is clear in the framing mechanism, which begins with Alfred Borden’s conviction and Robert Angier’s death before giving the audience any information about their friendship (Mooney 53).

Despite the early cues regarding how Borden's and Angier's methods may operate, Nolan toys with the viewer's blindness. Borden's performance must need a double, Cutter says, but Angier's continuous scepticism blurs the judgment of the audience. In the scene with a canary, a child is aware of what is happening with the bird, but the audience is not so quick to realize that Angier is doing the same thing later in the film. One more hint is evident in the scene with Chung Ling Soo, who constantly maintains the picture of a cripple, to preserve his magic trick. The scene in which Angier finds the new hats that are identical to his already appeared as the first scene in the film, but the audience here once more ignored this clue and wondered, just as the characters, how Tesla's machine works (Heilmann 23).

Usually, when Nolan leaves something for interpretation, his clues, if there are any, are not as obvious as in this film. When a viewer is done watching *The Prestige*, he may realize that there were clues, but on the other hand, he does not have to, especially if he disregards them immediately. Consequently, this is one of the reasons why this film is compared to the magic trick, i.e., everything depends on the one watching it. This means that, just like in a magic trick, there are clues, but they are hidden so well that the viewer does not see them. Later, after the prestige, an explanation of how something was done can be given (if one shows interest, like Sarah's nephew) so he can comprehend everything that transpired before him. The same can be said for the understanding of *The Prestige*, since only at the end is the audience able to look in detail at every scene and discern what truly transpired there.

It can also be said that Tesla has his double; his assistant Alley (Andi Serkis) appeared in more scenes than Tesla did, and even though the reason for this may be Bowie's unwillingness to act in *The Prestige*, another explanation could be the idea that Alley is Tesla, i.e., everything that Tesla represents. What is more, Alley is the one who works with the machine and defines how it works (he wrote instructions, not Tesla). Therefore, Alley is the one in charge, while Tesla serves as a diversion (Nathan 64). The fact that Angier employed a well-known historical figure to create a machine can easily explain why the audience paid attention only to what he was doing. Nevertheless, it is also possible that he was the one that hid the reality from the viewers, i.e., just like in other scenes in which Nolan hid the truth, even though there were clues, here the actual clue was Alley, so Tesla was used to conceal what was transpiring in America.

This idea of a double can be found in numerous scenes, some of which have been previously mentioned, but there are also scenes in which this duplicity is not as apparent. For example, duplicity can be detected in two shots that show the magic trick with a canary. There

are Cutter and Jess in the first scene, while the second one contains Sarah, her nephew and Borden. In the former shot, Jess is amazed by what Cutter did, i.e., her reaction is a manifestation of awe that is a response to something considered magical. On the other hand, the reaction of Sarah's nephew was completely different, i.e., he started crying because he immediately realized that that was not the same bird and that something had happened to the canary he had seen a couple of minutes ago. And in the subsequent scene, this proved to be true. Therefore, these two reactions represent the feeling that the viewers may have after seeing something that is at the same time magical and grim (Tembo 202-203). This means that the audience is not ready to accept the death of dozens of innocent birds; it is easier for them to completely ignore the fact that these canaries get killed during the magic trick. Consequently, it is understandable why the audience, while watching the film, reflects Jess' reaction to the magic trick, i.e., since they want to be puzzled, they will watch the film, they do not want the harsh truth.

Furthermore, duplicity can be drawn between this scene with a canary and the "Real Transported Man" magic trick by Angier. The first time the audience sees the magic trick with the canary, they do not visualize the prestige part of the trick, i.e., only later, after Sarah watched the trick with her nephew, it is revealed that the bird must be crushed to complete the trick. The order of revelation for Angier's trick is broadly the same; firstly, the viewers witness Angier doing the trick, but they still do not realize how he is doing that. The prestige of this trick is revealed in the final part when Borden and Angier encounter for the final time (now the audience has the chance to see what occurred when Angier used the machine for the first time in America, and what happens every time he does the "Real Transported Man" in London) (Olson 55). The prestige part of the magic trick is also hidden from the viewers with both Borden's and Angier's versions of "The Transported Man". When the prestige happens during Borden's trick, the camera stays on Angier's and Cutter's faces, and the viewers see the outcome of the prestige only later. The same occurs when Angier performs his version for the first time in front of the theatrical agent. Here the camera stays on the agent's face, and the audience gets to witness his reaction, which is exactly what Angier cherishes the most (Bordwell 303). While placing the camera on the faces of those witnessing the magic trick, Nolan emphasises why Angier is a magician, i.e., Angier adores watching people's faces as the magic trick unfolds. Additionally, this camera work serves as one more confirmation that *The Prestige* is a magic trick on its own. Nevertheless, this focus on viewers' faces could also be one more technique

that Nolan uses to conceal the truth from the audience (they are watching their response to magic and are blind to what is truly going on).

Moreover, the trick at the beginning of *The Prestige*, which involves the disappearance of a canary, can be compared to other various scenes later in the film that include doubles. Here, the audience sees a considerable number of canaries that look identical. The same can be seen in later scenes, with many black hats and cats, and in the end, dozens of water tanks in which the dead Angiers lies (Brislin 11). This canary is in many ways similar to Borden; those watching the magic trick believe that there is one bird, just like the audience thinks there is one Borden. But there are dozens of the same birds and two twin brothers, i.e., two Bordens. As a result, for these canaries, just like for Borden, there is no difference between illusion and life, because this illusion became the basis of their existence (Tembo 203). The trick with canaries, on its own, is a straightforward deceit, but it is unavoidable once viewers realize all its meaning. Consequently, the audience should pay more attention to these shots, i.e., those that fall under the category of unimportant scenes after the first viewing. The fact that this trick is shown again at the end of the film should also showcase how meaningful the whole shot is. On the other hand, it is a much bigger possibility that viewers will understand this scene just as something used to explain the three basic parts of a magic trick. The same can be said for the scene with Sarah and her nephew, which the audience will probably characterize as a shot used for the introduction of Sarah. Regardless, this is just a proof that Nolan emphasises that every scene has its value.

#### **4.2. Characters and Their Identity**

Unlike other Nolan films in which the audience sympathises with the character, this is not the case in *The Prestige*. Here, the final revelations, concerned with the fact that Borden had a twin whom he used and that Angier killed himself after every act, bring a sense of eerie and some disturbing feelings. To maintain the spectacle and their status as heroes, these magicians lie about their technique to themselves and their audience (Labuza 41). Furthermore, this contest between Angier and Borden, between legitimacy and showmanship, never gets the winner; the viewers support one character, but then they show sympathy for another one, which depends on the recently acquired information (Shone 153). Regardless, their deeds brought them on the same level in the end; they both lost their loved ones, i.e., Borden killed Angier, but Angier previously killed his clones. And even though one of the Borden twins had survived and reunited with Jess, he still lost a brother who was half of his identity, as well as the woman he loved (Goh 73).

On the other hand, films that are based on the rivalry between two main protagonists offer the viewers the possibility to pick a side, i.e., to choose a character whom they will defend, based on everything they see on screen. Regardless, the situation is different with *The Prestige* because the opinion of Angier and Borden may change as new revelations emerge. The plot constantly goes back to the past, Angier is reading Borden's diary and vice versa, so the original perceptions of them as characters, shift from positive to negative and contrarily. However, in the case of Borden and Angier, is it hard to determine, after the final shot, who was right and who was wrong. And even if it is possible, who should then receive encouragement, and who needs to be banished for his deeds?

Depending on the part of the film, one can say that Angier is driven by a desire to destroy Borden's life because Angier wants to avenge Julie's death, but in some other circumstances, it can be said that he just wants to steal Borden's magic trick. The latter possibility seems to be a more logical one, but there are scenes when the former one comes to the surface. That is highly obvious when Angier expresses jealousy when he sees Borden with Sarah and Jess, and at the end when Angier takes away Jess from one of the twins. In this final part of the film, it becomes obvious how, even though he destroyed both Borden's life and career, Angier still wants something more, and that is Borden's family (when he does not accept the secret for the trick in exchange for Jess, it is again apparent that the magic trick is not the main object of his desire) (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 4). Consequently, it seems as if Angier's goal changes from one part of the film to another one. Firstly, he starts with a wish for revenge on his wife, but later, this vengeance takes Angier's life, and his only desire becomes the destruction of Borden's life. At the moment when he realizes the popularity "The Transported Man" is receiving, he wants that for himself, he no longer wishes simply to sabotage Borden, because now he wants what Borden has. Nevertheless, even though his aspirations change, it is hard to miss that he is still dreaming about a life he could have had with Julie. Still, this raises the question of whether the fact that he will not have the family he dreams about allows him to do such things.

