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Konrad Kirsch

From Doodlebug to Oppenheimer
An Analysis of Christopher Nolan's Film Work

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The analysis of the corpus formed by Christopher Nolan's film works allows us to derive its poetics. The key to this is provided by the magic trick script in *The Prestige* that influences all of Nolan's post-*Insomnia* films. *Inception* is an allegory of filmmaking entirely shaped by the script of magic tricks. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* turns out to be the embodiment of neoliberalism, and in *The Dark Knight Rises*, we see Bane, a populist who benefits from the destruction that neoliberalism wreaks. *Interstellar* and *Tenet* are about how humanity reacts to the climate catastrophe: in *Interstellar*, all that remains for humanity is to flee into space; in *Tenet*, Nolan has future generations fight back against the present, because we are destroying their essential conditions for life. With the nuclear bomb, the protagonist of *Oppenheimer* gives humanity the power to destroy itself. In doing so, he not only heralds the atomic age but also the Anthropocene. Thus, the analysis shows how outstanding Nolan's films are, but they also prove to be surprisingly political.

Other key topics in this analysis include: the attack on the Kiev Opera in *Tenet* and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine; the references in *Inception* to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*; the relationship of the dead female characters in Nolan's films to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition*; the transformation of the canary birds of *The Prestige* into planes in Nolan's later films; how the escape from Earth in *Interstellar* is complemented by the evacuation in *Dunkirk*; the interdependencies between *Interstellar* and Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel*; how neoliberalism is reflected in Michael Mann's *Thief*; what it means that Nolan casts his daughter Flora in the role of a refugee in *Interstellar* and in the role of an atomic bomb victim in *Oppenheimer*; and the allusions in *Tenet* to the *James Bond* Film *Skyfall*.

Because of this last point, there is a digression that deals with *Skyfall*. Against the background of changing gender relations, Bond is looking for a new identity. Silva's homosexuality is a cipher for misogyny, and the femicide of Séverine is a reference to the death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs. This includes an explanation of why Bond has to do without his Beretta in *Dr. No* and is instead accompanied throughout his film series by the 'triumvirate' of the Walther PPK, the Aston Martin, and the Vodka Martini. These findings are looked at in relation to Daniel Craig's subsequent *Bond* films.

Konrad Kirsch is a PhD in literature and an enthusiastic viewer of films. The Edition Axel Menges has published his volume *A Second Look*, that deals with films of Alfred Hitchcock, Blake Edwards, Ridley Scott and Stefan Ruzowitzky.

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Menges

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Christopher Nolan's
Film Work



**From *Doodlebug* to
*Oppenheimer***

**An Analysis of
Christopher Nolan's
Film Work
with a Digression on
James Bond's Fall in *Skyfall***

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»Alle Häuser sind verpixelt und die Kinder sind im Bett
Ganz Dubai hochgezogen und Sylt ist endlich weg
Alles erledigt, die Welt ist fertig
Wir bedanken uns für jede Mitarbeit ganz herzlich.«
Deichkind

Preliminary remarks

Christopher Nolan's films form a corpus. My original text on his works was published in 2022 and discussed Nolan's films from *Doodlebug* to *Tenet*; in the current issue, the analysis is expanded to include *Oppenheimer*. What was intended to be a brief analysis of *Tenet* became more and more extensive, finally transforming into a poetics of his work. The term *poetics* implies that, within this corpus, certain themes and motifs recur, condense into patterns, and ultimately form a complex. There are a number of ›keys‹ to accessing Nolan's multi-layered films, the central one being *The Prestige* and its *magic trick script*.

One question that arose was whether the insights into Nolan's previous films would also be applicable to *Oppenheimer*. This did, in fact, prove to be the case. However, the script of the magic tricks does not represent a rigid schema that Nolan implements in his films in a predictable way. On the contrary, the range and subtlety with which he varies the recurring motifs and structures, applying them to ever new subject matter, is highly impressive.

Films are almost exclusively collaborative works by a community. If Nolan is discussed here as an auteur,¹ then this is primarily for pragmatic reasons and is not intended to disparage the contribution of the other participants.² In particular, the contributions of his wife and co-producer Emma Thomas, as well as his brother Jonathan Nolan, can hardly be overestimated.

Although there are a few illustrations in this text, it is recommended that the readers (re-) watch the films of Christopher Nolan. The more you see them, the more fascinating they become.³

April 2024

Watch closely!

The arena-like tiering of the audience in their ranks suggests that the concert will not take place. People in formal attire take their seats, and a soundproof construction is lowered behind them to enclose the concert hall like a wall. The musicians of the Ukrainian National Opera check their instruments one last time, until the conductor strikes his baton against the music stand. There is a moment of silence. But it is not followed by harmonies: harsh shots are fired, masked mercenaries brutally hurl the musicians to the ground, trampling on their instruments and harassing the audience. From the outside, another team, also masked, penetrates the opera house and feeds gas into the concert hall. One of these figures will prove to be ›the Protagonist‹ (John David Washington) of *Tenet*. He evacuates a person from the danger zone and secures an obscure object from the mercenaries working for the Russian⁴ arms dealer Andrei Sator (Kenneth Branagh). As if the simultaneous attacks of two armed groups were not confusing enough, the nameless Protagonist is saved by an unknown person. Only a small brass disc dangling from his backpack reveals towards the end of the film that he is Neil (Robert Pattinson), the first character to introduce the theme of ›friendship‹ in Nolan's films. To grasp all this the first time you view *Tenet*, you have to watch pretty closely.

