Christopher Nolan, Melodrama, and Why Love is All You Need

Roald Richard Lindof
Engelsk, 10. semester
Forår 2025

Summary

Christopher Nolan, Melodrama, and Why Love is All You Need is a thesis which analyses the films of Christopher Nolan through the lens of auteur theory. It argues that Christopher Nolans films have a personal style added to them by Christopher Nolan, which involves cerebral logic, that is in tension with the material of his films, which is thoroughly melodramatic pathos. The thesis also poses that all Christopher Nolan films can be set in to two categories of how they deal with melodramatic pathos. The first category involves the film going all in with the cerebral logic, showing how self destructive that can be to the characters within the film. The second category has the film and the films characters go all in on the melodramatic pathos, showing how that helps the film and the films characters out. The thesis goes through the history of auteur theory, as well as showing off some of the criticisms of it that have come up. The specific films that the thesis analyses are *Memento, Interstellar, Tenet,* and *Oppenheimer*. The thesis finds that all of these films involve the personal style of Christopher Nolans cerebral logic, as well as having tension with the material, being melodramatic pathos. The thesis concludes with showing that Christopher Nolan is indeed an auteur, and that his personal style is cerebral logic which as a tension with the melodramatic pathos that is the main material of his films.

Introduction

Christopher Nolan is one of the most interesting working filmmakers at the moment, and one of the biggest reasons as to why that is, is because he is a director with his own personal vision. Christopher Nolan, whether you enjoy his films or not, will show you something that could only come from him. This is what this thesis is all about, it looks at the films of Christopher Nolan and shows what makes them unique, and interesting. How this is done is through looking at Christopher Nolan's filmography through the lens of auteur theory. Firstly the history of the auteur theory is explored, seeing where it came from and how it has developed over time, starting with the writers of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, Truffaut, Bazin, leading in to Andrew Sarris, who eventually coined the term auteur theory for the english speaking world, as well as actually laying out a method as to how one can spot an auteur. Finally for auteur theory this thesis looks at some criticisms of the theory, specifically from Pauline Kael. All of this is important knowledge to fully understand why and how auteur theory is important, as well as showing how it is the only way that one can analyse one person's whole filmography.

In this thesis it is shown that Christopher Nolan is an auteur, specifically through the way in which Andrew Sarris describes an auteur having a tension between their personal style and the material of their films. This thesis shows that the personal style of Christopher Nolan is a cerebral kind of logic, while the material of his films is the pathos of melodrama, meaning that the most important thing to understanding Christopher Nolan's filmography, is understanding that what he finds most important to showcase in his films, is melodrama. On top of this, this thesis shows that the way in which Christopher Nolan's films showcase the pathos of melodrama to be the most important, is shown in two different ways, either by showing the folly of giving fully in to cerebral logic, or showing the wonders of giving fully in to the pathos of melodrama.

As it would simply stretch the material too far to analyse every single one of Christopher Nolan's films, this thesis has picked four films of his to dive deeper into, though the rest of his filmography will be discussed within these deeper dives. The exact films that are deeply analyzed within this thesis are *Memento* (2000), *Interstellar* (2014), *Tenet* (2020), and *Oppenheimer* (2023). These films have been chosen due to their overall differences between each other, as well as to show how Christopher Nolan's auterial traits have evolved through time.

Theory

Truffaut

The main theoretical framework which this project will use is that of auteur theory. While Andrew Sarris coined the term auteur theory in 1962, the idea of it originates from earlier than that (Sarris, 1962). In 1954 François Truffaut wrote an article in *Cahiers du Cinema*, a French film magazine, about a tendency in French cinema that he had come to dislike (Truffaut, 1954). This tendency being what he called "the Tradition of Quality" which he felt was abundant in the cinema of the time. What "the Tradition of Quality" describes within French cinema, is how French directors would often adapt well-regarded literary works to film and the emphasis these directors put on the screenplay, rather than on the mise-en-scene of the film. Truffaut's problem with "the Tradition of Quality" is not found in the adaptation of these literary works, but rather how this adaptation is done. Truffaut specifically calls out two screenwriters in his article, Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who reinvented the way in which adaptations of literary works were made at the time, so that rather than being faithful to the letter of the work, one had to be faithful to the spirit of the work. However to Aurenche and Bost this manifested in something they called equivalence. What equivalence meant in this context is that Aurenche and Bost found that when adapting literary works there were scenes that were filmable and scenes that were unfilmable, and where in the old system these unfilmable scenes would simply be removed, Aurenche and Bost would instead replace them with scenes that were equivalent. Truffaut mentions here that the idea of filmable and unfilmable scenes was simply an idea that was taken for granted, rather than an idea to be investigated further, and this is where his main criticism lies. One problem that arises from this thinking, is that if it was deemed impossible to come up with an equivalent scene to an unfilmable scene, the unfilmable scene would simply be cut from the screenplay, much like how it used to be before Aurenche and Bost's "Tradition of Quality". An example of this that Truffaut discusses is that of George Bernanos' 1936 novel *Diary of a Country Priest*. Aurenche and Bost had actually written a screenplay based on this novel, however that screenplay was never made into a film due to Bernanos finding the adaptation insufficient. One way in which this manifested was with the character of Dr. Delbende, in the novel Dr. Delbende dies about halfway through, this Aurenche thought would be an impossible task to put into a film adaptation, choosing to instead remove the character from the narrative

altogether. Aurenche even mentioned that he could imagine that in ten years time it would be possible to create a film involving a character dying halfway through, but for him it would not be possible (Graham & Vincendaeu). Three years after Aurenche made this remark, Luc Bresson's adaptation *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), would be released in theaters. This adaptation does not remove Dr. Delbende from the narrative, and watching the film it seems as though removing him and his death from the narrative would be a great betrayal to the original work. The function of Dr. Delbende in the narrative of *Diary of a Country Priest*, is as a mirror to the main character, the titular country priest. They are both struggling with feelings of losing their faith, while the people of the respective towns they both reside in find their skills subpar, Delbende's skills as a doctor and the priest's skills as a clergyman. Soon after Dr. Delbende is introduced in the story, he commits suicide, and it is only after this that the priest finds out about the parallels between Delbende's and his own life, prompting him to further examine his loss of faith and the consequences suicide would have on that. With all this in mind it seems absurd that Aurenche would choose to omit this character from the narrative, purely because he found it unfilmable. Truffaut praises Bresson, first of all for faithfully adapting the novel, but secondly and most importantly he praises him as being a director that is capable of looking at what was previously thought to be an unfilmable scene, and making it work on camera. Towards the end of Truffaut's piece on "the Tradition of Quality" he mentions that he does not see any way that this tradition could coexist with what he then calls a "cinema d'auteur" that directors like Bresson belong to, planting the seeds of what would eventually come to be known as auteur theory.

Bazin

The next step towards auteur theory comes in 1957 again in the Cahiers du Cinema with André Bazin's article "La Politique des Auteurs" (Bazin, 1957). This article is interesting as it seeks to do a couple of things. First of all it wants to make sure that it reminds the reader that the writers of the magazine Cahiers du Cinema are not a monolith, and while a lot of the writers for the magazine might share a lot of opinions, they do not share all of their opinions and they definitely do not share them all the time. What this is in relation to is what Bazin calls the "politique des auteurs", which a lot of the writers for the Cahiers du Cinema had adapted at the time (Bazin, 1957). So while it was common for the writers to believe in the "politique des auteurs" it was not a policy of Cahiers du Cinema to believe in it.

Secondly the article is actually an early bit of criticism towards auteur theory, of course called “politique des auteurs” in the article. Bazin spends most of the article writing about his problems with the “politique des auteurs”. Not necessarily saying he disagrees with it, but rather trying to open up a dialogue about it, by pointing out things within the “politique des auteurs” that he finds problematic. He wants the discussion around the “politique des auteurs” to be more nuanced. One of Bazin’s first problems with the “politique des auteurs”, is that he feels it does not examine the actual work being done, but rather just looks at the name of the director and from there the film can be assessed as good or bad, depending on if the director is seen as an auteur or not. Bazin elaborates that he himself frequently finds films that he believes transcends the director, which makes it hard for him to truly give in to the idea of the “politique des auteurs” (Bazin, 1957). Furthermore, Bazin goes on to talk about how cinema as an artform, as a necessity, is not individualistic but rather a collaborative effort. This he believes should not be looked at as a hindrance, but rather as a fact of the matter that needs to be reckoned with and discussed, both positively and negatively (Bazin, 1957). With this he segues into praising American cinema, which believers of the “politique des auteurs” find to be one of the best places to find auteurs. But Bazin argues that while a lot of the directors within Hollywood are brilliant, what really makes American cinema excel is the Hollywood system, with its plentiful resources and traditions (Bazin, 1957). Bazin however does also give some credence to the “politique des auteurs” when he talks about the ever changing landscape of art, first by giving the example of Abel Gance, who in his 1927 film *Napoleon* used a revolutionary new cinematic technique which came to be known as Polyvision to project the finale of the film. What Polyvision did was use three projectors simultaneously in the theater, to show the film in ultra-widescreen. However, *Napoleon* (1927) was the only film to ever use this technology. At the time of the film's release, it had a lukewarm reception, due to it being a silent film and talkies becoming more relevant. Bazin argues though, that in 1957 the film had been reevaluted to be much more significant than before thought, and Polyvision in particular being an incredibly interesting film technique, that only an auteur such as Abel Gance could have come up with (Bazin, 1957). The next argument Bazin brings up is that if one is to be a follower of the “politique des auteurs”, one must also believe that any auteur's latest film must be their best work. This would be due to the auteur, throughout their career, becoming a better and more skilled filmmaker. An example would then be that a follower of the “politique des auteurs” would look at Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* (1994), and then look at Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), to then come away thinking that *Alice in Wonderland* is better and more important than *Ed Wood*. Now of course an argument can be

made that this is true, but Bazin would argue that for a follower of the "politique des auteurs" it will always be true due to *Alice in Wonderland* having been made after *Ed Wood*, and because of this, Tim Burton must have grown as an auteur and filmmaker. While this of course is a fairly flawed argument, due to the many different circumstances and challenges involved in filmmaking, in large part due to it being an inherently collaborative artform, rather than a truly singular one. Bazin acknowledges that this is flawed but then goes on to further argue that, for the argument to stand the later film must then also be a work that is not dependent on anyone but the auteur. An example of this could then be comparing Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis* (2024). Once again the argument for Bazin would be that due to *Megalopolis* being made after *Apocalypse Now*, it must be the better and more important film. But furthermore, due to *Megalopolis* being completely funded solely through Coppola himself, he had no higher ups to answer to, meaning the film could be made exactly as he wanted to, rather than making any compromises. This would then truly mean that *Megalopolis* is a truer vision of what Coppola wanted to make as a filmmaker than *Apocalypse Now*, and if one is a follower of the "politique des auteurs" that must then mean it is the better and more important film.

Bazin has one last argument for why a later film might not necessarily be the better one, and that is simply that the medium has outpaced the filmmaker, not necessarily meaning that the filmmaker has become worse in their later years, but rather that filmmaking around them has moved on to different things that this specific auteur might not be able to keep up with, or find interesting. This does not necessarily mean that what the filmmaker is doing is bad, but rather that seeing it for what it is might be harder at the time. This was his earlier argument for Abel Gance for example.

Lastly, Bazin tries to actually define what the "politique des auteurs" is. First trying to distinguish between what he calls true auteurs, and what he calls merely "metteurs-en-scene". A "metteur-en-scene" is what would now be called a journeyman director. A reliable filmmaker, that does not necessarily have much of a singular voice but can make a film, "metteur-en-scene" literally meaning scene-setter, meaning that what they do is literally just set up the scene so that it can be filmed, rather than truly thinking out the mise-en-scene. True auteurs on the other hand, he describes as always leaving something of themselves within the film, in some way always telling the same story, even if the subject matter is different. A true auteur is someone who speaks in the first person (Bazin, 1957).

Bazin ends the article by tepidly defending the “politique des auteurs”, writing that it is a way to view cinema as a piece of true artistic creation, but that if used incorrectly it overlooks the actual film to instead praise the auteur (Bazin, 1957).

Andrew Sarris

We then return to Andrew Sarris and his notes on auteur theory in 1962. What this article does is define what is meant with auteur theory. As Andrew Sarris thinks that when people like Bazin use terms like “politique des auteurs” they are somewhat misunderstanding it, and with how vague that term has been up until then, he wanted to define it better than had been done before. This would also be the first time an english speaker would talk about auteur theory, and while other critics such as Bazin and Truffaut had somewhat defined the term already, this would also be the first time it was actually called auteur theory, Andrew Sarris being the person to coin the term (561).