Moreover, since a large part of the film follows Angier's adventure of duplicating Borden's trick, it can be said that *The Prestige* is a comprehensive critique of materialism that aims to duplicate and regulate what is at first enigmatic and ambiguous. *The Prestige* is explicitly sceptical of such unthinking materialism because its character desires to escape the boundaries of a chilly, materialistic society. In this case, Borden is this poor character who understands why someone like Chung Ling Soo would sacrifice so much, while Angier is not

aware that that is the only way for both Chung and Borden to depart from this poverty they are living in (Mooney 60). Consequently, this may be used as an explanation for why two brothers sacrifice so much to portray one person, hence there is nothing more valuable for them than the knowledge that they did some magic trick flawlessly. This is important because only they know what they are losing while doing it.

In most of Nolan's films, the main character has suffered from both psychological and physical trauma, hence that character cannot function properly, and everything that happens has a colossal effect on his identity (Tembo 201). Therefore, Christopher Nolan also raises this question of personal identity in *The Prestige*, specifically with Borden's case. It is hard not to connect this issue with the fact that two persons pretended to be Borden (Kania 177). Additionally, Angier's identity also gets tested, maybe not as evidently as with Borden, but this happens many times as the film progresses, but this was already mentioned. Nevertheless, Borden's question of identity is more complex than Angier's because, in this case, two men are sacrificing their lives entirely to fulfil this act of one person. While doing this, they give up on individuality, which is their own choice, so the viewers are the ones who must evaluate how immoral or legitimate that is.

Furthermore, Emma Thomas, Nolan's wife and usually the producer of his films, required him to give more integrity to the female characters of the film. Therefore, there are three main female characters: Julie, Angier's deceased wife, for whose death Borden may be responsible, Sarah, Borden's wife who believed that her husband did not love her every single day, i.e., it is as if she was aware that there were two persons, and finally Olivia, Angier's and Borden's assistant who deceived them both (Nathan 63). Julie, even though she is there only in the beginning, proves to be a crucial character whose death highly influences Angier's behaviour, and consequently determines the tone of the film. Olivia had a relationship with both Borden and Angier, and while Angier used her, one of Borden twins fell in love with her. Nevertheless, she could not cherish that love because she felt bad for Sarah, i.e., she did not know that there are two Bordens. Consequently, Sarah ended up as a victim who was aware that something was happening; she gave clues about the deception that was going on, but she never revealed that truth either to herself or to the audience.

### **4.3. Ambiguous Narrative and Filmmaking**

The death of Angier's wife was a tragic accident, but Angier is keen on finding out what kind of knot Borden fastened around Julie's wrists. In the scene that precedes her death, Borden expresses willingness to tie a Langford Double, a more complex type of knot, but Angier is not



keen on the idea. Later, when Angier and Borden step on the stage to tie Julia up, she and Borden exchange looks, because of which Borden starts tying another type of knot. At this moment, it is unclear whether he started with the normal knot and then switched on to the Langford Double or vice versa. Consequently, Borden, Angier and the audience do not know what transpired here (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 4). Furthermore, this becomes another element of *The Prestige* that cannot be answered because there is no way for the audience to know what knot he tied. They can only make a guess, but that will depend on their understanding of the scene, i.e., various viewers will pay attention to different aspects. While doing this, Nolan once again puts a sense of ambiguity on a scene that is crucial for the plot of the film, just like he did in *Memento* (in both cases, the death of the main character's wife is central to the development of the plot).

The irony is also evident in *The Prestige*; one example of this is Nikola Tesla and Cutter, who help Angier and Borden with their magic tricks; Cutter is an actual *ingénieur*, while Tesla becomes one after he makes Angier the machine for "The Transported Man". Tesla tells Angier a couple of times to give up, not to use the machine, because he knows the consequences of an obsession. Cutter also tells him that certain sacrifices are not worthwhile. Nevertheless, Angier pays Tesla, who then makes the machine, and Cutter constantly emphasises how a magician must get his hands dirty if he wants to achieve something (Decker 85). While doing this, Nolan, in a way, creates a parallel between the world of magic and filmmaking, i.e., just like Tesla and Cutter stand by some principles, directors do as well, but to amaze the audience and create something different, they need to take a risk and go against those said standards. And Christopher Nolan is not new to that.

When the two characters find each other's stolen journals that narrate the story from different points of view, Nolan again manipulates time by changing the film chronology as both Angier and Borden get to tell the story from their point of view. Nolan here becomes an illusionist who intertwines these narratives, and since he prolongs the process of revelation, the audience is again left to comprehend everything on its own (Brislin 11). Usually, diaries are conceived as truthful, one writes them for personal usage, so there should not be lies in there, but this is not the case in *The Prestige*, because here both diaries are used as deceptive devices. Borden's diary deceives Angier that Tesla made him a transportation machine, while Angier's diary leads Borden towards the understanding that he did not kill Angier. Furthermore, this journal is used as a device that keeps the audience in an illusion throughout the film, i.e., the film never addresses the audience directly. Even the shot that shows a person reading a diary is

accomplished through a fictitious diary or another fiction-producing instrument (McGowan 116).

Moreover, Christopher Nolan was already known as a film director who preferred playing with the chronological order of the plot before the release of *The Prestige*, but here he dealt with it differently. As it was already mentioned, he used an instrument, a diary, that the audience did not perceive as something that would deceive them. In a way, it can be said that Nolan used an everyday accessory in a magic trick that is a part of this film. Just like a magician, who can use whatever he likes to incorporate in the trick, Nolan as a director can work with it to create his trickery. And what better way there is than to use it to mislead the viewers that they know when and how something is happening?

Unlike *Memento*, where two linear narratives are distinguished by the distinction between the black and white and colour sequence, *The Prestige* uses voiceover, i.e., the audience must differentiate between Borden's and Angier's voices. Furthermore, there are various scenes in which those narratives are interwoven, e.g., there are situations in which Borden is reading Angier's diary about how Angier read his journal. The viewer hears Borden's perspective filtered via Angier's point of view before returning to Borden once more, which is an impressive and compelling degree of recursion. More than that, it turns out that both narrative levels were created for the advantage of the audiences who read them: Borden's diary was a hoax to lead Angier down dead ends, while Angier's journal was a jab at the imprisoned Borden (Mooney 56-57). After Borden finished reading Angier's diary he was stunned, but so was the audience; how is it possible that Angier knew Borden would be responsible for his death (303)? And even though viewers are surprised by the ending of both diaries, this scene with Angier's diary is more astonishing because, from the first scene in the court, the audience believes that Angier is dead. The revelation at the end of Borden's journal is also unforeseen, but it is easier here for the audience to understand that Borden tricked Angier, unlike the scene with Angier's diary where the viewers cannot immediately decipher what had happened.

The limitations of both Borden's and Angier's positions are made clear throughout the film. As it was previously mentioned, the two twins that portrayed Borden had to sacrifice their whole lives for one simple magic trick; they constantly switch between Fallon and Borden, they are in love with two different women (who suffer for it), and one of them had to cut his fingers off just so they could be identical in every way. Nevertheless, Borden never realized that those losses meant something, and what is more, Nolan contends that making such sacrifices is essential to the creation of art and that this high personal cost is justified (Fhlainn 154). Borden

focuses only on what was lost, he says so himself to Angier in the end: *“You did terrible things... and all of it for nothing.”* But on the other hand, Angier understood this from the very beginning, and especially in the end: *“You never understood why we did this. The audience knows the truth. The world is simple, miserable, and solid all the way through. But if you can fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder.”* Consequently, Christopher Nolan uses the character of Angier as a basis through which he emphasises everything included in the filmmaking process. Not only does he direct films for people to watch, but he also directs them in a way that will involve them, i.e., the viewers will not be just innocent bystanders whose experience of the film will finish the minute credits start rolling (Fhlainn 154). Nolan incorporates the viewers, and for him, this could be what Angier is talking about when he says: *“Then you got to see something very special. You really don’t know. It was the look on their faces.”*

Nevertheless, Angier is also a character that can be criticized. Firstly, for his inability to understand the importance of Borden’s sacrifice, which is highly evident when Angier does not believe that Borden used a double for his trick, just as Cutter told him. Instead of hard work and extraordinary sacrifice, he thinks magic is the outcome of a trick or a secret. In the end, he makes a greater sacrifice than Borden ever did, because it is hard to imagine something more horrific than killing yourself or your clone every time you do a magic trick (McGowan 108). *The Prestige* claims that magic, or film art, is worthwhile while highlighting the terrible sacrifice required to create a work of fiction. The film urges the viewer to engage in this process by making sacrifices, in addition to calling attention to loss as an essential component, as well as loss of the fiction-making process. Examples in this film are various, i.e., they are evident even in the example of a side character like Chung Ling Soo (ibid. 110-111).

