

THE FICTIONAL  
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN  
—  
TODD MCGOWAN



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CHRISTOPHER  
NOLAN

BY TODD MCGOWAN

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First edition, 2012

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ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
McGowan, Todd.

The fictional Christopher Nolan / by Todd McGowan. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-292-73782-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Nolan, Christopher, 1970—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.


PN1998.3.N65M35 2012

791.4302'33092—dc23

2011048569

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*For my mother, Sandi McGowan,  
and in memory of my father, Bob McGowan,  
who both ensconced me in a fiction from early on*



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Thanks to the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* for permission to publish a revised version of the essay that appeared as “The Violence of Creation in *The Prestige*,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 3 (2007): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/58/120>. Thanks also to *Jump Cut* for permission to publish a revised version of the essay that appeared as “The Hero’s Form of Appearance: The Necessary Darkness of *The Dark Knight*,” *Jump Cut* 51 (2009): <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/darkKnightKant/index.html>.

I owe a tremendous debt to my students at the University of Vermont, who have constantly advanced my thinking about cinema in general and Christopher Nolan in particular. I’m also thankful for the support and generosity of my colleagues within film studies at the University of Vermont—Dave Jenemann, Sarah Nilsen, Hyon Joo Yoo, Deb Ellis, and Hilary Neroni. Outside of film studies, Joseph Acquisto, John Waldron, Emily Bernard, and Eric Lindstrom have been invaluable.

Thanks to Andrew Barnaby for reading and providing extensive commentary for the chapter on *Memento*. The inspiration for that chapter came from our joint teaching of the film.

I am grateful to Jonathan Mulronev for his catholic perspective, which sees what I tend to overlook.

I appreciate Jean Wyatt and Quentin Martin’s careful reading of the chapter on *Inception*. Whatever clarity it now has is due in no small part to their efforts.

Thanks to Slavoj Žižek for his many forms of assistance and generosity, which are always done without concern for recognition or plaudits.

Sarah Nilsen and Michael Ashooh provided challenges to my certitudes and infusions of new thinking.

Danny Cho read several chapters and provided suggestions that sprouted into entire new sections of the book.

I am grateful to Jennifer Friedlander for her invitation to speak on *Inception* at Pomona College and for her penetrating questions. Most of all, I am indebted to her and Henry Krips for being theoretical comrades.

Thanks to Sheila Kunkle, who has provided years of dialogue and incessant construction of new forms of fiction, without which I would be floundering.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I am grateful to Fabio Vighi, whose reading of the entire book helped to make the philosophical arguments evident to me.

Hugh Manon provided so much additional information for the book that, if the book were better, he should be listed as a coauthor. His reading was one of the most detailed I have ever received, and his insights were always clear and to the point.

Walter Davis, Paul Eisenstein, and Hilary Neroni have all traced the logic of my lies to the point of truth, for which my debt remains inexpressible. My relationship with each has become one of true speculative identity.

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## FOREGROUNDING DECEIT

The lie plays a central role in every Christopher Nolan film. In his first feature, *Following* (1998), the film's protagonist, Bill (Jeremy Theobald), becomes entrapped in a deception that frames him for a woman's murder. Nolan's most popular film, *The Dark Knight* (2008), depicts Batman (Christian Bale) hiding not just beneath a mask but also behind the fiction that he is a murderous criminal. Characters in Nolan's films constantly find themselves deceived by others and often caught up in a vast web of deceit that transcends any individual lies. The predominance that deception has within the content of these films has a clear homology in their form. The typical Nolan film has the formal structure of a lie designed to deceive the spectator concerning the events that occur and the motivations of the characters. Nolan uses the form of deception to constitute an ethical philosophy rooted in the ontological primacy of the lie. Nolan's films do not abandon the idea of truth altogether, but they show us how truth must emerge out of the lie if it is not to lead us entirely astray.

Nolan's lying structure does not consist, as one might expect, in showing events that aren't really happening. Such visual deception would force spectators to conclude that they simply cannot believe what they see—and thus creates a dead-end street in filmmaking.<sup>1</sup> Nolan's films, in contrast, show events that actually transpire in the filmic universe, but the formal structure leads the spectator to misinterpret these events. The structure of the films deceives the spectator about the meaning of the events seen. The deceit exists in the form more than in the content, which suggests that deceit is a structural phenomenon and not simply an empirical one. By exhibiting the structural nature of deceit and its ubiquity, Nolan demands a reevaluation of the prevailing ideas of truth and fiction.

