The Unreliable Narrator in Christopher Nolan's Movies

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The Unreliable Narrator in Christopher Nolan's Movies

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Student/ica: Mentor/ica:
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Zadar, 2024.

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Zadar, 25. rujna 2024.

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1. Introduction

When talking about Hollywood filmmaking industry nowadays, one of the names that comes to mind is certainly Christoper Nolan's. Considered as a star of the industry and a genius known for his distinctive style and ability to keep the audience engaged by playing tricks on its mind, he has managed to gross billions worldwide. His films are well-liked by many due to his innovative narrative structures, therefore offering a unique cinematographic experience. The influence of postmodern elements on his filmography and an array of philosophical questions which characterize his work have inspired numerous other filmmakers and earned him a reputation of an auteur. This paper will examine one of the aspects of postmodern film, i.e. the unreliable narrator which is crucial to understanding Nolan's filmography. It will provide analysis of the unreliable narrator in three of Nolan's films and those are *Memento* (2000), *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020), however these are not the only films where the director uses the aspect of unreliable narration, *The Prestige* (2006) can be regarded also as a clear example of this notion. Through the lens of postmodernism which impacted both the contemporary cinema and the director's work it will aim to show the main points of Nolan's style. Furthermore, this paper will provide definitions on what unreliable narration actually is and describe some of the characteristics of puzzle-films, also known as mind-game films. Nevertheless, the focus of the majority of this analysis will be in detecting and presenting the unreliable narrator in each of the movies and providing examples to support those claims adequately.

2. Postmodernism

Since the very term postmodernism was created, there has still not been a general agreement on its meaning. Numerous books have been published for the purpose of explaining in more detail the aspects of that term and the philosophies that influenced its creation. It can be said that in a broader sense it is the epoch of the second half of the 20th century, and in a narrower sense that it encompasses the thinking and creativity of that period. However, just as its exact beginning is not strictly defined, because for some it is merely deemed to be a late phase of modernism, the question also arises on whether the age we live in is in fact postmodern or have we already entered a completely new period. It is important to point out that some of its aspects are present even nowadays. This paper's aim is not to describe a detailed review of postmodern social trends and economy, but to explain its significance and influence on Christopher Nolan's filmography by focusing on the unreliable narrator. To succeed in this, it is important to highlight some of the main characteristics of postmodern film.

To begin with, the very term postmodernism suggests something that comes after and is characterized by doubt about everything that came before such as: Enlightenment ideals, metanarratives and social progress. As Jim Powell argues "no longer is there one morality or myth or ritual or dance or dream or philosophy or concept of self or God or culture or style of art that predominates" (4). There are numerous new technological discoveries and cultural deconstructions into numbers of smaller ones, and in this way our view of the world expands and shrinks simultaneously. Postmodern artists aim to present something new, they in a way merge everything attainable, and then create e.g. painting, song, film that "reflects the postmodern condition" (5).

Speaking of postmodern condition, it is valuable for this paper to mention a prominent philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard who introduced the term "postmodernism" and his definition: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). These so-called grand narratives have been undermined by postmodernists who according to Butler see "relativism as our fate" and hold "universal truth impossible". (16)

Matthias Stephan in his book *Defining Literary Postmodernism for the Twenty-First Century* illustrates some key aspects of postmodernism and argues how various literary techniques such as "the use of irony, metaphor, metafiction, intertextuality and pastiche" can be applied to film, as can be seen in the works of Nolan (185). Postmodern cinema is also characterized by the distortion of time, which is the case for all three movies that shall be analysed, hyperreality and mixing of genres by obscuring the lines between them and creating a hybrid. Intertextuality can be explained as the relationship between texts, i.e. when one text is being referenced by another. Nolan uses intertextual allusions in his work, an example of this is the use of film noir elements in *Memento* where Leonard can be seen as a typical noir protagonist and Natalie as a femme fatale, as well as showing flashbacks. Intertextuality is also noticeable in *Inception*, e.g. using an optical illusion of Penrose stairs, among other references. Pastiche is an artistic device characterised as a piece of work which in order to create something new, borrows, imitates or copies the style of other works. For instance, in *Inception* there are many scenes which resemble the James Bond movies. Goh mentions that Christopher Nolan is often distinguished along with other filmmakers who share postmodernist tendencies in their works such as Wes Anderson, the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino, "on the basis of a perceived shared 'emphasis on pastiche'…" (12).

As explained by Stuart Sim, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard sees the postmodern world as a world of simulacra, "where we could no longer differentiate between reality and simulation" and hyperrealism as a postmodernity trait (11). To give some example of this is Mal's character in *Inception* who firmly believes that Limbo is her reality, or the people in Yusuf's basement who opt for sleep in reality and life in dreams.

When speaking of American popular culture, it is relevant to note that American products dominate the postmodern film market with Hollywood film industry and various streaming services at its core. This control impacts the style of American cinema, as well as other film industries that are often overshadowed, overlooked, or excluded. Simultaneously, American films must limit their cultural uniqueness to meet the need for global appeal. Although postmodern cinema shares similarities with modern mass-produced cinema, the demand for globalization amplifies its unique characteristics and encourages embracing diversity (Hill and Every 103). Further analysis on postmodernism and its characteristics such as unreliability and uncertainty which are significant for this paper will be discussed later in the following sections on Nolan's directing style and his movies.