Even though Borden’s and Angier’s stance on magic differs (Borden believes that the most important aspect of magic is the illusionist’s dedication while Angier pays more attention to the reaction of the audience), one of them, in a way, does not live according to his beliefs, and that is Angier. In his final monologue, one could conclude that the only reason he does magic, in general, is because of the reaction of people watching it, but his actions throughout the film do not go by that. Just like Borden used his twin brother to execute “The Transported Man” as well as possible, Angier travelled to America, met Tesla, used Olivia, and framed Borden for his murder. Nevertheless, he did not have to do all of this to amaze the audience, and the conclusion from there is obvious: he did it simply to destroy Borden (Tembo 209). Consequently, the audience is again left to suspect what Angier’s actual intentions are, because

the plot leaves it to them to decide what characteristics will prevail. Some may say that everything that transpired had to happen because, otherwise, Angier would not have achieved what he wanted to. It is also evident, in all the scenes in which Angier dreams about the family he wants, that Julie is the basis of everything Angier does. Again, the individual viewer's stance is crucial because of ambiguity.

The trickery of filmmaking is used to tell the film's story about this one specific magic trick. Accordingly, the goal is to lead the viewer towards the deceit and consequently make its output known. Nolan typically does this by cutting away from a scene just as the action is about to end. Because of this, the viewers think that everything that happens after this cut follows normally, but this is deceptive because each time the scene develops, more information comes to light, dramatically altering the scene's meaning. These deceptions appear all the time, e.g., in the scene in which it seems as if Cutter is explaining how magic works to Jess, but he is explaining this to the jury. The second and the biggest trickery happens in the scene when Borden encounters Angier drowning. The first time the audience sees this scene, they do not see Borden trying to save Angier, nor does Angier's double appear, but at the end of *The Prestige*, when the entirety of the scene is shown, deception is unravelled. But these are just a few of them, deceptions appear in numerous scenes in the film (McGowan 117-118).

Furthermore, since the films directed by Christopher Nolan tend to be concerned with the process of filmmaking, it is not a surprise that this is more than obvious in *The Prestige*. Nolan emphasised that as well:

*"The filmmaker is very similar to a magician in the way we release information, what we tell the audience and when and how we draw the audience in through certain points of view. We use our techniques, blind alleys and red herrings, to fool the audience and, hopefully, to create a satisfying payoff. With The Prestige, there was an opportunity to really play with these concepts right before the audience's eyes."* (Mooney 62)

It is well known that Christopher Nolan takes satisfaction in creating puzzles for the viewers, who return to his films because they admire his directing skills, which include an everyday spectator in the film process. *The Prestige* enabled him to use magic, something which draws people because of its mystery. Moreover, magic cannot be explained to everyone in simple terms, i.e., its audience needs to put in some effort to understand how it works, so the same can be said for Christopher Nolan's directing. He, as a director, takes various film techniques and plays with them, using them however he likes, just as a magician who uses

numerous tricks, because of which his act will be unique. Consequently, Nolan is also a magician whose specific way of directing, based on his view on cinema, fools the audience until the point when they may start believing that the film resembles a magic trick.

According to Cutter's voiceover narration explaining the format of a magic trick, *The Prestige* is Nolan's most self-conscious film about performance (magic or cinema), and his final sentence in the film: "*You are not really looking for the secret. You don't want to work it out. You want to be fooled.*", shows the natural relationship between Christopher Nolan's films and his audience, i.e., it is not just that they cannot understand his films, they just as well do not want to comprehend them (Labuza 41). The most famous line of the film "*Are you watching closely?*" can be connected both with the plot of the film but also with how films are made, and even Nolan emphasized that:

*The Prestige is very much about film-making [...] It's also intended to suggest [...] how the film itself is spooling its narrative out to the audience. We want people really to be aware of the effect the film is having on them as it's unfolding before their eyes.*" (Heilmann 22)

Because of this question, the audience is warned from the beginning that they need to be careful and pay close attention (Olson 54). Still, it is questionable whether the audience will realize that they must be careful while watching *The Prestige*. Perhaps those who have watched Nolan's film before will be aware that *The Prestige* must be more complex because of their previous experience. Regardless, those who did not see his films, but also those who did, may easily ignore this warning from the beginning of the film. Moreover, one can never know in what direction Nolan will go with his directing, i.e., his puzzling techniques change from film to film, so it may be complicated to discern which method he is using now.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Nolan is completely misleading the audience, i.e., he places the film's secrets in front of everyone's eyes the entire time, but due to his deft deception tricks, time changes, and genre-related distractions, the viewers never notice anything (Nathan 67). And this is what Nolan expected:

*"A film doesn't make sense until you get to the end,"* said Nolan. *Only when you think back over it in the light of revelation do you realize what it is you have seen? Your emotional response changes. The dénouement should make what you've seen into a better film. With the end of The Prestige, the two tricks will be explained and we realize the truth had been right before our eyes.*" (Nathan 70)

Even though the audience was entirely unaware that Borden had a twin, some clues hinted towards this. The biggest hint for this is Borden's journal, in which he wrote: "*We were two young men at the start of a great career, two young men devoted to an illusion, two young men who never intended to hurt anyone.*" In this moment of the film, the viewers will believe that Borden is talking about Angier and himself, but he is actually thinking about his brother, and what is more, a few times in the diary, while he was referring to himself, he wrote "we" (Mooney 53). Furthermore, a subtle example of Nolan's non-linear storytelling is found in *The Prestige*. And this is because of the way it is arranged, all its riddles are resolved before the audience even becomes aware that there should be a puzzle (ibid. 55). Consequently, *The Prestige* is tricking the audience, but it is also revealing all its secrets to them, but how it is disclosing it is not evident to them. Moreover, this can be used as another illustration that goes along the thesis that Nolan provides hints to the viewers. But how he gives them, plus the fact that the audience is not looking in the right direction, leads towards the puzzle that *The Prestige*, its plot, and its characters are.

Additionally, Nolan's stance on how open the films should be, i.e., will the audience be able to decipher everything that is happening, is apparent in the scene when Borden tells a boy watching his magic trick: "*They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up, you'll be nothing to them. You understand? Nothing. The secret impresses no-one, the trick you use it for is everything.*" (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 4). Various plot creation strategies are used to change the method in which the tale is presented. The script switches up the order of the events, toys with the audience's level of understanding, reruns some scenes, cuts off others, and withholds the results of some. Nevertheless, all those techniques do not confuse the basic plot, they rather arouse the audience's curiosity and anticipation (Bordwell 300).

Finally, it is also possible that *The Prestige* reflects Nolan's long-standing ambivalence toward technological advancement in the film business. So, Borden's transported man, even though it is straightforward, is appreciated by Angier, for whom this is the best trick he has ever seen. On the other hand, Angier's version, the one including Tesla's device, is depicted as horrifying and eerie (Mooney 64). It can be concluded that while doing this, Nolan uses *The Prestige* to display his view on the ever-growing popularity of modern technology in cinema. In this aspect, he is subjective because Borden's "The Transported Man" functions without flaw and he is simply using a double, i.e., his twin. On the other hand, Angier's trick with the machine is portrayed as bizarre, i.e., Nolan achieves this when he explains that at the end of his trick,

one Angier dies. Consequently, the portrayal of both magic tricks is impeccable, but Nolan subjectively places more negative characteristics on Angier's "Real Transported Man".