Sarris’ problem with the term arises when people like Bazin take it to its furthest extreme, believing for example that a bad director is unable to make anything but bad films, and even further believing that good directors could never make a bad film. Sarris finds this notion foolish, as any director, auteur or not, will not always work at the same level. For a critic to watch a film by a supposedly bad director, and assuming it will be bad because of that, would run counter to the idea of what a critic is supposed to do. However, Sarris supplements this by then saying that the whole point is not that auteur theory is fully consistent, but rather that it largely is. A bad director will not always make a bad film, but will rather mostly make bad films, and vice versa with a good director (561). Taking this idea and extrapolating it to Christopher Nolan as an auteur, tells us that the idea behind him as an auteur does not concern itself with if his individual films are of high quality, but rather then the consistency of his work being largely high quality.

The next point brought up is important, as it is the first time that the idea of the auteur is not just presented as something that refers to the director of the film, but also potentially the actors involved in the film, as well as the work being adapted being critically acclaimed already. Sarris uses a fictional example of someone he sees as a mediocre director, getting to work with a group of great actors on an adaptation of a critically acclaimed play. However I think a more apt and contemporary example would be that of the director David Yates and his

work on the Harry Potter films. The four Harry Potter films that David Yates directed are all critically acclaimed, but everything he's made besides that has been critically panned.

Why exactly that is can come down to three factors, much like in Sarris' original example. The first and seemingly most important factor is the inherited cast. Before David Yates stepped in to direct the Harry Potter films, there had already been made four other Harry Potter films, with a well established cast. The three main actors Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, and Rupert Grint, while still child actors, would have been playing their characters for years at this point, which would mean that they know their characters well enough to understand how to play them further on, even with lackluster direction. On top of this, the Harry Potter films are filled to the brim with great actors, such as Alan Rickman, Brendan Gleeson, Gary Oldman, Helena Bonham Carter, and Michael Gambon to name a few. These actors would be able to play their characters well due to their experience outside of the Harry Potter films, as well as some of them already having been in previous Harry Potter films and building off of that. The actors who had not been in previous Harry Potter films would however also know the tone of the films, from having seen the previous ones before joining the cast.

This leads to the second factor, the source material. Every Harry Potter film is based on a Harry Potter book, except for the last book which is split into two films. Every Harry Potter book is largely well acclaimed and incredibly popular. Which means the source material is well known. This latches on to the actors knowing their characters well already, if they have read the books. This also means that if the films do not stray too far from the source material, it is likely that anyone who likes the books already, will like the films. Meaning that the director has a fairly rigid framework that they can build from, and also stay within if they want to be safe with the film. There are of course still directorial choices to make, but this leads into the third factor.

The third factor is the fact that before David Yates stepped in, there had already been four other Harry Potter films made. The first two directed by Chris Columbus, the third directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and the fourth directed by Mike Newell. A lot can be said about all three of these directors, but the most important one here is Alfonso Cuarón. There is an incredibly marked shift in aesthetics between the second and third Harry Potter film, this in one part is due to the source material beginning to get bleaker by the third Harry Potter book, but more importantly it coincides with the known aesthetics of Alfonso Cuarón as an auteur director. Alfonso Cuarón's other films are very aesthetically similar to the third Harry Potter

film, and this bleaker aesthetic carries over into every Harry Potter film afterwards, especially the David Yates films.

All this to say that even if a director is involved in making a good film, it is possible that the film is good in spite of the director, rather than because of the director. The true auteur of the Harry Potter films is hard to pinpoint, but it is likely more within the actors and the source material, rather than David Yates.

Returning to Sarris, we finally get a concrete and concise overview of what exactly an auteur entails within the auteur theory. For Sarris, the auteur theory is split into three parts, which he says should be visualized as three concentric circles (Sarris 562-563). The first part, and the outermost circle involves the auteur's technical capabilities. This aspect is fairly wide, as it entails competencies within photography, editing, and even the acting within a film. So when talking about this outermost circle of the auteur theory, what is being spoken about is such things as if the camerawork is competent. Is the subject shown well? Are the colours correct? Do the camera movements work? Are there even any camera movements? These are all questions that pertain to this aspect of the auteur theory. As well as if the editing is competent? Do the shots linger too long before a cut? Is a cut too quick? Are there any superfluous scenes that could be cut out entirely? These all also pertain to this aspect, however it is also important to think about why a cut might seem too long, or why a scene might seem superfluous, as this leads us deeper into the second aspect of the auteur theory as presented by Sarris.

The second part of Sarris' view on the auteur theory concerns personal style (Sarris 562). What this aspect is about is the idea that when you are watching a film by an auteur, you can make out that it is a film made by this auteur, due to the way the film looks and moves (Sarris 562). The individual auteur has a specific aesthetic that is identifiable. The auteur is not just competent at knowing how to use a camera and how to edit a film. But rather they know how to competently use a camera and edit their film to make it look like one of their own. A fairly superficial example of this can be Wes Anderson. While it is important to note that Wes Anderson's films are deep and complex, aesthetically his films are incredibly easy to identify. With his frequent use of a warm color palette, filling the screen with reds, yellows, and oranges, along with his usual symmetrical framing, knowing when you are watching a Wes Anderson film is a simple task.

For the third and final part of Sarris' view on the auteur theory, we also have the most abstract aspect of it (Sarris 562-563). This aspect concerns the interior meaning that the

auteur injects into their films, through the tension that comes from the auteur's personality, and the auteur's material (Sarris 562). It is the almost intangible throughline that tells the viewer that what they are looking at is made from one specific vision, and that vision is important. What creates this interior meaning can both be grand and bombastic, but it can also be small things, such as the way Martin Scorsese and Thelma Schoonmaker cut their films, frequently just a tiny bit off by what would be considered the norm. This aspect will not necessarily be readily available and easy to recognize within any given auteur's film, but if studied closely it will be there (Sarris 562-563).

For an auteur to be considered truly great, they would need to inherit all three of these aspects (Sarris 562-563). However, to be an auteur according to Sarris one only needs the third aspect, interior meaning, within their films. As long as a director has that connecting throughline, they can be considered an auteur, but perhaps not one that makes particularly great films. An example of this could be Kevin Smith, who undeniably has a singular vision when he creates films, but is also well known to be fairly incompetent with the technical aspects of filmmaking. Famously getting in a heated argument with Ben Affleck about how Smith almost never moves the camera.

Sarris finishes his article off with why exactly it is interesting to look at a director as an auteur, instead of just viewing the films as individual pieces of art. Which when it comes down to it is fairly simply that it can deepen the meaning of their films. One can watch a later film by a director and see something they find interesting, go back and watch an earlier film by that director, and see the conception of this idea, expanding their knowledge of why this exact idea came about, as well as why perhaps the director found it interesting. At the same time it is also possible that if one does not know about this aspect from the earlier film at first, it will be entirely uninteresting in the later films, because one does not know the context that the director does, but because one has seen the earlier film the context will add a lot of depth to the film. This is why he finds the auteur theory interesting and important (Sarris 564).

Pauline Kael

When discussing the usage of the auteur theory, it is important to understand that it is a theory that has many criticisms, and that some of these criticisms are valid. This was already apparent even before the term was coined by Sarris, as we saw in Bazin’s article on the

subject, though his criticism was fairly light and hinged on understanding the theory in a very specific way. However, in 1963 film critic Pauline Kael would write an article named "Circles and Squares" in direct response to Andrew Sarris and his view on the auteur theory (12). The article is extremely critical of the auteur theory in general, but in large parts seemingly mostly due to the examples that Sarris uses in his article, rather than fully engaging with the points he tries to make through the examples. Nonetheless it is an important text within the history of auteur theory, and does still bring up some interesting points concerning auteur theory, especially at the time.

Kael's articles starts out by criticising Sarris' final point of his article, that what makes it interesting to watch films through the lens of auteur theory is that it lets the viewer see how the directors ideas have developed, through how the director explores those ideas throughout their filmography. Kael points out that this is just something that is innate to art criticism as a whole, that when one looks at an author's works, the work being a painting, book, or film, one will always be taking into account the authors previous works (Kael 13). On top of this she also mentions that just noticing an author repeating an idea, does not mean that the idea has developed, but rather that through this repetition the idea, as well as the author have diminished (Kael 13). Interestingly, Kael here takes for granted that the director is the author of the film, which is something even Sarris' version of the auteur theory does not. This viewpoint comes up again later in the article when Kael talks about how she does use directors as a guide, both positive and negative, in what films she wants to watch. She tries to avoid the directors which films she dislikes and rushes to directors which films she likes, and then some of the directors which she dislikes she will still watch if there are specific actors in their films, cause she enjoys those actors too much (Kael 23). What this shows is that on some instinctive level, Kael does subscribe to the auteur theory, even though she lambasts it in this article. She even to some degree subscribes to it on the level of actor as auteur, when she goes to watch something just because an actor in it is someone she finds good (Kael 23).

Kael goes on to criticise the three concentric circles of Sarris' view on auteur theory one by one. Starting with the outer circle, she takes somewhat the same stance as when she criticizes Sarris' final point of his article. As the outer circle is about how technically competent the director is, Kael believes that it is basically self-given that as a critic one would view that as a point to be interested in, rather than as a point of a larger theory (Kael

14). However, Kael supplements by pointing out that a lot of wonderful directors, are not technically competent in the way that this outer circle would imply that they need to be, to be a great director. She mentions that some directors are incredible at using the technical competencies of filmmaking, but not in the usual or mainstream manner, but rather in new, interesting, and experimental ways, that will make them standout, but would not make them seem like they are exactly technically competent (Kael 14). Kael goes on to say that truly great directors do indeed not show mainstream technical competency, but rather through breaking the common rules of technical competency, they show off their personalities and styles in a much better way (Kael 14).

A keen reader might notice that this does not actually necessarily disagree with what Sarris is saying about the auteur theory, but rather reinforces it. Sarris himself never says that an auteur needed the outer circle to be considered an auteur, but rather that they would need the technical competency of the outer circle to be considered a great auteur. What Kael does is then actually building upon that, by going into the second circle and talking about how one does not need standard technical competency to achieve an auteurial personality, but rather that actually breaking with the standard, one achieves the personality that the second circle is about (Kael 14). Kael poses the idea that it is not necessary that a great auteur actually has the standard technical competency that Sarris talks about, as long as the director has that personality in their work that the second circle is about, it does not matter if the director actually understands how a normal, technically competently directed film works.

Kael ends this section by amending Sarris' outer circle, rather than standard technical competency being required to be a great director, she believes it is instead a crutch of the mediocre director (Kael 15).

Kael's next section talks about the middle circle of Sarris' view on the auteur theory (Kael 15). Kael's problem with this circle comes again from the idea that Sarris' theory is just commonplace ways to criticize films, rather than an actual theory (Kael 15). But, Kael goes a bit further by saying that the idea that one uses the director's personality as a way to judge if a film is good or not, does not make any sense. As far as criticism goes of the theory, this is fairly valid. Watching a Neil Breen film, his personal style shines through very clearly, however his films are also well known to be incredibly incompetent, so saying that being able to see and understand someone's personal style means that they are a good director, is just measurably false. The problem is of course, that this is not what Sarris supposes when he talks about auteur theory. Kael misunderstands Sarris when he talks about being able to

identify a directors personality in their films as a “criterion of value”. Kael reads value here as meaning the more value something has, the better it is. But that is not what value means in this context. It rather means, in this context, that being able to identify a directors personal style through their films, is interesting and adds another degree of thought when interacting with the film. It is not something that dictates if the film is good or bad, but rather it dictates if a film is worth thinking about.

Now in some way Kael does get to this point, when she criticizes how Sarris has at times used auteur theory to dismiss some directors as uninteresting, even though some of their movies have been good or well acclaimed (Kael 16-17). She says that applying the auteur theory to directors like that would make more sense, rather than dismissing the good movies those directors made as being carried by the actors (Kael 16-17). Returning to the example of Neil Breen here, this makes a lot of sense, because while watching a Neil Breen film and trying to judge it purely on it’s technical competency would mostly be an unpleasant experience, watching them through the eyes of auteur theory, it is way more possible to get something interesting out of them, no matter how bad they may seem.

Kael goes on to talk about the inner circle of Sarris’ auteur theory. Interestingly, this is the only part of the theory where she thinks the idea is not just the simple commonplace way to analyse and criticize films, but rather the complete opposite. Kael sees the unity between form and content as the usual criterion of value for appraising a directors work, instead of the tension between personality and material that Sarris talks about (Kael 17). Kael understands this to be saying that what really makes a great auteur, is a director that will jump on any script handed to them no matter the quality, and then through their direction inject that script with their personality, no matter how badly the script and the personality fit together (Kael 17).