2.1 Christopher Nolan and Puzzle-films

Christopher Nolan is one of the leading filmmakers of the 21st century and a winner of numerous awards including two Academy Awards. Due to his complex storytelling, non-linear narrative and distinctive style, his films are abundant source of analysis, discussions, reviews and books. Some themes that mainly interest him are the malleable nature of memory, personal identity, time epistemology and existentialism. He is perhaps most famous for the ambiguity of his movies which after "numerous repeated viewings often remain as mysterious to audience as the man himself" (Joy 1). Appraised as a director who manages to

transmit his personal vision without succumbing to the pressures and limitations of American cinema, which is often common in Hollywood.

Puzzle-movies are as the name suggests portrayed as intricate puzzles, containing layers within layers, and therefore challenging the viewer's perception of the events shown on the screen. They often have ambiguous endings and require several viewings to fully grasp the meaning behind them, if that can even be achieved. Movies categorized as such are commonly known for their unexpected twist or surprise ending, altering the truth of the story and allowing for multiple interpretations. They can be relatively transparent by providing enough clues but that does not undermine the fact that their number one goal is to trick the audience constantly (Fhlainn 151). Some of the well-known puzzle-movies are Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) and Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010), among others. What these movies have in common is the ambiguous or misleading narration, the unreliable narrator, uncertainty of what is reality and what is fantasy because there is no clear boundary and often there is a mentally unstable protagonist.

Todd McGowan suggests that a filmmaker can demonstrate the importance of falsehood by tricking the audience and then explaining the reasons behind the deception. The movie needs to first build a fundamental trust between the audience and the protagonist, and then reveal how this trust is ultimately unfounded. This can ultimately be perceived from a Hegelian view, where truth is subjective, and it relies on lies to be recognized therefore it is necessary to embrace the untrue to eventually uncover the truth ("Fictional Nolan" 165). What is mainly attractive in these movies is the gained pleasure in figuring out the narration, but they are also as Kiss and Willemsen suggest "providing enigmatic journeys into the impossible" (79). Their emergence and popularity indicate a troubled obsession in modern

western society with issues surrounding memory and its decline. Time can be seen as malleable and subjective.

Nolan loves to experiment with complex narrative structures and themes such as exploration of time and memory. One of his main traits in filmmaking is fascination with depicting trauma. There is even a term "Nolanesque" coined to describe the particular style solely related to his work. And that style is characterized as Fhlainn describes by "acts of misdirection, obfuscated knowledge, or falsified histories and memories of unreliable protagonists" (152). His aim is to lead its audience into error by misleading and showing how it is difficult or almost impossible to separate truth and lie. Fhlainn explains that just like protagonists we, as spectators, "wish to believe the palatable lie over the unbearable truth" (148). This brief analysis of Nolan's style can be summed up by the notion of lie being liberating, which is the focal point in the great variety of his movies (McGowan, "Fictional Nolan" 177).

2.2. The Unreliable Narrator[1]

To start this topic, it is needed to acknowledge Booth's established definition on unreliable narrator "…I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (145). It is worth to elaborate this definition a bit further, i.e. in greater detail. To begin, it can be said, that this kind of narrator's goal is to mislead the audience/readers and in order to do that, they can hide crucial information, intentionally lie and misdirect. Though that is not an accurate description of every such narrator but merely

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[1] This analysis includes parts of the seminar paper *The Unreliable Narrator in Christopher Nolan's Memento*, written as a part of the course "Introduction to American Popular Culture".

some of them. According to Uri Margolin "a narrator is the originator, inner-textual or actual, of the narration at hand… A narrator is considered reliable if he is dependable, if he possesses the cognitive and behavioural properties necessary for the production of reliable claims" (56). As shall be later analysed in some of Nolan's filmography, not every unreliable narrator is as evident as in e.g. Memento.

It is important to note that not every scholar would agree with these statements. In terms of film narrative theory, Volker argues that the concept of unreliability has become a "mixed bag" (133). When the spectator realizes that they are dealing with an unreliable narrator they need to question everything seen before that because of "the hidden or hitherto unknown motives of their character-narrators" (143). She concludes her work by stating that only pseudo-diegetic narrator "can be properly unreliable" (153).

Nolan puts focus on "the falsity of the hero" in several of his works. This falsity he constructs proves to be more entertaining rather than the entire truth – which has a tendency to end up being disappointing (McGowan, "Fictional Nolan" 171). The following section of this paper will offer a detailed analysis of the unreliable narrator in *Memento*, which is one the Christopher Nolan's first movies.

3. *Memento* (2000)

Memento is an American neo-noir psychological thriller made in 2000, written and directed by Christopher Nolan. The film was based on a short story by his brother Johnathan Nolan, who later wrote the story "Memento Mori". In order to summarize the plot briefly it can be said that the film follows the journey of a character named Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) who is dealing with a particular condition. Following a dreadful event where he witnessed his wife being murdered and where he was also attacked, he now experiences

anterograde amnesia, causing short-term memory loss and an inability to form any new memories. The main character is in a desperate search for the attackers and uses photos, tattoos, and sticky notes to aid him in his search. Essentially, the night of the attack is also in a sense, a termination of the life as he once knew it. The film's central idea is straightforward, but its complexity is heightened by its incorporation of two distinct sets of scenes. The black-and-white scenes are presented in a chronological sequence, while the colour sequences are shown in reverse order, making it difficult to follow the events. These two storylines will eventually come to a converging point near the end of the movie.