## **5. *Inception* (2010)**

*Inception* (2010) is a science fiction film that follows Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), a masterful dream robber who enters people's minds to extract their plans and secrets while they sleep. Cobb was hired by a Japanese entrepreneur Saito (Ken Watanabe), who is planning on putting the idea in the head of his business rival Robert Fisher (Cillian Murphy). If Cobb manages to do so, Saito will help him return to his family, whom Cobb did not see for an extended period since he is a fugitive from the law, as authorities believe that Cobb killed his wife Mal (Marion Cotillard). To achieve this, Cobb gathers a team of dream thieves that consists of Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), Eames (Tom Hardy), Ariadne (Elliot Page), and Yusuf (Dileep Rao).

Since its release, and because of the various elements of the film, *Inception* has received positive critical recognition. The reason for this is the stellar cast, quick story, and spectacular action scenes, as well as Nolan's trademark filmmaking techniques: ambiguous meaning (both structurally and thematically), the idea of the divided ego, non-sequential storytelling and a character that has been driven by an obsessive ambition and mission. What is more, here Nolan used different psychological problems, such as deception, doubling, concealment and symbolic demonstrations, all of which can be found in his earlier work (Goh 76-77).

### **5.1. Dreams and Reality**

One of the inspirations for *Inception* Nolan found in his experience during college when he would wake up at 9 AM, go to breakfast and then return to bed and sleep until 1 or 2 PM. During this second stretch of sleep, he would be half awake and in a state of lucid dreaming where he would know that he was asleep. While doing this, he realized how distorted time was, i.e., it seemed to last much longer than it did, so Nolan's dreaming affected his filmography in the later years:

*"Film has a relationship to our dreams that's difficult to articulate, but there's an extrapolation of your experience working things out through your dreams. You're hoping to make connections and find things that are hidden from you while you're living your life or being in the world. I think that's what films do for us. They're very dreamlike experiences."* (Shone 203)

Regarding this, one of the challenges for him while making *Inception* was how to make the audience care as much about the dream world as they do about the real one, so much so that in the end, they will not say that everything was just a dream. Nolan said:

*“That was the overwhelming difficulty. How do you address the idea of dreamlife, and raise those stakes, without invalidating the experience of the audience watching the film?... That was the challenge: How do you do this? How do you get to a point where you can say that what you consider reality or the stuff in the world around you may be no more or less valid than the next layer of a dream?”* (Shone 204)

Nolan wanted to achieve this by including the viewers in the deceit so that there is a sense of suspense, and he did this by developing a heist film with a gang, because of which the actual theft will depart from the plan. Therefore, they will build a suspension with their improvisational skills (Shone 204). To achieve this, to make people pay attention to the dream world, Nolan made that part of the scenery highly realistic and connected to the actual world. By doing this, the audience would often forget that the characters were in the dream world and realize that everything that happens in the dream state is also full of secrets, just as in the real world, especially from Cobb’s perspective. Furthermore, while mixing the real and dream world, Nolan made it impossible for the audience to decipher what happened where and when, so they had to consider both possibilities. The biggest thing that Nolan did to emphasise the dream world, was the final scene, in which the audience cannot say if Cobb met his children in the dream or the real world. Since this was the greatest question of the film, whether Cobb is going to return to James and Phillipa or not, by forcing the audience to make their own decision about this, Nolan gave the dreams a higher role than the audience would have.

The film’s use of the dream-within-dream cliché and the multiple interpretations that this trope provides have sparked one of the primary critical disputes. Therefore, there are four main possibilities to explain this: the “most realistic” interpretation holds that Cobb is indeed reconciled with his children at the end and that most of the film takes place in reality (apart from the moments when it is made clear the characters are entering a dream world), the second “mostly real” one where Saito and Cobb stay in limbo, and Cobb is not reunited with his children, the third one or the “mostly dream” interpretation states that everything is a dream after Cobb falls asleep in Yusuf’s basement, and there is the fourth one, or the “full dream” scenario, in which Cobb awakens from the limbo he experienced with Mal, and enters this dream, i.e., the entire film’s action occurs in a dream. This dilemma leaves viewers with two different problems: how to connect with a character and how to comprehend what is real and



what is a dream. And even though the film's structure makes it impossible to say with certainty whether actions occur in "real" time or in a dream, this ambiguity does not preclude the spectator from making his conclusion about characters and what they did. If a spectator decides to go with the "most real" interpretation, this leads him to believe that everything a person does in a dream will affect the real world. On the other hand, if one believes that the whole film is a dream, i.e., the "full dream" scenario, then the dreams must be meaningful because they are the only thing that the audience can interpret (Goh 78-79).

Which interpretation they will follow depends on the viewer, i.e., not every person will start questioning what is real and what is a dream after the same scene. Some may wonder about this after the scene in Yusuf's basement, but others may question it only after the final scene. Others may seek an answer even after the scene in limbo between Cobb and Saito, but the most questionable moment is at the end with Cobb and the children. At this moment, the audience will probably believe that Cobb finally reunited with them, but this question may arise when the film ends, and the wheel does not stop spinning. Now audience starts questioning the whole film and everything they have seen, all the way from the beginning. At that point, it is hard to say at which scene will the viewer return and start thinking that at this moment, the dream world began and never ended. Nevertheless, there could still be those who will say that Cobb is in the real world because the wheel started wobbling, even though they have not seen it fall. Although that may be the case, one question remains unanswered, and that is why James and Phillipa still look the same, i.e., why they are not older, but the plot of the film does not explain that.

Consequently, by constructing many phases of dreams inside dream situations, *Inception* attempts to put the viewers in a position in which they are not able to tell the difference between dreams and reality. The majority of written analyses of the film focus on epistemological issues, like whether it is one continuous dream from start to finish or if there are brief moments of what may be endless reality interwoven with shared or collective dreaming (Sinha 90-91). What is more, the dreams that they enter during the inception are not Fischer's dreams (the first dream is Yusuf's, the second one is Arthur's and the third one is Eames'). Also, the architect of all those dreams is Ariadne, even though every dreamer believes that he is the creator until they hear the "kick" from outside, again from someone else, to wake up (ibid. 97). To sum this up, it can be said that Nolan wants to leave the audience in a confused state, i.e., his main goal is not to create a film in which everything will be explained from the beginning to the end. The question he has regarding the structure of the dream, Nolan wants to transfer to the screen and leave the audience with the same mystery. By doing this, Nolan goes against the

notion that dreams and reality are opposites that do not correlate and that people can distinguish between them.

One of the main ideas Christopher Nolan seems to have had in mind while creating *Inception* is the notion of leaving a scene open to interpretation. As the protagonists move between many planes of on-screen reality, the audience is left to debate the concepts of reality and truth. And even though the viewers will think that everything shown on the screen is realistic, Cobb does not share that belief. He battles with the notion that his world is not real throughout the film, so Nolan introduces the totem, which will help him decide what is a dream and what is not. Cobb's totem is a spinning wheel, and as Cobb himself explained it: If the wheel stops spinning, then he is in reality, but if it does not stop turning, then he is still in someone else's dream (Nathan 94). The usage of a totem may help to clarify the boundaries between the internal dreamscape and the external world, it is an object that, as Arthur had said serves its purpose: "*So when you examine your totem... You know, beyond a doubt, that you're not in someone else's dream.*" What Ariadne gets from this is that the totem can help someone understand if he is in a dream or reality, but since Arthur says "someone else's dream", the audience can conclude that the person cannot know if they are in their dream. As a result, this makes it more difficult to tell whether the characters are in their dream, or the real world (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5).

Furthermore, the idea of the totem, which intends to serve as a unique object that will notify its owner whether they are awake or dreaming, is the concept that causes the biggest confusion among the audience. Cobb's totem is Mal's spinning wheel, which adds to the ambiguity of the final scene when Cobb returns to his children and spins the wheel, but because the film ends before it can be seen if the wheel stopped spinning or not, the audience is left with a question if this is now reality or still a part of the dream (Goh 85). Cobb struggles between the actual world where James and Phillipa are and his dream reality with Mal. One of his nightmares shows the viewers a memory he constantly revisits. Cobb sees his kids playing outside as he prepares to leave the country to avoid legal issues resulting from his alleged role in Mal's murder. He wants to call out their names so that they turn towards him, but he does not do this. Cobb wants to see them only when he returns home, so he even rejects to see them in Limbo when Mal calls them, maybe because seeing James and Phillipa's faces would mean that he is in reality. In a way, it can be said that his children are his totem, i.e., if he sees them, he will be in the real world (Lindenmuth 156-157).