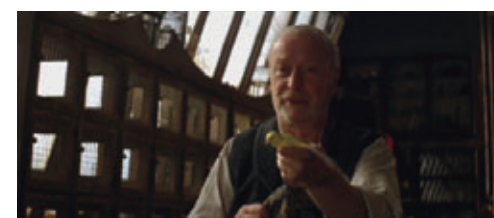
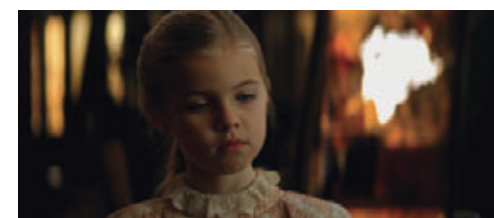
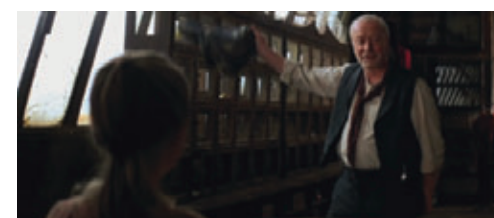
Christopher Nolan's film *The Prestige*, which came out a decade and a half before *Tenet* begins with a voice from off-camera saying: »Are you watching closely?«⁵ It is about two magicians, Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman), whose rivalry escalates into a deadly conflict. They watch each other, trying to figure out each other's secrets, outdoing each other, watching their competitor closely, and sabotaging one another's performances. The off-screen question – »Are you watching closely?« – is more an invitation than a question, and it presupposes an agreement: that the audience, in buying a ticket, has purchased the right to be amused, but with it comes the obligation to watch closely.⁶ This gives a new shape to the old Enlightenment precept that art may entertain us, but also has to be useful – *delectare et prodesse* – and applies it to magic shows. Thus, it is apparent even in the first moments of the film that *The Prestige* is about more than just magicians and their tricks.

To which audience, though, is the question being addressed? Initially, it appears to be directed to those attending Robert Angier's magic show. As the question is heard from off-screen, however, the screen shows a pile of top hats, apparently simply cast aside in the woods. The only audience in sight at this point in time is the audience that the viewers of *The Prestige* themselves are a part of. Only after we see the top hats do the fictional people watching Angier's performance appear on the screen. The invitation to watch closely is therefore addressed to the real audience in the cinema or in front of the screen at home. Although this disrupts the fiction, it does not lead to an alienation effect. On the contrary, it leads to a greater immersion: a feeling of diving deeper into the film. From a structural perspective, this immersion is a factor that is to play an increasingly important role over the years. Nolan's films are, in fact, about us.⁷

The magic shows are an allegory for the medium of film: for cinema and its magic in general, and for *The Prestige* in particular.⁸ Above all, however, the magic tricks will prove to



1. *Tenet* – The audience are an essential part of Nolan's films: the concert hall in Kiev before the assault.
2. Right: *The Prestige* – Cutter explains the structure of magic tricks: »The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird, or a man.«
3. The bird is put in the cage.
4. The birdcage is covered with the cloth.
5. The cage is vanished.
6. »[...] making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back.«
7. »That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part. The part we call the Prestige.«
8. The young audience is delighted.



be a key to all the films by Christopher Nolan that follow *Insomnia*. A fade to black is followed by John Cutter (Michael Caine) explaining the script of the magic trick, or at least what the fictional audience gets to see of it in *The Prestige*. Cutter constructs sophisticated apparatuses for the performances of magicians, and is therefore the man to provide this enlightenment. At the same time, his name is a reference to the medium of film, since *Cutter* evokes the *cutting* and montage process through which film footage becomes a film. During Cutter's remarks, he has, at the least, a doubled audience: in the image, to the delight of a little girl, he makes a canary disappear and reappear. At the same time, his voice comes from off-screen, and, as it seems at that moment, is not directed to the girl, but, like the initial question, to us, the viewers of *The Prestige*. In addition, in Cutter's explanations, we see a montage of the events during Robert Angier's magic show that the fictitious audience attends – they illustrate and complement, but, above all, counteract his explanations. Thus, even these first moments of *The Prestige* make it clear how complex Nolan's films are and with what seeming ease he implements this complexity.

»Every magic trick«, says Cutter – after a *cut* – »consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the Pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary. A deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it, to see that it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. Yeah, unaltered, normal. But, of course, it probably isn't. [...] The second act is called the Turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it, because, of course, you're not really looking. You don't really wanna know. You want to be fooled« (PRE 0:02:50). Although the audience appears passive, this is their role in the performance: the audience's desire to be entertained is so great that they are willing to be deceived. Thus, Nolan diagnoses an anti-enlightenment tendency in the audience as it reverts – if only for the duration of the show – to the quality that Immanuel Kant calls »self-imposed immaturity«, a quality from which the Enlightenment allowed them to »emerge«.⁹ The audience, however, is not solely concerned with a distraction: behind this lies a deeper need.

Rational modern thought has occasioned an enormous step forward in virtually every respect. However, sociologist Max Weber postulates that it brought with it the ›disenchantment of the world‹.¹⁰ His phrase suggests that scientific and technological development leads to something being irreparably lost. In *The Prestige*, the magic shows feed this nostalgic longing: at these shows, visitors can immerse themselves in the illusion that the world has become enchanted again, if only while the performance lasts. This explains the sceptical undertone of the question »Are you watching closely?« – its enlightenment emphasis is in opposition to the desire for regression: »You want to be fooled.« The yearning for ›re-enchantment‹ is the basis for the profession of magicians, and can make them rich. Ironically, their performances are made possible by resources from the world that the audience are trying to flee from (a circumstance that puts one in mind of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944, by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno). The opposition between the desire for regression and the struggle for enlightenment makes it clear that, in *The Prestige*, the *A as well as B* meaning of *delectare et prodesse* has given way to a contradiction: either *delectare* or *prodesse*.