This dynamic is most apparent in the openings of Nolan's films. We often see an event but draw incorrect conclusions about its nature. Rather than directly manipulating spectators in the manner of a film like *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), Nolan's films tend to begin

## INTRODUCTION

### THE ETHICS OF THE LIE



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in a way that causes spectators to trick themselves simply by adhering to standard cinematic codes. For example, the opening of *Memento* (2000) shows Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) shooting Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) for the murder of his wife. Though the film moves backward, it is clear that Leonard shoots and kills Teddy, and Leonard's narration leads the spectator to believe that he has discovered that Teddy is the murderer of his wife. At the conclusion of the film, however, it becomes evident that Teddy did not murder Leonard's wife and that Leonard sets in motion the events that will result in Teddy's death just because Teddy has angered him by telling Leonard what he didn't want to hear. The truth behind the murder of Leonard's wife has nothing to do with the killing that opens the film, though the film deceives the spectator into thinking that this is in fact an act of revenge.

The opening of *Insomnia* (2002) involves a similar though less dramatic deception. Shots of blood staining a white piece of clothing appear throughout the film's opening sequence, and the subsequent depiction of a police investigation leads the spectator to believe that this is the blood of the murder victim. But the end of the film reveals that these bloodstains have nothing at all to do with this murder investigation. Instead, they are the result of a police detective, Will Dormer (Al Pacino), planting evidence to frame a suspect in an earlier investigation. The structure of the film creates a deception in which the spectator misinterprets the opening images, and this initial misinterpretation paves the way for a series of misinterpretations that end only when the film's conclusion enables the spectator to recognize them as such. But in each case, the deception marks the beginning and occurs before any truth. The spectator begins the Nolan film with a mistaken idea of what has happened and what's at stake in the events. The movement of the typical Nolan film is not, as in most films, from ignorance to knowledge. Instead, the spectator moves from mistaken knowledge to a later knowledge that corrects the mistakes. The beginning point is not a blank slate but an initial error.

Other contemporary filmmakers also privilege deceit, though none do so to the extent of Nolan or in quite the same way. M. Night Shyamalan, for instance, is famous for the trick ending that reveals to spectators that their understanding of the filmic reality was entirely wrongheaded. In the most celebrated case, *The Sixth Sense* (1999) reveals that the hero of the film, Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) has actually been dead throughout most of the film's running time. The difference between Shyamalan and Nolan—or between *The Sixth Sense* and *Memento*—is

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that the former does not include the deception as part of the truth that the film reveals. A clear line of demarcation exists between the deception and the truth in *The Sixth Sense*, and once one knows the truth, one can watch the film again from this new perspective to examine how it constructs the deception. With *Memento*, such a strategy is not possible because it is only through immersing oneself in the deception that one arrives at the truth. To remove oneself from the deception, which is possible when re-watching a Shyamalan film, would cause one to miss the truth altogether.

The structure of a Nolan film plays on the spectator's investment in the idea of truth, but this investment always results in the spectator being deceived. Insofar as we believe in what we see, Nolan's films lead us into error. The idea of truth as what is immediately visible blinds us to the fictional structure that mediates the visible world and creates meaning in it. In each instance, Nolan's films show how this fictional structure has an ontological priority and shapes what we see, providing the ground against which truth can emerge.

The lie of the Nolan film is not simply the depiction of events on the screen that have not occurred—or are not occurring—in the world outside the theater. What the lie means in Nolan's filmic universe goes far beyond this rudimentary lack of correspondence between representation and flesh-and-blood reality. The lie, as Nolan depicts it, is what misleads both characters and spectators. Lies encourage us to draw incorrect conclusions and to misunderstand actions and events. The victim of a lie fails to recognize what motivates characters to act as they do. But the lie also points to the truth that it hides. Lies are not immediately visible as lies in his films but rather are part of a formal structure that exists only insofar as it covers a truth. We understand the lie as a lie through its relationship to a truth that we finally distinguish from the lie. Nolan's films define the lie as a disjunction between what one believes and what happens, but this disjunction becomes apparent only when one transcends it.