When it comes to the totem, there is also the notion that no one else can touch someone else's totem, and there is still a question of why Nolan includes it in the first place: Is he doing it so that the audience knows when the characters are dreaming, or so that characters know? The final scene makes it seem as if the totem cannot help anyone because Cobb started spinning it, but he did not stay to see what would happen to it. So, what is the use of a totem to him if Cobb will not even look at it, as he abandons it completely to reunite with his children? Cobb has used the totem before, so why is he not doing it now, has something changed that the audience does not know? Cobb accomplished his goal and came back to James and Phillipa, so maybe now he is not interested in the outcome, or he firmly believes that he is finally in reality. On the other hand, the totem could be there to help the viewers, so that they know where the character is, but Nolan does not allow them to do so since he finishes the film before showing if the wheel has stopped spinning.

Nolan explained how he taught a lot about the final scene: when to cut it, and therefore end the film, so he justified it by saying:

*"I remember reading online some physicists were trying to track the movement and all this, but it actually cuts at the moment of recovery of the wobble. It's just spinning, spinning, and then it starts to destabilize, but the thing about spinning tops is that they do destabilize and then restabilize. We had a longer cut of that shot, which was on a later wobble. And maybe the reason why all my films end this way is that you try not to weigh heavy as a presence on your film, but there's a moment when you have to go, 'We're done.'" (Shone 234)*

Therefore, the final scene in which Cobb's wheel does not stop spinning can mean that he is not in someone else's dream but actually in his own. But can the totem that previously belonged to Mal now be used by Cobb? Arthur has advised Ariadne that she should not let anyone else touch the totem, so why is it normal that Cobb uses Mal's totem? Can it even help Cobb to discern between reality and the dream world? In a way, viewers could conclude that for Cobb, the wheel is not working, and because of that, it is not important what happens in the last scene. If the totem does not function for Cobb, then it will not tell him where he is, so there is no problem when he abandons it in the final scene. If viewers accept that explanation, then there is no question at the end where Cobb is. This audience made its interpretation that can also be accepted because none of the characters questioned if Mal's totem works for Cobb, i.e., there is no scene in the film during which characters debate about this problem.

Following this, Cobb's need to continuously reflect on his part in Mal's death within the dream prompts a more in-depth analysis of the basic connection between dreams and films. The

screen serves as a canvas for the individual to display their most traumatized imaginations and unconscious desires, and this is how dreams work. In the film, Cobb relives his narrative, so the same can be done by the audience, who gets invited to express their deepest wishes without apparent judgment. According to Ian Alan Paul, just as Cobb's dream worlds are influenced by his subjectivity, the theatre space is also the domain of viewers' desires and subjectivities. What is more, the final scene can be ascribed to "fetishistic disavowal", which stands for the notion that a person is aware that what they think to be true is a lie, but regardless of this, they decide to hold onto it. This can relate to the final scene because when Cobb leaves the wheel on the table, he is willing to accept the possibility that this is a dream as he is finally mending things with his family (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5).

The scene in Mombasa, in Yusuf's basement, is just one example of the many implications made throughout the film that the distinction between the real world and a dream is blurry, and maybe it does not even matter, as long as one gets what he desires. In this scene, Cobb and his team encounter a group of people who every day go to Yusuf to be put down together in the same dream (Lindenmuth 154). When Eames asks if they have come there just to sleep, one of the men who works for Yusuf says: "*No. They come here to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, sir?*" In this scene, Nolan once more deals with the distinction between reality and dreams. As it was mentioned before, in this film, Nolan wanted to blur the line between these two concepts and go against the accepted belief that people know the difference. The people in this scene do not agree with that, for them the dream world is the reality, and they are willing to do anything to go there, even be put to sleep with the help of dream thieves. Similarly, to the audience, Eames and his team believe they know the distinctness, but this is questionable. If the audience at the end of the film is not sure what is a dream and what is the real world, how can the film's character be any more knowledgeable in that field? To know where they are, they need the totem, but as it was said before, it is doubtful if they function, so the audience can conclude that the characters in this film do not have the right to question why someone wants to join the dream world.

## **5.2. Realistic and Dreamlike Characters**

While looking at the character of Cobb, it is clear that he is heartless since he attacks people in their sleep when they are most vulnerable and is willing to do anything to achieve his goal, i.e., reunite with his children. It can also be said that all of Cobb's victims exist only in his dreams and that his motivations – reuniting with James and Phillipa and stopping Fischer's conglomerate from developing, justify everything he does. Nevertheless, it cannot be

disregarded that Cobb is still deceitful and violent. What is more, since most of the characters in *Inception* appear as figures in dreams that they experience with Cobb, it might be claimed that all of them reflect or mimic his unconscious features. Mal, Cobb's dead wife, is most likely the best representation of Cobb's inner state. Perhaps she does not have an independent personality like the other main characters because Cobb's recollections and projections of her depend on Mal's real-life demise (Goh 80).

The character of Mal serves as a traumatic occurrence that prevents the individual, in this sense Cobb, from trying to maintain a steady sense of reality, so because of this, she goes everywhere with him, even into Fischer's subconsciousness. The audience gets acquainted with Mal not only in these flashbacks in different dream levels, but they also get to relieve her suicide together with Cobb. The film's underlying aim to depict its framework of a traumatic event may be found in Cobb's devotion to Mal, as shown by the discoveries surrounding her death. Since Mal appears only as Cobb's projection, the audience gets to know Mal who occupies Cobb, which contradicts what Arthur said when Ariadne asked him what she was like: "*She was lovely.*" And since Cobb's projection of Mal is only the result of his subjectivity and is consequently an extension of his ego, continuous attempts to distract Cobb from reality serve as an expression of his own subconscious and ultimate narcissistic need to preserve the memory of her, or at least his interpretation of her (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5). Mal, who the audience meets, is not as delightful as Arthur says she is, and this is because the viewers see her as a part of Cobb's subconsciousness that is riddled with guilt. Therefore, the audience characterizes Mal as an antagonist without knowing the genuine Mal. On the other hand, the viewers can presume that Mal, before she died, was nothing like her now, so they can understand why Cobb feels guilty, both for the way she died, as well as what happened with her knowledge of what is real and what is a dream. There is also the fact that Mal pushes Cobb to stay in this dream world with her and their children, and the answer Cobb gives most likely corresponds to the audience's opinion; he will not stay there, i.e., Cobb will return to James and Phillipa in the real world. But after the final scene, the viewers could change their opinion on this topic because now they are no longer sure what is real and what is part of a dream.

Cobb is full of guilt, he says so himself in the final scene with Mal: "*I feel guilt, Mal, and no matter what I do, no matter how hopeless I am, no matter how confused, that guilt is always there.*" He feels like this because of two things: he left his children after their mother died, and he feels responsible for Mal's suicide because he convinced her that her world was not real. If Cobb succeeds and does as Saito wants him to, he will return to his children, but the

guilt connected with Mal will remain there (McGowan 159). Furthermore, Cobb is highly complicated, his mental state and the feeling of responsibility affect all his decisions, and because of this, he is also mysterious, i.e., the audience does not learn anything about his past until Ariadne shows up. Therefore, it can be said that Ariadne represents the viewers because she sets her mind on finding out what happened to Cobb and his wife. Just like the viewers, Ariadne is thrown into this world without having any preconceived beliefs about anything connected to what Cobb and his team are doing. She, while investigating what happened with Mal, helps the audience to understand, i.e., she is the guide into Cobb's past, subconsciousness, and belief system. What is more, the audience can measure Cobb's actions differently, because some viewers may only pay attention to the notion that his goal is to return to his children. Consequently, the audience can express sympathy for Cobb and the fact that he is simply a father who got separated from his children because of something that he did not do.

