HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Noir Guilt Complex

*The Death of Women as a Catalyst for Character Development
and Plot in the Films of Christopher Nolan*

Sverrir Sigfússon

Janúar 2015

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Kt.: 240890-2409

Leiðbeinandi: Lára Marteinsdóttir

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Extract

This essay provides a feminist analysis of Christopher Nolan's films; examining the complicate role of women in relation to the guilt-ridden protagonists, with their deaths serving as a foundation for the narrative trajectory of the male characters, and how this conveys messages to the audience that propagate the prevailing patriarchal worldview. Nolan actively blends disparate genres, infusing them with film noir influences that predicate his use of this recurrent theme. Arguments will be supported by source material from E. Ann Kaplan, Janey Place, Christine Gledhill, Edward Dimendberg, Richard Armstrong, and Sylvia Harvey, as well as a varied assortment of articles, interviews, and profiles written about Christopher Nolan and his films, along with further material relating to film noir.

The essay is split into five segments; an introduction, two theoretical chapters, an analytical chapter split into four sub-chapters, and final words. The first theoretical chapter establishes the traits of film noir and the roles of women in noir films. The second theoretical chapter provides a short biography of Christopher Nolan and then connects his films to the previously established film noir, as well as detailing its revival as neo-noir. In the analytical chapter four films will be examined: *Memento* (2000)*, The Prestige* (2006)*, The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Inception* (2010). The analysis, conducted from a feminist criticism point of view and in a film noir context, will focus on the women in the films and their relationships with the psychologically shattered male protagonists, which leave them dead *en masse*. To supplement the exploration of this recurrent theme, instances of intertextuality within Nolan's work will also be noted.

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

In this essay my emphasis will be on examining the importance of the loss of women in the Christopher Nolan's films. Academic studies of his films have not taken this aspect of his work into account, despite the fact that this is a significant recurrent theme, which ties greatly into his film noir influences. I will seek to analyze this glaring absence of the female characters and demonstrate how this lack bears on the narratives and underlying messages of his films, as well as how this serves to reinforce the patriarchal status quo. This I will attempt to do reading his films from a film noir point of view. Along with this my focus will remain as well on the intertexuality between his films, mainly through re-use of actors, which intensifies the visibility of repeated motifs, such as the noir protagonist and the demise of their female loved ones that acts as a motivating force.

Despite the fact that Christopher Nolan is one of my favorite filmmakers, I hope that this essay will highlight his strengths as well as his weaknesses in terms of feminist film analysis. Analyzing Nolan's films, an activity he invites, is relevant and urgent to the modern viewer for he is an important filmmaker due to his power and influence in modern mainstream filmmaking and the immense popularity of his films, which have grossed a sum total of $4.209 billion worldwide, as of the end of 2014.[1] Of the nine feature length films Nolan has directed I have chosen to take a closer look at four of them; *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Inception* (2010), where I will examine their noir credentials and focus on their female characters and elements, rather than a broad holistic analysis of each film. Nolan is the sole screenwriter of *Inception* and *Memento,* the co-writer of the other two, and used the same cinematographer, Wally Pfister, to shoot all of them. I believe these four chosen films provide the most fertile ground for analysis and represent a satisfying cross section of Christopher Nolan's career to date, from a humble independent director to a Hollywood powerhouse.

My primary source material will be taken from the book *Women in Noir Film*, a collection of essays on the subject, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. From that book I will attempt to support my arguments by quoting the works of Janey Place, Sylvia Harvey, and Kaplan herself. To establish a broader view of film noir I will also be using the books, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* by Edward Dimendberg and *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* by Frank Krutnik. In addition to this, references

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[1] "Christopher Nolan," *Box Office Mojo*, http://boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=christophernolan.htm, (accessed 6 January 2015)

will be taken from several profiles written about Christopher Nolan and his films, spanning his career.

Christopher Nolan's frequent reuse of actors opens up additional avenues of interpretation. Michael Caine is his most frequently collaborating thespian and openly recognized good luck charm,[2] appearing as a wise, older figure in *Batman Begins* (2005)*, The Prestige, The Dark Knight, Inception*, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and *Interstellar* (2014), a six film and eight year streak. Morgan Freeman also appears to impart wisdom in The Dark Knight Trilogy and *Interstellar*. Christian Bale plays the titular hero in Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy as well as appearing as one of the two leads in *The Prestige*, infused with a similar sense of obsession. Anne Hathaway played the femme fatale Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises*, as well as portraying a lead astronaut in *Interstellar*'s mission to save mankind. Ken Watanabe, who was an antagonist in *Batman Begins,* plays Sato, the industrialist who hires and helps the protagonist, in *Inception*. That protagonist, Cobb, shares his name with the burglar antagonist of Nolan's first feature, *Following* (1998). Marion Cotillard, who was also a femme fatale in *The Dark Knight Rises*, plays the femme fatale who accosts him throughout his mission in the film. Also appearing in those two films were Tom Hardy, playing a helpful trickster in the first and the Batman villain Bane in the second, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, performing the role of sidekick to the hero in both instances. Cillian Murphy played the secondary villain Scarecrow in *Batman Begins*, reprising his role in both subsequent Batman films in small cameos, as well as playing the subject of Cobb's mission in *Inception.* Even minor characters serve to further thematic intertextuality, as Mark Boone Junior appears as a crooked motel owner in *Memento* and then again as a crooked cop in *Batman Begins.*

The essay is split into five sections; an introduction, a theoretical look at film noir and the women in noir films, a biographical segment which introduces and illuminates the idea of loss in Christopher Nolan's films, an analytical segment split into four parts, one for each film which I will analyze, and lastly a summary and final words.

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[2] D. Jolin, "Sir Michael Caine on The Dark Knight Trilogy," *Empire*, 4 July 2012, http://www.empireonline.com/interviews/interview.asp?IID=1526, (accessed 11 January 2015)

2. Film noir and women

Film noir can be considered an interesting phenomenon within the realm of cinema, its origins are clearly influenced by German expressionism and it was, at least partly, also born out of French filmmaking where the phrase was first coined, although film theorist E. Ann Kaplan argues that film noir is very much a product of Hollywood.[3] While film noir originally only existed for a short period of time and was in truth defined in retrospective, its lasting effects are considerable. Its beginnings are traced directly back to the post-World War II era by a large majority of scholars who have written about noir, with anxieties about women's increased presence in the workplace being the primary source of thematic inspiration in film noir, as per readings by the likes of Kaplan, Janey Place, and Sylvia Harvey.

Edward Dimendberg, in his exploration of film noir in the book *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, charts the rise and fall of noir as reaching its peak five years after the end of World War II. In that year, 1950, 57 noir films were produced in Hollywood before production trailed off in the years following, with twenty films made in 1955 and production cut down to seven per year in 1958 and 1959. Dimendberg posits that film noir cinema had all but disappeared by the early 1960s, and theorizes that the appearance of crime series such as *Dragnet* and *Naked City* on television transplanted the noir conventions to the new medium and siphoned ticket sales from the box office, along with the general decline of the B-movie, boredom with the movement's tropes and fatigue on behalf of audiences. He also points out that invoking noir's legacy entails nostalgia and self-consciousness.[4]

The urban environment is important to film noir, the shadows created within the mean streets, both practically and metaphorically, shrouding proceedings in added mystery. Dimendberg points out that film noir is remarkably concerned with urban life and the cities the stories play out in, as well as the surveillance placed upon those lives.[5]

Film noir was defined retroactively,[6] with many debating its true nature. Some simply consider it a genre while others view it as an artistic movement. Janey Place defines it as the latter; due to its dependence on stylistic elements above narrative, the focus on which sets noir films apart from their contemporaries, and its relatively short life span in comparison with genres. Place goes on to say that film noir in fact touches