This is pretty great criticism for the time period, and even of something Sarris says, as this was in many ways what was happening under the Hollywood studio system. Sarris mentions that a reason that American directors at the time were usually seen as better directors, was exactly because of the way in which they were forced to put their personality into the scripts they were handed, instead of getting to develop their own scripts and having their personalities shine through that way (Sarris 562). Sarris’ idea here somewhat makes sense, as the auteurs with the greatest vision, would of course be able to shine through with any script they were given. However, it does not follow that an auteur would then be worse off just because they also had the freedom to choose, or even write their own scripts. No, a

great auteur would of course be even greater, the more creative control they have over the project.

Kael says that the reason that Sarris, and other followers of the auteur theory, do not really give credit to directors who also write their scripts, is due to how that would not work with the inner circle of Sarris's idea of the auteur theory (Kael 18). How could there be tension between the auteur's personality and the material, if they have full control over it? This seems to stem from the idea that Kael thinks tension between personality and material, must mean that the auteur dislikes the material. Rather, it comes from the auteur wanting to explore a tension within themselves, through the material. An example being Martin Scorsese and the way in which a large part of his filmography explores catholicism, sometimes pretty explicitly in films such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Silence* (2016), and other times more subtly in films like *Mean Streets* (1973), catholicism is always looming within his films. What is interesting here is that Scorsese throughout his life has changed how he identifies with catholicism, at one point identifying as a lapsed catholic (Blake 25). But more recently has returned to identifying as a catholic (Wooden). This conflict with how he identifies with his religion, seemingly shows within his filmography, in *The Last Temptation of Christ* for example showing that even Jesus himself had doubts. So the tension between the personality and the material here is pretty clear, with there not being any dislike for the material, but rather an incredible interest in exploring the idea of the material, through personality.

Analysis

Memento

Memento (2000) is Christopher Nolan's second feature film, made just a couple years after *Following* (1998). Already this early in his career there are things to grasp at that show that Christopher Nolan is a director and screenwriter with a unique vision, slowly building a clear throughline with his films. An interesting place to see this is with the crew, even though it would take Nolan a couple more films before he really began building a roster of recurring collaborators, there are already some names within this film that will come back in later films. First and foremost Emma Thomas, Nolan's wife and a producer on every single one of his feature films, though specifically for *Memento* she is credited as associate producer, the only time that has happened in their professional career. Composer David Julyan would also

return, as they had worked together on *Following*, Julyan would return to compose two more films for Nolan, those being *Insomnia* (2002) and *The Prestige* (2006).

As far as returning crew members, those were the only two (besides Nolan himself of course), however there are a few crew members from *Memento* that would also be used in later films. Wally Pfister, the cinematographer of *Memento* would become Nolan's go to cinematographer for his next six films, *Insomnia*, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The short story that the film is based on "Memento Mori" (2001), is written by Jonathan Nolan, Christopher Nolan's brother (though interestingly enough the short story would only be published after the film's release). Jonathan Nolan would later go on to co-write four of Christopher Nolan's films, those being *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *Interstellar* (2014). When it comes to actors, it would not really be until *Batman Begins* that Nolan would truly begin having frequent collaborators, however Mark Boone Junior who plays Burt the motel clerk in *Memento* would return in a minor part in *Batman Begins* (Jeremy Theobald and John Nolan (Christopher Nolan's uncle) who both play characters in *Following*, would also return in minor roles in *Batman Begins*).

What this shows is that while Christopher Nolan had not made an expansive roster of frequent collaborators yet, a few seeds had been planted, and as that roster grows and becomes more interesting, this thesis will explore those frequent collaborators further later on. It also shows that it is not just Christopher Nolan who is making these films, making films is a collaborative effort, no matter how much it seems like they are just the work of one person in the middle of it all. It would not be possible for Christopher Nolan to be where he is today, without these people working with him.

Getting into the actual film that is *Memento*, a great place to start is with the convoluted plot structure, and how it is presented in the film to intrigue the viewer, but also how the film helps the viewer along, as to not make them too confused as to what is happening in the story. *Memento* is Nolan's second film to use a non-linear plot structure, technically starting the film where the plot ends. *Following* starts in largely the same way, however in that film the film starting at the end of the plot, is more used as a frame story, rather than a larger plot device. *Memento* also does something really smart, to help the audience follow along with where they are in the film, it differentiates between in-colour sections and black-and-white sections. The in-colour sections start at the end of the plot and move backwards in time, while the black-and-white sections start at the beginning of the plot

and move forwards in time. Nolan had already used black-and-white in *Following*, where in that film it was simultaneously used as quick visual short-hand to make it look more like a film-noir, it was also used to make it have more of a modern documentary style feel, and finally it was to keep the budget as low as possible (Duncker). So while it visually made sense to film *Following* in black-and-white, it largely came down to the budgetary constraints of the film.

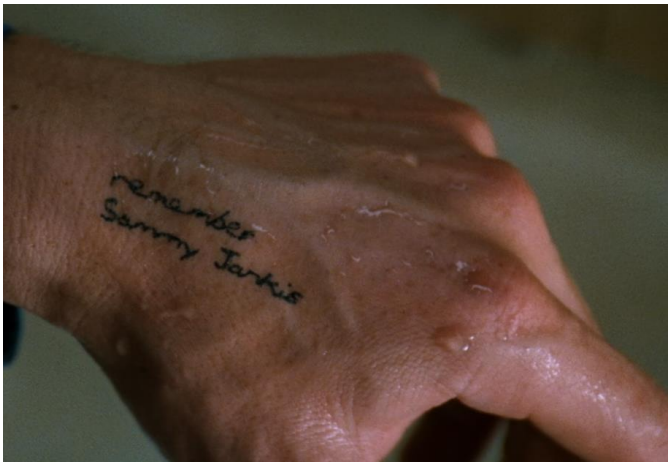
With *Memento* however, this was different as Nolan had a much higher budget to work with on that film, making the use of black-and-white in that film much more deliberate. As mentioned with *Following* before, he liked how the black-and-white could give the film a more documentary style feel to it, which is something he carries over to *Memento* for the sections filmed in black-and-white. Black-and-white filmmaking of course does not inherently make something documentary style, but the black-and-white in conjunction with other film techniques would suggest to the audience that something is more documentary-like. In *Following* Nolan accomplishes this by largely filming handheld and with minimal lighting, making the camera feel much more like a neutral observer, but of course this was also a side-effect of the budgetary constraints. In *Memento* Nolan uses a lot of the same techniques while shooting the black-and-white sequences to make it feel like a documentary, still having the camera be handheld for example, but he also adds on to the techniques in somewhat subtle ways, which changes the dynamic of the black-and-white sequences a lot. Rather than the neutral observer camera that is used in *Following*, the way the camera is used in *Memento's* black-and-white sequences seems more deliberate, it is meant to feel like Leonard (played by Guy Pearce) is being observed, and he unconsciously knows it. One of the ways the film accomplishes this is by having a recurring shot in the black-and-white sequences be from the ceiling of Leonard's motel room, almost as if there is a hidden camera in the ceiling fan spying on him. The film tries to instill a sense of paranoia, both within the audience but also within Leonard through this technique. It is not a neutral observer, but rather seemingly someone deliberately spying on Leonard. This is furthered by the other ways in which the camera is used within the black-and-white sequences. The camera is frequently fairly intimate with Leonard, with a lot of close-ups, as well as slow deliberate movements, almost

eyeing Leonard up and down, observing every minor detail of him. The camera is almost always moving, but never in any quick manner, every movement by the camera is made to make Leonard feel observed. This works in tandem with what is happening in the black-and-white sequences, as Leonard keeps getting phone calls from an anonymous voice on the other line. As the audience we never hear this other voice (at least until the end when we find out it has most likely been Teddy (played by Joe Pantoliano) calling him the whole time), but we are almost invited to believe that it is us, the observer, that is calling him, as we spy on him.

Along with how this whole style of filmmaking tries to induce paranoia, it is also a great excuse to bombard the audience with exposition. This is a notorious auteur trait of Nolan's, as due to his frequent use of convoluted plot structures, as well as just convoluted plots in general, he wants to help the audience along in the easiest way possible, which leads to him spending large amounts of his films runtime doing exposition. However, it is critical to notice that the exposition is done naturally in the film, even if a keen observer will notice that this is what he is doing, it is never unmotivated. There are three ways this manifests in *Memento*, firstly through the voice-over made by Leonard. Throughout the film, both in the black-and-white as well as the colour sections, we the audience get to, on occasion, be privy to Leonards thoughts, shown through the use of voice-over. When this is done in the black-and-white sequences of the film, it is usually to do exposition on Leonards mental condition, as well as what his ultimate goal is.

The second way is through Leonards retrograde amnesia. One might think that due to Leonard's condition, the film would be much harder to follow, and in many ways this is true. The film is structured the way it is, to somewhat mimic what living through Leonard's condition would feel like. However, what the condition also allows Nolan to do, is reiterate exposition repeatedly, as due to Leonard's condition he has to repeatedly tell himself and whoever he is with what is going on. This is even played for laughs within the film, as Leonard says the line "you see, I have this condition" so much that another character repeats it back to him in the form of a joke, easing the tension within the scene, and hopefully getting a laugh out of the audience.'

The third and arguably most important way that exposition is done within the film, is through the story of Sammy Jankis. One of the most interesting visuals seen within *Memento* is Leonards body, as it is absolutely covered in tattoos. We find out pretty early on in the film that covering his body in tattoos is one of the ways in which Leonard himself remembers crucial information. One of these tattoos says "remember Sammy Jankis". Within the story Sammy Jankis has the same condition that Leonard has, so the reason he has the tattoo is both



to remind himself of what condition he has, but it also functions as an easy way to explain his condition to others. Which is the exact role the tattoo plays for the audience as well, it is a great segue into giving the audience a lot of exposition, through the story of Sammy Jankis. Sammy Jankis will be explored more thoroughly later on in the thesis, as his story is one of the biggest moments of melodrama within the film.

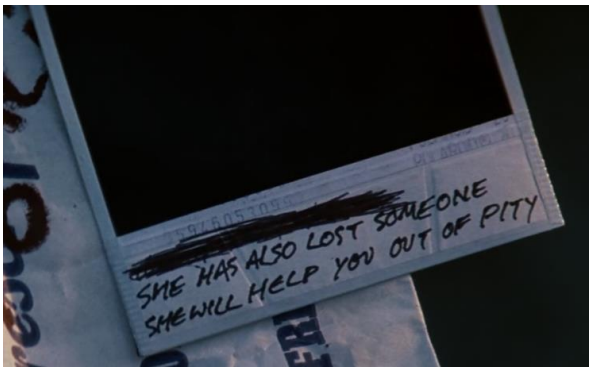
Despite exposition being such a major part of the film, some people still find it hard to follow along with. In his review of the film, renowned film critic Roger Ebert starts out by quoting two people he had discussed the film with (Ebert). All three of them had one key issue when it came to Leonard's condition. How does he remember that he has retrograde amnesia? Ebert does not fault the film for not explaining this, rather just attributing it to a necessity of the script. The problem of course being, that the film does explain this exact issue with Leonard's condition. Leonard explains that there is thought behind where he places his tattoos, the more important tattoos put in places where he will likely look at himself more frequently. The arguably most important one, that explains to both himself and anyone around him that he has this condition, being the "remember Sammy Jankis" tattoo, that he has on his hand, a place he frequently finds himself looking at.

Another example is fairly early in the film when Natalie (played by Carrie-Anne Moss) asks Leonard how he can know anything at all due to his condition. Leonard explains that there are certainties that he can know, like how something feels when he picks it up, or the distinct sounds something makes when he knocks on it. He explicitly mentions the feel of the world, which one can interpret as him having some fundamental understanding of the way in which his life works now. Of course it is important to mention that this example is unreliable, as it is Leonard trying to explain that his system works, which the rest of the film shows as being an incredibly unreliable system, however it does seem to confirm that Leonard has some fundamental understanding of his condition.

Moving away from the convoluted plot structure, as well as exposition, it is time to look at the melodrama within the film. When one first looks at *Memento*, melodrama does not

seem like something of great concern within the film. However, when looking at it on a deeper level, it becomes quite clear that melodrama is in many ways the most important part of the film. A good way that can be seen is with the character of Natalie and her relationship with Leonard. Due to the plot structure of the film, the audience sees the development of this relationship backwards, as every moment of this relationship is only shown in the colored sections of the film.

The first time the audience meets Natalie within the film, it is already quite clear that her relationship with Leonard is built on bad premises, as on the back of his polaroid of her, it says “She has also lost someone she will help you out of pity”. At this time we as the audience do not know the context of this text, but it tells us that Leonard believes that this is not an even relationship, but rather one built on Leonard having some kind of leverage over Natalie. This will be elaborated on later.