While looking at the character of Cobb, it is important to remember that he is a thief, because, at the beginning of the film he has been employed by Cobol Engineering to plunder information from Saito's mind, i.e., he gets paid for this. On the other hand, the reward for Saito's job is a return to his children; a chance for salvation, and that is ethically satisfactory. But the question remains: Is this job acceptable? In the final scene in limbo, it can be said that Cobb acts as a real friend when he decides to go there to save Saito. But he needs Saito alive because if Saito dies, everything will be in vain, and he will not be able to come back to his children. What is more, when it comes to Saito's reason for inception, according to him, the objective is to keep Fischer's firm from becoming a "new superpower", but the film offers no proof of this (Goh 94-95). Even though Cobb mostly feels guilty throughout the whole film, especially when it comes to Mal, Cobb's bitterness, and rage over Mal's decision to commit suicide taint his recollections of her. What is more, this Mal, the one that is part of his unconsciousness, is not the same Mal he married: *"You are just a shade of my real wife. You're the best I can do, but I'm sorry, you are just not good enough."* In a way, all of Cobb's encounters with Mal throughout the film can be seen as a psychoanalytical session where Cobb, as a patient, goes through different feelings and unsolved issues to experience the catharsis he needs when he lets go of the memory of Mal (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5).

Additionally, Cobb is obsessed with Mal, and he cannot escape from her as she has overtaken every aspect of his life, and she has been doing so since the moment she jumped from the building. Everything that happened with Mal has affected Cobb and his actions following her death, she is the reason why he feels responsible for everything that transpired. As a result,

*Inception* can be seen as a film during which Cobb overcomes this feeling and finally finds a way to let go of Mal and her memory. He eventually finds a way to accept what happened to Mal and what was his share in it. In a way, he understood that he had to do this from the beginning, but only in the end was he able to find a solution that would get him rescued from the grip Mal had on him. At this moment, Cobb leaves his wife behind and focuses solely on his children because they have been his objective this whole time, and Mal has been the one staying in the way.

Through the series of flashbacks, the audience finds out what happened to Mal. Cobb's wife began to think that limbo was the real truth after both of them spent a lot of time in their dream where they built this new universe. So, when Cobb realized that Mal had buried her knowledge of reality, he planted into her mind the idea that she had been dreaming by doing inception. But, when she woke up, she still believed that their reality was a dream since this belief had been ingrained so firmly in her unconscious mind. And to wake up, Mal kills herself by following the rule that when you get killed in a dream, you will wake up in your real life. And even though Mal's passing takes place in an incident that happens before the beginning of the plot, throughout the film, Cobb's projection of her may be seen several times as the tangible representation of his memories, indicating that the only way to deal with and move away from the past is by first facing it head-on (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5). Nevertheless, the audience can still wonder why Mal committed suicide. Did she do it because she realized the deception of the dream and decided to end it once and for all, or because she wholeheartedly believed that there was no reality or truth outside the dream? Still, she continues to live in Cobb's subconsciousness with their children as a memory, but he does not want to join them there, Cobb wants to come back to reality, to the real James and Phillipa (Sinha 100).

Besides the relationship between Cobb and his wife, *Inception* showcases the relationship between Cobb and his father-in-law Miles (Michael Caine). Miles is the rational character of this film because he advises his son-in-law to return to his children and reality. So, when Cobb comes and asks him for a new architect who would be good enough for this mission, Miles sends him Ariadne, not because he is interested in the outcome of this job, but because he believes that Ariadne can help him return to the reality and his children. Additionally, Ariadne is not in any way romantically connected to Cobb, so she is only a threat to Mal because she wants to take away Cobb from this dream world that is occupied by Mal (McGowan 157). Though Miles does not appear in various scenes, his influence is evident in the character of Ariadne. His only wish is that the father of his grandchildren returns to them, so this idea is

represented in Ariadne, who throughout the film becomes aware of Cobb's past, and consequently accompanies him in his quest to return to James and Phillipa. And even though the audience may not see this connection, it can be said that Miles had his part in this because if he wanted to influence Cobb to give up on this job, why would he help him in the first place? He had to have a goal which he achieved with the help of Ariadne, who did what Miles wanted her to do.

What is also important for the character of Miles, is the fact that Nolan did an enormous cut to that scene, leaving out half of the original shot. While doing this, he once more left the viewers on their own:

*"The original scene clarified every point of everything that anyone could ever ask about the logic or the history of the story, and we cut the scene in half. We went out to lunch and we talked about it, and I said, 'What if we don't worry about explaining? What if you allow people to misunderstand certain things?' A lot of people see the film and they think Professor Miles is his father, not his father-in-law. We just said, 'You know what? Just let that happen.'" (Shone 231)*

### **5.3. Influence of Dreams and Limbo on the Characters**

In *Inception*, Nolan offers an insight into the relationship between films and dreams by implying that people prefer the inherent discrepancies between what they see and what they think they see. What is more, how this film is structured leaves the audience thinking that they are drawn into the production of the story. The viewer's mind is always trying to fill in the blanks due to the use of cuts in editing and space and temporal compressions. The spectator's mind learns new information as they progress through the many locations and events of the story to form a coherent whole. In this way, as Ian Alan Paul states, the audience is doing what the characters in the film mention several times; they are taking a leap of faith (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5). Additionally, by moving the action from one dream level to another, *Inception's* integrated narrative structure shatters the impression of a cohesive world of action, obscuring its actuality and significance. Because of this, the film is full of scenarios that must be explained by the characters because they do not work in the expected way. At the beginning of the film, Cobb kills Arthur to wake him up, but later, when Eames wants to kill Saito to do the same thing, Yusuf stops him because they are too sedated to wake up. In the final parts of the film, when Saito and Cobb return from limbo, it is believed that they achieved that by killing themselves, and if that is true, then Yusuf has had to be wrong (Goh 84-85).



Sinha also explains that *Inception* deals with another notion of how society influences people's minds with untrue thoughts. This idea is supported by what Cobb says to Saito at the beginning of the film: "*An idea. Resilient, highly contagious. Once an idea's taken hold in the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate. A person can cover it up, ignore it – but it stays there.*" This goes to show how moments of awareness that people take for granted, such as dreams, are external insertions that shape people without using force by making them think they are the creations of their deepest selves (91-92). Since ideology's main task is to persuade individuals that their perception of reality is distorted and that a better, larger reality exists outside of this one, it can be concluded that the plot of *Inception* is based on an ideological foundation. Just as politicians need a team to spread their ideological views, Cobb needs his team of dream robbers who have to work together to do an inception. Every team member has a task that leaves Fischer in his most vulnerable state; therefore, they can implant the idea into his mind (97).

This assumption can be transferred to everyday situations in which people get engulfed with information that affects their view of various topics. People cannot escape from this news, so as a result, they must develop their opinion which depends on what they encounter, i.e., which information will prevail. The same happens in *Inception*. Fisher until this point does not plan to give up on his father's company, but when Cobb and his team start playing with his subconsciousness, Fisher starts changing his mind on this topic, so he makes a decision he believes is his own. While doing this, Nolan displays the idea that things that happen in dreams can influence one's beliefs and views. People may think that dreams are just a part of their psyche and that they cannot in any way influence their decision-making, but Nolan contradicts this completely, especially in the final part of the film, in which it becomes clear that the inception worked on Fisher.

To plant the idea into Fischer's mind, Cobb explains that the concept must elicit positive feelings from Fischer because then it will be more effective. Therefore, the objective is to convince Fischer that dissolving the business and becoming successful on his own accord matches his father's intentions. Since Fischer and his father have a tense relationship, Cobb says: "*We all yearn for reconciliation, for catharsis.*" These remarks also shed light on Cobb's personality since they reveal that he too longs for a reunion with his late wife Mal, something he is unable to have (Lindenmuth 155). While trying to plant the idea in Fischer's mind, Cobb and his team are playing with his individuality, they are "attacking" his subconscious, putting an idea there, and making him believe that he came up with that thought (Sinha 106).

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, *Inception* provides a self-reflexive commentary on the interaction between fiction, such as films or dreams and reality. Mal wrote a letter to the lawyer expressing concern for her safety and making up allegations that Cobb had threatened her life. Thus, in *Inception*, where Cobb serves as the viewer's primary point of identification, his choice to give up the unconscious projection of Mal in favour of returning to reality not only enables him to regain his parental identity, but also momentarily satisfies the viewer's need for wholeness and their search for a meaningful life (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 5). Truth hides in *Inception*, but not in the real world, as one might expect, but in the dream world. This film shows how fiction, or in this case, the dream, is not an obstacle to this reality but rather the way to it. The film's main misconception is its insistence that the actual world is distinct from the dream world, and one must get over this misconception to understand how priority is given to the dream. The real escape in this film is not Mal's escape into the dream world, which Cobb wants to protect her from, but Cobb's attempt to flee the terror he encounters in the dream world by returning to reality. Nolan argues that awakening is a means of evading the truth rather than discovering it (McGowan 150).