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[3] E.A. Kaplan, "Introduction," *Women in Noir Film,* ed. E.A. Kaplan, London: BFI, 1996, pg. 1–5, here pg. 2

[4] E. Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, pg. 207–209

[5] ibid., pg. 22

[6] F. Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity,* London: Routledge, 1991, pg. 23

every single genre, further cementing its status as a movement rather than a genre in and of itself. Frank Krutnik, who supports Place's viewpoint, also posits that film noir at the time represented a massive departure from the narrative, stylistic, and thematic style of pre-war Hollywood.[7] In "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," Sylvia Harvey similarly states that film noir is a wholly unique beast in Hollywood, that the worldview generated within it demands that noir be considered a distinct and separate entity within the history of American film.[8]

Film noir is complex in regards to whether or not it is seen as progressive in its attitude towards women, to the degree that a clear consensus is all but impossible. It can be seen as progressive in the sense that women frequently possess agency within noir narratives, and regressive for the fact that they are usually killed for capitalizing on this agency. In *Women in Noir Film* both Christine Gledhill and Sylvia Harvey talk about potential progressiveness and potential regression when discussing film noir.[9] Perhaps Place illustrates it best when she states that film noir was hardly progressive in regards to women, as the female characters did not defy their fates and triumph, but that it presented audiences with a rare period of film history where women were active symbols, intelligent and powerful, and derived power instead of weakness from their sexuality as was otherwise the case.[10]

Richard Armstrong, in an analysis titled "Somewhere in the Night: *Memento,*" establishes some of the psychological quirks present in film noir. He illuminates that film noir traditionally foregrounds the fears and anxieties of male characters seeking self-affirmation and how noir explored, directly or indirectly, the American status quo and unspoken fears at a crucial moment in the nation's history.[11] The lynchpin of the anxiety expressed in film noir is that of women entering the workforce during World War II. In "Motherhood and Representation," E. Ann Kaplan discusses how this made women an increased threat to returning veterans, and how that was reflected in the films of the time.[12] Armstrong sees film noir as offering an exorcism of bad dreams for these returning servicemen and allaying the fears of the ordinary American in a politically

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[7] Krutnik, pg. 15

[8] S. Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," *Women in Noir Film,* ed. E.A. Kaplan, London: BFI, 1996, pg. 22–34, here pg. 22

[9] Kaplan, pg. 4

[10] J. Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Noir Film,* ed. E.A. Kaplan, London: BFI, 1996, pg. 35–67, here pg. 35, 54

[11] Armstrong, "Somewhere in the Night: *Memento,*" *Screen Education*, Issue 41, 2005, pg. 119–123, here pg. 119

[12] E.A. Kaplan, "Motherhood and Representation: From Postwar Freudian Figurations To Postmodernism," *Psychoanalysis and Film*, ed. E.A. Kaplan, New York: Routledge, 1990, pg. 128–142, here pg. 129

changed world.[13] Kaplan, quoting Julia Kristeva, explains how the mother becomes an abject, phobic object due to the power of her body which socially and symbolically results in a need to separate the sexes, giving men rights over women and creating an asymmetrical power dynamic against the other sex. Thus the feminine becomes synonymous with a radical evil that must be suppressed.[14] In the ruling culture of the patriarchy this dynamic is the status quo, the female is the other to the male's self, a self-imposed centralization of the male. In this situation the power of language resides with the male while the silenced female has meaning projected upon her.

Laura Mulvey's influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," originally written in 1973, famously defined the intrinsic film gaze as male, and almost exclusively relating to the male psyche. She further explains how women are confined and shackled within the dominant male gaze, as they can never be the maker of meaning, only the bearer of meaning: "The paradox of phallocentricism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world."[15] From this perspective, one can apply this view to the women in film noir, how they try, however unsuccessfully, to break out of these insidious constraints. Mulvey specifies that Freud connected scopophilia with the need to objectify other people and subjugate them under the power of an overwhelming gaze.[16] Along this line Armstrong offers a poignant take on film noir's fascination with bad women: They are rotten because we see them through the noir protagonist's eyes.[17] Their gaze is completely askew, particularly as these liberated women run counter-intuitively to Hollywood cinema's dominant narrative; the formation of the couple through the male protagonist's search for his female soul mate, which in film noir becomes a perverted courtship marked by pain and desire.[18]

Christine Gledhill, in her analysis of the early neo-noir classic *Klute* (1971, Alan J. Pakula), elucidates the five features of film noir:[19]

1. The investigative structure of the narrative;
2. Plot devices such as voice-over or flashback, or frequently both;

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[13] Armstrong, "Somewhere in the Night," pg. 119–120

[14] Kaplan, "Motherhood and Representation," pg. 133

[15] L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. G. Mast and M. Cohen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pg. 803–816, here pg. 803–804

[16] ibid., pg. 806

[17] Armstrong, "Somewhere in the Night," pg. 121

[18] ibid., pg. 122

[19] C. Gledhill, "*Klute* I: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," *Feminism and Film,* ed. E.A. Kaplan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pg. 66–85, here pg. 76

3. Proliferation of points of view;

4. Frequent unstable characterization of the heroine;

5. An expressionist visual style and emphasis on sexuality in the photographing of women

Gledhill also remarks how the notion of realism and genre are problematic for feminist criticism, as the ideas are diametrically opposed. While realism points toward values such as "real life," "truth," and "credibility," genre productions have the negative connotations of "illusion," "myth," and "stereotypes." Therefore, for Gledhill, the Hollywood genre production represents a fictional elaboration of a patriarchal culture that produces macho heroes and a subordinate, demeaning, and objectified place for women.[20]

Film noir has two primary poles of female archetypes, as defined by Janey Place, both much older than noir itself as they are among the oldest storytelling themes in Western culture.[21] On one hand there is the spider woman, an evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction. On the other there is her sister, or alter ego as Place interjects, the virgin, the mother; the innocent redeemer who serves to absolve the male protagonist, frequently depicted in an idealized, high-key light and perhaps often only existing as a dream of the past in memory.[22] As with most Western art, film noir is a male fantasy where women are defined by their sexuality. The spider woman, commonly referred to as femme fatale, has access to it while the virgin does not.[23] Key to understanding the position of women in our culture is the recognition that women are defined in relation to men. Place asserts that in film noir the crime which the liberated woman is guilty of is refusing to be stereotyped in such a way, a perversion seen as an attack on men's very existence and one for which these women must be punished.[24] Moreover, they are portrayed as the greatest obstacle to the male quest, their narrative trajectory.[25] Place further elaborates that the femme fatale, with her combination of sensuality, activity, and ambition, is often not won over and pacified by love for the generally passive and impotent film noir male, whose contrast serves to emphasize her strength.[26]

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[20] Gledhill, "*Klute* I," pg. 67
[21] Place, "Women in Film Noir," pg. 35
[22] ibid., pg. 50
[23] ibid., pg. 35
[24] ibid., pg. 35
[25] Kaplan, "Introduction," pg. 3
[26] Place, "Women in Film Noir," pg. 52–54

Because of the importance of cultural time and place in its inception, noir is therefore present in modern filmmaking in a different context than it originated in, with different gender connotations, though they still plays a pivotal role in the dynamics at play. Even though noir had all but disappeared by the 1960s, the attitudes toward women have persisted. Are we seeing a cultural backlash against the rise of feminism and subsequent increased mobility of women in society?

What happens though, when the central element of female empowerment in film noir, the sensual visual style that enables the women to be deadly, sexy, exciting, and strong, is absent?