When analysing the narrative, this paper's aim, as stated in the introduction, is to detect the unreliability of the narrator. The main protagonist is creating his own storyline to follow, and the spectators can rely only on the information presented by him. However, as the story unravels it becomes obvious that Leonard Shelby's reliability should be questioned, especially because he is the protagonist who faces the challenge of retaining memories for only fifteen minutes. Trusting a character as such should prompt the viewers to doubt his investigation. Throughout the movie there are indications that the human memory can be unreliable which only puts further emphasis on the untrustworthiness of Leonard's character. What is more, Rob Content argues that Leonard is one of "the least reliable narrators" in the latest cinema (36). Another indication is that Leonard's condition makes him susceptible to manipulation. This implies that the information gathered about the accident and the notorious John Gammell may be false due to deceptive individuals like Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), whose actual name is John Gammell, or Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss).

Despite his cleverness, Leonard never grasps the fact that truth is just as biased as memory, and his perceived logical and evidence-based conclusions are filled with doubt. Every person he meets is a skilled deceiver, and it is up to him to distinguish who is a foe and who a friend (Lin 27). Although it may seem as though Teddy was the antagonist in the

movie, it can be argued that he was perhaps Leonard's actual friend. There were so many instances where he could have taken advantage of his amnesiac condition and steal from him, but he did not do it which shows perhaps he was genuinely fond of Leonard.

Same can be argued for Natalie's character, for instance there is a scene where she deliberately infuriates Leonard by making various rude remarks about his deceased wife. She does that in order for him to hit her so that she could later on come back in the house, when Leonard's memory goes blank again, and pretend someone else beat her in order for Leonard to track that man down, which he refused previously. Before all that, she had cunningly removed all the pens from the house, preventing Leonard to write himself a warning about her. Upon first watch, it is a scene where viewers genuinely feel sorry for him, and it also makes Natalie look like a horrible person; however, as Phillip Novak suggests, she also turns out to be the complete opposite of what it seems like at first glance. Over time, Natalie's true nature slowly appears not as heartless, manipulative, and dangerous. Instead, she ends up displaying unexpectedly empathetic and surprisingly decent behaviour, considering the circumstances (42).

Leonard believes his notes and facts will help him track down the real culprit but as the audience comes to realize later, these also cannot be trusted leading to the conclusion that viewers should not rely on his facts nor the memory's manipulative power, as noted by Leonard in the film:

> Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police, eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, make notes, and draw conclusions. Facts, not memories: that's how you investigate. I know, it's what I used to do. Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the colour of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts. (00:28:56-00:29:31)

Rebecca Weber claims that "the first fact that is revealed to the viewer states that Teddy is the second attacker" (Bulbapp, Internet). Leonard took a photography of Teddy and wrote down a

note that says: "Don't believe his lies. He's the one. Kill him" (2:14:00-2:14:01). If his notes are facts as he claims they are, then that information must be true and the spectators should deem it as credible, but not everything is as it seems. It is later revealed why Leonard wrote those words and by doing so consequently chose his next victim. Weber also supports this by saying that through the further information gained on Natalie's and Teddy's characters, as the plot progresses, "the less factual Leonard's notes become".

In the past Leonard worked as an insurance investigator and was very successful in his job. He was given a case of Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky), a person with anterograde amnesia, married to a woman suffering from diabetes. Leonard gave Sammy's wife a false hope by claiming that his condition was merely psychological and that he should be able to form new memories. All this led her to give one final test to Sammy by making him inject her with insulin therapy multiple times in hopes that he would remember. This is important to mention because there are scenes afterwards which makes the audience question whether Sammy was actually Leonard all along. There are two exact flashbacks contradicting each other, the first one, where Leonard playful pinches his wife's thigh and the second one where she is diabetic, and he injects her. There is also another scene where Sammy is admitted to a psychiatric hospital and in an instant this image is replaced by Leonard occupying his place. Novak argues that those sequences demonstrate "that the story Leonard tells repeatedly about Sammy is really just Leonard's own story" (47). This just goes on to further reinforce the unreliability of the protagonist, and question Sammy's existence.

Finding the true reality in the film seems impossible because new ones keep arising. Leonard chooses his own reality by lying to himself to achieve happiness. He states:

> "I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning... even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there" (2:16:24-2:16:41).

Robbie B. H. Goh suggests that the protagonist relies on tangible objects to establish and add meaning to his reality, such as carrying his wife's possessions with him, or flashbacks to insulin bottle. However, this significance may not be inherently objective, rather it can be created or instilled, it can be "a memento of a real past or a false clue altogether". He concludes by saying that although objects in Nolan's films are important to individuals, "the significance and interpretation of each one is unreliable" (35). The previously mentioned movie quote also aims to show that perhaps Leonard has created his own simulacrum where his own constructed beliefs shape his perception of the world. According to Jim Powell (122), simulacrum is, by the concept of Jean Baudrillard a copy that is so close to the original, that the original is no longer important. So, *Memento* makes it is almost impossible to find out the real truth, because the film is only shown from Leonard's perspective. As Weber states, Leonard chooses to erase crucial facts because without his quest for vengeance, his life would have no purpose.