As a result of its attitude toward the lie, the cinema of Christopher Nolan is not a moral cinema in the traditional sense. He does not illustrate the priority of deceit in order to denounce lying and insist on the importance of truthfulness. But it is an ethical cinema all the same, as Nolan redefines the relationship between ethics and truthfulness. The experience of Nolan's films reveals the importance for ethics of understanding the ontological priority of the lie. The failure to recognize the priority of the lie leaves one entirely in its thrall, and one gains free-



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dom from deceit only when one fully submits to it. This is the paradox that Nolan advances and explores throughout his cinema. By accepting and recognizing the priority of the lie relative to truth, one can access the freeing power of the lie and discover its link to the origin of subjectivity.

*Memento* goes further than any of Nolan's other films in its foregrounding of the lie. The film's hero, Leonard Shelby, spends the running time of the film searching for the murderer of his wife, and the film encourages the spectator to invest in this ritual of detection that aims at discovering the truth of a crime. Despite the atypical disruption of forward-moving chronology that gives the film an exceptional structure, *Memento* appears throughout to share a widely held conception of truth. Truth is what we seek and what we discover when we uncover all the facts of an event. But the film does not conclude in the fashion of the usual detective thriller. Instead of ending with the truth of what happens to Leonard's wife, it reveals Leonard's own lie to himself as the origin of Leonard's search. Leonard's self-deception is not simply an impediment on the path to the discovery of truth; it is the engine behind the search for truth. The lie to himself creates the mystery that Leonard attempts to solve. It is in this sense that the lie has for Nolan an ontological priority relative to truth. The possibility of truth would not exist without the lie that provides its background. Truth must be torn away from its foundation in deceit.

Throughout the history of cinema, many filmmakers have emphasized the relativity of truth. This can be done with the subjective camera, as in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947), or by showing multiple accounts of the same event, which is how Akira Kurosawa constructs *Rashomon* (1950). One might also include video footage within the film, as Michael Haneke does in *Caché* (2005). In contrast to Nolan, these forms of perspectivalism do not impugn the priority of truth but rather insist on its multiplicity and its rootedness in a particular knowing subject. Truth here becomes identified with the capacity to recognize the limitedness of one's vision. As long as one believes in the objectivity of what is seen, one remains deceived. But as soon as one grasps that all knowledge is necessarily perspectival, one accedes to a new form of truth.<sup>2</sup> This type of film redefines truth in order to maintain its ontological priority, which is precisely what Nolan wants to challenge.

The point is not that we are misled by a mistaken idea of truth but that the very conception of truth's priority relative to the lie leaves us unable to recognize the way that deceit structures our reality. In the

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filmic universe of Christopher Nolan, truth is neither relative nor non-existent. There is truth, but one arrives at it only by passing through the lie. Lies establish the path through which one discovers the truth, and one can make this discovery only by accepting and investing oneself in the lie. A lie establishes a fictional version of events that don't correspond to what is actually happening or what has happened. The problem with our usual conception of truth is that it separates truth from this fiction and views truth as an original state that fiction or deceit corrupts. But for Nolan's cinema, the link between truth and fiction always remains clear: if one wants to discover the truth, one must first succumb to the fiction that seems to obscure it.

In each of his films, Nolan follows psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's well-known axiom that "the non-duped err." The non-duped err because they fail to realize the fictional origin of all truth and thus believe that they can access truth without the detour of mediation. As Lacan notes in his seminar titled "Les non-dupes errent," "The non-duped are two times duped."<sup>3</sup> Not allowing oneself to be duped, demanding the truth directly, leaves one in the dark about both one's own status as a desiring subject and the fictional structure of the social order. Those who refuse to become dupes, who refuse to accept the fiction, ironically abandon the field of truth entirely. Truth exists as a possibility only for those who don't create an absolute distinction between it and the fiction from which it emerges. The fiction has this structural privilege because there is no truth apart from our act of seeking that truth.