Cutter elaborates on the psychological mechanism of the magic trick: the magician has made the object disappear. »But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third part. The hardest part. The part we call the Prestige« (PRE 0:02:50). The magic trick appears to be only an artful deception that alleviates somewhat the ›discontent of the disenchanted world‹. This seems benign at first, because no one is visibly harmed. Cutter, however, only explains what the visitors get to see – behind the scenes, something else is going on. On the way there, Alfred Borden meets a blind stagehand whose blindness mirrors that of the audience. While Cutter speaks, with some pathos, of the final part of the trick – »The part we call the Prestige« – what is happening under the stage is anything but benign. In the second phase of the performance, it appears as though, beneath the flashes and brilliant arcs of his magical apparatus, Robert Angier vanishes into thin air. In truth, he disappears through a trapdoor in the stage and plunges into a water tank whose lid closes and locks above him. Unable to escape, the drowning man pounds on the glass of the tank. Seeing his predicament, Borden tries to break the glass, but in vain. The resulting commotion prevents the Prestige from taking place: a double of Robert Angier was supposed to appear in the theatre as if out of nowhere. If the performance had gone according to plan, the death under the stage would have gone unnoticed, and the audience would have been astonished by the reappearance of

the magician. Hence, the *Prestige* doesn't just mark the climax of the magic trick, it also conceals the fact that someone died during it.

Thus, it is shown that the ›re-enchantment of the world‹ has a price: the illusion may spread glamour and evoke a joyful amazement, but, by showing the drowning man, Nolan presents the dirty side of the trick. Conversely, the *prodesse* aspect in his work is indicated by the fact that Borden is a witness to the murder and tries to save the life of his rival. However, since not even Borden sees through the events, his conflict with Angier leads to a belief that he has caused Angier's death. Therefore, instead of the murderer, it is the person who investigates and might have produced an enlightenment – in both the specific and the higher sense – who is charged and finally executed.

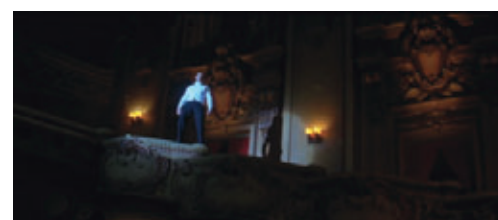
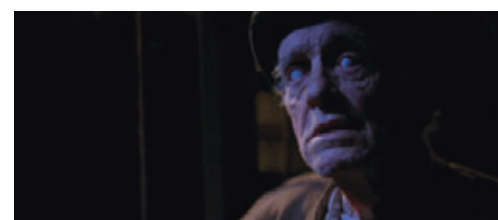
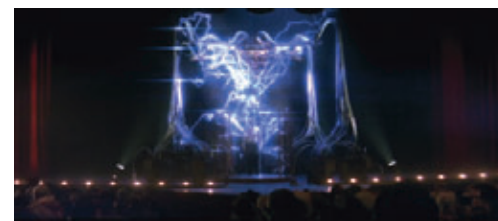
In the following section of the film, a second voice sounds off-screen. Now, it is revealed to whom Cutter's explanations are addressed: not to the little girl, the people watching Angier's show, or us, but to the court before which Borden is on trial. »The *Prestige*«, the prosecutor (Jim Piddock) interrupts Cutter's remarks. »And did Robert Angier, *The Great Danton*, your employer, get to that final part of his trick that night?« Cutter: »No, sir. Something went wrong.« Prosecutor: »What went wrong?« (PRE 0:03:22). Instead of an answer, the actual film begins. Thus, *The Prestige* completes the interrupted magic trick, itself constituting the third phase of which Cutter speaks.¹¹

Are you reading closely?

(Magic) tricks have been a part of the medium of film almost from its very beginning. Alongside Alice Guy, the brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky, and Auguste and Louis Lumière, Georges Méliès is among the earliest film pioneers. He founded his studio in 1896 – around the time period in which *The Prestige* is set. Méliès' films are characterized by use of varied tricks to present his audience with the fantastical and hitherto unseen.¹² In *Un homme des têtes* (1898), for instance, he duplicates his own head using multiple exposures, singing a song polyphonically with his doubles. Finally, he eliminates those copies of himself who don't carry the tune well and, before the short film ends, he quickly replaces the head that presently rests on his shoulders with another head that suits him better. In *Escamotage d'une dame chez Robert-Houdin* (1896), he makes a female assistant disappear as a magician would, as if he wished to illustrate the analogy between magic tricks and trick effects in film.¹³

While only *The Prestige* is overtly about magic tricks, this is a motif that runs through Nolan's work from *Batman Begins* onwards. Unlike Superman or other superheroes, Batman has no superhuman powers and therefore needs all sorts of tools to prevail against his adversaries. Because of his masquerade, the gadgets, and his tricks, his performances resemble those of a magician who amazes his ›audience‹ – in this case consisting of the criminals and the random passers-by and onlookers. This is reflected in the words of Henri Ducard alias Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson), who says to Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale): »Theatricality and deception are powerful agents. You must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent« (BAT 0:18:08). As *Batman Begins* opened in cinemas before *The Prestige*, it seems inadmissible to relate the magic tricks motif from the later film to the earlier film. However, Darren Mooney indicates Christopher Nolan's longstanding interest in Christopher Priest's novel *The Prestige* (1995), of which Nolan's film is an alleged adaptation: »The origins of the cinematic adaptation can be traced back to the earliest days of Nolan's career. [...] Producer Valerie Dean brought the novel to Nolan's attention while he was in the UK promoting *Memento*«, released in 2000. »[...] The Nolan brothers worked on the script on and off for about five years, between finishing up *Insomnia* and getting ready to film it following *Batman Begins*. This explains in part how Nolan was able to release *The Prestige* only 16 months after *Batman Begins*.«¹⁴ That sounds as if the opening sentence of *The Prestige* reflects back upon the reading of the novel by the Nolan brothers: *Are you reading closely?* The exploration of Priest's novel appears too long and too intensive to be confined purely to the script of Nolan's next-but-one film. Effectively, the whole poetics of his films result from his experience with Priest's mystery novel.