Margaret A. Toth argues that Leonard could be perceived as the murderer of his wife. This claim is also supported by Teddy's words in the final scenes where he states that his wife survived the attack, and it was easier for Shelby to believe that someone else was responsible for her death. If there is accuracy in this then "the mnemotope of memento is at best unreliable and at worst an outrageous deception". Leonard distorts the past, denying his violent actions towards his wife and wrongly blaming and consequently murdering others for the crime he did (81). He suggests that it is exactly this made-up version of truth which offers Leonard "a sense of order and control in a perverse postmodern world" (81). What is more, Leonard's condition can perhaps be viewed as a metaphor for postmodern condition. Leonard serving as "the ultimate postmodern subject", who struggles to bridge the gap between the recent past and the current moment due to his schizophrenia (Parker 3).

Carlos Gallego also makes metaphorical links between Leonard as someone who represents modernity and Sammy as someone who represents postmodernity, from that perspective one can conclude how Sammy is essentially a result of Leonard's mental health issues, much like how postmodernity emerges from the unresolved conflicts of modernity. Leonard's situation typifies the postmodern split by exemplifying the self-deception and deceptive reasoning required to survive in that condition (45). So basically, Leonard symbolizes modernity "in denial of both its failure and incompleteness", and Sammy the postmodern "ideological fantasy of both completion and deferment" (46).

The film's beginning sequence is actually the ending where the act of protagonist killing his wife's apparent murderer is shown. Fran Pheasant Kelly highlights some interesting points worth noting such as "the reverse flight of a gun" and the polaroid photography of a dead man which "slowly fades to white" suggesting Leonard's amnesia (104). All of this makes it obvious that the movie will be chronically reversed and non-linear. The film's segments seem to be fragments of one distant reality which eventually comes together. Those are all elements of postmodernism which is according to Jim Powell (17) is an attempt to make sense of what is going on at the present time and one can see the present clearly only in retrospect. Among several elements of postmodernism in the film there is the idea of reconstructing an identity, for instance Leonard's tattoos help him reconstruct his own identity and his polaroid photos help him to reconstruct context. Powell (39) states that we need "aesthetics of cognitive mapping" to tell what is imaginary and what is real, the protagonist cannot remember however, instead he creates his reality writing notes, tattooing his body with facts and instructions for not to be deceived by his own mind.

There is one scene worth noting which further supports the claim of Leonard as unreliable and raises the question of what he is actually capable of doing. One time after

waking up he finds a man sequestrated in his closet, tied up and physically hurt. He has no recollections of the man's identity is and what happened to him. Soon after Teddy comes over because Leonard called him before he went to sleep. Only when the man reveals his name is Dodd, the spectators can figure out that he is the one abusing and threatening Natalie and that she set Leonard up to track him down and get rid of him. Every character in the movie can be deemed as unreliable because the audience is invited to pay close attention to every detail as the story unravels, which gives rise to the possible discrepancies. David LaRocca suggests that even the motel clerk takes advantage of Leonard's condition by charging him for at least two rooms (184). This can be due to the false persona Leonard creates by appearing as an affluent man in a suit, driving a fancy car but in the end that is also presented as false because he has in a sense taken on a dead man's identity. He explains this by saying "…well I'd rather be mistaken for a dead guy than a killer" (2:15:39—2:15:41).

Lacking any recollection or sense of self, Leonard is adrift in a sea of unfamiliar experiences and aimless in his journey through life. He is stuck in a strange "postmodern limbo" (Mooney 37). This according to Mooney represents many of the worries and cultural uncertainties people had while living in America during the nineties and the shift to the new millennium. He explains that the concern of Popular culture during that time was with the "notions of the subjective experience of an objective reality." Leonard's existence lacks a perception of time and history and without these recollections, Leonard transforms into a person lacking a sense of self. (39,40) There is irony in *Memento* in the sense that the protagonist undermines the truthfulness of memory but then goes on to faithfully follow the last memory that he remembers, that of his wife suffocating on the bathroom floor. As it has been mentioned previously, he puts great emphasis on facts in the form of tattoos which then go on to represent absolute truth for him. Dennis Knepp points out one example of this in the

scene where Leonard tattoos Teddy's license plate number incorrectly which showcases "how dangerous the apparent truthfulness of the printed word can be" (122).

Although it may appear as Shelby is playing the role of a detective, going back in time and figuring out the missing pieces, it is false. The spectators are the ones that act as detectives and try to solve the impossible puzzle by being focused and reconsidering every scene shown. Moreover, having to wait until the final scene to see who the true culprit is, creates anticipation, but also ambiguity due to the fact that they are never revealed because they can be anyone the protagonist chooses to believe. Therefore, by ripping the twelve pages of investigation Teddy helped him collect, he decides to make and believe his own truth. Instead of looking at the main character as a victim, or some sort of modern-day martyr, Novak sees him as possible major criminal. This portrayal was used to deceive the viewers during most of the movie "so that we see the serial killer sitting there before us" (45). Leonard's mission turns sinister the moment viewers acknowledge that he is not in search for his wife's killer but Teddy – "the man who stripped him of his delusions about himself" (Lin 27).

Nevertheless, the spectators are invited to create their own narrative because of the subjectivity and ambiguity of the film which leaves room for different conclusions and discussions. McGowan believes that recognizing the importance of lies enables one to unlock the liberating potential of lies and understand their connection to the beginning of subjectivity. Memento surpasses all of Nolan's other movies in emphasizing the deception. Leonard's self-deception isn't just a hindrance in uncovering the truth; it drives the pursuit of truth. Truth could not exist if it were not for the backdrop provided by light. Truth must be separated from its roots in deception ("Fictional Nolan" intro). "There is truth, but one arrives at it only by passing through the line" (4-5). The second unreliable narrator this paper will

analyse will be Dominic Cobb, the main protagonist of *Inception* (2010), and a character who shares some similarities with Leonard due to the fact that their sense of reality is shaken by a trauma response.