3. Christopher Nolan and the death of women in his films

Christopher Jonathan James Nolan was born on July 30th, 1970 in London, England to the British advertising copywriter Brendan Nolan and American flight attendant Christina Jensen. The family moved frequently between London and Chicago, and his father was often away on business all over the world.[27] From age seven he created homemade short films and by age 11 he had cemented his aspiration to become a professional filmmaker.[28] Nolan did not go to film school despite these ambitions,[29] but his aspiration did guide him through his education, culminating in him choosing University College London, where he read English literature, partly because of their comprehensive filmmaking facilities and partly due to his interest in fiction.[30] Nolan is married to his production partner, Emma Thomas, and together they have four children, three boys and a girl.[31]

Nolan is a highly technical filmmaker, to the degree that many call him cold and emotionally distant,[32] but he is also a classicist and traditionalist. He is one of the few working Hollywood filmmakers who still champion shooting on film and chooses to employ practical effects whenever possible instead of the more prevalent computer generated imagery of today.[33] His status as a huge moneymaker for the Hollywood studios allows him to operate in this eccentric manner. Even in the current age of four quadrant summer blockbusters made with optimum safety, Nolan is able to veto studio orders for his films to be made in stereoscopic 3D and overrule company wide mandates for shooting on digital.[34] For all intents and purposes, Nolan's word is the law when it comes to his films. He has a strong authorial voice to match his authority, and is most certainly an auteur director.[35] One of his most prominent signatures is his use of *in*

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[27] T. Shone, "Christopher Nolan: The Man Who Rebooted the Blockbuster," *The Guardian*, 4 November 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/04/-sp-christopher-nolan-interstellar-rebooted-blockbuster, (accessed 11 November 2014)

[28] S. Timberg, "Indie Angst," *New Times Los Angeles*, 15 March 2001, pg. 13–18, here pg. 14

[29] J. Bevan, "Christopher Nolan: Escape Artist," *British Film Institute*, August 2012, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/christopher-nolan-escape-artist (accessed 15 October 2014)

[30] Timberg, "Indie Angst," pg. 14

[31] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

[32] ibid.; Bevan, "Escape Artist"

[33] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

[34] J. Ressner, "The Traditionalist," *Directors Guild of America*, Spring 2012, http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1202-Spring-2012/DGA-Interview-Christopher-Nolan.aspx, (accessed 16 November 2014); R. Verrier, "Paramount Pictures to Make Some Exceptions to All-Digital Policy," *Los Angeles Times,* 28 January 2014, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-paramount-pictures-digital-20140128-story.html#axzz2rilVTVne, (accessed 25 October 2014)

[35] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

media res narrative techniques, allowing the viewer to figure things out on his own. Nolan goes out of his way to not hold one's hand, giving you the pieces, often very subtly right from the get go, before layering meaning on them throughout, both via added scenes for context and through dialog, nudging the viewer towards the conclusion where the pieces are put together. This leeway allows for a considerable amount of interpretation, even despite his tendency to often guide the viewer in his films' final moments. Nolan's films also betray his deep appreciation for film history and a clear love of the medium. For instance, the climax of *The Dark Knight Rises* where thousands of extras clash in the streets is clearly inspired by the large-scale epics of Hollywood's golden age, such as *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916) or even the German science fiction epic *Metropolis* (1927, Fritz Lang), complete with their own overwhelming multitude of on-screen extras.

Christopher Nolan's influence on modern cinema is unmistakable. The "*Inception* horns,"[36] which ironically are not featured in the film itself but only its marketing, are still heard in almost every trailer for action adventure films to this day, while the wave of dark and gritty reboots of dormant franchises can be traced directly to the success of *Batman Begins* and its billion dollar grossing sequel, *The Dark Knight*.[37]

In *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide,* released in 2001, Nolan is described as favoring intense, small, character-driven stories, featuring characters who become detectives in the mysteries of their own lives presented in a manner which is heavily influenced by noir narratives and aesthetics.[38] They also highlight his use of flashback narrative and simple plots that can be made to appear convoluted. When that was written, Nolan had only directed two films, *Following* and *Memento*, but all those descriptions can be applied to his later career, save for calling his films small, as the scale of his filmmaking has grown exponentially with the larger budgets he has been given by studios as a financially successful filmmaker, to the level that he has *carte blanche* with Warner Bros. Studios.[39]

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[36] An instantly recognizable, rhythmic droning blast of brass sound instinsically linked to *Inception* and any effort to satires or represent it in popular culture

[37] "*The Dark Knight*," *Box Office Mojo*, http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=darkknight.htm, (accessed 6 January 2015); "*Batman Begins*: Impact" *Wikipedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Batman_Begins#Impact, (accessed 27 December 2014)

[38] H. Patterson, "Christopher Nolan," *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide*, ed. Y. Allon, D. Cullen and H. Patterson, London: Wallflower, 2001, pg. 251–252

[39] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

A common thread in the articles about Christopher Nolan's films is that of the identification of noir themes in his work. Nolan himself has also openly talked about his usage of film noir.[40] As previously stated, Janey Place identified that noir touched every genre in the classic period. Certainly this reflects not only how noir is present in modern filmmaking but also, specifically, how it is present in the films of Christopher Nolan, which run the gamut of genres, though they do tend to center around mysteries. He is frequently mentioned when discussing the so-called neo-noir, the resurgence of the stylistic noir movement in contemporary cinema. Neo-noir is clearly in Nolan's blood as a filmmaker. Ridley Scott, director of *Blade Runner* (1982), perhaps the quintessential neo-noir, is one of Nolan's two primary influences, the other being Stanley Kubrick, so one can see where his cold, emotional distance might have derived from. Another classic neo-noir, *Chinatown* (1974, Roman Polanski), is one of Nolan's favorite films. Also among his most important influences are the American crime fiction writers Raymond Chandler and James Ellroy, both of whom are figureheads in noir storytelling.[41]

Andrew Spicer dates the origins of post-modern neo-noir around 1981,[42] the movement that Nolan is very much a part of, his debut *Following* coming on the heels of films such as *The Usual Suspects* (1994, Bryan Singer), *Se7en* (1995, David Fincher), and *L.A. Confidential* (1997, Curtis Hanson), the last one based on a story by James Ellroy. In his essay on *Memento*, Richard Armstrong states that while neo-noir owes its mood and atmosphere to the classical model, it intensifies the usual noir traits. Classic noir was marked by narrative complexity and ambiguity of character so neo-noir sees the classic narrative in disarray. He quotes Spicer who goes on to say that the excess of neo-noir is evident in its highly complex narratives where the convoluted plots often circle back on themselves and in a pervasive uncertainty about the reliability of what is being shown or told. Those descriptions unequivocally fit Nolan's films, as they are littered with ambiguous protagonists, narratives with complex structures, circularly convoluted plotting, as well as featuring an ingrained sense of uncertainty of the world. Nolan's series of white male protagonists are "driven by the need for absolute certainty in a world were certainty is impossible."[43] This leads to a deeply melancholic sense of distrust in the world, often brought about by a deep-rooted sense of victimization.

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[40] Timberg, "Indie Angst," pg. 15
[41] ibid., pg. 14
[42] Armstrong, "Somewhere in the Night," pg. 122
[43] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

Urban environments are the settings for Nolan's films, which is especially apparent in his Batman films and *Inception*. *The Dark Knight, Following,* and *Inception* all also touch on matters of surveillance; the first through literal surveillance, the second through voyeurism and the last through intrusion into a subject's mind, the final refuge of privacy, all fortifying distrust of the surrounding world. The sprawling metropolitan backdrops engulf the characters, which simultaneously shows the immense effect the characters have on the world around them. This power is projected outwards in an attempt to mend their broken hearts through external change.

