



# DARK ROOTS

**CHRISTOPHER NOLAN AND NOIR** Jason Ney

**T**o fully appreciate the films of Christopher Nolan, an understanding of his admiration for and relationship to film noir is absolutely essential. He is now primarily known for his highly successful reimagining of the Batman franchise—but his first film, *Following* (1998), which he made not long after he graduated from University College London with a degree in Literature, is a self-aware exercise in low-budget noir filmmaking. With its stark black and white cinematography, flashback-heavy narrative, crime-riddled plot, femme fatale and doomed protagonist, the film effectively resurrects and embraces the tropes of the genre.

In fact, *Following* and Nolan's second film, *Memento* (2000), serve as a useful interpretive lens for all of Nolan's subsequent work, and you won't fully understand what Nolan is trying to accomplish in his later works without going back and examining the noir-infused structural elements, characters, and themes he explores in his first two directorial outings. However, a clarifying word about how to approach the relationship between Nolan and noir should be useful as a preface to the actual analysis of Nolan's films. The debate about what does or does not constitute noir is well-worn ground, the steps of which, for the purposes of this study, don't need to be extensively retraced. What's far more important is to understand *Nolan's conception of noir* as a genre—how he views it and seeks to implement it in his films.

**Nolan recognizes that** deception is one of the essential elements of noir. "I think there's an incredible emphasis on characterization through action in film noir and great crime dramas," he has said, "where you're not learning about the characters through what they tell you about themselves—because they're very often lying to you. You have all kinds of great unreliable narrators and



Jeremy Theobald in Christopher Nolan's first film, *Following*



In *Following*, Jeremy Theobald's Young Man makes the mistake of following the same man more than once

double crosses and things going on in the narrative [of film noir]."

Characters whose default setting is "deceive" populate the events of *Following*. As J.P. Telotte writes in *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, "the voice-over, usually introducing or accompanying a flashback to some prior action or event, is often seen as the most characteristic *noir* strategy," and Nolan adapts this structural method in *Following*. The film's protagonist follows in the weary, broken footsteps of many great noir characters from films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Detour* (1945) and *D.O.A.* (1950), opening with a confession from the main character of the story's events after the fact, allowing the film to play out in a series of flashbacks. The nameless Young Man (Jeremy Theobald) in *Following* is a loner, a loser, an aimless drifter, a failure. (Had the film been made fifty years earlier, Elisha Cook Jr. would have been the odds-on favorite for the role.) He has no job, no prospects, and while he calls himself a writer, his empty bank account and decrepit flat say otherwise. His life is an empty shell, so he decides that he's going to start following people to fill the void. Not for any malicious reason—not to steal from them or assault them. Just to watch what they do.

But as he confesses to the man taking his statement, he got addicted to it, and so he needed to put down some rules to keep himself under control. "Don't follow the same person twice. Don't follow women down dark alleys at night. Keep it all as random as possible." However, as he admits, he couldn't help himself, and that's when it all started to go so very, very wrong.

As he tells it, the Young Man makes the mistake of following the same man more than once, and the man eventually confronts him in a restaurant, demanding to know what he's doing. Having come face-to-face with one of the people he follows, the Young Man





Guy Pearce in a pensive moment from Nolan's *Memento*

wilts under the pressure. Cobb (Alex Haw), the man he's been following, is so self-assured, so in control. Cobb openly admits to the Young Man what he does. He's a thief, and to the Young Man's surprise, he offers him an opportunity to join him. What else does the Young Man have to do? Of course he accepts.

But the poor Young Man is a classic noir fall guy—inept, powerless, and in over his head. As he entangles himself in Cobb's web, eventually getting framed by him for a murder he didn't commit, the Young Man also gets seduced and manipulated by an archetypal *femme fatale* (Lucy Russell) he meets in a seedy, underground nightclub. As events around him spiral out of control and he senses that the walls are closing in, he grasps for answers that could clear his name but never finds any that don't point an accusatory finger right back at him. Like scores of suckers in noirs that came before him, he doesn't know who's playing whom until it's too late. When he should be skeptical, he's trusting. He can't see



through the thick layers of deception that are masking everyone else's dark, true natures. As the old poker saying goes, if you can't spot the sucker at the table, it's probably you.