4. *Inception* (2010)

Inception (2010) is a science fiction heist movie which explores relations between dreams and reality. Leonardo DiCaprio portrays Dom Cobb, a thief who has the unique skill of infiltrating people's dreams to extract secrets from their subconscious while they sleep. His expertise has made him well-known in the realm of corporate espionage, yet it has also made him lose all that he holds dear, his wife and children. Cobb is given an opportunity to start over when he is presented with a seemingly unattainable mission: to plant an idea in someone's mind. A Japanese businessman Saito (Ken Watanabe) wants to eliminate his biggest competitor through the act of inception which can only be done by the master extractor Cobb, and in return he would help him reconnect with his children. This being the only to get his life back, Cobb agrees to do this extremely complex task, and gathers the best dream thieves. His team consists of Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), Eames (Tom Hardy), Yusuf (Dileep Rao) and Ariadne (Ellen Page). Out of Nolan's filmography, *Inception* could be regarded as the one having most clearly depicted analogies to filmmaking, making it a sort of "allegory of a film production crew" (Olson 47). There is the producer, the production designer, the actor, the audience and the director.

As previously mentioned in the sections regarding Nolan and *Memento*, the falsity of the hero on which the director insists in his works can be seen in this blockbuster as well. The main protagonist is also the antagonist in this movie. We, as audience, follow him on his journey to gaining his freedom back and seeing his two children again and naturally root for the success of the hero. However, his quest is not as sincere as it may appear on first glance,

McGowan argues that Cobb's real goal is "to escape his own desire that manifests itself in the real world" ("Superhero" 172). There have been various assumptions about the reality in the movie and McGowan explains that the main problem is that they are misleading us from the focal point of the movie. And the problem lies in Cobb, a character with questionable credibility, just as Leonard, who is trying to deceive us ("Fictional Nolan" 151). The ending of the movie is another deception, because it makes us question the reality of the final scene as if it were "central point of the film" ("Fictional Nolan"168). But not just the final scene, spectators are called to question everything presented and also choose the reality they want to believe in: "Admit it, Dom. You don't believe in one reality anymore. So choose. Choose your reality like I did. Choose to be here. Choose me" (2:00:42—2:00:53).

In the past Mal and Cobb were working together experimenting with the shared-dreaming technology. During that period, they spent a long time, half a century to be exact, in a perfect world they created for each other, but that period equals only a few days in reality. When they ran out of imagination, they used real memories to fill their world. This is important to highlight because later Cob advises Ariadne not to do so: "Never recreate places from your memory. Always imagine new places. … Because building a dream from your memory is the easiest way to lose your grasp on what's real and what is a dream." (0:32:51—0:33:06). The problem occurred when Mal didn't want to go back to the real world instead, she desired to stay for ever in the deepest dream level limbo and forget the truth. So he hid her totem in a safe, but Cobb wanted to go back: "It wasn't so bad at first, feeling like Gods. The problem was that none of it was real. Eventually it just became impossible for me to live like that" (01:15:55—01:17:05). Therefore, he decided to do inception on his wife and set her top spinning in the safe. When she woke up, she could not accept the new reality and thought she was dreaming. In order to wake up there is a mechanism, one must commit suicide, and that is what she did. She became obsessed with the notion that her world was not real:

"What is the most resilient parasite? A bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? An idea. Resilient, highly contagious. Once an idea's taken hold in the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate. An idea that is fully formed, fully understood – that sticks …" (0:02:47—0:03:11).

All of this is initially hidden from the spectators, it only near the end when Cobb tells this story to Ariadne so that she understands why he is being hunted by the memories and destructive projections of his dead wife. He was essentially lying to everyone, and this is revealed to us through flashbacks. This revelation of the fundamental lie makes us reinterpret everything seen previously and bring a new perspective on Cobb's character, one where is a selfish wife-killer. Not only did he hide his true subconscious state he also concealed important information about the heist to his fellow associates, such as the long-lasting power of Yusuf's sedative combined with the special compound. Which is another reason to show why his Dominic Cobb cannot be trusted. If someone dies in a dream, they do not wake up as per usual but fall into Limbo, if others knew about this, they would not have taken part in the heist in the first place. Nevertheless, this movie shows that everything can be altered thus trusting what is spoken as truth is futile.

Mal is represented as a villainous figure in the beginning, an essence of femme fatale, and a sole reason why her husband cannot dream anymore. She is constantly in his subconscious torturing him and sabotaging the team's mission and can be seen as a manifestation on Cobb's neurosis. What is more, he keeps going back to his memories, revisiting her and the guilt that consumes his being. "Do you think you can just build a prison of memories to lock her in? Do you really think that's going to contain her?" (1:00:37—1:00:46). Later this image of malevolent female figure changes and Arthur's words: "She was lovely" (0:41:20), prove to be possibly accurate. Just as Cobb planted the idea into Mal's

subconscious that her world is not real, the audience is also being manipulated into believing what is real and what is a dream. Having so many different phases of dreams, complicated levels, it is difficult to decipher what is going on in the end. With the intention of getting a better understanding, many opt for watching the movie several times to drive their own conclusion.