Because Cobb needs dreams and everything that happens there, i.e., he must get rid of Mal in this world, dreams serve as a method to acquire what he wants in the future, and that is James and Phillipa. Therefore, dreams play a more crucial role in reality than one might think because everything that led to Cobb returning to his children has happened in the dream world. What is more, one fundamental occurrence, Cobb giving up on Mal, happened in limbo, from which Cobb wanted to run away with Mal immediately in the beginning. Everything that the audience wanted to see, the resolution of the plot, all the barriers that Cobb had to overcome, everything took place in a dream world, a place where one normally would not expect that to happen.

One of the most difficult aspects of the film that Nolan had to create was limbo, the fantasy city Cobb and his wife constructed, which dates back indefinitely with the structures becoming larger and older, and it also serves as a perfect metaphor for the film's development through time. The structures, which were previously stunning and immaculate, at the end of the film were falling back into the sea like enormous architectural icebergs breaking off and floating away in the ocean, as Nolan intended it to depict the deteriorating state of Cobb's psyche (Shone 210). The two of them have spent so much time entering and exiting dreams that they had to make special items (totems) to assist them in figuring out if they were indeed dreaming. Every totem has a distinctive quality that only the bearer understands. In this world, they have spent

around fifty years (time passes more slowly in dreams), so Cobb, as time went on, felt restless and yearned to go back to reality, while Mal wanted to stay. To change her opinion, Cobb found her spinning wheel in a safe, because she hit it there, like a big secret, and left it spinning to remind her that this is a dream world. However, this move had the unforeseen effect of making Mal feel that she still was in a dream long after they awoke. They killed themselves in the dream world by laying on the rails, but when they woke up, the idea that Cobb had planted in Mal's mind came back with her. She latched on to the notion that Cobb had instilled in her – that her reality was not legitimate, and that suicide was the only way out – and it became an obsession. As a result, this became the first and biggest inception of the film (Lindenmuth 155-156). Therefore, this parallel between dreams and reality is best shown here in the example of limbo, where these two worlds are interwoven, and both the audience and the characters are not able to tell them apart.

Finally, limbo is the best representation of the dream world, it is the place where only dreams matter, and the real world is far away from this place. While creating it, Mal and Cobb built the reality that they wanted to have in the first place. Therefore, limbo became more than just a place full of dreams for Mal, it became the spot where she had wanted to spend the rest of her life. So, while creating limbo, Nolan once again emphasised the connection between two worlds that should never be associated with one another. He put even more emphasis on this when he decided to play out one of the most decisive scenes in that limbo, i.e., it was evident that Cobb had to confront Mal to return to his children, so when this happened in limbo, that dream world can no longer be just a simple part of someone's subconsciousness. What is more, the complexity of the whole limbo reflects the intricacy of the dream world that the people from reality cannot comprehend. Therefore, it can be concluded that Nolan did this with the idea in mind to stir people away from the belief that the dream world is something one is not aware of and that it cannot, in any way, affect the real world and the decisions that people make.

## **6. Parallels between *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010)**

Christopher Nolan, in most of his films, just like in *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception*, includes the audience in the complete cinematic experience, and he achieves this by involving the viewers in the story and simultaneously challenging their role as spectators. In these films, this is evident in the way in which Nolan plays with space and time. So, these non-linear scene arrangements reveal the production processes and highlight the influence of the film discussion over the narrative while simultaneously demonstrating the viewer's emotional connection to the events as they play out (Joy, *The Traumatic Screen* ch. 8). Because of this,

Nolan creates a discussion between viewers who do have an identical opinion on various topics. Additionally, no one can say that someone's opinion is not valid because Nolan, as a director, does not share his views on certain endings, i.e., even though he has them, he does not regard them as the only rightful judgment.

One basic element of Christopher Nolan's films is the fact that he creates protagonists who, at first glance, arouse sympathy from the viewers, but as the film progresses, this compassion disappears (Diehl 25). And this is evident in *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception*. In *Memento*, while playing the film backwards, the audience is, in a way, forced to show sympathy toward Leonard Shelby, who is portrayed as a victim, i.e., his wife was raped and murdered, he was not able to save her, he lost his memory and is now suffering from anterograde amnesia. The audience is experiencing all the characters through Leonard's perspective, so the initial opinion of Natalie and Teddy contrasts to the one the viewers will have at the end of the film, i.e., Natalie started as a positive character that turned into a negative one, while the opposite happened to Teddy. Therefore, it can be said that Nolan is playing with the viewers' comprehension by fully tricking them into believing that they understand both the plot and its characters.

A similar thing happens in *The Prestige* with the example of Angier, portrayed as a victim at the beginning of the film. His wife Julie died during the exhibition of one of the magic tricks, and Angier believes his friend Borden is responsible for that. Furthermore, the audience finds out that Borden caused Angier to die from drowning, just like his wife died. Consequently, the viewers stand on Angier's side and consider him as the ultimate victim of Borden's schemes. However, as the story unravels, it becomes obvious that Angier is not as innocent as the plot suggests in the first thirty minutes of the film. Finally, there is an example in *Inception* with Cobb, depicted as an innocent father whose wife and mother of his children died. Moreover, Cobb is falsely accused of her murder, because of which he cannot return to his children. In the first part of the film, Nolan suggests that Cobb is doing this job with inception to be able to return to his children, but as the plot goes forward, it becomes apparent that Cobb is not as blameless as it was previously concluded. Nevertheless, the ending of *Inception* is ambiguous, so the audience cannot know what truly transpired there, but it is clear that Cobb carries with him a certain guilt that cannot be ignored.

*Noir* elements can be found in Nolan's films, as it was previously stated, so the same case is with *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception*. In these three films, the trauma is depicted through the death of the main protagonists' wives, i.e., Leonard Shelby's, Cobb's, Angier's and

even Borden's wife (Pheasant-Kelly 99). These deaths serve as a basis for the revenge, i.e., it is a basic plot of *Memento* and *The Prestige*. Leonard and Angier, at the beginning of the film, start as two men whose lives were destroyed when they lost their wives. Regardless, even though this is driving them forward, it can easily be concluded that their motifs change, i.e., the death of their wives is still there, but it is not as important as the audience, and themselves have believed from the start. The situation with Cobb in *Inception* is a little bit different because there is no revenge plot, but it cannot be denied that her death and Cobb's acceptance of it are crucial for the development of any kind of understanding of what is happening there, even though it needs to be mentioned that this realization varies from viewer to viewer.

Furthermore, the complexity of the story, over the years, became an essential part of Nolan's writing style, as is evident in his films, so *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception* are no exception (Molloy 43). Consequently, all three films were constructed with the idea to include their viewers in the cinematic experience. The scenes are not linear, they jump from one perspective to another, characters go from one dream to another one, or back to reality, etc. Moreover, there is a sense of ambiguity because it may seem to the viewers that these films did not have a proper ending. The audience is used to films in which the plot is straightforward and linear, there are no puzzles that need to be solved, and it is expected that viewers will just watch and enjoy, without too much thinking. That is not something that Christopher Nolan does in his films, i.e., he goes in the opposite direction; he expects his audience to be as involved as possible, and that is exactly what he is doing in *Memento*, *The Prestige* and *Inception*.