**When speaking about** the uniqueness of noir, Nolan has said that he found himself “very attracted to working within a genre that lets you take our everyday neurosis—our everyday sort of fears and hopes for ourselves—and translate them into this very heightened realm. That way, they become more accessible to other people. They become universal. They're recognizable fears; they're things that worry us in real life.” Nolan is correct in concluding that fear is one of the dominant emotions and motivations in many noir films. Just take a look through the noir canon at some of the most obvious titles: *Journey into Fear* (1943), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Fear* (1946), *Fear in the Night* (1947), *Sudden Fear* (1952), *Storm Fear* (1956) *Hidden Fear* (1957), *City of Fear* (1959).

For Nolan, emotions such as fear,



Carrie-Anne Moss tries to temper Guy Pearce's vengeful motives in *Memento*

placed into the tightly compressed situations that inhabit many great noirs, define both the genre and the characters within it. The visual style of noir, which many noir fans and scholars see as essential to any film's inclusion within the canon, isn't enough to define the essence of the genre, because it is not uniquely embedded in the genre's DNA. Of noir's visual style, Nolan has said "it applies to various genres—horror movies, for example—so I think to really look at what film noir is, you have to look beyond that and see how that lighting and how the use of shadows and the darkness interacts with the story elements [...] and how it all relates to the mental state of the characters." As Claire Molloy correctly observes in her examination of *Memento*, "Nolan's historicizing of *film noir* as an expression of the anxieties of a society at a specific moment in time suggests that it is both mobile and elastic enough to accommodate meaningful appropriations within different contexts," and it is not the visuals—although he does import some of the same stylistic tendencies typically associated with noir in both *Following* and *Memento*—that Nolan cares about adapting from noir into his own films. What he really wants to examine is the dangerous emotional states of his characters and how their unstable emotions destroy themselves and others. As he put it when describing what he sees as the essence of noir, "to many people, *film noir* has become this nostalgic image of guys in rain coats and fedoras coming down alleyways. But when you get back and

look at the films, you realize they were very contemporary stories, imbued with exaggerated everyday fears."

*Following* explores this idea of fear through the character of the Young Man, who fears loneliness so much that, rather than be alone, he gets tangled up with a thief, some mobsters, and a dangerous woman, ultimately taking the fall for a murder that Cobb committed. However, Nolan's second film *Memento* expands on the same theme by raising the stakes even higher. If *Following* is a sketch, some blueprints doodled on a napkin during lunch, then *Memento* is the finished product, a meticulously constructed skyscraper.

The "heightened realm" of noir to which Nolan refers becomes bleakly oppressive in *Memento*, a film which, like *Following*, features a voiceover narration as well as a series of complicated, recursive flashbacks. The film follows Leonard Shelby, a man who cannot form short-term memories, as he tries to track down a man named John G\_\_\_\_\_ who apparently broke into his home, raped and killed his wife, and injured Leonard in a fight, causing his inability to form any new memories. At one point, Leonard outlines his fears to a man on the phone that claims to be a police officer. "You know the truth about my condition, officer?" Leonard asks. "You don't know anything. You feel angry; you don't know why. You feel guilty; you have no idea why. You could do anything and not have the faintest idea ten minutes later."

Leonard's entire life is an exercise in trying to find meaning outside himself, and while he channels the laconic attitude made famous by Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe—an appropriate personality trait, considering he's operating as a detective of sorts—the twin fires of fear and revenge are always burning just below his cool, calm demeanor. He gives a glimpse into this darkness when he tells his friend Teddy about John G: "He killed my wife. Took away my fucking memory. Destroyed my ability to live." When Teddy feels his pulse and tells him that he's still living, Leonard replies, "only for revenge." Fear and revenge are what drive him to keep living, to tattoo clues he has obtained in his investigations all over his body so that he will never lose them, and to develop a complex system that keeps



Guy Pearce as Leonard, vengeful and driven, in Nolan's *Memento*





Robin Williams and Al Pacino make an unlikely, but memorable pair in Nolan's *Insomnia*

him from forgetting everything about who he is, why he suffers from his condition, and what he must do to make it right.