The novel tells of a fantastical technical apparatus accidentally creating a ghost that survives the decades and centuries. Nolan's film partially adopts the character configurations and motifs of the novel, but they are given a different slant at crucial points, transforming the novel's modern ghost story into an allegory of the desire for ›the re-enchantment of the



9. *The Prestige* – Robert Angier gets ready for the trick.
10. The audience is enthralled as they watch the events onstage.
11. The flashes of light serve as misdirection.
12. Angier is not teleported, he is copied: one falls into a water tank.
13. The audience are just as blind as the stagehand.
14. Alfred Borden tries to save the drowning clone.
15. With a beaming smile, Angier's clone presents himself to the audience.

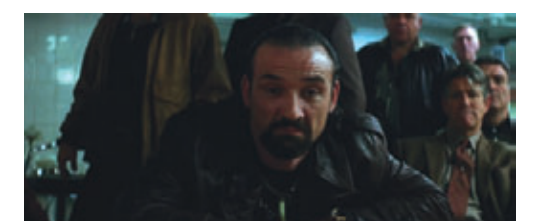
16. *The Dark Knight* – The Joker lightens the mood with a trick: »The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird, or a man«, or a pencil.
17. »The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary«: The Joker strikes the head of the man onto the table and the pencil.
18. »Now, you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it, because [...] there is no secret.
19. The ›audience‹ for the ›show‹: the assembled Mafia bosses are impressed, in their own way.

world« and the price that has to be paid for it.¹⁵ My thesis is that this forms the intellectual foundation on which Nolan's post-*Insomnia* films are based. The extent of the role played in this by Jonathan Nolan is presumably known only to the two brothers.

This thesis is reinforced by the way that *Insomnia* doesn't really fit with Christopher Nolan's other films. It is a remake of Erik Skjoldbjærg's film of the same name from 1997. According to Mooney, while Nolan was filming this remake, both brothers were studying the novel. It seems that, at this point, the magic trick script was not well developed enough to be presented to the public. This being the situation, working on *Insomnia* enabled Nolan to expand his technical and organizational skills¹⁶ and to present a respectable film – without, in my consideration, having to delineate the intellectual content prematurely. This would explain why *Insomnia* has the style of a Nolan film, but has only a few points of similarity with the rest of his work in terms of content – whereas, as we will see, the other films reference each other in many ways. In the subsequent film, *Batman Begins*, he presents for the first time – which means ›before‹ *The Prestige*, actually about magicians – parts of the magic trick script that is to decisively shape his future work.

If one looks at Nolan's *Batman* films from this perspective, then the battles of the Dark Knight with his opponents can be described as magic tricks applied practically: *Batman* could be said to be the stage name under which Bruce Wayne ›presents‹ his ›tricks‹ in his carefully created ›costume‹; Gotham's dark streets serve as his ›stage‹, and he defeats the villains with his ›riveting performances‹: »Theatricality and deception are powerful agents. You must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent.« Batman repeatedly disappearing at the end of conversations – as if he had magically vanished into thin air – also fits the magic trick context. When he appears during a criminal pursuit in *The Dark Knight Rises*, an older policeman (Brent Briscoe) tells a more inexperienced colleague: »Oh, boy, you are in for a show tonight, son« (DKR 0:46:14). By saying this, he reveals himself as a member of the ›audience‹ for Batman's ›performance‹ – an audience that also includes James Gordon (Gary Oldman) who is watching the ›show‹ live on TV. Conversely, the temporary superiority of Bane (Tom Hardy) is indicated by his disdain for the firecrackers that Batman throws at him. He addresses the limitations of Ra's al Ghul's piece of advice: »Theatricality and deception, powerful agents to the uninitiated. But we are initiated, aren't we, Bruce?« (DKR 1:13:11).

For the Joker (Heath Ledger) in *The Dark Knight*, magic tricks are only part of a cynical game, as is illustrated by his encounter with the assembled mafiosi of Gotham. The mood is antagonistic, since the Joker has robbed one of their banks; looking at one of his thugs, Gambol (Michael Jai White) says to him: »Give me one reason why I shouldn't have my boy here pull your head off?« The Joker responds with what sounds like an effort to defuse the tension: »How about a magic trick?« He rams a pencil into the tabletop and makes passes over it with his hands like a magician: »I'm gonna make this pencil disappear.« As Gambol's man approaches, in one swift stroke, he strikes the man's head down toward the tabletop, so that the pencil penetrates the gangster's brain. »Ta-daa!« the Joker shouts triumphantly: »It's ... it's gone« (TDK 0:23:22).



The corpus

It is instructive to ask to which genre Nolan's feature films belong. The first three – *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), and *Insomnia* (2002) – are commonly assigned to the genre of neo-noir.¹⁷ *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) are comic book adaptations, *Interstellar* (2014) is science fiction, *Dunkirk* (2017) is a war film, and *Oppenheimer* (2023) is a biopic. So far, so straightforward. Determining the genre of *The Prestige* (2006), *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020), however, is not so easy. *Historical film* does not adequately describe *The Prestige*; the same applies to calling *Tenet* a *thriller*. And what about *Inception*? The film gives an impression of realism, but this realism is very significantly contaminated by fantastical aspects. The same could be said of *Tenet* and *The Prestige*. Jeff Prucher has coined the term *slipstream* as a label for a work »which makes use of the tropes or techniques of genre science fiction or fantasy, but which is not considered to be genre science fiction or fantasy.«¹⁸ Although, strictly speaking, he understands this to apply only to literary texts, Prucher's description could also be used for films. If one looks at Nolan's work from this perspective, one notices that – with the exceptions of *Dunkirk* and *Oppenheimer* – all of his post-*Insomnia* films oscillate between realism and the fantastical: *Interstellar* fluctuates, at any rate, between the poles of *science* and *fiction*, and in *The Prestige*, *Inception*, and *Tenet*, realism is extended to embrace fantasy. The fantastical element is inscribed into the Batman source material owing to its origins in the superhero genre; in his adaptations, Nolan tones this down somewhat in favour of realism.¹⁹ Although *Oppenheimer* is told realistically, there are sequences that reflect the subjective feelings of J. Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) and thus have a fantastical character in the broader sense. If one regards the non-linear narratives of *Following* and *Memento* as qualifying as fantastical elements, then these films also belong to this group. Additionally, this consideration reinforces the exceptional position of *Insomnia* among Nolan's purely fictional works.