Nolan's fascination with the superhero stems from his investment in the primacy and the productivity of the lie. The superhero takes on a false identity to assist in the struggle for justice. Sometimes the myth of the superhero's power has some link to this false identity: Peter Parker has an accident that gives him spider-like powers, and Tony Stark develops an iron suit that renders him almost invincible. But most often, the false identity of the superhero has no necessary relation to the superhero's powers. Superman, for instance, is just a guise that Clark Kent adopts when he wants to fight criminality and injustice. In purely physical terms, he might perform all the actions that he performs as Superman while remaining Clark Kent. The Superman identity does not offer him any additional power: at the most, it bequeaths anonymity; at the least, it provides an aesthetic flourish. The superhero's false identity does not appear to be a necessary condition of the superhero's power, and yet it is difficult to imagine a superhero without this false identity. The false identity separates the superhero from the realm of the ordi-

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nary and thus causes others to look on the superhero differently. What's more, the deceit of the false identity reflects our investment in deceit as such. If superheroes really existed, it would not take much effort to discern their true identity, especially in the case of Superman, and yet spectators accept the idea of the disguise's effectiveness. The superhero's false identity reveals the power of deceit not just for the superhero but also for the audience watching this figure from the outside.

Nolan's first Batman film explicitly delinks Batman's superhero guise from his power. As *Batman Begins* (2005) recounts, Bruce Wayne does have an accident involving bats when he is a young boy. He falls into a cavernous opening, where he stirs up a large group of bats that engulf him. This trauma has a shaping influence on Bruce's life, but it doesn't transform him into Batman. After undergoing a rigorous training regimen in China, Bruce gains the fighting ability that he will employ to act as a superhero. Batman gains his power through physical and mental training, not through being bitten by a bat. Bruce decides to adopt the false identity of Batman not because this training gives him the powers of a bat but because he wants his enemies to experience the fear that he experienced as a young boy.

The identity of the rich playboy Bruce Wayne does not intimidate criminals in the way that the figure of Batman does. As Batman, Bruce gains an additional advantage that has nothing to do with his fighting ability, and this is true of the false identity that every superhero adopts. Batman wins many of his struggles simply because he is Batman, not because of superior strength or cunning.<sup>4</sup> This false identity gives the superhero the illusion of transcendence, and this illusion has the power to reshape the psychic reality of any situation. When confronted with the superhero, the criminal tends to act in a self-destructive manner that ensures the superhero's triumph.

But the deception of the superhero's false identity is not simply a tool for better apprehending criminals. It also captures a truth of the individuals that their actual identity obscures. The fictional Batman is the truth of Bruce Wayne, just as Superman is the truth of Clark Kent. At the end of *Batman Begins*, Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) comes to just this realization. After Bruce tries to minimize the importance of the Batman guise, she in turn dismisses the Bruce Wayne identity. She touches Bruce's face and tells him, "No, this is your mask. Your real face is the one criminals now fear." As Rachel grasps in this scene, the illusory identity that Bruce Wayne has created, the superhero figure, becomes his "real face." Batman identifies what is essential about

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Bruce—the trauma with the bats that shapes his existence and his ability to confront this trauma. The superhero’s false identity is the source of both power and truth, which is why it holds such appeal for Nolan as a filmmaker. The superhero’s guise is clearly a deceit, but it points toward a truth of the subject that would otherwise remain completely obscured.

Nolan gravitates toward the superhero for the same reason he is attracted to a formal structure that deviates from a forward-moving chronology and shuffles narrative time. In both cases, truth is inseparable from what misleads us—and this link is constantly at play in the cinema. When we go to the cinema, we allow ourselves to be misled and thus distracted from our everyday lives. But filmic fictions, through their power to deceive, make manifest the truth of the extra-cinematic social reality. In the cinema, a society reveals its repressed desires, its hidden fears, and its implicit ideological imperatives. By highlighting the power of film to deceive and by remaining faithful to film’s fictional structure, Christopher Nolan unveils the ethical potential of the cinema.

### THE PERILS OF VISITING THE CINEMA

Christopher Nolan’s filmic investment in the lie threatens to subject his films to an obvious critique. In fact, one of the most enduring criticisms of film concerns its association with deceit. Even great proponents of cinematic art, such as Hugo Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim, recognize a danger when film comes too close to presenting a false sense of reality.<sup>5</sup> Films falsify a sense of reality and thereby dupe spectators into unfounded beliefs that often have pernicious effects in their actual lives. For instance, one leaves the cinema with an idea that a ruthless executive will turn out to have a heart of gold or that every random encounter might actually be a meeting with one’s future soul mate. These routine cinematic deceptions help to produce unthinking subjects who accept rather than question the structure of their society and their position in it. Even a critical thinker like Theodor Adorno admits that he finds himself unable to resist this deceptive power. In *Minima Moralia*, he laments, “Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse.”<sup>6</sup> To go to the cinema is to accede at least to some degree to its lies.