But although he is acting from a motive of vengeance, his overall morality still initially seems to align with the morality of a private detective like Philip Marlowe—played by, among others, Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep* (1946) and Dick Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)—who has a clear sense of right and wrong and acts on it. He is a man who, as Raymond Chandler wrote in *The Simple Art of Murder*, must be “neither tarnished nor afraid. [...] He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour.” When Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss), a woman Leonard meets at a dive bar, points out to him that “even if you get revenge, you’re not going to remember it. You’re not even going to know that it happened,” Leonard undercuts the premise of her argument—that he’s only seeking vengeance for his own satisfaction—by emphatically stating, “my wife deserves vengeance. Doesn’t make any difference whether I know about it. Just because there are things I don’t remember, doesn’t make my actions meaningless. The world doesn’t just disappear when you close your eyes, does it?” Leonard believes that he is Chandler’s man of honour—that he is righting a wrong for the sake of justice, not merely for his own ends.

However, Leonard is not that man. The final twists in the story take the film down a pitch-black road and cement *Memento* as noir at its very core, a film in which the moral spectrum runs not from black to white but from black to gray. The characters in the film—the corrupt cop (Teddy, played by Joe Pantoliano) who strings Leonard along and uses him to kill drug dealers and steal their money, the femme fatale (Natalie) who uses Leonard’s condition to manipulate him into beating up a man who is bothering her, the hotel manager

(Burt, played by Mark Boone Jr.) who double-books Leonard in two rooms so he can make him pay for both of them—all fit right at home in the darkest corners of the noir universe, but none more so than Leonard himself. He is a man so undone by his fears that he lies to himself to be happy, creating clues that feed his darkest desires but inevitably lead him down the same dead-end street again and again. Nolan emphasizes Leonard’s mental and emotional instability and subsequent inability to find meaning outside of the lies he tells himself by starting the film with Leonard asking himself, “So where are you?” and ending with him asking the same question—“Now, where was I?”

**Once one understands** Nolan’s interest in infusing the fears typical of noir films into both *Following* and *Memento*, Nolan’s first two films can then serve as a useful interpretative lens for understanding how film noir influences all of his other films, regardless of their genres. While it’s true that Nolan hasn’t made a “true” or “pure” noir since his first two films, what Nolan sees as the essence of film noir—everyday fears placed into tightly compressed situations—still casts a long shadow over the themes and characters of his later films. Steve Neale writes in *Genre and Hollywood* that noir films feature a “downbeat emphasis on violence, anxiety, death, crime and compromised morality,” and this description could just as easily describe the content of not only *Following* and *Memento* but the rest of Nolan’s films as well.

*Insomnia* (2002), *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010) all feature morally compromised characters at the center of their respective stories, and the same types of fears and obsessions that drive the doomed protagonists in Nolan’s first two noirs also drive these



In *Insomnia*, we watch Al Pacino's Will Dormer's slow psychic disintegration

characters. It's almost as if, in Nolan's post-noir films, his characters are fighting to escape from the inevitable fatalism and destruction that permeate his earliest works.

Take *Insomnia*, for example. The film is a ponderous, slowly paced meditation on one morally compromised cop's slowly unraveling psyche and his paranoia-fueled actions. Despite a solid record as a homicide detective, Will Dormer (Al Pacino) isn't doing so well. Internal Affairs is coming after him, claiming he's corrupt. In an effort to buy him some time, Dormer's boss sends him and his partner (Martin Donovan) to Alaska to aid in a murder investigation. Dormer's partner is going to cop a plea with IA and rat him out, so when Dormer, his partner, and several of Alaska's finest are chasing a suspect through the fog-shrouded woods and Dormer sees who he thinks is the suspect, he shoots and kills him. Except it isn't the suspect, it's his partner, and he has a choice to make: tell the truth about what happened, or give into his fear that no one would believe it was an accident and try to cover it up.