In his book, Dimendberg could have been referring to Christopher Nolan's films directly when he describes film noir as "preoccupied with the traumas of unrecoverable time and space" and as featuring "inability to dwell comfortably either in the present or the past."[44] He goes on to depict what noir tries to convey as "a lived experience with the impression of real life being presented to the audience."[45] The first two quotes directly relate to how preoccupied Nolan is with his protagonists' traumas and their inability to deal with them sufficiently, along with the non-linearity of his narratives. The last quote perfectly matches the method of Nolan's attempts to ground his films, no matter how fantastical, in a sense of reality.

Christopher Nolan reflects on neo-noir in his work with the use of noir styles and motifs without necessarily fitting neatly into all of noir's squares, which is appropriate given noir's status as an artistic movement rather than a genre. It also serves to effectively heighten the visibility and negative elements of female representation in his films. Having established these overt connections to film noir in Nolan's films we can move on to explore the role of his women in them.

There is a certain paradox in Nolan's film narratives as the female characters are simultaneously hypothetically supremely important, yet they are usually absent and without agency. In other words, women are crucial in his films, but rarely in pro-active ways and they are almost always ultimately disempowered. They are generally lovers, wives, and mothers, but are not seen in the role of motherhood. This is in line with the fear of the mother and reflects the general absence of parents in his films, itself a potential reflection on his father's absence, as well as his own while he is away from his children when making films, something that causes him a degree of guilt and is simultaneously a trait of noir.[46] Occasionally the women appear as femme fatales but their sexuality is rarely on display. Looking back at Christine Gledhill's five features of

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[44] Dimendberg, pg. 1
[45] ibid., pg. 5
[46] Shone, "Rebooted the Blockbuster"

film noir, four would apply to Nolan's films, except the sexual photographing of women, as his films show an almost complete lack of sexuality in any shape or form. Because the films are not sexual and do not portray women sexually, the lack and absence of the feminine is intensified. In effect this is a dual muffling, the women's sexual power is removed and their corporeal forms evaporated, allowing for the ultimate disempowering in a manner of speaking. So while he does not objectify them sexually, which under any other circumstances would be positive, the context in which his films are made and the noir influences there on actually lead to the sum total being more negative than positive. Even though the visual side of the subjugation is not present in the same sense as Mulvey theorizes, it is still there as a whole. Through the lens of Gledhill, Nolan's films also exhibit another paradox as he produces films that are steeped in genre filmmaking but always seeks to service the utmost sense of reality. This results in difficulty for Nolan to craft female characters that have their own agency when he is working within an arena that is inherently opposed to that notion.

Christopher Nolan's protagonists' unifying trait is that of their feeling culpable for the loss of a loved one, condemned to wrestle with the trauma of that event. The repeated nature of this particular trauma throughout Nolan's cinematic career is striking. It is not hyperbolic to say that the loss of women plays a central and pivotal role in every single film that Christopher Nolan has ever made. Criticism has been leveled at him for this recurrent theme on which his films are built to the extent that some critics claim that Nolan is making the same film over and over again. This is a crass oversimplification, as the other thematic and narrative elements of his films do vary considerably. However, it is fair and valid to critique Nolan for relying so heavily on killing off the wives, girlfriends, and mothers of his white male protagonists to motivate them, especially when one considers the negative gender connotations of the trope. In modern popular culture this is referred to as "fridging," derived from the term "Women in refrigerators," a concept coined by comic book writer Gail Simone and originating from a comic book scene where a superhero, Green Lantern, discovers his violently brutalized girlfriend dead and stuffed in their refrigerator. Female characters in popular culture are disproportionately killed, maimed, or disempowered at an alarming rate for the benefit of male character development[47]

The root causes of female deaths in Nolan's films lie primarily with the protagonists, who through their actions or circumstances drive their loved women either

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[47] G. Simone, *Women in Refrigerators*, March 1999, http://lby3.com/wir/, (accessed 28 December 2014)

to suicide or a situation which causes them to be killed, or in some instances will do the deed themselves. A quick rundown of Nolan's filmography clearly reveals his repeated use of this narrative plot twist: *Following* features a femme fatale with whom the protagonist has an intimate relationship and is ultimately killed, a murder for which he is framed. *Memento* features a short-term memory impaired man hunting down the rapist-killer of his wife, though he might be more at fault than he initially lets on. *Insomnia* (2002) features a detective hunting down a serial killer of women and accidentally kills his working partner, a female detective. *Batman Begins* simultaneously features the death of Bruce Wayne's parents, which sets him on a costumed path of vengeance and the introduction of a female love interest, Rachel Dawes. *The Prestige* features two stage magicians, Angier and Borden, who attempt to best one-another in a fierce rivalry ignited when Borden is partly responsible for Angier's wife drowning, which among other things leads Borden's wife to hang herself due to the emotional toil of their deadly game. Batman returns in *The Dark Knight*, a film that includes the death of his love interest to serve as motivation for him, Harvey Dent, and Jim Gordon out of grief and guilt. *Inception* follows a dream thief who is haunted by the memory of his dead wife who killed herself after becoming convinced that reality was a dream, a state brought about by his actions. Finally, *The Dark Knight Rises* has Batman in a reclusive, almost catatonic state following the death of Rachel Dawes in the previous film. Two new love interests, both femme fatale types, are introduced, one of which who initially under the guise of redeemer turns out to be the film's villain, which leads to him killing her, while he lives happily ever after with the other. This closure however does not signal a complete break in the cycle, as Nolan's latest film, *Interstellar*, features a single father, though the dead wife is not omnipresent throughout and he is not actually at fault for her death, nor is he tormented by it, her death mentioned only once in passing. Perhaps a change is in the air in Nolan's filmmaking as the main character's daughter is the second lead in a film which could be considered the least influenced by the film noir aesthetic in his filmography.

Is it possible that the women in Nolan's films have to die because the male protagonists are too ambiguous and insecure of their manhood, feeling undeserving of the power to possess them? It would certainly seem so, and even then when they do possess them it seems their obsessive natures or mistakes end up killing them. The only exception in this equation is *The Dark Knight Rises* where Catwoman's femme fatale nature and unrepressed sexuality is contained and restrained in a normative relationship with Bruce Wayne at the end of the film instead of being killed, which does little to no

service to her autonomy. Whichever way one looks at it, the portrayal of women is sorely lacking in Nolan's films.

The four films that provide the broadest palette to exemplify these traits are *Memento*, *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Inception*. They form a thorough crosscut of Nolan's career and display the development of his style as well as underlining the recurrent motif of female absence and lack over time.

4. Film Analysis

4a. *Memento*

Memento, based on a short story by Nolan's brother Jonathan, is a thriller that follows Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), who is unable to form new short-term memories, as he searches for his wife's rapist-killer known only as John G, whose attack also left Leonard memory impaired. Along the way a sleazy detective and a seemingly helpful barmaid aid Leonard, but not all is as it seems in his quest for vengeance. The film is structured in such a way that alternating scenes are shown forwards and backwards from the beginning and ending of the narrative. The plot therefore concludes in the middle of the chronological narrative, with the discovery that Leonard has long since killed the original John G and is manipulating circumstances so as to give his life continued purpose.

Memento begins as the film fades in on Polaroid photo in close-up. It shows the body of a man, murdered and lying in a pool of his own blood. Then the photo slowly starts to fade out, the Polaroid is shaken and goes almost completely blank. In that moment the viewer realizes that the close-up is actually being shown in reverse. Then the film cuts to a reverse shot, showing a man who turns out to be the film's protagonist, Leonard, taking the photo, continuing in reverse. As it turns out that entire sequence is shown in reverse, creating a profoundly uncanny effect. A cut to black and white shows Leonard sitting on a bed in a sleazy motel room as he narrates the situation; a setup which is textbook noir, but clearly not straightforward in any shape or form. Christopher Nolan creates a convoluted mystery plot out of a simple premise and narrative by mixing up the film's structure: Color and monochrome sequences alternate, the color ones taking place chronologically backwards while the monochrome ones progress chronologically forward. This results in the film ending in its chronological middle, where the twist is fully revealed. Not only does this structuring allow for a mystery that would otherwise not play out correctly over the course of a film with a linear narrative, it also allows the audience to experience the film in a manner akin to that of its protagonist, who suffers from anterograde amnesia. The film's structure is paramount, Leonard does not know what happened earlier because he cannot construct the memories of the events and the audience does not know either because they have not seen the events. As such one's opinion of the characters fluctuate throughout the film as one discovers and sees more and as things are re-contextualized with new information regarding previous events.