From the beginning it is shown that *Inception* is a movie that plays with temporal and spatial segments with emphasis on achronological timelines to demonstrate how time is subjective. In the opening scenes our main character is shown on the shore of his unconscious searching for Saito, who is now and old man. A scene which is repeated near the ending also, and throughout the movie we see Saito as his younger self. There are controversial scenes in the movie where it is unsure whether it all is just a dream such as Cobol Engineering chasing Cobb, his difficult escape through a narrow passage and Saito appearing at just the right time and place to save him. But Cobb is convinced that he knows what is real and ignores Mal's explanations of past events (McGowan, "Fictional Nolan"166). Brooker indicates that the subconscious we go through is not Mal's or Cobb's but Nolan's and "his real trick is that we cared about the trick at all" (xii).

Cobb's way to question reality is a totem. Arthur explains that totem must be a small personal object, touched upon no-one, so that it can without a doubt ensure one is not in someone else's dream. The spinning top problem has produced many paratexts, people discussing on Easter eggs, hidden meanings etc. which has resulted in various theories some claiming it was all a dream and some that Dom made it home to his children in the reality. Nolan does not give a clear conclusion on what happened, preferring for the entire film to have ambiguous meaning and for audience to create their own conclusion (Joy 2-3). Looking at the ever-polemical ending and the spinning top from this point of view, it makes no sense

to question did the top fall, because it was never Cobb's totem to begin with, but Mal's, hence it cannot provide accurate information on reality. According to Gutierrez Jones, the spinning of the totem in the last scene "raises the possibility that his notion of reality … is yet another dream" (107).

The true emphasis in *Inception* is on the person's connection to trauma and the truth is found not in reality, but in the dream state. In this movie Nolan shows that waking up is a way to avoid the truth rather than uncover it. *Inception* shows that the fiction or dream is a path to truth, not a hindrance. The film's main deception lies in its emphasis on the real world as distinct from the dream world, and one must understand this deception in order to appreciate its favouring of the dream world. Nolan shows that "waking up serves as a path for escaping the truth, not finding it", which was possibly influenced by Lacan and his view of dreams (McGowan, "Fictional Nolan", 149-150). Cobb just as Leonard creates a "hyperreality that … [he], and the viewers, cannot escape" …and [they] remain caught within a never-ending loop of grief" (Perdigao 121).

Robert Fischer's character also deals with trauma, he is the heir to one of the biggest energy conglomerates, and someone who was never good enough in his father's eyes. This feeling of disappointment and failure haunts him and Cobb plays on this dysfunctional relationship between father and son in order to achieve his goal. The poignant moment of mutual understanding between the dying father and son is perhaps the most emotional in the movie, but it is entirely fabricated. (McGowan, "Fictional Nolan" 162) Joy claims that this reconciliation could represent rejection of Robert's identity and calls attention to "the inherent unreliability of any resolution that the film presents" (109).

Joy then addresses how the unreliable narrator (or narrative representation) "forces the spectator out of a position of passivity to understand the film and to produce meaning".

This is in Nolan's cinematic repertoire also related to Inception. Nonetheless, the disclosure of each character comes towards the end of their story, leading the viewer to be already involved in the character's actions, so that "the unreliable narrator draws attention to the character's psychology as much as the spectator's awareness of an implied author" (152). Dominic Cobb, the main protagonist is obviously the unreliable narrator, a person who questions his reality through the entire movie and the spectators see the world from his point of view. Nolan's main focus is to show again, as in Memento, how reality can be subjective, therefore *Inception* was made intentionally deceptive. In the words of Darren Mooney: "… it plays both as a dream and an awakening" (152). The third, and the last unreliable narrator this paper will analyse will be the main character of *Tenet* (2020), known merely as The Protagonist. He is somewhat different from Leonard and Dominic, his true identity is not known, and his memory is like a blank page, but his journey can be also seen as a response to trauma because it is not certain whether the events in the movie are real or imagined.

5. *Tenet* (2020)

Tenet is one of Christopher Nolan's newest films, released in 2020, and perhaps the most complicated to follow in his entire directing career. This movie follows a former CIA agent, the Protagonist, who is recruited from the future into a secret organization called Tenet, founded to save the world from ecological disaster. To even try to explain the complex plot would indeed be a strenuous effort several pages long. However, for this paper the detailed analysis, explaining every aspect of scientific terms and time loops it deals with, not needed. The main concern of this paper is to put focus on the unreliable narrator. And in this paper, it shall be argued just as previously, that as in *Memento*, and *Inception* where the

unreliable narrator was the main character, same goes for *Tenet*, i.e. the unreliable narrator is The Protagonist. The audience has the same knowledge as the main character because everything is shown form his point of view, i.e., his subjective perspective.

The word tenet can mean a life philosophy and this movie's tenet is that "ignorance is our ammunition" (1:49:01—1:49:03). Just as the other mentioned movies, this movie also contains postmodernist elements such as intertextuality, paradoxes, self-referentially, etc. The use of the unreliable narrator in *Tenet* naturally makes it difficult to discern truth from deception and brings an extra layer of confusion to the already conflicting narrative. All this leads to feelings of doubt and uncertainty, even more so when the main character ends up as the Tenet's mastermind. This aspect of unreliability has become almost a staple when it comes to Nolan's movies. Viewers are encouraged to doubt any information given and pay close attention during the movie because any scene can be crucial for better understanding, which also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking.