Given that this is a Nolan film, it's practically inevitable that Dormer chooses the cover-up route. Like the Young Man and Leonard Shelby, Dormer quickly sinks in over his head. For the majority of the film, it appears that Nolan is taking Dormer down the same desperate path as so many other doomed noir protagonists. Just like in *Following*, the murderer, Walter Finch (Robin Williams), gets the upper hand on Dormer, and just like in *Memento*, Dormer resorts to telling lie after lie in order to keep his head above water, allowing his fears and his paranoia to drive his actions instead of working to overcome them.

But the key difference between *Insomnia* and Nolan's first two films is that Nolan gives a sliver of hope that

some people who populate his cinematic universe might be able to escape the dark fate that presses down upon the characters in *Memento* and *Following*. In both of Nolan's early noirs, fear broke the protagonists and controlled their actions, but by the end of *Insomnia*, when Dormer is facing an imminent death, he conquers his fear and exhorts the Alaskan police officer (Hilary Swank) who was planning to cover up the truth about his partner's shooting to tell the truth about his actions. "Don't lose your way," he says to her just before he dies from a gunshot wound inflicted by Finch. She follows his advice, and in doing so, offers the first example in a Nolan film of someone who doesn't give in to what Nolan calls "the edgier fears that we have."

In essence, the plots and characters in all of Nolan's films—whether he wrote them himself, co-wrote them with others such as his brother Jonathan or David S. Goyer, or adapted them from pre-



Christopher Nolan bringing out the dark side of Robin Williams on the set of *Insomnia*





**Rogues' Gallery:** a gathering of villains from Nolan's Batman trilogy. Left to right: Cillian Murphy as Scarecrow; Heath Ledger as The Joker; Aaron Eckhart as Harvey Dent; and Tom Hardy as Bane

viously-created material—are shot through with the kinds of fears and psychological shortcomings that dominate the lives of countless noir characters. However, the further away from his first two films he gets, the more open Nolan seems to the possibility that some of his morally flawed protagonists can escape from noir's pitch-black shadow. It's no coincidence that the protagonist in *Inception* is a thief named Cobb. However, unlike the thief named Cobb in *Following*, while the actions of Cobb in *Inception* are often morally ambiguous, he is neither an obviously good or obviously bad person. The ambiguity of his character is matched by the ambiguity of the spinning top at the end of the film, but unlike the hopeless fates of the Young Man and Leonard Shelby, Nolan leaves the door open

(depending upon your interpretation of the film's final image) to a potentially satisfying ending for his second Cobb.

Nolan takes this idea a step further in the *Batman* trilogy, the three films serving to illustrate how Bruce Wayne's successful transformation into Batman is about overcoming his fears by taking control of them. As Wayne puts it to Rachel Dawes in *Batman Begins* (2005), he had to learn how to control his darker impulses, moving beyond being “a coward with a gun” to understanding that “justice is about more than revenge”—a lesson Leonard Shelby failed to learn. To truly become Batman, Wayne must, as he puts it, learn “to turn fear against those who prey on the fearful.” In each of the *Batman* films, this battle takes different forms but remains essentially



Heath Ledger's unforgettable Joker confronts Christian Bale's Batman in Nolan's iconic *The Dark Knight*



In Nolan's *Batman* trilogy, Christian Bale's *Dark Knight* struggles to maintain his moral center

the same. And if the ending of Nolan's final *Batman* film is any indication, he has come to believe that a man can beat back his darker impulses and accomplish this goal.

**While Nolan continues** to expand the moral spectrum on which his characters fit as well as the possibilities for their respective outcomes, the types of antagonists he creates in all his films are still linked to the fears he sees as heavily populating and defining the noir landscape. In each of his successive films, he continues to refine his ability to shape his villains as those who try to manipulate the fears of others for their own twisted purposes. Look at the antagonists in all three of the *Batman* films: the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy), the Joker (Heath Ledger), and Bane (Tom Hardy). The Scarecrow uses a nerve gas that induces fear and paranoia in its victims, the Joker is a self-confessed agent of chaos who seeks to terrorize Gotham and use the fear he inflicts through his terror to turn its residents against each other, and Bane seeks to turn fear, jealousy and anger about class inequality into full-blown rage and revolution.