The title of the film refers most directly to the trinkets, tattoos, and objects instrumental to Leonard's system of memory, as well as implying the film's theme of memory and its malleability, represented by the photos that Leonard not only manipulates with text but also destroys to control the narrative. Leonard has devised this system, tattooing key facts on his body and photographing everyone he meets and everything he owns, for him to remember where he stands in the progress of his mission of vengeance against the mysterious John G. Leonard explains that he uses habit and repetition to function and that having drive is paramount to continue on living. Thus his reason to live, the crux of his entire continued being, is revenge. Leonard makes a point of stating that while he cannot create new memories he does remember everything before the accident, the last thing he remembers being his wife seemingly dying, and that he does know who he is. Or so he thinks at least, as the film goes on to show that Leonard is not actually that person.

The concept of a systematic way of remembering corresponds directly to the construction of Nolan's later works. In *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors* Christopher Nolan is quoted thusly – describing *Memento* as a "dis-linear thriller, dealt to us in reverse chronology by a protagonist coping with a trauma-induced condition that prevents him from making new memories."[48] Nolan himself clearly recognizes that his protagonists are traumatized as well as stating in that quote that Leonard's condition is not physical but psychological, a key element in the film, as it relates to the film's story of the memory impaired Sammy Jankis. Sammy, a story that Leonard spends a good amount of the film's running time imparting and one that he tells everyone he meets, was a big case for Leonard in his previous life as an insurance claim officer, a clear reference to classic noir film *Double Indemnity* (1944, Billy Wilder), where he believed that Sammy's wife was trying to fraudulently claim money from insurance. When Leonard denied her claim on the grounds that Sammy's condition was not physical but mental, she attempted to prove that Sammy was not faking which resulted in him killing her by administering repeated insulin shots, not knowing that he had done so in rapid succession.

In the plot of the film Leonard primarily interacts with two individuals who appear to be helping him on his mission, Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) and Natalie (Carrie Ann Moss). The revelation of Natalie as less than savory comes off almost as a bluff, to momentarily distract us from the eventual truth that no one in the film is who they seem, but it also gives Nolan a chance to indulge in the noir trope of the manipulative spider-

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[48] Patterson, pg. 251

woman. She initially appears to be the polar opposite, a seemingly redeeming figure helping Leonard, as his picture of her is marked to be, out of pity, but it turns out that she uses him to her own ends after Leonard killed her drug dealer boyfriend, cleaning up the competition. In fact everyone is using him, even Leonard himself. The view on humanity expressed in the seedy West Coast town the film takes place in is deeply cynical and dark, well within the boundaries of film noir. What is most important and striking however is the fact that Natalie is basically the only character not absolutely punished for her manipulation, though Leonard does hit her at one point which she then uses to manipulate him when his memory fails to register the act of violence. In contrast, Teddy turn out to be the man lying dead at the beginning of the film and Leonard keeps himself in a perpetual purgatory, which practically invites others to manipulate him. That however does not excuse anyone from actually doing so, proving that *Memento* does paint a dire picture of mankind, even though Teddy tries to rationalize his wrongdoings by saying that he did all of those things to make Leonard happy by providing him with new John Gs.

In the case of *Memento* the central female in question, Leonard's wife, is dead before the film begins. Initially, the audience is led to believe that she was raped and murdered by intruders in their family home but as is revealed later on she dies of insulin overdose accidentally administered by Leonard. The implication is that Leonard is in steep denial, along with his trauma induced mental memory problem, and that Sammy Jankis' story is partly his own, at least as pertaining to the relationship with the wife, seeing how in reality Sammy was not married. Unable to reconcile the fact that he did this to his wife, Leonard manipulates the narrative of his own life in such a way that he is now the hero, hunting down his wife's murderer in order to perform a revenge killing. In fact, he has actually succeeded in doing this at least twice, each time conniving to fit new criminals in to mold of the original culprit. There is no wonder that every time he succeeds he is left feeling empty and without purpose because his whole mission is a sham. He cannot fix the problem if he cannot recognize that it stems from within himself, instead he projects it on to the world and tries to fix it in order to heal himself. He is a murderous psychopath, repeating the same thing over and over, expecting different results, not a hero.[49] In baser terms the violence he unleashes can be viewed as his masculinity overcompensating for the absence and lack of the feminine. His wife's absence justifies the violence in a manner that would be impossible if she were present. One could argue that the violence is righteous because it is being done to seemingly evil

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[49] Armstrong, "Somewhere in the Night," pg. 122

people but such arguments are questionable which disregards the fact that violence is rarely, if ever, justifiable.

4b. *The Prestige*

Set in Victorian era London, *The Prestige*, based on a novel by Christopher Priest, follows two rival stage magicians, Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), who are locked into a battle of wills after Borden is seemingly responsible for the accidental drowning of Angier's wife, Julia (Piper Perabo). Both men become famous performers and appear to move on from the event. Even though they find love in their lives, nevertheless, their professional rivalry escalates to dangerous levels. Angier sabotages a bullet grab trick which costs Borden two fingers. In retaliation, Borden sabotages a disappearing bird trick, maiming one of Angier's audience members. Borden presses on through his injury and performs a trick that amazes all who see it, The Transported Man, in which he appears to teleport across a stage to grab a ball that he himself had thrown. Not content to let Borden win, Angier recruits a body double to duplicate the trick, calling it The New Transported Man. That setup however leads to Angier ending the trick under the stage, unable to bask in the audience's glory, so he sends his assistant and new love interest, Olivia (Scarlett Johansson), to steal Borden's diary and find out how he performs the trick as Angier is certain that it is the same man that disappears and reappears. Olivia however is scorned by Angier using her as a tool and helps Borden sabotage Angier's trick, eventually starting up a romance with him. Borden then appears on stage as The Original Transported Man instead of Angier's body double and modifying the safety measures so that Angier breaks his leg. Angier, ridiculed and enraged both by his on stage failure and Borden's newly formed family with wife Sarah (Rebecca Hall), goes to America where he believes that Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) built a machine that allows Borden to teleport. Meanwhile, Olivia disappears and Sarah hangs herself, as she cannot deal with the emotional turmoil that Borden's stage life puts her through, him appearing to only really love her every other day. Angier manages to convince Tesla to build him a machine and then returns to London for a hundred performances of The Real Transported Man, a trick that only Angier knows involves duplication, not teleportation, necessitating that he drown the version of himself that steps into the machine, mirroring his wife's tragic death a hundredfold. The trick draws the awe of the masses and Borden feels compelled to discover how Angier performs it, sneaking backstage as Angier steps into the machine. Something goes wrong as Angier does not reappear and Borden sees

him fall into a locked case filled with water and drown. Despite trying to break him out, Borden is arrested, tried, and convicted of murdering Angier. In prison, Borden reads Angier's diary which in turn chronicles Angier's reading of Borden's diary. Entertained by reading as Angier discovers that Borden's diary is a false narration, he is likewise struck as Angier addresses him directly in his text, seemingly from beyond the grave, turning the trick around on Borden. While on death row he is visited by Angier, who mocks him and adopts his daughter while Borden implores Angier to tell the authorities that he is alive. Angier does not comply and Borden is hanged. Later, while attending to his tricks in a secret storage facility, Angier is surprised and confronted by Borden. He explains that The Transported Man was made possible by the fact that Borden was not one man, but in fact identical twins who lived a single life, but loved different women, in service of their stage trickery. The remaining Borden then shoots Angier and burns the storage facility down before being reunited with his daughter.