To start this analysis, it is necessary to name the main characters and their importance, and also to sum up the plot as much as possible which will later on prove to be beneficial for the unreliability aspect of the film. The main characters are the unnamed Protagonist (John David Washington), his associate Neil (Robert Pattison), Russian oligarch Sator (Kenneth Branagh) as the villain and his wife Kat (Elizabeth Debicki). The movie starts with the siege at the opera house in Sydney where the protagonist is trying to obtain the plutonium-241. He ends up being caught and instead of giving away important information to the enemy, he takes a cyanide pill and wakes up on a platform. There he finds out that he has been recruited by the Tenet organization and learns about inverted bullets and time entropy. There was a scientist in the future who found a way of inverting time, but she decided to kill herself and send her discovery as pieces of the algorithm back in the past. Due to the effects of global warming and decaying state of the planet, people from the future aim to find the algorithm

with the help of Sator. Our protagonist is what is later to be revealed the actual founder of Tenet and recruiter of Neil, but he does not know that, not until the end. Neil knows who he is from the start but discloses that information. On his journey he meets Priya (Dimple Kapadia), a Tenet operative who leads him to Andrei Sator. He tries to get close to him through his wife Kat, who is trapped in their marriage with no possible escape. Later various actions scenes take place, such as the amazing highway heist, also inversions through turnstile machine, scene repetitions etc. Fast-forwarding he finds out Priya was actually using him to help Sator collect nine pieces of the algorithm. The final battle, as temporal pincer movement, takes place at Stalsk-12, where blue and red team, going backwards and forwards fight Sator's men while the Protagonist goes after the algorithm. While the battle takes place, inverted Kat is on a yacht in Vietnam where she shoots Sator. This quick summary made as briefly as possible is needed to explain how time works in this movie. It may appear that weeks passed between all the events because of the two hours of screen time separating them, but the opera siege, the battle and Sator's death occur all at the same day, the 14th. Lance Belluomini makes some excellent points in his philosophical analysis of *Tenet*, as I have tried to demonstrate, he argues that for comprehending the movie it is important to see it as "one giant closed loop that had already happened" as there are also "multiple versions of Neil and the Protagonist existing at the same time" (1332).

While there is a narrative similarity with *Inception* in the sense that its ending is also the beginning and as McGowan argues that reverse entropy has the same function as inception in the previously analysed movie their goals are not the same ("Tenet and Politics"83). Terrence Blake identifies this difference by explaining how *Inception's* goal was to plant a specific idea to guarantee the rival's failure, Tenet's objective, for the purpose of defeating the algorithm, is to create a powerful enough tenet. In this mind-challenging puzzle film, Nolan urges the audience to "de-algorithmize and to tenetise the future" ("Review").

Andrei Sator appears to be the main villain, a self-absorbed antihumanist whose believes he can control death. As a young man, while cleaning the remains of nuclear waste in his town, he got a message from the future, and it made him an extremely wealthy man. Sator is a very possessive husband who keeps his wife captive by using threats of never seeing her son Max again if she abandons him. His body pulse rate is being measured by the smart watch he carries on all the time, and which is connected with the nuclear bomb so if something happens to him, the world as we know it disappears too. When meeting the Protagonist, he asks him whether he had already slept with his wife and tries to taunt him: "It's very gratifying watch a man you don't like try to pull his own balls out of his throat before he chokes" (0:54:48—0:54:54).

What this actually shows is that Sator knows who the Protagonist is and that he would eventually end up with his wife. But despite this destructive nature he showcases, McGowan argues that he is not the true villain of this movie but merely a "pawn in the struggle of the future against the present" ("Tenet and Politics" 90). He is being used by the future to collect the algorithm's pieces which will result in the destruction of the past. Sator's phone call with the Protagonist reveals important information, he requires the answer to the future's intention on wiping out the past and Sator explains: "Because their oceans rose, and their rivers ran dry. Don't you see? They have no choice but to turn back. We're responsible" (2:11:30—2:11:39). After this revelation it shows that he is helping the future in preserving the planet's habitability. "The figure who has hitherto appeared as a barbaric sociopath now comes into focus as a tool in the struggle against climate change" (91). It can be said that placing the Protagonist on the opposing side of those battling against climate change complicates his heroic acts and guarantees the earth's environmental destruction. Due to Nolan's brilliant filmmaking and deception, the spectators are applauding the outcome (92).

There are multiple views on the role of The Protagonist. Just as previously analysed movies it becomes difficult to decipher whether he is a good guy or a bad guy. He can be seen as a representative of the audience because in the majority of the movie he is learning new information and trying the comprehend the situation he is in. He is placed in a time-war, not knowing its cause and is trying to discover his future role. Although there is no whole picture on who he is, it is only natural that he is seen as a hero initially and together with him, the audience can follow the complex narrative and try to connect the dots in their head.