When Leonard first meets up with Natalie in the story of the film, it is important to note that it is the last time he meets up with Natalie in the plot of the film, meaning Natalie at this point knows as much as she ever will about Leonard. What is curious then, is the fact that Natalie seems surprised that Leonard does not remember her during this meeting in the diner. While this will also be elaborated on later, within this scene there are a lot of hints toward why Natalie acts like this, as well as a bunch of smaller details that when added together, really states the thesis of the film.

The first hint being that Natalie calls Leonard, Lenny at the start of their conversation. Earlier in the film we see Teddy doing the same, but Leonard quickly corrects him, saying that he prefers Leonard but this is not elaborated upon until this scene in the diner. He says that his wife used to call him Lenny, but incredibly importantly he elaborates that he also hated when she called him that. Meaning that while he probably tolerated it in some way from her, showing that she does have a special privilege in his life, it was always a nickname that he had a strong dislike for. This brings into question his ultimate goal within the film, because up until this point there is an understanding that the reason Leonard wants to take revenge is because he loved his wife. But this shows that there was a degree of animosity within that relationship, even if Leonard never explicitly brings it up. In his review of the film Roger Ebert brings up the next thing Natalie says in this scene, that Leonard will not even be

able to remember taking revenge on his wife's behalf. Leonard replies by saying that it does not matter if he remembers it or not, his wife deserves it either way. Ebert's review here is important because of the way he describes Leonard's reply, it "has a certain logic" (Ebert).

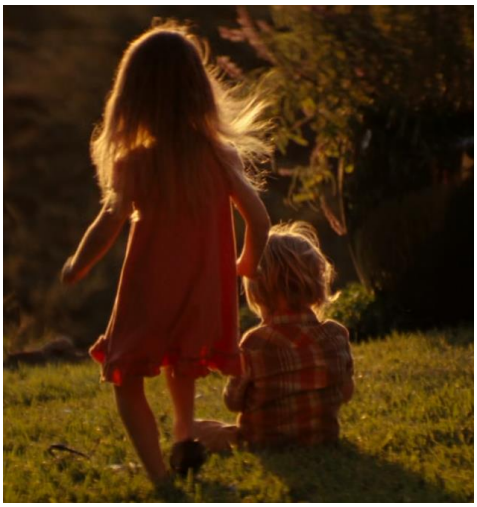
This is really where one begins to see the tension between Christopher Nolan's style and his material within *Memento*, as described by Sarris when defining the auteur theory (Sarris 562). Nolan's style (the way it is viewed when looking through the lens of the middle circle of Sarris' theory) can largely be seen as the way he constructs his plots, often non-linear, almost always convoluted, with exposition being of great importance (Sarris 563). There is always a cerebral logic to the way in which the plot is constructed, and if one really wants to figure out the full picture, it is possible. However, Nolan seemingly throughout his filmography tries to discourage this, the further into his filmography one goes, the more overt this discouragement is. An example could be the opening of *The Prestige*, where Cutter (played by Michael Caine) explains the three steps of a magic trick, the pledge, the turn, and the prestige. While not entirely consequential to this thesis, it remains important to understand what these three steps entail, to fully understand the example. The pledge involves the magician showing you something ordinary, something without any atypical attributes, something you would not assume would be capable of doing anything all that interesting. The turn then makes that ordinary something, do something extraordinary, like making the ordinary something disappear into nothing. This is when Cutter brings in the whole thesis of Nolan's filmography, between the turn and the prestige. Because it is here you are trying to figure the logic out, you want to understand how the magician turned this ordinary something, into something extraordinary. But as Cutter says "you won't find it… because, of course, you're not really looking. You want to be fooled." (*The Prestige* 00:02:36) The prestige is then all about finishing off the trick, because you will not be entertained just from watching something disappear, it also has to come back. But everything considered, the prestige is not the important part, but rather Cutters quote. The quote is basically Nolan putting into words the tension between the cerebral logic and the melodrama within his films. You can figure out the cerebral logic, but Nolan argues that you do not really want to, because it would ruin the magic.

Extrapolating further from this, it is important to recognize that there are two ways in which Nolan's films showcase this tension, though both with the purpose of showing that the pathos of melodrama is what is most important. The first way is by having the film and the characters within the film give in to the cerebral logic, *The Prestige* is the clearest

representation of this kind of Nolan film. In many ways *The Prestige* is Nolan showing exactly what would happen if he went all in with his style of cerebral logic. The tragic fates of both of the main characters of the film, come on the back of wanting to figure out the logic of eachothers magic trick. Alfred Borden (played by Christian Bale) gets thrown in jail and sentenced to death after witnessing the death of Robert Angier (played by Hugh Jackman) at the start of the film. This happens due to sneaking behind the scenes at his magic show trying to figure out how he does "The Real Transported Man" (an updated version of Borden's own trick in the film, simply called "The Transported Man"). The way in which Angier actually does "The Real Transported Man" is through a machine that at the same time clones and teleports the person within it, meaning that while Borden did witness the death of Angier, another Angier is out there and alive due to the cloning. This is still incredibly problematic for Angier though, as when he uses the machine, he has no idea if it is him who is teleported or the clone, either way one of them always dies. Importantly, the reason Angier has this machine stems from him wanting to figure out how Borden did "The Transported Man", and Borden then misleading him into thinking that Nikola Tesla (played by David Bowie) had something to do with "The Transported Man". While this was all a red herring by Borden, Tesla does end up inventing the machine that Angier then uses to perform "The Real Transported Man". The film ends with Borden getting hanged, but at the same time it is revealed that he had an identical hidden twin throughout the film, that he would frequently switch places with, this turns out to be the way he performs "The Transported Man". What this truly entails though, is Borden and his twin giving up their entire lives, to make this one singular magic trick work seamlessly. In the film this sacrifice is portrayed through one of the Borden twins having to cut off his finger, as well as them having to share a wife who, while she does not know that Borden has a twin, can tell that at times her husband does not truly love her. This eventually leads to her committing suicide. Borden fully committing his life to this one magic trick, leads not only to his own bodily harm, but also to losing a loved one. The final scene of the film consists of one of the Borden twins meeting with Angier, in a house where they are surrounded by Angier's dead clones, Borden ends up killing Angier and burning the house down, so no one but himself knows about their secrets. Had either of these people not given in to trying to figure out the cerebral logic of the other, and instead left it at the melodramatic pathos of a well done trick, both of them would have lived much better lives.

The second way in which Nolan showcases that the pathos of melodrama is most important, is a little more straightforward, though a lot of the time left somewhat ambiguous.

This of course is by having the plot and the characters of the film revolve around the pathos of melodrama, eventually leading the characters into fully giving in to that pathos. A great example of this kind of Nolan movie is *Inception*. The plot of *Inception* involves physically entering people's dreams, stealing secrets within them, and as the title says, incept new ideas. The main character of *Inception*, Dom Cobb (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) spends large parts of the film being haunted by his dead wife Mal Cobb (played by Marion Cotillard). This is a major conflict within the film, as it makes the larger dream heist within the film, a lot harder to accomplish for Cobb and his team. The reason Mal is haunting Cobb, is largely due to him being unable to let her go after she has killed herself, Cobb wants to be together with his wife, so any dream he inhabits he will also manifest her. Cobb and Mal have children that reside in the United States, but due to the authorities thinking that it was Cobb who killed Mal, and not Mal who killed herself, Cobb is unable to be with his children as he is unable to return to the United States. Cobb's whole reward for accomplishing this elaborate dream heist, is that his criminal record will be wiped clean, and he will be able to be with his children again. Throughout the film, a repeated visual within the many different dreams is Cobb's children, but we only ever see them with their backs turned. At the end of the film though, as Cobb finishes the dream heist by finally thematically letting Mal go (mechanically killing her manifestation deep within a dream), Cobb is allowed back into the United States where he can finally be with his children again, who finally turn around to face us and him. All of this is already a quite clear indicator of this film's willingness to give in to the pathos of melodrama. But the truly most interesting part comes right after all this, with the final shot of the film. The shot starts out by focusing on Cobb and his children, but then slowly tracks to the left and focuses on a spinning top (a totem within the film, meant to show the user if they are within a dream or not, if the top does not fall over, we are within a dream), we do not see if the top topples over or not before the credits start rolling. There are two ways to interpret what this final shot is focusing on, thoroughly showcasing the tension between Nolan's style and his material. The first and



most common way to interpret what this shot is focusing on, is whether or not the spinning top is gonna fall over or not. Is this a dream or is this reality? Does Cobb actually get to go back to his children in the end, or is he stuck in a dream? This leads to the second way of interpreting what this shot is focusing on, which is the fact that Cobb himself is not focusing on the spinning top at all. To him it is of no concern anymore, as he has let Mal go, he realises that all that matters to him now, is the love of his children. The top falling over or not, does not matter in the slightest.

Taking all of this and applying it back to this particular scene in *Memento*, it is clear that Nolan is not being as overt about the tension between his style and his material in this film, as he is in *The Prestige*. But he is very clearly showing that this is an example of his films where the main character of Leonard will be giving in to the cerebral logic that he himself has come up with. But we as the audience are prompted to sympathise with him here, because there is, as Ebert says "a certain logic", behind what he is saying. Your actions still have consequences, whether you remember them or not. There would still be some form of catharsis in the world, if Leonard kills the person who raped and murdered his wife. If Nolan was a filmmaker, that was all in on his personal style of cerebral logic, this is what the thesis of the film would be. However, the film is deeper than that, it has more to say on the concept of revenge, and what obsessing over that does to a person, and the people around them.

Which segues back to Natalie, as after Leonard explains his logic to her he mentions that to make sure he remembers, he would just get another "freaky tattoo". This is a callback to earlier in their conversation where Natalie talks about his tattoos in the exact same way. What this shows though, is that Natalie and Leonard have had a somewhat intimate relationship before this, because besides maybe his "remember Sammy Jankis" tattoo, his other more intense tattoos are only visible when he is undressed. This is confirmed to us later in the film, but right here it is specifically telling Leonard that his relationship with this person might be slightly deeper than he had thought beforehand. This gives Leonard the opportunity to be more empathetic and melodramatic with Natalie throughout the rest of their conversation, which in a way is something he takes her up on. Natalie asks Leonard to remember his wife, and as Leonard begins reciting stock phrases, Natalie elaborates that she wants him to really remember her. This leads to a small montage where we get to see a few glimpses of everyday things about Leonards dead wife, the montage ends with Leonard saying that all these small things add up to let you know how much you miss this person that you have lost. But incredibly important to his character he follows that up with how all of that

also adds up to how much you hate the person who took the person you love away from you. He does not end his little montage of remembering with love, but rather with hatred.

The scene ends with Natalie seemingly a little emotional about the way Leonard remembered his wife, she gives him the information that will eventually lead to Leonard killing Teddy at the start of the film, as well as the added information of where doing something like this would be good. Leonard asks if he needs to pay for this information, where Natalie then says that she did not do all of this for money. This finishing interaction between them truly shows the disconnect between how they see each other's relationship that is first shown through the description of Natalie on Leonard's polaroid of her. Natalie seemingly believes that it is possible that they could have a real relationship, either romantically or just friendly. But Leonard in the end only sees it as one built on transactions, he believes she would only help him out of pity, or monetary gain. In his mind it is impossible to fathom a world where he has any other interests or obligations outside of taking revenge on the person who raped and murdered his wife.

We meet Natalie in a couple more scenes throughout the film, but the most important scene concerning the purpose of this thesis is when Leonard arrives at her house after he has seemingly done something to someone named Dodd. Due to the backwards nature of the film, when we first see Dodd here, we know nothing about him or what has happened to him, but luckily that is not really important, outside of him being someone that Natalie had a problem with. This scene is important for a couple of reasons. First of all due to it showing us how Natalie knows about Leonards tattoos. It is confirmed here that it is not just through some coincidence that she has seen him with his shirt off, but rather through intentional intimacy. In this scene it is also revealed when Leonard wrote on Natalie's polaroid, that she is someone that would help him out of pity. Most importantly though, is that when Leonard is writing on Natalie's polaroid, Nolan does something that he does not do in any other part of the film. The whole film up until this part, has only been shown through the perspective of Leonard. We are not seeing the world through his eyes, but rather we are always with Leonard, seeing him and his surroundings.

But in this scene, for just a few brief moments Nolan changes this. Leonard and Natalie are in bed together, and briefly Leonard decides to step out of the room to write on her polaroid. While this is happening, the scene is cut between Leonard walking around outside of the room, as well as Natalie all alone in the room. This is probably the most melodramatic scene in the whole film. It is so important to the film that in the director's commentary Nolan himself mentions how this is something that is not done anywhere else in the film. The scene perfectly shows the tension that is described by Andrew Sarris, Nolan's style of cerebral logic shown through what Leonard writes on the polaroid, intercut with the material that is the melodramatic pathos of Natalie longing for someone to join her in bed. Much like the scene in the diner, it shows the juxtaposition between Leonard and Natalie, Leonard is unable to give up his quest for revenge and can only see relationships as transactional, while Natalie is right there, seemingly ready to leave all the baggage behind and start anew.