Furthermore, this classification hints that his films form a corpus.²⁰ Accepting this has far-reaching consequences: each of Nolan's films is fascinating in its own right, but this premise suggests that they complement and expand each other, and that a synoptic study of them is thus needed to enable a deeper understanding of his work. Nolan's film corpus is populated by doppelgängers, clones, twins, and characters with false identities: the billionaire Bruce Wayne hunts criminals at night as Batman, and, although the Joker wears a mask beneath his mask,²¹ he ironically demands that Batman should take off his mask. Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) becomes the psychopath Two-Face, whose name reflects this theme of doubles. In *The Prestige*, the twin brothers Alfred Borden and Bernard Fallon (Christian Bale) share a life – a fact that is reflected by their names, which are almost complete anagrams of each other. The other magician, Robert Angier, has his own second existence, as Lord Caldwell, and, in Gerald Root (Hugh Jackman) a doppelgänger, too. Not only this, but he creates dozens of clones of himself over the course of the film. In *Batman Begins*, the figure introduced as Ra's al Ghul (Ken Watanabe) is merely the straw man for the real Ra's al Ghul alias Henri Ducard. The same is true of Bane and Sanjay Singh (Denzil Smith), who serve, respectively, as the straw men for Miranda Tate alias Talia al Ghul (Marion Cotillard) in *The Dark Knight Rises* and for the weapons dealer Priya (Dimple Kapadia) in *Tenet*. And, finally, the latter film begins with two antagonistic groups of masked figures storming the Ukrainian national opera, and also features the Protagonist's time-inverted self fighting his orthochronic self.

From a structural perspective, this also applies to character constellations, themes and motifs: on the one hand, this happens within a single film, with Nolan creating references that link individual scenes and sequences in parallel montages, and on the other hand, it also takes place between different films. This means that the elements of one film may be internalized, externalized, or mirrored in another, and is coupled with the fact that Nolan often repeatedly casts the same actors: Michael Caine is the first notable name, but others who appear several times are Christian Bale, Kenneth Branagh, Marion Cotillard, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Tom Hardy, Anne Hathaway, Cillian Murphy, and Ken Watanabe. David Bowie has a role in *The Prestige*, and his song *Something in the Air* (1999) accompanies the credits of *Memento*. Although Nolan's films are not parallel universes – despite their many similarities and overlaps – Neil's remark from *Tenet* applies to them: »In a parallel worlds theory, we can't know the relationship between consciousness and multiple realities« (TEN 1:39:25).



Inverted events on two yachts:

20. *The Dark Knight* – Alfred Pennyworth is asked to put sun lotion on the back of a Russian dancer.

21. *Tenet* – After covering Sator's back with ample sun cream, Kat shoots him.

22. *The Dark Knight* – Bruce Wayne springs into the sea.

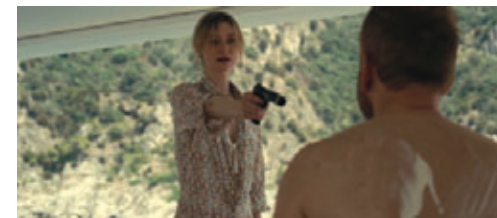
23. *Tenet* – Kat dives headfirst into the sea.



Two trick coins:

24. *The Prestige* – Fallon gives the boy a trick coin: »Never show anyone.«

25. *The Dark Knight* – Two-Face with the former trick coin.



26. *Following* – Bill in an author's pose. Next to the ABC, the image of his ideal woman.

27. The precursor for inception: Cobb leaves behind unfamiliar pants during the burglary.



Some examples may serve to illustrate the nature of these constellations. In *The Dark Knight*, in order to kidnap the criminal financial service provider Yinglain Lau (Chin Han) from Hong Kong while in his persona as Batman, Bruce Wayne needs an alibi, and so he stages a luxury cruise with the female dancers of the Moscow Ballet for this purpose. As he springs from the deck of the yacht into the sea and sets off for Hong Kong, Wayne leaves his butler and confidant Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine) on the deck of the yacht with the young ladies, one of whom immediately asks Alfred to put sun lotion on her back. In *Tenet*, this interaction is inverted in a scene that likewise takes place on a billionaire's yacht. This time, it is Katherine »Kat« Barton (Elizabeth Debicki) who asks her Russian husband Andrei Sator to turn around so that she can put sun lotion on his back. The older male Briton and the young female Russian on the luxury cruise in *The Dark Knight* have become a young female Briton and a male Russian in his prime. With the change in the constellation of figures, however, the emotions are also reversed. Kat hates her extremely violent husband, and so Alfred's pleasant situation in *Tenet* is turned into a murderous attack: Kat anoints Sator's back to make it easier to push his body overboard after she shoots him. Then, like Wayne in *Batman Begins*, she dives headfirst from the deck into the sea.

Another example: in *The Prestige*, Bernard Fallon gives the nephew of Sarah (Rebecca Hall) a trick coin that has the same image on both sides. If used in a coin toss, it would override the power of chance. When Fallon presents it to the boy (Anthony DeMarco), he re-emphasises the question from the film's beginning: »Are you watching closely? Look closer.« Through this gift to her nephew, Bernard wants to win the sympathy and ultimately the love of Sarah, and he succeeds. About the coin, he says to the boy: »Never show anyone. They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up you'll be nothing to them. [...] The secret impresses no one. The trick you use it for is everything« (PRE 0:20:04). In *The Dark Knight*, district attorney Harvey Dent also owns such a coin, and it was through this coin that he got his first date with Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Thus, in both films, the beginning of a love story is associated with a manipulated coin. In *The Dark Knight*, the coin is also a sign that the lover is dead. Harvey gives it to Rachel, thereby revealing the secret that Fallon warns the boy not to impart. When Harvey gets the coin back from Gordon with one side blackened by soot, he knows that Rachel died in the fire started by the Joker. Now that the two sides of the trick coin are different, the aspect of chance, previously suspended by the coin, is effective (for real), and the idealistic prosecutor becomes Two-Face, whose murders are dictated by chance.