"Are you watching closely?" With *The Prestige*'s opening line, Nolan implores the viewer to scrutinize the film, urging them to seek out its finer details that will herald answers to the mysteries it presents through its labyrinthine structure of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and dual diary readings, both written by untrustworthy narrators. Appropriately, nothing in the film is as it seems, not even the premise of two men embroiled in rivalry as they are in truth three men. Borden is thus the literal embodiment of dualism. Angier and the Bordens are completely and utterly dedicated to the craft of stage magic; it is the only thing that truly matters to them. To them it is all theater, especially the Bordens. The magicians are completely insincere with everyone in their lives; they treat them simply as performances. In essence the lives they live are not real.

The film sees the greatest transplantation of noir tropes in Nolan's career, into a nineteenth century period piece that retains all of his hallmarks. It also serves as a prime example of the lack of sexual photography despite the opportunities afforded by the Victorian era stage assistant attire worn by Scarlett Johansson in the role of Olivia, who is frequently sexualized in her films.

In the narrative continuity of the film both females that are killed are dead before the film begins but in this case we see their deaths as the plot unfolds, rather than simply as a precursor to it, as is the case with *Memento*. There are two aspects to this loss: Angier's wife is drowned during a stunt, an event for which he feels Borden is responsible and of which Borden cannot provide fulfilling evidence that he is innocent, due to literally arguing with himself in the form of his secret twin. Angier is engulfed by

both rage and sorrow over the death of his wife, first attempting to drown himself in order to experience his wife's passing, foreshadowing the true nature of his ultimate magic trick, where he drowns his cloned doubles. Eventually, when pressed by Olivia how his wife would feel about the madness of his deadly game with Borden, Angier instinctively says that he does not care about her, the rivalry having replaced any other need for him. Olivia, who takes on the same assistant role that Angier's wife played quickly replaces her as a love interest, though he ends up losing interest in her as well in his battle to best Borden. This leads to her double-crossing him and falling in love with the Borden who is hanged for the staged murder of Angier. She is however never shown dealing with any of the fallout or revelations as she simply exits the film with little to no fanfare around the time that Sarah, Borden's wife, hangs herself. In short, she moves between the rivals as a love interest, proves malicious and mistrustful, and then simply disappears. The other target of loss, Sarah, is unable to cope with the web of lies and emotional trauma brought on her by her husband's duplicity and commits suicide. She is shown to recognize that all is not well, remarking that she can tell on which days Borden truly means that he loves her, stemming from the fact that the Bordens are taking turns at playing Alfred, with one loving her while the other loved Olivia. Relationships are built on trust, a fundamental that the Bordens break by constructing the lie that they are one person when in fact they are two. Borden, the one who lives, is a parent in *The Prestige* but is largely absent, despite the main emotional hook of the ending being the reunion with his daughter, the narrative and plot ending when he reclaims her from Angier.

  The Prestige concludes when the conflict between the magicians is resolved with the death of Angier at the hands of Borden, the elliptical plot coming around to parallel the film's intro where Borden supposedly killed him. This resolution however involves a great amount of tragedy and loss: One of the Borden brothers is dead, Sarah hanged herself, and the other Borden shoots Angier, versions of him having been exposed to painful drowning a hundred times. Much like in *Memento*, obsession is the absolute undoing. The ultimate lesson implies that complete and utter devotion to your craft will most certainly bring you glory in your field but it will come at the cost of those around you. In Borden's words they will be the price of a good trick.

4c. *The Dark Knight*

The Dark Knight, a heavily lauded thriller, is the second film in Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Saga and portrays Batman's (Christian Bale) continued struggle to rid

Gotham City of corruption and crime. While Batman has been making progress and the fledgling legal system has seen a boost thanks to the judicial vigor of district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) and his assistant and girlfriend Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a new breed of criminal arrives on the scene: The psychotic anarchist, The Joker (Heath Ledger). He threatens to unravel the city into pure chaos by killing cops and public servants, including seemingly assassinating Commissioner Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), calling for Batman to reveal his true identity, public opinion swaying against him when he refuses to do so. Seeing an opportunity, Dent publicly proclaims that he is Batman and is arrested. During his prisoner-transfer, The Joker assaults the convoy but the combined forces of Batman and Gordon, having faked his death, manage to repel him and finally take him into custody. In the subsequent interrogation, Joker reveals that all he wants is for Batman to break his one rule: Never to kill. It turns out that this whole sequence of events was all a ruse to kidnap Dent and Dawes and strap them to ticking time bombs. Batman and Gordon rush to their aid, as The Joker escapes custody in their absence, only to arrive too late. Rachel Dawes is killed and Dent is left heavily disfigured and emotionally distraught, transforming him into the villain Two-Face, who decides everything with a flip of a coin, leaving it up to pure chance. Batman also feels an immense sense of guilt, having failed to rescue the woman he loved and allowing The Joker to destroy Gotham's greatest symbol of hope. Prior to her death, Rachel had informed Alfred, Batman's butler, that she intended to marry Dent but he withholds this information from Batman, who still believes that she would leave Dent for him. However, he is forced to press on through his emotional doldrums as The Joker places bombs all over the city, threatening to blow up innocent citizens. Using a highly invasive form of surveillance, Batman taps into every cellphone in Gotham to find The Joker, finally subduing him. That however was not the full extent of The Joker plan, as he had managed to convince Two-Face to take vengeance on the ones who wronged him. Batman catches up with Two-Face, after he had killed several police officers, in the destroyed husk of the warehouse where Rachel died. There he holds Gordon and his family hostage, flipping his coin to see who lives and dies. Batman is shot but manages to tackle Two-Face off a ledge, killing him and injuring himself. Convinced that Dent was the best of them and that no one should know of the crimes he committed, Batman decides to take the blame for the murders. The film then concludes with him on the run; the hero that Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right know.

In *The Dark Knight* Christopher Nolan tackles Batman, the modern mythological hero figure, for the second time, building upon the origin story in *Batman*

Begins. Titling the film in that way also brings added mythical weight, with a knight being someone on a mission of higher purpose, but the modifier of "dark" twists it and offers us a view into the darkness in the hero. The extended chase sequence where Batman stops The Joker from assassinating the arrested Dent depicts how small The Joker and Batman are on a citywide scale, as the urban landscape of Gotham physically towers over them, yet they are exerting immense effect on the world around them. This sense of scale is increased by Nolan's usage of large format 70mm IMAX cameras, a technology he has used with increasing frequency since, in several of the film's urban scenes.[50] Essentially, the dystopian metropolis is the system in which they are trapped and they each attempt to mold this environment to their liking. More so than any other Nolan protagonist, Batman has to be represented in a degree of normalcy, so as to justify the violence that he commits. In turn, sadism is a feature of the antagonist, The Joker; this allows the protagonist himself to be sadistic. Even though he is enacting violence upon criminals, the question still lingers whether it is ethically justifiable to subject human beings to violence, regardless of their status as criminal or otherwise. He is after all a vigilante spouting justice on lawbreakers while breaking the law himself.