Another moment of melodrama within the film actually spurs from Nolan playing with a concept which he came up with in *Following*. This concept is that of "the box", within *Following* everyone has a "box". What "the box" is, is a container that everyone has somewhere in their living quarters, this can be a shoe box or a chest or anything of that sort. What "the box" contains is personal items, though not necessarily personal items of great monetary value, but rather items that only really have sentimental value to the person who put them there. Jim Emerson in his 2012 article "*Following*: Nolan in a nutshell" talks about this concept of "the box" and mentions that it is also a concept that is very similar to the dream vaults in *Inception*, showing that it is a concept that Nolan further explores. However, Emerson does not seem to quite grasp at just how melodramatic this idea of "the box" is, on top of missing that before *Inception*, he had actually played with the concept once more in *Memento*.

How we see this concept used in *Memento,* is when in the middle of the night Leonard drives out to an old abandoned industrial area to burn a bag full of miscellaneous items. One by one as he pulls items out of the bag to burn them, we get a flashback to his wife using that item. He burns an old hairbrush, and it cuts to his wife using that hairbrush. He burns an old book, so old and worn out that it has lost its cover, and it cuts back to his wife reading that book, and even back then it was old and worn out. Exactly like with "the box" in *Following*, these items only have sentimental value, both for Leonard and his dead wife. But Leonard is not just looking at these items, remembering his wife, Leonard is burning these items. He is explicitly trying to forget his wife, he in some way wants to move on, but is unable to, even through this exercise of burning her items of high sentimental value. He even goes so far as to say that he has probably done this before. Once again this shows the tension in Nolan's work, the cerebral logic in burning his wifes old items, with the melodramatic pathos of always remembering her anyway.

For the final part about *Memento* and the melodrama within it, the most important part that shows Leonard's psyche and how he has fully given in to the cerebral logic that leads him towards revenge, rather than giving in to the pathos of melodrama, that could potentially lead him to a more fulfilling life, we have Sammy Jankis. As mentioned before Sammy Jankis and Leonard have the same condition, meaning that Leonard frequently mentions him so that other people can understand his condition. However, within the story of Sammy Jankis, Leonard is his insurance investigator, which is how Leonard knows about him in the first place. While Leonard does not believe that Sammy is faking necessarily, he does believe that rather than it being a physical condition he has, it is a mental condition. Due to his insurance not covering mental conditions, Sammy's wife now has to pay his medical bills. Paying the medical bills was not the problem for Sammy's wife though. Due to Leonard making it just slightly doubtful that Sammy has this condition, Sammy's wife begins spiraling, trying many different things to try and snap Sammy out of his condition, fake or not. Eventually, after Sammy's wife goes to Leonard's office to ask him what he truly believes, where Leonard then answers that he believes it should be possible that Sammy could physically make new memories. It leads to Sammy's wife tricking Sammy into giving her shot after shot of insulin, believing that if he was truly faking, he would stop before it would kill her. This did not work, and she died. Had Leonard just actually believed in Sammy's story, this woman would not be dead, but rather than acknowledging this, Leonard

obfuscates. He did not know what Sammy's wife was gonna do, he had finances to think about, he had to think about his company, stuff like that.

This story is what shows what kind of person Leonard truly is, he believed in his own cerebral logic, and it led to a woman dying. Had he instead given in to a more melodramatic pathos, he had a chance to see that this was not a story about Sammy and his wife wanting to scam money out of his company, but rather a story about a woman wanting to understand what her husband was going through. This way of thinking is what eventually leads to the revenge and rage filled person that Leonard is in *Memento*. The person that ends up killing both Teddy at the end of the story but the start of the film, but also Natalie's boyfriend and the end of the film but the start of the story.

"It's not possible. No, it's necessary." - *Interstellar*

Interstellar is Christopher Nolan's ninth feature film which means that between this and *Memento,* Nolan had six films to develop his craft through, as well as building up his roster of frequent collaborators. Even going so far as to having picked up a few of actors that he worked with a couple of times, but have not worked with since. One of these actors is Morgan Freeman, who first appears in *Batman Begins* playing the character of Lucius Fox, which role he reprises in *The Dark Knight,* and *The Dark Knight Rises,* which are to date the only three Nolan films that he has appeared in. Another actor is Christian Bale, who also first appears in *Batman Begins,* playing the character of Bruce Wayne/Batman. Like Morgan Freeman he also reprises his role in *The Dark Knight,* and *The Dark Knight Rises,* but Christian Bale also appears in *The Prestige* playing the character of Alfred Borden. But he has also not returned in any Nolan film since *The Dark Knight Rises.*

But Nolan did not only pick up collaborators in *Batman Begins* just to never work with them again after the last installment of his Dark Knight trilogy. *Batman Begins* is arguably one of the most important films for picking up frequent collaborators in Nolan's career. For actors he would keep working with you have Gary Oldman, who plays the role of Jim Gordon in Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy, but he also appears in *Oppenheimer* playing the role of President Harry Truman. Moving into some of the more important figures of Nolan's

filmography there is Cillian Murphy, who initially plays Dr. Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow in Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy, but he also has major roles in *Inception* and *Dunkirk*. Most importantly he plays the titular role in *Oppenheimer*, and he will be discussed more in depth in that chapter of this thesis. Finally concerning actors that started collaborating with Nolan in *Batman Begins*, we have Michael Caine. In Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy, Michael Caine plays the role of Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred. But more importantly, from *Batman Begins* to *Tenet*, Michael Caine has a role in every Nolan film (though in *Dunkirk*, he only plays the uncredited role of a voice on the radio). Within *Interstellar* he plays the role of Professor Brand, which will be unfolded more further into this section. The working relationship between Nolan and Michael Caine, will also be explored a bit further in the section about *Tenet*, as that was the last time the two would work together.

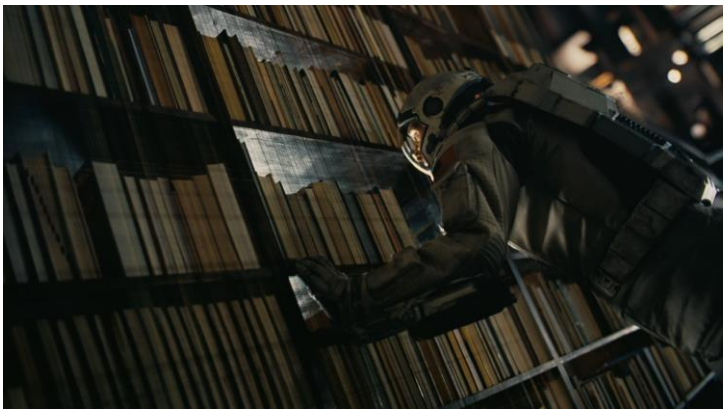
The final important collaborator that Nolan picked up with *Batman Begins*, is the composer Hans Zimmer, who largely replaces David Julyan from here on in his filmography until *Tenet*, except for *The Prestige* which was released only a year after *Batman Begins*, but would be the last time that David Julyan and Nolan would work together. This change was fairly big for Nolan, as Hans Zimmer was already fairly well acclaimed and while the scores done by David Julyan were competent, they do not evoke the same grand emotions that Hans Zimmer's scores do. Hans Zimmer working with Nolan also granted him more credibility as a big director, as he had already worked on other highly praised films by well regarded filmmakers such as *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Gladiator* (2000) by Ridley Scott, as well as *Crimson Tide* (1995) by Tony Scott and *The Rock* (1996) by Michael Bay. While the move from David Julyan to Hans Zimmer did largely lead to the scores of Nolan's films becoming more emotional and epic, it is really with *Interstellar* that this truly comes to fruition.

Looking at *Interstellar* through the lens of Nolan's personal style (in the way that it is described in Andrew Sarris' second circle of the auteur theory) we can see that it is very different compared to *Memento*. While *Memento* almost constantly has to tell the audience what is going on due to the convoluted non-linear plot, the convoluted plot in *Interstellar* works a little differently. The film opens on a series of documentary style talking head interviews, that serve as exposition for the audience, explaining how the world is decaying in *Interstellar*. It is easy to read this as the logical

evolution of the “documentary style” black-and-white footage that Nolan used in both *Following* and *Memento*. Rather than using black-and-white footage to signify that something is supposed to be like a documentary, he instead is here using an aesthetic technique that is almost exclusively used in documentaries. While black-and-white footage is fairly common in documentaries, it is in no way exclusive to the genre, meaning that while it is somewhat of a signifier, it is no way as clear as the talking head interview.

Another interesting part of the talking head interviews, is that they are the only part of the film that is actively non-linear, depending on how one defines non-linear of course as there are elements of time travel within the film. But besides the talking head interviews, every other part of the plot happens in a linear manner. The talking head interviews are revealed to be from after most of the events of the film, as a part of a sort of museum exhibit showing how the main character Joseph Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey, and will be referred to as Coop for the rest of this thesis) “used” to live.

Going further through how Nolan has evolved his personal style, the way he does exposition in *Interstellar* is either much subtler than how he does it in *Memento*, or much tighter and economical. For a great example of the subtler exposition, one only has to look at Murphs (played by Jessica Chastain as an adult, by Mackenzie Foy as a child, and Ellen Burstyn as an older Murph) “ghost”. Early in the film the audience is introduced to the concept of a “ghost” that resides in Murphs bedroom. While exactly how this “ghost” works is left pretty ambiguous until later on in the film, it becomes clear quickly that it in some way is trying to send an important message. The “ghost” sends these messages in different ways, one message through dust expressed in binary, another message as morse code shown through the gaps in Murph’s book case, both Coop and Murph interpret these messages. But unlike *Memento*, Nolan does not spend a whole lot of time going into the exact details, he rather trusts the audience will accept this absurdity at the time, as a plot device to



keep the story moving forward. When we then get to the end of the film, and we realize that Murphs "ghost" was Coop the whole time, sending messages to himself and Murph from the future, we do not exactly find this all that confusing. Even though the visuals are grand, contorting, and seemingly endlessly complex, showing iteration after iteration of Murph's bedroom, when Coop is shown sending a message through, it is a message that we have already seen earlier in the film, except for the last morse code message sent through the broken wristwatch. So when we see Coop sending these messages, even if the way in which he does it is fairly abstract, we know what the end result is, meaning that even if you do not particularly understand all the details of the way in which the messages get sent back in time, you understand that that is what is happening, and what the messages mean.

An example of the tighter and more economical exposition can be seen when Romilly (played by David Gyasi) explains how a wormhole works to Coop. Firstly the explanation is started because, while Coop knows how a wormhole works, he has a hard time wrapping his head around why exactly it visually looks like a sphere. Romilly then has an excuse to explain how a wormhole works to the audience. The way Romilly does this is incredibly intuitive, by taking a piece of paper and drawing a line on it, then folding the piece of paper and punching a hole through it with a pencil, explaining how going through the paper is a much quicker way of going from one end of the line to the other.

Keeping with the theme of logic being Nolan's style, an executive producer on the film was the theoretical physicist Kip Thorne. Kip Thorne technically was the originator of the story of *Interstellar*, however besides very loose elements of the story, Nolan has changed it to be his own (Clery). However, one of the few things that remained from Thorne's original idea was traveling through a wormhole. It was important for Thorne that the film did not break any laws of physics, and that if there were any incredible speculations of the scientific kind within the movie, those speculations needed to come from the mind of a scientist, rather than the mind of a screenwriter (Clery). Nolan agreed with this, as long as it would not hinder the filmmaking (Clery). What this means is that not only is Romilly's explanation of the wormhole concise and easy to understand, but it is also scientifically accurate.

The one place where Thorne was uneasy with the scientific accuracy of the film, is on Dr. Mann's (played by Matt Damon) planet, where it is so cold that the clouds are made of ice. According to Thorne ice simply is not strong enough to form into clouds (Clery). This inaccuracy does lead into one of Nolan's smaller, but very visually interesting, auterial traits, only appearing in *Insomnia*, *Batman Begins*, and finally *Interstellar*. His use of glaciers. The first time glaciers show up in a Nolan film is at the start of *Insomnia*, as Will Dormer (played by Al Pacino) and Hap Eckhart (played by Martin Donovan) fly in to their new assignment in Alaska. The second time glaciers are used in a Nolan film would be in *Batman Begins*, the glaciers in that film are located just around The League of Shadows headquarters, and are first shown as Bruce Wayne is making his way to them. The third and final time glaciers show up in a Nolan film, is in *Interstellar* as the crew of The Endurance go to Dr. Mann's planet. While the visual of these glaciers is always incredibly strong in these films, their inclusion is not just purely for aesthetics. They also serve as a clear environmental marker of how harsh the circumstances will be for our protagonists in each film. In *Insomnia* the whole film takes place in a town in Alaska, where the sun never goes down, which on top of other issues for Will Dormer, makes it very tough for him to sleep. The first time we see the glaciers in *Insomnia* is also just before we are introduced to the character of Will Dormer, who while charming, has been sent on this assignment because he has done something cold and harsh, much like the environment around him.