Tenet as well as Nolan's previous movies uses the unreliable narrator to guide the spectators from the very beginning. Before taking the cyanide pilule, the Protagonist was tortured in horrible ways which easily could have caused him post-traumatic stress disorder. This leads Amar Singh to argue that what is seen later in the movie might merely be a series of hallucinations imagined due to what he has been through (7). Obviously, this is only a possibility that can never be known for sure, but due to the complexity and ambiguities, Nolan encourages the audience to think outside the box. Different sources, providing the information, make the narration unreliable as well as time inversions. The Protagonist is receiving incomplete information which makes his perspective. For instance, there is a scene where Kat sees a woman jumping into the sea from her husband's yacht and concludes that she must be his new lover. This makes her extremely envious to what she deems as -- the woman's freedom. It is not until later revealed that the woman she saw was actually herself after having killed Sator.

Characters such as Neil and Priya are also questionable because they choose to hide their knowledge of the past events. In terms of Neils character there is a scene where he had apparently just met the Protagonist but knows what kind of drink he would like to order. Similarly, in the ending he says: I think this is the end of a beautiful friendship" (2:22:15—

2:22:18) thereby revealing he has known him for a long time, some fans even go so far as to suggest that Neil is actually young Max, Kat's son. However, there is no way to know for sure unless the director himself does not reveal it, all this enhances the confusion of the audience. In case of Priya, although she promised to keep Kat protected, she tries to kill her in the end for she knows too much information and poses a future threat.

Todd McGowan points out that "the fictional lie plays a central role in Tenet" just as in other Christopher Nolan's filmography ("Tenet and Politics" 83). So, the aim of this analysis was to provide certain aspects of unreliability and true meaning behind the events but there is, as might be expected, still uncertainty whether everything is as it appears.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a thorough analysis of Nolan's unreliable narrators and give an overview of some of the crucial plot points and philosophies the movies, *Memento* (2000), *Inception* (2010), *Tenet* (2020), deal with. It identifies the three main characters of the movies, Leonard Shelby, Dominic Cobb and The Protagonist, as unreliable narrators and offers evidence to support these claims. There is also a brief section dedicated to the analysis of postmodernism, and its key characteristics in cinematography, as well as the concept of unreliable narration, and what it essentially means. Additionally, this paper touches upon the topic of puzzle-films, describing their characteristics and gives some examples of such movies. Postmodernity aspects play a significant role for the overall success of Nolan's movies, because they are so distinctive and complex, they attract the audience and have therefore prospered in Hollywood film industry in the last few decades. By using various sources, this analysis is written to be as objective as possible, nevertheless that proved to be an arduous task, because Nolan leaves plenty of room to form one's own conclusions and multiple theories. Before attempting to write anything, I have seen each

movie several times and read multiple books and paratexts which helped me draw some conclusions and make sense of certain dilemmas. It is easy to get lost in the topic of postmodernism, however the goal was to showcase the mere influence it has had on Christopher Nolan's cinematographic work by studying the aspect of the unreliable narrator in the three movies. These are the types of movies where questions are left unanswered, and the feeling of being tricked by the director surfaces, which encourages rewatchability and enjoyment in seeking answers and clues. These movies are still important and liked by many as they will probably remain being for years to come. They question the definition of belief, truth, reality and dreams, something that never ceases to inspire the spectators. This shows that postmodernism in films is not dead yet but continues to evolve, as there are still movies being made that follow its tenets.

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8. The Unreliable Narrator in Christopher Nolan's Movies: *Summary* and *key words*

This thesis paper deals with the unreliable narrator and unreliable narrative structures in the filmography of Christopher Nolan. It analyses the movies Memento (2000), Inception (2010) and Tenet (2020) specifically. The first chapter deals with what is exactly postmodernism, provides a short historic overview and depicts some of the key characteristics of postmodern film, especially in relation to Nolan's filmography. Moreover it explains how Christopher Nolan incorporates many postmodernist traits in his work and provides an overview of some definitions regarding the unreliable narration and what it really is. It moves on to analyse the characteristics of puzzle-films, which are typical of Nolan's filmography. In the following three chapters, it provides a thorough analysis of the unreliable narrator in the aforementioned movies, making also some comparisons between them. Lastly, it offers conclusion in regard to everything analysed.

Key words: Christopher Nolan, unreliable narrator, postmodern cinema, *Memento* (2000), *Inception* (2010), *Tenet* (2020).

9. Nepouzdani Pripovjedač u Filmovima Christophera Nolana: *Sažetak* i *ključne riječi*

Ovaj rad bavi se nepouzdanim pripovjedačem te nepouzdanim narativnim strukturama u filmografiji Christophera Nolana. Posebno analizira filmove *Memento* (2000), *Početak* (2010) i *Tenet* (2020). Prvo poglavlje bavi se time što je zapravo postmodernizam, daje kratki povijesni pregled i prikazuje neke od bitnih karakteristika postmodernog filma, s posebnih naglaskom na Nolanovu filmografiju. Štoviše, objašnjava kako Christopher Nolan uključuje mnoga postmodernistička obilježja u svoj rad i daje pregled nekih definicija vezanih za nepouzdano pripovijedanje i što ono zapravo jest. Nastavlja se s analizom karakteristika takozvanih puzzle filmova, tipičnih za Nolanovu filmografiju. U iduća tri poglavlja daje temeljitu analizu nepouzdanog pripovjedača u prethodno spomenutim filmovima, pritom dajući i neke njihove međusobne usporedbe. Na kraju nudi zaključak temeljen na svemu prethodno analiziranom.

Ključne riječi: Christopher Nolan, nepouzdan pripovjedač, postmoderna kinematografija, *Memento* (2000), *Početak* (2010), *Tenet* (2020).