There are also correspondences between *Following* and *Memento*. In *Following*, Cobb (Alex Haw) breaks into strangers' apartments, not primarily to enrich himself, but to learn something about the inhabitants. In *Memento*, the protagonist applies this to himself: Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) suffers from a short-term memory disorder, which is why he uses the objects in the hotel room to speculate about its inhabitant, i. e. about himself. While Cobb is sure of himself and rummages through the apartments of strangers out of psychological curiosity, Leonard is a stranger to himself and has to deduce and (re)construct his self from the evidence of the environment.

The fact that *Inception* massively references *Following* is made evident by the protagonists of both films bearing the same name: Cobb.²² Both Cobbs are intruders,²³ but not in a conventional way:²⁴ the psychological interest that causes Cobb to commit the burglaries and thefts in *Following* is internalized in *Inception* to the extent that Dominick »Dom« Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) penetrates the psyches of others and »steals« their most secret thoughts; in the film, this is referred to as »extraction« (INC 0:03:22). Additionally, the break-ins / »extraction[s]« have artistic connotations: in *Following*, Cobb is accompanied by the author Bill (Jeremy Theobald), who is hoping to use these intrusions into strangers' apartments as material for a story;²⁵ and in *Inception* Dom Cobb accesses the secrets of other people by inventing storylines and creating dream worlds.²⁶ Cobb doesn't just steal something in *Following*; sometimes he leaves an object in the apartment and imagines the questions and discussions that it provokes among his victims. This detail becomes key plot point of *Inception*, with Dom Cobb, by means of the titular »inception« (INC 0:19:24), planting an alien thought in the mind of the heir to a major business, in order to prompt him to take a certain action.

At the end of Nolan's feature film debut, Cobb kills his accomplice and lover (Lucy Russell), manipulating the traces so that the police believe Bill is the culprit. *Inception* offers a clever variation on this by splitting the name and role of »Cobb« from *Following* between two characters. In *Inception*, the character of Cobb's female partner is violently killed too, but the

role of the perpetrator is passed to the partner herself, in the sense that Mal (Marion Cotillard) commits suicide. In addition, she arranges the circumstances of her death to give the impression that her husband has killed her, thus putting Dom Cobb in the same situation that Bill is put in by Cobb in *Following* (hence her name: *Mal = the evil one*).

Nevertheless, this is only one of at least two readings of *Inception*. The other is pursued by David Kyle Johnson, Ruth Tallman, and Jason Southworth. One can leave the dream worlds that Dom Cobb creates by being released when the set time elapses, by plunging into water,²⁷ or by dying. Cobb believes that Mal thought reality itself was a dream and committed suicide because she wanted to wake up from it. He feels guilty about her death because it was he who gave her this thought. At the end of the film, however, the spinning top that enables him to distinguish dream from reality does not stop spinning. This suggests that it is not Mal but Cobb who remains in the dream world: »Come back to reality, Dom« (INC 0:24:10), Nolan has Stephen Miles (Michael Caine) say. Cobb insists that he is already in the real world, objecting to Mal: »If this is my dream, why can't I control this?« Mal: »You don't know you're dreaming!« (INC 1:18:30). According to this reading, his dream spans the entire film, whereas Mal has returned to (fictional) reality through her suicide.²⁸

The significant role of time in Nolan's films is well-known. In *Following*, the plot is told achronologically. In *Memento*, sequences are arranged in linear and non-linear chronology. Time is stretched in *Inception*: the nesting of several dream worlds into each other means that time passes faster on the »upper« levels than on the »lower« levels, so that the characters age at different rates on the different dream levels. In *Interstellar*, this is implemented through the relativity of time in space. *Dunkirk*, on the other hand, is divided into three sections, whose narrated time varies considerably – *The Mole*: one week, *The Sea*: one day, and *The Air*: one hour – but whose respective narrative time, on the other hand, ends almost exactly at the same moment.²⁹ This echoes the time structure of the different dream levels in *Inception*, whose duration increases from dream level to dream level and which all end at the same time, with the »kick« (INC 0:10:52). In *Tenet*, the characters are able to reverse time so that they can change the past based on their knowledge of the future. After all, several time levels intersect in *Oppenheimer* in a positively classic way, as there are two framing narratives: the interrogations of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.), within which a number of episodes from the past are described.

The points of connection shown here may give an impression of how Nolan's films »function«. By varying a comprehensible pool of motifs, themes, and character constellations, and through the repeated appearances of regular actors, the unknown receives an aspect of familiarity, while the seemingly familiar becomes the unknown through surprising recombinations.

Discontents in the disenchanted world

Max Weber sees the »disenchantment of the world« as a significant consequence of rational thinking. He uses this expression in his lecture *Science as a Vocation* (1919): »The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage« – like all of us, Weber is only a child of his time – »for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means.«³⁰

The quoted passage is about the relationship of human beings to the world: by means of rational thinking, the enlightened human being makes the world transparent and controllable, or is potentially able to do so (at least, that's what he believes³¹). *The Prestige* and Nolan's other films, on the other hand, are less about knowledge of the world and more about the relationships between the characters. Although they, also, can potentially know everything – »Are you watching closely?« – the illusions of the magicians are based on the power imbalance between those in the know and those who are ignorant: »Never show anyone«, Fallon says as he gives the boy the trick coin. »They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up you'll be nothing to them. [...] The secret impresses no one.