In *Batman Begins* the symbolism is in many ways the same, however there are a few changes. While the character of Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* is also largely cold and harsh like the glaciers, the glaciers more so symbolise The League of Shadows, and their view of the world, which Bruce Wayne chooses to not partake in, as he finds it too harsh. This in many ways is the inception of Bruce Wayne/Batman's whole character arc throughout Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy, developing from the cold, harsh, and brutish nature of the glaciers around The League of Shadows, to a more loving and open person, who leaves Gotham in safer hands at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

In *Interstellar* the symbolism once again stays largely the same, but also has some added qualities. Rather than showing the nature of the crew of The Endurance, the glaciers in *Interstellar* rather show the nature of Dr. Mann who resides on the planet. Though at first one might think that the glaciers and Dr. Mann living with them for years could represent the indomitable human spirit. Being able to overcome any harshness and living through it, turning out better on the other side. But when Dr. Mann eventually betrays Coop and the other members of The Endurance, we see that the symbolism is more in line with what was shown in *Insomnia* and *Batman Begins*.

While *Interstellar* as a whole is perhaps the most clearly melodramatic of all of Nolan's films, it does contain a couple of characters that conform to his style of cerebral logic. These characters being Professor Brand and Dr. Mann. This is shown in a couple of interesting ways, though the clearest way in which they are distinguished from the more melodramatically inclined characters, is through their belief in Plan B over Plan A. The main goal for everyone in the film is to save humanity, and quite early in the film we hear the different plans for how this is supposed to be done. Both plans involve finding a new planet to inhabit for humanity, but how this will be done in each plan is very different. Plan A involves finding a new planet that humanity can live on, and then returning to earth so they can take the rest of humanity with them to this new planet. Plan B on the other hand, does not involve returning to earth and saving the rest of humanity, but rather colonizing the new planet by bringing 5000 frozen embryos that would then ensure the survival of the human race, but leave the rest of humanity to die back on Earth.

These two plans clearly show the tension between Nolan's style and material, his style of cerebral logic being Plan B, as it is the safest and easiest way to make sure that humanity will endure and survive, but it does involve leaving the rest of humanity to die, for the greater good one might think. Plan A is then rather his material, filled with melodramatic pathos, even though it seems largely impossible, it is clearly the plan with the most empathy and humanity. Plan A involves saving everyone one loves, instead of just creating a whole new humanity.

Now Professor Brand and Dr. Mann do not just believe in Plan B over Plan A, they believe it was the only plan that would ever actually work. Professor Brand in a way almost makes it impossible that Plan A could ever be successful, as he hides that the equation that needs to be solved to make it possible for all of humanity to be able to lift off from earth, is actually impossible to solve without a key part that can only be found within a black hole. Professor Brand hid this from every other character, except for Dr. Mann who also fully believes in Plan B over Plan A.

Besides this there is one other thing that both of these characters have in common, that also confirms them as being characters that subscribe to Nolan's style of cerebral logic. That being the poem "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas, that they both recite at different points throughout the film. The poem, while incredibly pertinent to the main mission of the film, seems to be misunderstood by both Professor Brand and Dr. Mann. "Do not go gentle into that good night" is a poem all about doing whatever you possibly can to resist death. So Professor Brand reciting early on in the film seemingly makes sense, he is reciting the poem as The Endurance leaves earth to go find another planet that is meant for all of humanity. Though that is just what the crew of The Endurance think. Professor Brand, in his own mind, is thinking that they will never return and that he himself will die on earth with the rest of humanity. While this is somewhat noble, it is not in any way what the poem is telling one to do. The poem wants you to "rage against the dying of the light", what Professor Brand is doing is much closer to going gentle into that good night. He is even going so far as lying to the rest of humanity, so that they may gently go into that good night. Completely betraying the meaning of the poem that he is reciting.

Later in the film, Dr. Mann recites the poem as well, though this time around it is much clearer that Dr. Mann does simply not understand the poem, or is in complete denial about its meaning. As while he is reciting it, he is walking away from Coop suffocating after having destroyed his helmet. While Dr. Mann is technically reciting the poem to Coop, telling him to not go gentle into that good night, as he is slowly suffocating, it is also clear that Dr. Mann believes that he is reciting it to himself. Though Dr. Mann acknowledges that he faked the scannings of his planet so that someone would come and save him, right before getting into this big fight with Coop that ends with Coop gasping for air. Coop even calls him a coward here, and Dr. Mann agrees to that terminology. But even with all of that, right before he begins reciting the poem, Dr. Mann tells Coop that he is going to be the one that will save all of humanity. He talks of survival instinct, and how that is the driving force

behind all of humanity, how it is what drove him to stay alive on his unsustainable planet, how it is what makes all of humanity endure no matter what. Dr. Mann is being incredibly grandiose in his speech to Coop, right after leaving him to die on this planet that he always knew would be doomed. Because Dr. Mann believes that he is the only person that was ever meant to save humanity, not realising that that was not the point of his mission. Then he begins reciting the poem. Both because he believes it will be a small comfort for Coop as he is slowly dying, but mostly to make him believe his own story, that he is the one raging against the dying of the light, not Coop.

It is important to note here the allure of the cerebral logic that Nolan portrays. Much like Leonard in *Memento*, Dr. Mann here has a certain kind of logic to his argument. Because yes, he has in a way been tested like no other human before. He was sent on what was very likely a doomed mission, without the thought in his mind that that might even be the case. He simply believed that his planet would surely be the one that humanity would be able to live and flourish on. He never truly believed that it was possible for his mission to fail, so when it did, he did what could very well be a thing that a lot of humanity would do. Lied to get help. In a way this is also reflected in the character's name Dr. Mann, reminiscent of man, as in humanity. Though incredibly cowardly, what he ends up doing in the film is in some way very human.

Now for a character that truly gives in to the idea of melodramatic pathos, who truly believes in Plan A, no matter how impossible it might sound, one has to look no further than to who Dr. Mann is reciting the poem, the main character of the film. Because Coop takes the poem to heart, and rages against the dying of the light. Before Dr. Mann begins fighting Coop, he pulls a little chip off of Coops suit, which makes Coop unable to communicate with the rest of his crew. But as he is gasping for air, listening to Dr. Mann recite the poem, he is looking for that little chip to put back in his suit. He is not going gentle into that good night, he does everything in his power to keep himself alive, so that there is a chance to complete Plan A, so that he can see his family again. As he finally does find the chip, an extended sequence begins within the film. Starting off with Dr. Brand (played by Anne Hathaway, professor Brand's daughter, usually referred to in the film as just Brand) flying out to save Coop's life, then Romilly dies after he finds out that Dr. Mann's readings of the planet have all been falsified and when that knowledge came out he had rigged his base to explode. Dr. Mann then steals one of The Endurance crews spaceships, so he can leave them on his

doomed planet, and he alone can become the saviour of humanity, but most of all, the saviour of himself.

The sequence keeps going as Dr. Mann flies up to The Endurance, but he is unable to dock with it as he does not know the procedure of how to do so, and TARS (voiced by Bill Irwin) one of the robot crew members of the The Endurance has disabled the autopilot so he is unable to use that. Right as Dr. Mann is about to enter into another grandiose speech about how he will be the saviour of humanity, he blows up, a long with a part of The Endurance, sending it into an uncontrolled spin. This is when Coop and the film truly begins fully embodying melodrama, fully leaving the cerebral logic behind. TARS tells Coop that there is no reason to waste fuel chasing after The Endurance, that it is impossible to dock with it while it is spinning. "No. It's necessary" (*Interstellar* 2:08:21) Coop answers, as the score by Hans Zimmer swells to unimaginable heights, and due to Coop letting go of all the cerebral logic, deciding that it does not matter if he dies here or is stranded on Dr. Mann's planet, the only possible choice to save humanity, is to do this impossible thing, he does it. Unlike Dr. Mann who was enamored in the cerebral logic, that he was the only person who needed to be saved to save humanity, Coop gives up on everything, for this impossible thing to happen.

All of this, then actually culminates with Coop sacrificing himself, going into the black hole so that Dr. Brand can go to the final hopefully sustainable planet for humanity. But of course, doing the melodramatic thing in a Nolan film, ends up with Coop not dying within the black hole, but rather him finding himself in the middle of a seemingly never ending tesseract, and it is here that the film states its thesis. Even though this is a film that is largely hard science fiction, this last piece of the film, with Coop inside the tesseract sending messages to his daughter Murph, is explained entirely through the power of love, the most melodramatic thing to exist. It is largely a full on bootstrap paradox, the reason Coop is in the tesseract sending messages back in time to Murph, is because Coop sends those messages back in time to Murph, so Coop can read them and be sent on this mission. But in the film it is explained that it is all like this, simply because Coop loves Murph, and through that the universe in some quantifiable way has understood that this needed to happen, so Murph could figure out Professor Brand's seemingly impossible equation.

To finish up, this is not the first time the film mentions that the power of love is somehow quantifiable. In the film, there are three planets that seem viable for The Endurance to check in on, to figure out if that planet will be the new one for humanity. The first one is Miller's planet, which turns out to be so close to the black hole that time gets incredibly dilated, meaning that spending an hour on that planet is the equivalent of spending seven years on earth (for the score on this planet Hans Zimmer adds a little tick that repeats every 1.25 seconds, symbolising a day passing on earth). This time dilation means that the data coming from that planet ends up being not entirely correct, meaning that it is not viable for humanity. When the crew return to The Endurance more time has passed than anticipated, and they no longer have the fuel to go to both of the other seemingly viable planets. They have to choose between the two, Dr. Mann's planet or Edmunds' planet. The data from Edmunds' planet is better, but Edmunds is not transmitting anymore. Dr. Mann on the other hand is still transmitting. The key thing that happens in this scene, is that it is a pure choice between cerebral logic, or melodramatic pathos. Dr. Brand wants to go to Edmunds planet, at first she tries to go through the logical steps as to why that is, but eventually she gives in and says that it truly is because she loves Edmunds, she argues that in some way shape or form, love is a quantifiable thing. Though it is not something that we understand at the moment, it means something. Had Coop and Romilly just listened to this argument, given in to the melodramatic pathos of Dr. Brand's love for Edmunds, they would not have gotten into all the trouble that came from going to Dr. Mann's planet instead.

"What's happened, happened" - Tenet

Tenet is Christopher Nolan's eleventh feature film, meaning that in between *Tenet* and *Interstellar*, Nolan made one other film, *Dunkirk*. Briefly going over *Dunkirk*, there are a couple of interesting evolutions in Nolan's auteurial traits. First of all it is the last time we see a couple of his frequent collaborators, though he does also pick up a new face, that will be in his next couple of films, that being Kenneth Branagh. For the actors we see for the last time in *Dunkirk*, you have Tom Hardy who was first seen in a Nolan film with *Inception*, then later in *The Dark Knight Rises*. In *Dunkirk*, Tom Hardy plays one of the three lead roles, specifically the lead role in the part about the sky. He arguably also gets the most melodramatic end to his storyline in the film, choosing to sacrifice himself and his plane to ensure the safety of the soldiers on the beach. Though as usual in a small role, *Dunkirk* is as

of time of writing also the last time that John Nolan, Christopher Nolan's uncle, appears in one of his films. The most significant frequent collaborator to have his last collaboration in *Dunkirk*, would be Hans Zimmer as the composer. Though once again it is not impossible that he will return in the future, for other Christopher Nolan projects.

As far as his personal style, as well as how the tension is between that and his melodramatic material evolved from *Interstellar* to *Dunkirk*, the melodrama specifically is not quite as overt as the power of love in *Interstellar*, but it is still very clear in *Dunkirk*. His personal style shines through, as the film explores the Battle of Dunkirk in three different parts, The Mole which takes place over the span of a week, The Sea which takes place over a day, and The Air which takes place over a single hour. Though the only exposition explaining the different time settings of every part is a simple title card, Nolan makes it work seamlessly even though they all crosscut in between each other, at different parts throughout the film. All leading up to the incredibly melodramatic ending of all the privately owned boats coming to evacuate the soldiers from the beach.