Furthermore, in Nolan's films, multiple characters frequently deal with issues of self-knowledge and self-definition, and the main protagonists are no exception (Fosl 167). In *Memento*, Leonard Shelby believes he knows who he is, but he is living in the past, and the identity he relies on is in a clash with his life now. Therefore, he is in the unknown like the audience, so both need to find the explanation and how the viewers will do that depends on their understanding of the narrative. In *The Prestige*, the examples of Borden and Angier are connected to duplicity; their true identities are hidden from other characters and the viewers. Borden is not just one person, i.e., those are two twin brothers whose lives and identities have been affected by the fact that none of them had an opportunity to live a full life; they are sacrificing their identity and love (the twin that survived loves Sarah, and not Olivia, so he does not have a chance to live an adequate life now when he does not have to share it with his brother). On the other hand, Angier has changed his name and is living the life of a magician with more money than others in that same field. He hides it from everyone and uses it only

when he needs it for some reason, like in the end when he stages his death. Consequently, it can be said that Angier is partly a magician whose ambitions and wishes change from time to time, and partly Lord Caldlow, a personality he mixes with Angier. Finally, there is Cobb in *Inception*, who, because of his wife's death and departure from America, was left questioning his role in her death, as well as how to return to life that he has lost. In addition, Cobb is hiding the things that occurred in the past from other characters and the viewers, so everyone has to suspect why Cobb acts the way he does and how he found himself in that position. To achieve his goal and return to his children, he must accept the basic fact with which he has to live, and that is Mal's death and his share in that.

And finally, another topic apparent in all three films is morality, i.e., the lack of it among their main characters. In *Memento*, Leonard Shelby's quest for vengeance may be noble, but the question remains: Who gave Leonard the right to punish those who raped and allegedly killed his wife? Morality is questioned once more by Teddy, a policeman who does not have a problem with the fact that he is getting rid of criminals by killing them. Furthermore, in *The Prestige*, morality is debated with Angier and the killing of his clones, as well as with deception with Bordens, the twin brothers. Borden believes that is the only way in which he can survive, while Angier is aware of the sacrifice he makes every time he enters Tesla's machine. Additionally, in *Inception*, the example of Cobb questions morality when Mal and he decide to create a different life in the dream world. And even though that is one colossal question, morality is also tested in connection to the job Cobb's gang performs. Finally, it can be said that these are just some of the questions, there is so much more in the whole span of these three films.

## 7. Conclusion

To summarize, Christopher Nolan is a unique film director who, over the years, developed his reputation as a filmmaker whose primary goal is to involve the viewers in the cinema experience. The audience is invited to pay close attention to various techniques that Nolan uses to confuse and force them into thinking and creating their opinion. Taking into account all the films he directed, it is evident that Nolan is a big fan of non-linear narrative, either by using dreams, going backwards into the past or creating multiple narratives while using different devices, such as diaries and bullets that go backwards. Even though Nolan usually deals with time, trauma, *film noir*, psychology and morality, how he incorporates them into the films varies from genre to genre. *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception*

(2010) are just three examples of a career filled with films that should be similar but are always perceived and understood in distinct ways.

*Memento* follows Leonard Shelby, a man with retrograde amnesia, in a quest to locate and kill his wife's murderer. And even though vengeance is the basis of this film, nothing goes as the audience expects it to go. Consequently, various questions are raised, and none are answered. Leonard turns out to be a more complex character than the audience believed in the first parts of the film, while other characters lose, or gain credibility as the plot progresses. In the end, the viewers feel tricked as they do not know who actually murdered Leonard's wife, and they are no longer confident in the nobility of Leonard's search. Additionally, there are also Natalie and Teddy who are experienced differently in the beginning and the end, i.e., going backwards showcased their real intentions later rather than earlier.

*The Prestige* combines the filmmaking process with magic and emphasises the questions of morality and duplicity. Borden and Angier are two characters who, throughout the film, try to sabotage one another, but they, at the same time, must deal with personal troubles and objectives. There is not just one Borden, i.e., it is a set of twins who have sacrificed their lives, professions and romantic relationships to perform a magic trick that will amaze everyone, even Angier, who, because of this, employs Nikola Tesla. Consequently, Angier's actions, the usage of a machine that creates his clones, as well as the fact that he framed Borden for his murder, bring morality into question. In the end, it is once again left to the viewers to choose whose side they will take in this self-destructing journey of theirs.

And then there is *Inception*, in which the viewers follow Cobb as he tries to come to terms with his fate because that is the only way for him to achieve his biggest goal: to return to James and Phillipa. While using the dream world and reality, Nolan invites the audience into the process of understanding what belongs where, and it also explains how Cobb got where he is now. Additionally, the film ends with a scene that leaves the audience in doubt about what actually transpired in the end, but the real answer cannot be found; it is on them to comprehend it in any way they like. Finally, it can be said that these three films, as well as the rest that Christopher Nolan directed, leave the viewers with more questions than they had in the beginning, but this is the price of his films and a trump card with which he attracts the audience to the cinema and his filmography.

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#### Filmography

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## 9. Christopher Nolan's Postmodernism: *Summary and Key Words*

This master's thesis deals with the filmography of Christopher Nolan and his style, and it analyses in detail three of his films: *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010). The first chapter focuses on Christopher Nolan's film style, i.e., it explains the most common techniques he uses, such as nonlinear narration, playing with reality and dreams and his eagerness to include viewers in the cinematic experience. Furthermore, it explains why Nolan is considered to be a postmodernist film director, as well as why his films are modern *film noirs*. In the next chapter, his first Hollywood film, *Memento*, is interpreted. It deals with the inverted narration of going back in the past and analyses the characters, such as Leonard and Natalie, whose motifs and memories are portrayed. What is more, the connection between classical *film noir* and *Memento* is drawn. The following chapter is concerned with *The Prestige*, a film in which Nolan uses magic to explain the process of filmmaking. In this, as in many of his films, Christopher Nolan uses ambiguity and clues in narration, because of which the audience must conclude whether Angier's and Borden's actions are moral. Additionally, this chapter explains the phenomenon of duplicity, as well as the personality of characters, i.e., what drives them and who they are. Lastly, the final film that is evaluated is *Inception*, a film in which Nolan blurs the lines between dreamworld and reality, he emphasises the importance of dreams on characters whose actions have been influenced by their past, and the film mostly concentrates on the main character Cobb, i.e., on his path as he accepts the death of his wife Mal and returns to his children James and Phillipa. In the last chapter, all three films are compared based on the main topics that can be found in their plots (inverted narration, *film noir* elements, the inclusion of audience, identity, and morality).

Key words: Christopher Nolan, *film noir*, postmodern cinema, *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006), *Inception* (2010).

## 10. Postmodernizam Christophera Nolana: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj diplomski rad bavi se filmografijom Christophera Nolana i njegovim stilom, a detaljno analizira njegova tri filma: *Memento* (2000.), *Prestiž* (2006.) i *Početak* (2010.). Prvo poglavlje fokusira se na filmski stil Christophera Nolana, odnosno objašnjava najčešće tehnike kojima se koristi, poput nelinearne naracije, poigravanja sa stvarnošću i snovima te uključivanje gledatelja u kinematografsko iskustvo. Nadalje, opisano je zašto se Nolana naziva postmodernističkim filmskim redateljem, kao i zašto su njegovi filmovi moderne verzije *film noira*. U sljedećem poglavlju analizira se njegov prvi holivudski film *Memento*. U filmu se ističe obrnuta naracija koja se vraća u prošlost te se analiziraju likovi, poput Leonarda i Natalie, čiji su motivi i sjećanja predmet analize. Štoviše, povlači se veza između klasičnog *film noira* i *Mementa*. Sljedeće poglavlje bavi se filmom *Prestiž*, u kojem je Nolan koristio magiju kako bi objasnio proces snimanja filma. U ovom, kao i u mnogim svojim filmovima, Christopher Nolan koristio je dvosmislenost i prekrivene narativne elemente, zbog kojih je na publici da zaključi jesu li Angierovi i Bordenovi postupci moralni. Dodatno, ovo poglavlje analizira fenomen dvoličnosti i osobnost likova, odnosno što ih pokreće i tko su oni. Te na kraju, posljednji film koji je obrađen je *Početak*, film u kojem Nolan briše granicu između svijeta snova i stvarnosti, naglašava važnost snova kod likova, na čije je postupke utjecala njihova prošlost, a uglavnom se koncentrira na glavnog lika Cobba, to jest na njegov put tijekom kojeg je morao prihvatiti da je njegova žena Mal umrla te da je spreman vratiti se svojoj djeci Jamesu i Philippi. U posljednjem poglavlju uspoređuju se sva tri filma na temelju glavnih tema koje se mogu pronaći u njihovim radnjama (obrnuta naracija, elementi *film noira*, uključivanje publike, identitet i moral).

Ključne riječi: Christopher Nolan, *film noir*, postmoderna kinematografija, *Memento* (2000.), *Prestiž* (2006.), *Početak* (2010.).