28. *Inception* – Is Cobb trapped in a dream? The spinning top.



29. *Un homme des têtes* – Méliès' multi-part harmony.

The trick you use it for is everything.« After all, in order to enchant the »disenchanted world« again, mystery is required. That's why the spectators of the shows willingly put themselves in the intellectually inferior position: »You want to be fooled.« The »[t]echnical means« appear to them to be the »magical means« of which Weber speaks. It would be a premature conclusion to ascribe to Nolan the aim of regressing the audience by means of the slipstream quality of his films, their use of fantastic – magical – elements. Instead, the reason he integrates fantastic aspects into his Enlightenment discourse is not for the sake of any kind of nostalgia (despite what the historicizing atmosphere of *The Prestige* might suggest), but in order to address and to expose the power structures associated with the secret.³²

Not only can a character wear a mask under the mask, but they can function themselves as a kind of mask to conceal a second (or a third) character from another film or text.³³ Thus, the protagonist of *Inception* is a transformed version of Cobb from *Following*, combined with the magician figure: Dom Cobb's »trick« is not to break into other people's homes and leave something there, but instead to penetrate their heads and implant a thought, causing them to think something specific. This is no different to what a magician does. Since Dom Cobb creates worlds for this purpose, he is also a God-figure, as is indicated even by his first name, which is derived from »dominus« meaning »Lord«, shortened to »Dom«.³⁴ Accordingly, reference is made to the divine act of creation when he describes how he created dream worlds jointly with Mal: »It wasn't so bad at first, feeling like gods. The problem was knowing that none of it was real« (INC 1:16:56). This line hints at the ambivalence that exists between appearance and reality by characterizing their creations as illusions and thus as magic tricks. Furthermore, Cobb is not autonomous like the biblical God: he cannot create something on his own. He needs equipment and techniques; he has to calculate the processes and is dependent on the help of specialists. He shares this dependence with the magicians in *The Prestige*, who rely on others to develop their tricks. Ultimately, he is fallible, plagued by worries and fears. He mourns his dead wife and misses his children. Thus, he is not so much a god in the true sense as a man with partially god-like abilities.

A person of this type is regarded by Sigmund Freud as typical of modernity. »These things do not only sound like a fairy tale«, he writes in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), »they are an actual fulfilment of every – or of almost every – fairy-tale wish. These things that, by his science and technology, man has brought about on this earth, on which he first appeared as a feeble animal organism and on which each individual of his species must once more make its entry – »Oh inch of nature!« – as a helpless baby. All these assets he may lay claim to as his cultural acquisition. Long ago he formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. So it can be said that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself. Only, it is true, in the fashion in which ideals are usually attained according to the general judgement of humanity. Not completely; in some respects not at all, in others only halfway. Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic god. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they give him much trouble at times. [...] Future ages«, Freud predicts, »will bring with them new and probably unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to god still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his godlike character.«³⁵ Without wanting to claim a genetic connection, it is as if Sigmund Freud populated the »disenchanted world« of Max Weber with his »prosthetic gods«.

The magicians in *The Prestige* are »prosthetic gods« par excellence. Their (professional) existence is built on the illusion that they have magical, god-like powers, which is why they painstakingly conceal the fact that their tricks are based solely on technical trickery and dexterity. Bruce Wayne alias Batman is a magician thanks to his gadgets and is therefore one such »prosthetic god« – »You must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent«, says Henri Ducard to him. The same is true of Alfred Borden and his brother Bernard Fallon, as well as Robert Angier, Dom Cobb, Andrei Sator and other characters in Nolan's films. True to Freud's assessment, however, none of them is happy: Angier mourns his dead wife Julia McCullough (Piper Perabo), Borden stands accused of murder due to Angier's death; Fallon's wife Sarah commits suicide, and he is threatened with losing their daughter Jess (Samantha Mahurin); Bruce Wayne mourns first for his parents and later for Rachel Dawes; Sator is terminally ill and his wish is that no one should survive him; Dom Cobb

misses his children, is haunted by dream images of his dead wife and has to flee from the police as her alleged murderer. He could, therefore, ask, like Don Rumata (Leonid Yarmolnik) from Aleksei German's film *Hard to Be a God* (2013): »If I am a god, why am I on your arrest list?« (GOD 1:06:02).³⁶

These examples illustrate how the ›prosthetic gods‹ also bring misfortune to others. This is particularly evident in *The Prestige*: Angier's wife Julia drowns in a water tank during the performance of an escapology trick onstage, and Sarah takes her own life because she cannot cope with her husband's double life. It is as if magic apparatuses have an inherent lethal tendency that causes people to regard them with scepticism, even – indeed, especially – their inventors. However, the magician figures largely ignore the devisers' warnings, allowing the misfortune to take its course. Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) suspects that his magic box is disastrous, which is why he advises Angier: »I add only one suggestion on using the machine: Destroy it. Drop it to the bottom of the deepest ocean. Such a thing will bring you only misery« (PRE 1:30:37). In *The Dark Knight*, an apparatus is destroyed because of its potential for abuse: Bruce Wayne persuades Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), the inventor character in the *Batman* films, to use the mobile phones of all the inhabitants of Gotham to locate the Joker by sonar, but only by giving him the opportunity to destroy the system after it is used. Fox does destroy it, whereas Angier uses the apparatus: »Tesla's warning is as unheeded as he knew it would be« (PRE 1:30:55).