Moving on to *Tenet*, there are once again a few frequent collaborators to talk about. First of all the return of Kenneth Branagh, who as mentioned before first appeared in *Dunkirk* as Commander Bolton, but is now the main antagonist in *Tenet*, Andrei Sator. With *Dunkirk* being the latest Christopher Nolan film that Hans Zimmer composed, someone else had to take over. That person being Ludwig Göransson, who seemingly has become Nolan's new go to composer, as he did both *Tenet* and *Oppenheimer*, as well as being announced at the time of writing to be composing for *The Odyssey* (2026) (Top Film). There seems to be somewhat of a marked shift in the way in which Nolan makes his films whenever he changes his composers, which is why it is important to mention Göransson being his new go to composer. Much like when he switched from David Julyan to Hans Zimmer, the music became grander, more epic in scale, and

seemed to be a little bit more important in the Nolan films that he composed, the same thing happens with the switch to Göransson. This will be explored further later on in this section about *Tenet*. Finally for frequent collaborators, we have both Jeremy Theobald and Michael Caine with both of their last appearances in a Nolan film being in *Tenet*.

Jeremy Theobald had not been in a Christopher Nolan film since *Batman Begins*, but his return in *Tenet* seems incredibly thematic. Besides his brief scene in *Batman Begins*, his only other appearance in a Nolan film is in his very first one, *Following*, wherein he played the main character of the film. But in what is seemingly a bit of a meta-narrative melodrama, the last scene in a Nolan film that features Michael Caine, his most prominent acting collaborator, also features his first main character, Jeremy Theobald. The plot of the scene is fairly simply, The Protagonist (played by John David Washington, and yes the name of his character is credited as The Protagonist) arrives at a restaurant where he is supposed to meet with Sir Michael Crosby (played by Michael Caine, knighted in real life as well as in the film) to discuss Andrei Sator. As The Protagonist enters the restaurant he is greeted by a steward (played by Jeremy Theobald), who leads him to Sir Michael Crosby's table where they then discuss Andrei Sator, his backstory, and how The Protagonist is going to get in to contact with him. While all of this exposition is somewhat pertinent, the real meta-melodrama comes at the end of the scene. The Protagonist gets up to leave as the steward comes back with a waiter carrying The Protagonist's food, giving us one last look at Jeremy Theobald. The film then cuts to Sir Michael Crosby mouthing something to The Protagonist, and then finally cuts to The Protagonist leaving, but not before saying "Goodbye, Sir Michael" (*Tenet* 00:26:54). In the universe of the film, it is not exactly unimaginable that The Protagonist would give such a goodbye to Sir Michael Crosby, but it does seem like a slightly weird way to interact with someone that you have literally just met for the first time, even though the chat they had was nice, and even had a few quips between them. No, what this goodbye might actually rather be while not

explicitly confirmed anywhere, is a goodbye sent from Nolan himself to his long time collaborator and friend Sir Michael Caine. What supports this is all within the film, as well of course the way in which Nolan uses melodramatic pathos, only that he uses it here not within the film itself, but rather in a much more meta way. First of all, the character is literally named Sir Michael Crosby, one can shorten that to Sir Michael C. and their names line up perfectly with each other, although Michael Caine does not want to be called sir, even though he has been knighted (Hall). Secondly, we have the presence of Jeremy Theobald as the steward in the scene, as mentioned before in Nolan's first feature film *Following* Jeremy Theobald plays the main character, so bringing him back in this last scene with Michael Caine seems to be a sort of nod to the way in which both Michael Caine's and Nolan's working relationship are intertwined, while not working together from the beginning of Nolan's career, having Jeremy Theobald here shows that in some way Nolan finds his collaboration with Michael Caine to be as instrumental, as that of his first main character. Lastly, we have the goodbye, which only mentions a Sir Michael, rather than saying the full name of the character, which might be the clearest indicator that this is something that Nolan is using The Protagonist to directly say to Sir Michael Caine himself.

Moving on to Nolan's personal style in the film, which would usually be filled with a lot of exposition explaining the various mechanics of how the world works. While this is all somewhat present in *Tenet*, to some degree or another, it is also made explicitly clear that it in many ways, does not matter. Much like how at the start of *The Prestige* the film tells you that you are not really looking for how the trick is done, because you want to be fooled, pretty early on in *Tenet* the film has a character tell The Protagonist "Don't try to understand it. Feel it." (*Tenet* 00:15:39). Though like always, it is completely possible to fully understand every plot point of *Tenet* if one is really trying to, but as this quote is saying, there really is no need to try to. *Tenet*, while filled to the brim with exposition, and characters talking about an almost absurd amount of interesting things at all times, is not about the plot, but rather about the feeling of the movie. It is in many ways Nolan's movie with the least tension between his personal style of cerebral logic, and his material of pathos filled melodrama. Because the film is almost all classic melodrama, in the style of the James Bond films, rather than the likes of *Brief Encounter* (1945). Though what makes it stick out in that regard, is that it also has the kind of melodrama that you would find in films like *Brief Encounter*, though rather than like a romantic love story, it is a story about the friendship between The Protagonist and Neil

(played by Robert Pattinson), some romance does show up throughout the film and is important.

When it comes to showing Nolan's usual personal style of cerebral logic that is usually done through the exposition of the film. The best scene to look at is actually the one in which The Protagonist (as well as us the audience) is told not to try to understand it, but rather feel it. Because that is not the only bit of exposition in that scene, though for *Tenet* (and in many ways Nolan's whole filmography) it is the most important. The film rarely slows down, though this scene does take a bit of time to set up the stakes of the film, as well as showing how inverted objects function, at least somewhat. Interestingly, this scene's exposition is much more reminiscent of earlier Nolan films like *Memento* and *The Prestige*, involving a character just talking about how stuff within the universe works. Whereas in later Nolan films like *Interstellar* and *Dunkirk*, a lot of the tougher ideas to understand are left up to the audience to figure out on their own, though of course Nolan gives the information in one way or another within the film. This scene makes a lot of sense to put in at the start of *Tenet* though, just to give the audience the broad strokes, it does not go as far as *Memento* almost spending half of the film doing exposition, rather just this one scene, and then moving on to Nolan's more evolved style of exposition, that is more focused on showing, rather than telling.

What this scene does show through the exposition though, is that the larger stakes of the story involve preventing World War III, though that would usually be seen as trying to prevent all out nuclear war, the world of *Tenet* is a bit different. Which leads into the other big exposition drop in this scene, inverted items. In the universe of *Tenet*, there are items that have come backwards in time from the future, classic Nolan playing with time. The way these items are interacted with is shown in a couple different ways in this scene, like with The Protagonist "dropping" an inverted bullet, which really means the bullet "returns" to his hand. As a fun meta way of showing exactly how this works, within the film they have the character giving the exposition set up a camera and a screen, that then forwards and backwards the clip of The Protagonist "dropping" the bullet. The forwards clip is what we see at the start, The Protagonist seemingly magically making a bullet move and then ending up in his hand. But then when the footage is shown backwards, we see it like how the inverted bullet sees it, The Protagonist dropping it. But how exactly does an inverted bullet lead to the end of the world through World War III? Well, one inverted bullet would not be a problem for humanity at large. But a weapon from the future, even stronger than a nuclear weapon,

sent back through time through inversion, that could end the world, and those are the stakes of *Tenet*.

But truly, besides understanding that The Protagonist is trying to stop the end of the world, and that it is possible for things to move backwards through time, there really is no more reason to try to understand the exposition within the film. This is explored in film writer Elroy Rosenberg's article on *Tenet* named "The Joys of Not Understanding '*Tenet*'". Rosenberg talks about watching the film for the first time and not exactly "understanding" it. But that in no way deterred them from enjoying the film, in some ways it even helped with that. Though what inspired the article, and what did somewhat nag at Rosenberg, were the repeated questions of if they "got it". Rosenberg came to realise that it was not actually the repetition of the question that bothered them, but rather how predictable it had become that someone would ask that of a Nolan film. But what is truly interesting about *Tenet*, is that you are not supposed to get it, you are supposed to feel it. It is Nolan once again trying to teach the audience how to interact with his films, but also how to interact with art in general.

Rosenberg goes on to compare the film to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), though the films are very different, comparing it to David Lynch makes a lot of sense. As Rosenberg mentions that a lot of Lynch superfans and cinephiles alike will spend a lot of time trying to puzzle together exactly how a movie like *Mulholland Drive* fits together, but really the whole point is not to make sense of it all, but rather to sit there with it, and make you feel something. Now the big difference between David Lynch and Christopher Nolan here, is that Nolan is seemingly unable to help himself from making a world that does cerebrally fit together logically, whereas that was almost never a real concern for David Lynch, outside of perhaps a film like *The Straight Story* (1999).

One thing Rosenberg does not mention when it comes to how *Tenet* is teaching the audience how to watch it, is the score. The scores in older Nolan films composed by Hans Zimmer, while largely bombastic and epic, did largely not inform how the film was watched. The score definitely added atmosphere, but interacting with the story was rare, the only example really being the ticking that is added to the score on Miller's planet in *Interstellar*.

This changed with Ludwig Göransson and *Tenet*. The score has never been louder and more bombastic in a Nolan film than it is in *Tenet*, and to many this is a problem because it makes the dialogue in the film hard to hear. What that fails to consider is that that might be the point. The dialogue in *Tenet* simply does not need to be heard over the score. The score is very specifically teaching the audience here, that they do not have to understand what is being said, but rather just live with the feeling that the overwhelming score is giving them.

So when interacting with *Tenet*, one should do it like The Protagonist, just let the melodrama wash over you and roll with where the story leads you. Where that melodrama leads The Protagonist, is right into the arms of Neil. When The Protagonist first meets Neil, it is because he needs his help to break into a penthouse, they spend a little time talking to each other before they figure out that bungee jumping up the building is the easiest way. But that is not what is interesting about this scene, as far as melodramatic pathos goes. Because as we find out at the end of the film, this is not the first time Neil meets The Protagonist. Neil hints at this with a small interaction he has in the middle of the scene, as he orders drinks for both himself and The Protagonist. A vodka tonic for himself, and a diet coke for The Protagonist.

This might seem incredibly innocuous at first, but the scene elaborates on it a bit further, by having Neil know that The Protagonist does not drink alcohol on the job. Then even further as The Protagonist says that he prefers soda water over a diet coke, but Neil snidely remarks back that that is not true. The Protagonist cracks the slightest smile, showing us that what Neil is saying is actually true.

This interaction, no matter how small it is, is bursting with the pathos of melodrama. Especially when taken with the reveal at the end of the film that Neil has known The Protagonist for years, and while that ending is Neil saying goodbye to a dear friend, it is only the beginning of that friendship for The Protagonist.

The ending of the film is so filled with that melodramatic pathos, that starts in this little scene, that he is tearing up, looking at what is to him a friend that he only met a couple of weeks ago. Nolan even gets to have his cake and eat it too with this ending, having Neil sacrifice himself to save the mission and The Protagonist, but also telling The Protagonist (as well as the audience) that he will have many more years of friendship to look forward to.

When it comes to the tension between cerebral logic and melodramatic pathos, and having characters that end up happy and fulfilled when they give in to that melodramatic pathos, the most important character for that comes through in Kat (played by Elizabeth Debicki). In the film she is Andrei Sator's reluctant wife, only really staying with him so that she can be with her son who she loves above everything else. Kat has two interconnected moments that showcase this tension. When The Protagonist first meets her at a restaurant at the start of the film, Kat tells him a story about how not too long ago she saw another woman leap off her husband's yacht, right after they had a big fight. This made her envious, though not because her husband might be with another woman, but rather because this woman was more free than she had been in a long time.

At the end of the film, through inverting herself and going back in time, which is something that can be done in *Tenet*, Kat finds herself back on this yacht with Sator. Kat is supposed to kill Sator here, but only after The Protagonist and his team have gotten their hands on the algorithm (a macguffin that is literally just shown as a bundle of interconnecting metal parts, that is supposedly able to destroy the whole world if not dealt with correctly). If Kat kills Sator without it being confirmed that they have gotten the algorithm, Sator has a dead man's switch that will trigger the algorithm, causing the end of the world. Looking at this through the cerebral logical lens, Kat should wait until she is signalled to kill Sator. What she ends up doing is killing him a little early, not awaiting the signal, but rather following her emotions. Sator wants to end the world by killing himself, but just like Sator had taken away Kat's freedom, here Kat takes away Sator's freedom, and kills him without giving him the satisfaction of knowing if he is also taking out the world with him.

This sequence is juxtaposed with Neil saving The Protagonist just before he dies in an explosion, also without Neil having gotten the signal that he should be able to do that. Simply believing that The Protagonist was able to fulfill the mission, which he was. Of course the same then goes for Kat and Sator, Kat jumping the gun and killing him early, is better for Kat as it gives her more agency, something she was missing so dearly. As the last icing on top, the woman that Kat saw jumping off the yacht at the start of the film, ends up actually being her from the future, traveling into the past, and jumping off the yacht, after having killed Sator.