What is remarkable is that the villains in Nolan's later films—especially those in the *Batman* trilogy—all seem to take their inspiration from Cobb, the thief in Nolan's first film. In *Following*, Cobb doesn't steal so that he can gain more material possessions. He steals so that he can inflict chaos and fear into the order of his vic-

tims' lives. When he takes the Young Man on his first break-in and the Young Man questions Cobb's methods, Cobb tells him why he steals. "It's all about interrupting someone's life," Cobb tells him as he dumps his victim's most personal items all over the floor. Cobb then sticks a pair of ladies' underwear from a previous theft into the couple's laundry bag, telling the Young Man, "I think I'll just give them something to chat about." Throughout the film, Cobb—despite all of his soliloquizing about his higher motives for what he does, such as disrupting someone's personal life for the sake of "showing them what they had"—proves himself to be nothing more than a sadist, a man who takes pleasure in disrupting and destabilizing the lives of everyone around him.

A direct line can be drawn from Cobb through the Scarecrow to the Joker, whose speech to Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight* (2008) mirrors Cobb's rhetoric in his speeches to the Young Man. "You know what I've noticed?" the Joker asks Dent. "Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow, I tell the press that a gangbanger will get shot or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die? Well, then everyone loses their minds! Introduce a little anarchy, upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos." That so many of Nolan's antagonists contain



Heath Ledger's Joker, disguised as a nurse, engages in some twisted gunplay with Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*





Divine Inspiration: compare the above scene from *The Dark Knight* with the lobby card scene at left from Kubrick's *The Killing*



think it's one of the really defining traits of a great film noir." Whether it is the non-linear storytelling in both *Following* and *Memento*, the series of magic tricks that mirror the structural deceptions in the narrative of *The Prestige*, or the dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream elements of *Inception*, Nolan clearly has an affection for noir-inspired, convoluted, confusing narrative structures that keep the audience wondering about the true natures of the characters they are watching. He realizes that the twist-heavy narratives of the great noirs not only made them fascinating viewing the first time around, but that they kept audiences coming back again and again as they tried to put all of the puzzle pieces together after repeat viewings. And just as Cobb's influence can be seen on the antagonists in every one of Nolan's subsequent films, the influence of the deceptive narrative structures of *Following* and *Memento* on Nolan's later films is just as clear, giving further credence to the idea that many fundamental elements of the noir genre will continue to play a major role in Nolan's future work.

elements of Cobb gives weight to the idea that the influence of noir will continue to remain a steady presence in Nolan's films for the foreseeable future.

**In film after film,** Christopher Nolan has continued to embrace the psychological and emotional elements of some of the best entries in the noir canon. But perhaps his greatest achievement is his ability to capture and adapt in his own films the uncertainty presented by the deceptive, twist-laden narrative structures of many classic noirs such as *The Big Sleep*, *D.O.A.* and *The Killers* (1946). Nolan has said that when "you get to the end of a great film noir, you're left thinking, 'Okay, who was the good guy? Who was the bad guy? Who did what to whom?'" That's a very strong form of characterization. I

Whether it is through his destabilizing narrative structures or the dark natures of his characters, the fingerprints of film noir are all over the films of Christopher Nolan, either explicitly (*Following* and *Memento*), implicitly (*Insomnia* and *The Prestige*) or somewhere in between (*Inception* and the *Batman* trilogy). Nolan has embraced the genre, and if his critical and commercial success is any indication, the genre has embraced him back. That a filmmaker can become one of the most critically and commercially successful writer/directors of his era by consistently implementing elements of a genre considered by many to have definitively ended with Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) should be a cause for celebration among those who seek to expose the cinematic riches of film noir to a new generation of moviegoers. ■