Film is famous for its untruth, and this untruth is indissociable from its appeal. We go to the cinema to be deceived, to take the unreal for

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the real, or to experience the cinematic creation of impossible worlds and situations. In difficult economic times, we head to the movies to experience the improbable fiction that our financial fortune could turn around in an instant if we became, say, the surprise winner of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* due simply to the contingent experiences of our lives. The acclaim that greeted Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), often articulated by otherwise-thoughtful critics and viewers, evinces most clearly the desire for cinematic deception. The film not only encourages us to believe in the possibility of individual escape from economic destitution, but it also portrays Westernization as the means for a parallel escape for an entire nation. These are powerful ideological fictions, and the film's popularity is inseparable from the support that it gives to them. *Slumdog Millionaire* lies in a way that helps contemporary capitalist society to function more smoothly. The difference between Boyle's film and those of Christopher Nolan is that Boyle presents the lie as truth, while Nolan presents truth as the product of a lie. But no matter how a filmmaker deploys deception, it infiltrates all filmmaking through the way that cinema structures our experience.

Special effects add to the cinema's appeal by multiplying its deception. As filmic technology develops, the power of filmmakers to create a convincing image of the world multiplies. Sound, color, and widescreen technology all help to lift barriers in the path of cinematic deceit. Even as critics lament this deceptiveness and rue film's reliance on new special effects such as CGI, the tools that augment filmic deception proliferate further and further into the act of filmmaking. Deception is at once the danger of cinema and its *sine qua non*.

One of the most common manifestations of cinematic deception is the imaginary reconstruction of history to produce a sense of progress where none should rightly exist. Scholars addressing the relationship between film and history must constantly address this problem. As Robert Rosenstone notes, "The mainstream feature (much like written history) tells the past as a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A tale that leaves you with a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift. A tale embedded in a larger view of history that is always progressive. Even if the subject matter is as bleak as the horrors of the Holocaust, the message is that things have gotten or are getting better."<sup>7</sup> The most damning case of this type of lie occurs in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). Here, a story about the Holocaust becomes a story of salvation, and the darkest moment for European Jews leads, according to the logic of the film itself, to the establishment of a Jewish

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homeland. Though this is the most egregious example, the distortion of history into a tale of progress is almost ubiquitous in the cinema, and then spectators take the idea of progress as the truth of history. The deceit acquires the quality of truth.

Probably the most powerful legend in the history of cinema is that of spectators screaming in terror and fleeing when the Lumière brothers' *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, 1895) was first screened at the Grand Café in Paris. Regardless of whether this legend has any basis in fact, it endures because it speaks to the widespread sense of the precise danger—and, at the same time, the allure—that we associate with the cinema. We fear that under cinema's spell we will take images as more real than reality. This is a danger against which critics from all political stripes have inveighed. Moralists have feared cinematic depictions of activities from smoking to drinking to sex outside marriage because they recognized cinema's ability to give these activities a sense of reality and thus a sense of desirability. The Hays Production Code has its basis in this conception of cinema, and it was created to shape the reality that cinema could present.<sup>8</sup> Just as film deceives us about the train that appears ready to crash into the theater, it also lies about the consequences of smoking, drinking, and sex. Films often show us the night of passion and the pleasures of a cigarette, but they rarely show us the damaging consequences of unintended pregnancy or lung cancer. When they experience these consequences themselves, spectators pay the price for cinematic deception.

The danger exists not just for conservative moralists but also for politically engaged leftists. Hollywood cinema's lies about the absence of poverty, the invisibility of work, and the ubiquity of romantic love have had a perilous effect on American political awareness. When we see characters who never worry about money, who never work, and who always find satisfying love, we don't tend to think about social inequality, the role of labor in the creation of value, or the nefarious social effects of our myopic concentration on romance. Every bit as intensely as the conservative moralist, the leftist political critic of the cinema recognizes the danger of filmic deception and fights against it.