As in *The Prestige*, we see the female loss occurs on screen in *The Dark Knight*, but it is even more straightforward as the film is linearly plotted, unlike *Batman Begins* and Nolan's previous films that have been analyzed here. *The Dark Knight* is especially potent in this context of exploring the death of women in Nolan's films, as Batman is already a character with a tortured past and dead loved ones, which nurtures his underlying paranoid guilt complex sufficiently. As such, Batman is already groomed to fit Nolan's mold, but Nolan chose to create a new female character, in the form of Rachel Dawes. She was introduced as a childhood friend and potential love interest in *Batman Begins*, only for her to meet her end in *The Dark Knight* in service of the character development of Bruce Wayne, Harvey Dent, and Jim Gordon, as well as completing Batman's transformation into a fully "Nolanian" protagonist.

The element of female loss is not prevalent throughout most of the film itself until Rachel is killed; from there it dominates the final act of the film. Nolan's Batman films are the only films of his that deal directly with the protagonist's parents, who are absent in their deaths. Their deaths always linger in the background, never explicitly brought up, but they do inform Batman's actions as the catalyst for him becoming a vigilante. He blames himself for putting his parents in the position that lead to their murders and sees it as his duty to stop crime in Gotham as a result, believing it to be his

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[50] Ressner, "The Traditionalist"

city. Batman of course has a surrogate father figure in his wise butler Alfred (Michael Caine), but their relationship is portrayed rather as a deep friendship than a paternal bond.

To fully explore the female loss in *The Dark Knight* one must first recognize how it connects with both the previous film, *Batman Begins*, and the final film of the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*. In the first film, Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered in front of him. This motivates and drives him to fight crime as Batman out of a sense of responsibility as well as deep guilt. Even though he loses his mother figure, the film only focuses on Bruce's relationship with his father; the mother, for the lack of a better term, is absent, and not just because she is dead, or not dealt with, but rather for she has been swept under the rug. Thus the sole female force of any prominence in the film is Rachel Dawes, a childhood friend of Bruce's, who has the same ultimate goal as Bruce/Batman: Making Gotham a better place to live. Rachel is woman as redeemer, seen as Bruce's one chance at a normal life; at no point is she a femme fatale, though she does have moments of autonomy and authority within the film. She goes through several discreet phases in the film, as her overall arch renders her somewhat disempowered and her agency removed. Initially, as shown before Bruce sets out on his quest to become Batman, she puts him in his place as she is diligently working for the betterment of the city while Bruce sulks. As the film continues and Bruce becomes Batman, her authority lessens, to the degree that eventually she is little more than a damsel in distress, a fact compounded in the imagery of Batman carrying her, unconscious, in his arms, even her freedom of movement restricted.

"It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me," Batman says to her, when she asks who he is in the final moments of *Batman Begins*, recalling a line that she spoke to him before his transformation into a hero. By that logic Rachel is not much more than a damsel, although she does try her best, the inevitable result of which is her death. In *The Dark Knight,* Rachel is working at the district attorney's office. She is a proactive prosecutor of criminals, who the corrupt legal system does not want any association with, and a warrior for justice in the court of law. She crusades along with the new district attorney, Harvey Dent who is portrayed as "Gotham's White Knight" in contrast to Batman, with whom she has stuck up a romantic relationship. This invites a potentially unfortunate reading where she, a woman, is either not capable of accomplishing these tasks without the help of a man or that she might not be in a power position if she were not sleeping with him, both of which are problematic and undercut her status as an independent character. This series of events can also be read as a

woman assuming the phallic power of the legal system, and then being punished for it. She is striving for something that is viewed as unnatural for her to possess as a woman. So even though she is very much the woman as redeemer archetype and not the spider woman, for whom capital punishment is usually reserved, she is still eliminated to make room for the shattered masculinity of the male characters.

The Dark Knight Trilogy concludes in *The Dark Knight Rises* when Bruce has solidified Batman as an ideal for the people of Gotham, passed on the torch to the next generation, and replaced Rachel with a new paramour, Selina Kyle's Catwoman (Anne Hathaway). She is a femme fatale who is metaphorically restricted and contained in the role of a woman as redeemer for his purification. His possession of her seemingly allows him to mend his psychological wounds and live happily ever after, or at least appear momentarily content. Symbolically Bruce's shedding of the Batman suit can be read as him letting go of his immense sense of guilt, through the act of obtaining a female paramour in a normative relationship, he can now successfully tame the femme fatale, a feat no other noir protagonist has been allowed to do.

4d. *Inception*

Inception chronicles the exploits of a man on the run for the apparent murder of his wife, Dominic Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), attempting to return to his estranged children. To accomplish this he utilizes his very particular skill set: Mind theft. Using a special machine that allows him to share dreams with other people and extract any valuable information that they possess by constructing scenarios that convince his subjects that they are in reality. Along with this there is also the concept of inception; the almost impossible act of planting an idea in someone's head without them being aware of any foul play, in effect faking what seems like genuine inspiration. The machine also allows for multiple levels of dreaming within the dreams, with each level affecting weather and gravity in the layer below where time also passes relatively slower. Cobb is hired by Sato (Ken Watanabe), a wealthy industrialist seeking to monopolize the market, to incept a dying rival's son (Cillian Murphy) in order to make him break up his father's conglomerate. Cobb accepts on the grounds that Sato can make the charges against him disappear, allowing him to return to his children in America. To accomplish his mission, Cobb assembles a team to help him construct a labyrinthine dream within a dream scenario to make the inception possible. One of the team members, architecture student Ariadne (Ellen Page), is new to the world of shared dreaming so its features are explained to her, such as the subconscious turning against

the invasive dreamer and the importance of not losing one's grip on reality. Paramount to being sure of what is real is having a small item, or totem, that only its owner knows the physical properties of, enabling them to tell if they are in reality, as its qualities could not be faked. In preparation for the mission, Ariadne finds Cobb dreaming and sneaks into his dream, finding that he is attempting to reengineer memories to change their outcome, something that he had expressly forbidden her from doing, lest she lose her grasp on reality. In his dream she discovers that Cobb always brings a subconscious projection of his dead wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard), with him into every dream, where she serves to sabotage everything he tries to do. He reveals to Ariadne that he and Mal experimented with shared dreaming; discovering an unconstructed dreamspace known as Limbo, where time passes even slower. Living there as gods for over half a century in relative time, constructing whatever they desired, they lost touch with reality. Finally wanting to return but finding that Mal had rejected reality, Cobb incepts her into believing that her life is not real by manipulating her totem, a spinning top, later taking it as his own. After waking up, the idea still held in her, causing her to commit suicide in an attempt to return to reality. She had arranged circumstances so as it would appear that Cobb had killed her, hoping to force him to kill himself as well. Cobb flees the country and has been trying to get back ever since. Ariadne keeps Cobb's secret but implores him to tell the others that he could endanger them. As they embark on their mission the stakes are raised when they discover that death does not kick them up a level, but instead plunges them down to Limbo. Racing against the clock they finally reach the moment of inception, only for Mal to appear and eliminate their subject, Cobb failing to take her out when he had the chance. This leads to a last ditch effort where Cobb and Ariadne venture down into Limbo in order to retrieve him. Once there, they confront Mal and Cobb is finally able to accept that what he sees there is only a shadow of her, in reality she is gone, allowing him to let go of her. Successfully completing the mission, Cobb seemingly returns to his children though the film ends before his adopted spinning top can confirm whether or not he is truly in reality.