"Can you hear the music?" - Oppenheimer

Oppenheimer is Christopher Nolan's twelfth feature film, and is in many ways his most ambitious film to date. It is an adaptation of the book *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, which is a book detailing the whole life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, cradle to grave. It is Nolan's longest film to date, with a running time of three hours. Finally the ensemble of actors he has accumulated in the film is immensely big.

So starting out this final section of analysis with which of Nolan's frequent collaborators return in *Oppenheimer*, is a good way to tackle it. For the third film in a row Kenneth Branagh returns, this time playing the character of Niels Bohr. Matt Damon returns after his surprise appearance as Dr. Mann in *Interstellar*, as Leslie Groves. Another actor returning from *Interstellar* is Casey Affleck, playing Boris Pash in this film. For actors we have not seen since *The Dark Knight Rises*, we have Tom Conti playing Albert Einstein, and Gary Oldman playing US President Harry S. Truman. Ludwig Göransson returned to compose after his success on *Tenet*. But the biggest returning frequent collaborator, last seen in *Dunkirk*, the only actor that has been in more Nolan films than him is Michael Caine, we have Cillian Murphy playing the titular character of J. Robert Oppenheimer.

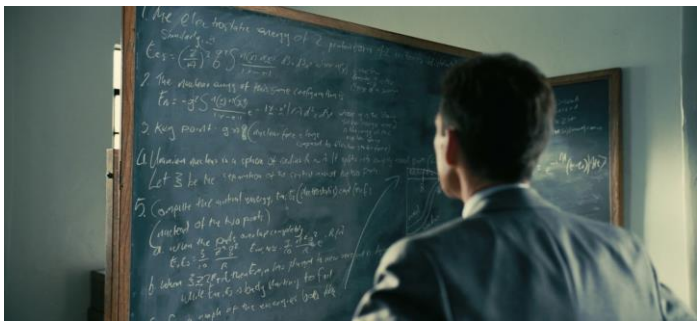
Due to the grand scale of the film, and its many characters, figuring out exactly which parts of this film to analyse is tough, which is why this section will solely focus on the character of J. Robert Oppenheimer within the film. Now the film is named after him, and he is by far the most important character in the film, with everything revolving around him. *Oppenheimer* is also very unique within the greater canon of Nolan's filmography, as it in a way is his only film where it is about a character going from believing in the cerebral logic,

that is Nolan's personal style, to evolving into a character that embraces the pathos of melodrama, that is Nolan's material.

Oppenheimer is split into two overt sections, as well as another unofficial covert section. To distinguish between these sections, Nolan went all the way back to *Memento* for inspiration and made the first section, named fission in color, and is told from Oppenheimer's perspective. The second section is called fusion, is in black-and-white and is told from the perspective of Lewis Strauss (played by Robert Downey Jr.), unlike his other forays into the world of black-and-white cinema, the purpose of the black-and-white here has nothing to do with it being like a documentary, in fact it is heavily implied that due to the black-and-white sequences being from Lewis Strauss' perspective, they might be even less truthful than normal. The final unofficial section comes in the form of Oppenheimer telling his life story at the security hearing, which is a large part of the fission section. Though much more subtle than the switch between color and black-and-white, there is a difference between this section and fission, being that in the fission sections of the film, the colors are paler, and in the sections of Oppenheimer telling his life story, the colors are richer. This is very much like the way the different time periods and fiction versus fact is portrayed in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), which could very well have been an inspiration for how Nolan wanted to

portray the different sections. In that film the present and factual events in the film are shown in largely cold colors, whereas the past and fictionalized parts of the film are shown in much warmer colors.

It is not entirely true that Oppenheimer's journey within *Oppenheimer* linearly lines up with him starting out as a full on believing in cerebral logic and lacking the pathos of melodrama. The film rather shows him in constant flux between the two, exactly like how it is the main tension to be found within Nolan's filmography. However, Oppenheimer does absolutely evolve throughout the film, being slightly more melodramatic at the start of the film, where he feels so miserable about his life that he almost poisons his teacher. But as he begins leading the Manhattan Project, he truly begins just thinking in cerebral logic. Though before this there is a moment where he shows himself in that same light, which is when he first reads about nuclear fission and immediately runs to his blackboard to prove that it is not possible. The music swells and the film quickly cuts to the next scene, of Oppenheimer standing in front of a full blackboard, proving that nuclear fission is impossible. The only problem being Lawrence (played by Josh Hartnett) coming up behind him and telling him that in the room next door they have made it work. As Oppenheimer is looking at the experiment working, even though he proved it impossible in theory, Lawrence says one of the most important lines of the film "Theory will take you only so far" (*Oppenheimer* 00:28:40). It is a line that comes up numerous times throughout the film, and it in a way serves the same purpose as Cutter's quote in *The Prestige* about the audience wanting to be fooled, as well as the quote in *Tenet* about not understanding something, but rather having to feel it.



The most important moment of Oppenheimer being fully in the mode of cerebral logic, comes as we are informed that Hitler has killed himself and Germany has surrendered, some of the scientists working under Oppenheimer are having a meeting about whether or not they should keep working on

the atomic bomb, seeing as Germany is defeated now. Oppenheimer argues then that Japan is still in the war and is fighting on, and that people who are not theoretical scientists like them, would not understand the power of this weapon without it being used. He also argues that when the atomic bomb is used in reality, due to the massive damage that it would be able to do, everyone would realise that the only way forward would be peace. This is an argument that he would end up regretting for the rest of his life, at least in the film. This moment shows Oppenheimer as he is deepest into cerebral logic, and he will not truly begin crawling out of that until after the atomic bomb has been used on Japan.

This then leads to how Oppenheimer becomes filled with more melodramatic pathos, throughout the film. As mentioned before this is something that is found within him even at the start of the film, in the section where Oppenheimer is explaining his life story. An interesting moment here is when he rushes to his classroom, trying to stop his professor from eating the apple that he has poisoned with cyanide. In the classroom he meets Niels Bohr, one of his big idols, who is just about to eat the poisoned apple, but Oppenheimer swats it away, not really wanting to kill anyone, though still lying about just seeing a wormhole rather than admitting to what he did. Bohr then gives him a metaphor for how algebra works, but it is also once again a metaphor that Nolan has put in there for understanding how to watch his film, “It is like sheet music, the important thing isn’t can you read music, it’s can you hear it. Can you hear the music, Robert?” (*Oppenheimer* 00:07:13). Ludwig Göransson’s score swells up and we are led into a montage of Oppenheimer quite literally hearing the music. Though the montage does feature shots of Oppenheimer in class, the montage is really mostly about Oppenheimer appreciating many different forms of art, literature, architecture, and music. The montage clearly shows that Oppenheimer as a person is not just about cerebral logic, he is much deeper than that, he is filled with melodramatic pathos, even so early in his life.

Another example of Oppenheimer being a melodramatic person, comes with his relationship with Jean Tatlock (played by Florence Pugh). Which starts early on in the film, but comes up a couple of times throughout the film. One little thing that happens every time they meet in the film, after them first meeting each other that is, is that Oppenheimer brings her flowers. Though Tatlock never wants the flowers, it is the only way that Oppenheimer knows how to express melodrama towards her. This is until Tatlock dies, and we see how this affects Oppenheimer. Even though at the moment of Tatlock’s death, Oppenheimer is

married to Kitty Oppenheimer (played by Emily Blunt), Tatlock's death completely breaks him. It is not until Kitty herself goes to him and tells him to snap out of it that he is able to go back to working at Los Alamos. What this reaction shows however, is that Oppenheimer is a deeply emotional being, no matter what he tries to outwardly show, even during his time at Los Alamos. What is also interesting is the fact that Kitty is able to work it out with Oppenheimer, even through his infidelity. Kitty in a way is what keeps Oppenheimer on the way of being melodramatic and emotional throughout the film.

Finally we have Oppenheimer after the atomic bomb has hit Japan, where there are a couple of incredibly interesting and emotional scenes, that show how Oppenheimer evolves after this event. First of all the speech in the gym at Los Alamos, where the speech is trying to project Oppenheimer as that cerebral logical person that he has shown himself as, but the filmmaking betrays that, or rather, shows his real human being. The music disappears, the background begins shaking, sometimes a terrified scream is heard, Oppenheimer sees his coworkers with their skin flapping off of their body. It is quite clear that the bombing of Japan has severely traumatised Oppenheimer, but he has not quite found out about that yet. Especially seeing as almost all of his coworkers are praising him so highly, though some of them are seen crying and throwing up, clearly also traumatised. This is what informs the melodramatic pathos of the rest of the film, Oppenheimer regrets that he made the atomic bomb, and that it was actually used on human beings.

The next interesting scene is Oppenheimer meeting with president Harry S. Truman, the reason Oppenheimer is there for the meeting is that he wants to make it clear that he wants there to be a global consensus on the usage of atomic energy. Oppenheimer truly wants peace, but he has failed to understand that not everyone is like him, and that using the atomic bomb did not at all deter someone like Harry S. Truman, but rather made him want to build even bigger bombs, for defence of course. In this scene Oppenheimer confesses to Harry S. Truman that he feels like he has blood on his hands due to the bombing, and his involvement with building the bomb. While this is entirely too late to clear Oppenheimer's conscious, it once again shows the melodrama that this bombing has sent him through. Right opposite of

him you have Harry S. Truman, who takes responsibility for the actual bombing, talking about how the people do not actually care who built the bomb, but rather the person who dropped the bombs, which with Harry S. Truman being in the highest office, is fully responsible for. The problem is, Harry S. Truman does not feel the same guilt Oppenheimer does, in the film the way Harry S. Truman is shown through Oppenheimer's eyes, it is not clear if has any empathy whatsoever for the people that were killed by the atomic bombs.

Finally, we have the final scene of the film, though in some ways it is a scene we have a seen a couple times throughout the film, as it is something that Lewis Strauss is obsessed over. It is the scene of Oppenheimer talking to Einstein. Throughout the whole film, we wonder what this conversation was about, Lewis Strauss believes it to be a conversation about him, that Oppenheimer is telling Einstein that Strauss is no good. But we finally find out what it is truly about right at the end, and of course, it has absolutely nothing to do with Lewis Strauss. Rather it is about Oppenheimer's guilt about what he has brought into the world. It is a continuation of a conversation Oppenheimer and Einstein had earlier in the film, about the miniscule chance that when they detonated an atomic bomb, it would start a chain reaction that would ignite the whole atmosphere, destroying the world. Oppenheimer asks Einstein if he remembers that conversation, but reformulates it a bit. He only mentions the part about starting a chain reaction, and at this moment, Oppenheimer truly believes that building and exploding the atomic bomb did start a chain reaction that would eventually lead to the end of the world. The film ends as we stare into Oppenheimer's face, as he contemplates what this means.

Compared to Nolan’s other films, this is a very different way of showing a person being melodramatic and filled with pathos, as this is the only time it does not end well for that character, of course this in some way is because he was a character of cerebral logic for so much of the film, leading to enormous death in the world.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is quite clear that this thesis showcases that Christopher Nolan is an auteur in the way that it is described by Andrew Sarris. Starting with *Memento* it is immediately clear that Nolan's personal style is cerebral logic, shown through the way he uses exposition and a convoluted plot structure in the movie, as well as how the main character of Leonard acts. Even this early in his career it is also clear his personal style is in tension with his material, that consists of the pathos of melodrama. Though at this point in time for his career he only had tried to show that in one kind of way, in *Memento* the importance of the pathos of melodrama is shown through the way in which Leonard lacks it in the film, and what that leads Leonard to do in the film.

This further evolves and develops in his later films, as shown in *Interstellar*, where once again his personal style is shown through the use of exposition and the use of a convoluted plot structure, as well as shown in some of the characters like Professor Brand and Dr. Mann. The tension between the cerebral logic and the pathos of melodrama is also clear in this film, as the eventual conclusion to the story foregoes cerebral logic, to instead focus on the power of love, as well as the story being able to have concluded much earlier, has the characters decided to believe in the pathos of melodrama.

It once again evolves further with *Tenet* as the personal style of cerebral logic almost forgoes the importance of exposition, though the film is still filled with it, as well as the film still having a very convoluted plot structure. The pathos of melodrama has an especially interesting development in this film, as it uses classic melodrama in the style of the James Bond films, while also using the more mainstream understanding of the pathos of melodrama.

Finally, concluding the evolution of Christopher Nolan for the time being *Oppenheimer* also showcases Nolan's personal style of cerebral logic, moving all the way back to some of the same techniques he used back with *Memento,* but also developing it further. Of course *Oppenheimer* also thoroughly shows the tension between the cerebral logic, and the pathos of melodrama. What is specifically interesting about *Oppenheimer* is the way in which it shows the main character move from being a character that fully gives in to the cerebral logic, but then at the end of the film has evolved into giving in to the pathos of melodrama.

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