Conservatives recognized that cinematic deceit was politically neutral and could be turned toward conservative ends, which it was with the invention of the Hays Production Code.<sup>9</sup> The Left reacted differently. Leftist and progressive filmmakers have historically adopted various strategies for offsetting or combating cinema's inherent deceitfulness. Leftists have tended to look for ways to wrench truth from cinema's ten-

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dency to lie. The Italian Neorealists eschewed traditional editing, hired nonprofessional actors, and shot on location—all in an effort to create truthful films. In works like *La chinoise* (1967) and *Le gai savoir* (1969), Jean-Luc Godard abandoned narrative and highlighted the production of the filmic image to avoid falling prey to cinematic deception. Many filmmakers choose the documentary form specifically as an avenue for truth that works against the fiction propagated by narrative cinema. For most of the various camps of alternative filmmakers, the association of deception with the cinema represents a fundamental problem that must be overcome in some fashion. Rather than perpetuating illusions, a politically engaged cinema must dispel them.

The problem is that the deceptions of cinema are inextricable from its place within the capitalist system of production and the reproduction of that system. The contemporary synergy between Hollywood filmmaking and the advertising industry is not a contingent development within cinema but a symptomatic one. As itself a structure of deception, the cinema is the perfect vehicle for indirect advertising through strategies like product placement, and as long as the link with deception remains, cinema will serve as part of the advertising wing of capitalist production.<sup>10</sup> But product placement is just the beginning of the link between cinema and the functioning of capitalist ideology. As Jonathan Beller argues, “Cinema emerges as the development and the intensification of the form of consciousness necessary to the increased mobilization of objects as commodities.”<sup>11</sup> Movies help us to treat every object and every person that we encounter as a commodity. They deceive us into a commodified way of seeing that strips us of our capacity to act in order to change the world. In response to the imbrication of cinematic deceit and capitalist production, it seems as if the only possibility for political filmmaking resides in smuggling truth into this deception.<sup>12</sup>

Christopher Nolan does not take this path. He attempts, in contrast, to develop a politically engaged filmmaking that takes up and makes explicit use of cinema’s tendency toward the lie.<sup>13</sup> From *Following* onward, his films embrace the deceit inherent in the cinema and even attach an ethical value to this deceit. Nolan initially misleads spectators into accepting a premise that the films later show to be false. This in itself is not all that uncommon. But Nolan’s films emphasize the importance of the deception—and submitting to it—for any subsequent discovery of truth. Nolan inverts the traditional priority of truth and deception: the quest for truth originates with a lie, just as the cinematic fiction itself creates a terrain for the discovery of truths.

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Characters in Nolan's films who fail to grasp the primacy of deception or fiction are inevitably doomed, like the protagonist of *Following*, who falls into a murderer's frame-up precisely because he believes in the power of truth. And Nolan's heroes, such as Batman or the magicians in *The Prestige* (2006), must take up the mantle of deceit and create a misleading appearance. Nolan shows a transformation occurring through the articulation of a fiction, and this transformation creates value. The fiction produces a sublimation that renders ordinary objects desirable. Without the magicians' deception of the audience, there would be nothing to arouse their desire. Some fiction is necessary to make life worth living at all, and Nolan's films draw attention to this to mark the moment at which value—what gives existence its worth—emerges. They don't encourage lying but rather the recognition of both the role that deceit or fiction has in the creation of value and the recognition of truth's dependence on this creative fiction. This is Nolan's ethic of the lie.

The idea of an ethic of the lie sounds, at first blush, absurd. By promoting such an ethic, one would, so it seems, help to foster a world of universal suspicion and paranoia, in which no one could trust anyone else. This is the kind of world that unrestrained capitalism would produce: claims are made solely to maximize one's profit in every situation, even social or romantic ones. In this world, the used-car salesperson would function as the ideal.<sup>14</sup> But in the end such a world would be unsustainable: if we could not trust the other members of society on some fundamental level, capitalist society could not function (even for the used-car salesperson), since it is based on the faith that others have faith in the value of our money. A world of universal suspicion would represent a complete loss of the social bond in its current form. Though a world of universal suspicion may be a danger attached to Nolan's ethic of the lie, his films focus not on the power of deceit to render us suspicious but on its power to make clear our freedom. In this sense, their concern is not lying as such but a specific dimension of the lie that they associate with the subject's capacity for freedom.

The most famous articulation of an ethic of the lie, in contrast, associates deceit with the flight from freedom. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor propagates an ethic of the lie as a way of alleviating the burden of freedom. According to this ethic, because the mass of humanity cannot accept the groundlessness of human existence and the horror of mortality, a few privileged figures of authority provide humanity with a lie that ensures its ignorance and happiness.



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