One of Christopher Nolan's central theses in *Inception* relates to the concept of ideas. Nolan has Cobb state that the most resilient virus is an idea; after it has taken hold it is almost impossible to get rid of. To a keen Nolan reader, it should be abundantly clear that the idea of a white male protagonist, riddled with guilt over his dead paramour has clearly taken hold in Nolan himself and is resilient to any and all forms of outside forces. *Inception* could be considered a culmination of everything that has come before in Nolan's career. His technique is at its most refined and at this point

his rise to prominence has allowed him to set up elaborate, complex, and expensive practical effects and camera tricks to accomplish his vision of mind heists and implants within people's dreams. *Inception* is a heist thriller with noir and science fiction trappings, as Nolan continues to cross-pollinate genres, with a particular slant towards the noir aesthetic. The uncertainty of the world in *Inception* is rivaled only by *Memento*, though it arguably surpasses the small town thriller setting in this regard, taking place in elaborately constructed dream worlds. Cobb's, or rather Mal's, spinning top, recalling the origami unicorns from *Blade Runner*, is eerily similar to the trinkets and mementos which Leonard uses in *Memento* to remind himself of his mission. Once again we are confronted by an unreliable narrator in the form of Cobb, a figure that Nolan wants us to mistrust.[51]

Deep regret on behalf of the protagonist is nowhere more prominent than in *Inception.* Cobb's guilt is always present, ready to crop up at any moment, in every action beat, haunting him at every single turn. Like *Memento*, the absent female, the wife, is dead before the film begins but unlike that film, here she is present throughout as a projection in Cobb's mind, the only view of her coming directly from his skewed point of view. Mal, the French word for bad or evil,[52] embodies the noir protagonist's neurosis; Cobb's underlying fear of how little he knows about the woman he has fallen in love with.[53] She is introduced as a femme fatale in a dark dress with dark, 1940s bombshell hair, and presented as having an uncanny power over Cobb, foiling him at every turn. This dynamic however is far more complicated than it initially appears, as the film demonstrates that it is not really the actions of the real Mal one is seeing, but instead Cobb's twisted, guilt ridden projection of her. In effect it is not actually Mal that does anything evil, she is only the victim of Cobb's inception. Essentially, it is his own mind which construes her as a femme fatale figure; a personification of his guilt and regret. So what we have is the representation of Cobb's shadow side and his guilt shown to be a female manifestation in the form of Mal. Her constant attempts to sabotage him stem from the fact that in the deepest recesses of his mind he feels that he does not deserve to succeed, his subconscious wanting him to fail. This is confirmed in the finale when Mal's projection asks him to stay with her in Limbo before he is ultimately able to reject her.

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[51] R. Capps, "Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and
Ambiguity," *Wired,* 28 November 2011,
http://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/all/, (accessed 21 October 2014)
[52] K. Blessing, "Mal-Placed Regret," *Inception and Philosophy: Because it's Never Just a
Dream*, ed. D.K. Johnson, Hoboken: Wiley, 2012, pg. 295–308, here pg. 296
[53] Capps, "Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity"

Cobb and Mal are absent parents in *Inception*, a reversal of the situation seen in Nolan's Batman films, but similar to *The Prestige*, which also to some extent revolves around returning to one's children. It would seem that Nolan has with age become more interested in the concept of parenthood, though his take on it is still twisted and mired with absence and guilt. Upon their first meeting, before the audience knows anything of their relationship, Mal asks if the children miss her, to which Cobb replies that he cannot even imagine how much they do. Cobb's guilt extends beyond simply causing his wife's suicide, also relating to how he has orphaned his children. Mal's suicide parallels that of Sarah in *The Prestige*; they are both driven to kill themselves due to a distrust of what is real, in both cases an untenable situation brought on by their supposedly loving husbands.

The presence of Ariadne, named after the Greek goddess of labyrinths and mazes who helped Theseus slay the Minotaur,[54] as the audience surrogate is interesting for the fact that she is a woman. It is from her point of view that the world of incepting is introduced and the rules of the world and the craft are conveyed and established, an audience identification role traditionally reserved for male characters. Ariadne is not fully developed as an independent character and possesses elements of the redeemer, as she serves a pivotal role in guiding Cobb towards his supposed redemption, thus guiding him out of his own maze. Despite this it is important to note that the audience's point of view is positioned from a female perspective and she does transcend her limitations, saving the team's mission of her own initiative; in effect her agency is her own, she is not killed and manages to stay her own person till the end without being subjugated in any way.

Inception ends when Cobb has dealt with his trauma of losing Mal and can thus return to his children. Cobb finally accepts the fact that Mal does no longer exists and is reconciled to the fact that he cannot revive her. However, there appears to be something insidious at work here, as the narrative trajectory is not in reality about how this woman is the victim of his manipulation, but his sadness relating to her suffering. In essence he is presented as the victim who overcomes adversity, freed of the shackles placed on him. Altogether troublingly, it is he who is solely responsible for his situation. It is however unclear if this is indeed a truly happy ending or if he still remains entrapped within the construct of his mind. This opens up an alternate view to dealing with trauma: Have you really dealt with the trauma or are you simply lying to yourself to patch up the wound without actual healing? Nolan has stated that the most important

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[54] Blessing, "Mal-Placed Regret," pg. 297

element of the ending is the fact that Cobb goes towards his children; not looking towards the spinning top as it no longer matters to him.[55] The top does indeed wobble but it is still spinning at the end of the film, allowing for the speculation of whether or not the sequence is a dream. In a way this makes the film's final note an extremely selfish one, as Cobb only cares that he be reunited with his children, but not that they be reunited with him, for if this reunion is all in his mind he seems content with his situation, choosing, like Mal apparently did, to forget reality.

However, the end can also be read in a more positive light. The common theme with Nolan's protagonists up until this point, aside from the loss, guilt and grief, is that they attempt to heal themselves by fixing their external world, instead of attacking the root problem which certainly must stem from within themselves. Cobb however works almost exclusively internally, most often inside other people's minds but also within his own. Though one could also say that the goal of reuniting him with his children is an external change, the internal work is thus a means to an end rather than an ultimate cure.

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[55] Capps, "Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity"

5. Summary and final words

Nolan pushes certain boundaries in all of his films, especially in light of their status as blockbuster entertainment, but as I hope to have established clearly in this essay there is one area where he is sadly complacent. Stepping back from any notions of gender, misogyny, and representation, the death of a loved one and its subsequent guilt is the simplest motivation in storytelling, and to use it as the foundation for over a decade of filmmaking could be critiqued as supremely lethargic. That is not what we want or should expect from filmmakers granted such freedom to create. Especially when the results have such damning connotations.

Despite the fact that Nolan is clearly capable of crafting female characters outside of the regressive noir models, taking Natalie and Ariadne as examples, it seems of no great interest to him to do so. Nolan could therefore be accused of towing the conformist line as he fails to challenge the normality set in place by post-World War II noir films; his own films continuing to reinforce the normalization of patriarchal rule. It would be difficult to proclaim with absolute certainty that Nolan himself is necessarily overtly misogynistic. His films do not portray blatant aggressiveness against women but instead fit into a more subtle, systematic subjugation of them. His films in and of themselves would not be considered anti-female, but placed within the larger cultural context they do aid in perpetuating the ruling male supremacy worldview. This is potentially harmful when placed in the context of an inexperienced or uneducated viewer. If one is aware of the problem with representation and the subjugation of those pushed to the fringes of the patriarchal norm, these messages would hold no potential influence. A viewer armed with counter-knowledge, a tool to deflect and decipher subliminal propaganda, cannot be swayed by the harmful messages, no matter how unconscious, subtle or sinister they may be. The depressing reality however is that a large majority of viewers are completely unaware of any propaganda or stereotyping and are thus ripe for manipulation.

E. Ann Kaplan states in her introduction to *Women in Film Noir* (Originally written in 1978) that "one of the depressing aspects of the study of women in art works is the repetition of the same structures, showing the strong hold of the patriarchy."[56] This cyclical nature of repetition was in place in the noir revivals of the time and is clearly prevalent in modern filmmaking. Without rigorous discourse creating informative dialogue regarding these issues, the problem will persist and continue to

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[56] Kaplan, "Introduction," pg. 1

stall and impede any further attempts towards egalitarian emancipation for both genders.

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