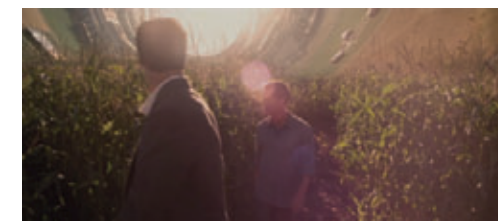
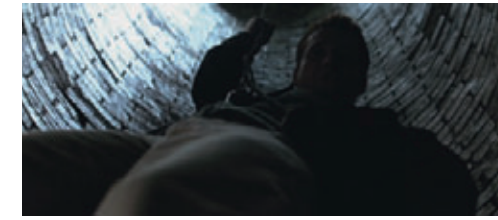
Consequently, dozens of clones of Angier, which he creates with Tesla's machine, die during the spectacular magic trick *The Real Transported Man*. In *Tenet*, this is made far more radical: Tesla's apparatus is replaced by an algorithm that could invert the entire world – this would be the ›show‹ aspect – but would thereby destroy the entire world like Angier's doomed clones. To prevent this, the developer of the algorithm divided her invention into nine parts, which she handed over separately to the nine nuclear powers and which they were to guard carefully. She then took her own life, »so she couldn't be forced to make another« algorithm (TEN 1:47:23). While Tesla recognizes the evil caused by his device but merely recommends its destruction, the algorithm developer in *Tenet* tries to prevent any new creation even at the cost of her own life. This parallels Dr. Pavel (Alon Aboutboul), the nuclear physicist and builder of a fusion reactor of a new type which is supposed to supply Gotham with clean energy. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane forces him to turn it into a bomb to destroy Gotham. He then kills Pavel, the only one who could defuse the bomb again. By committing suicide, the developer of the algorithm in *Tenet* pre-empts a similar fate. However, just as Tesla's warning is ignored, Sator, whose »lifelong mission, financed and guided by the future, has been to find and reassemble the algorithm« (TEN 1:48:20) succeeds. In *Oppenheimer*, Nolan puts the figure of the constructor at the heart of the film. The atomic bomb – the »gadget« (OPP 1:01:44) whose development Oppenheimer directs – is exceptionally deadly. Accordingly, he is driven by the effect of his invention. He cannot unmake it, which is why he campaigns for international conventions to at least prevent its further use as far as possible. This will be discussed in detail later.

In the mask of a demon

Nolan extracts further de-transcended components from the metaphor space opened up by Freud's term »prosthetic god«. A ›de-transcended‹ religious element has been stripped of its connection to a supernatural realm, its associated motifs, structures, thought patterns and action scripts applied to more worldly topics. Its religious element has not, however, become completely immanent; it still carries within itself the germ of its religious descent and thus the possibility of being re-transcended.

Besides Dom Cobb, there are two other characters in *Inception* that relate to the Christian mythos, and, like him, they are unhappy. Cobb and his team are supposed to implant in the son and heir of a recently deceased business mogul the idea that his father wanted him to go his own way and to split up the giant family corporation (structurally, this corresponds to the division of the algorithm in *Tenet*). They are abetted by the fact that Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy) longs for recognition from his father (Pete Postlethwaite) as well as for an original idea of his own. This thought is to be induced in him by an alleged »testament« (INC 2:10:51), which, in the context of religious motifs, naturally refers to the *Bible*. Fittingly, the two Fischers, father and son, stand for the biblical God and Christ respectively, and their sur-

30. *The Ascent of the Blessed* by Hieronymus Bosch.



Transformations of *The Ascent of the Blessed*:

- 31. *Batman Begins* – In the well shaft, the young Bruce is attacked by bats.
- 32. The fallen Bruce is lifted into the light by his father.
- 33. *The Dark Knight Rises* – an ascent out of the dungeon fails.
- 34. *Interstellar* – The rocket.
- 35. Cooper Station.

name refers to the ›fish‹ that is a symbol of Christ. The mountainous region created by Cobb and his team where the son experiences the illusion of meeting his dying father is a very violent place. In spite of this, the white of God's heavenly abode is, on this level, transposed into the white of the snowy dream world. In the son's forsaking of his father's teachings, the structure of the alleged break between the Jewish and Christian religions is easily recognizable. The religious connotations are further emphasized by the fact that Robert Fischer's godfather (Tom Berenger) is involved, whose first name – *Peter* – also refers to the eponymous apostle. On this level, the splitting up of the Fischer business corresponds, in its turn, to the confessional differentiation of Christianity into the Coptic, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches etc.

Other films by Nolan also exhibit motifs borrowed from the Judeo-Christian mythos. At the beginning of *Memento*, Leonard searches his hotel room to find clues about his own identity; he pulls open the bedside drawer and giggles as he states: »Nothing except the *Gideon Bible*. Which I of course read religiously. Hehe« (MEM 0:06:30). This reference to religious motifs, which is seemingly marginal and masked by irony, finds no point of contact in *Memento*, but it foreshadows several of Nolan's films. This becomes particularly effective for the first time in *Batman Begins*. Nolan switches back and forth between two timeframes by means of parallel montages: Little Bruce (Gus Lewis) steals something – i.e., he commits a sin from a Christian point of view; he then plunges into a dry well shaft – symbolising the underworld or hell – where bats attack him like punishing demons. The scene then moves to another time and a Chinese prison, because the adult Bruce Wayne has also stolen something; instead of bats, he is now attacked by other prisoners. Their leader (Turbo Kong, according to the credits) gives this religious connotations: »You are in hell, little man. And I am the devil.« Wayne replies: »You're not the devil. You're practice« (BAT 0:02:17). The reason why he needs this practice appears shortly afterwards under the name ›Henri Ducard‹. As soon as Wayne arrives at his mountain residence, Ducard throws him on his back, so that he lies helplessly on the ground like little Bruce in the depths of the shaft. Another film cut returns us to this scene: Bruce's father (Linus Roache) abseils down to reach his son and to bring him out. »And why do we fall?« he asks indulgently, speaking of both moral and physical falls. »So we can learn to pick ourselves up« (BAT 0:10:42). He brings the little sinner out of the darkness of the black, cylindrical shaft, evoking the painting *The Ascent of the Blessed* (early 16th century) by Hieronymus Bosch. In this picture, the souls of those found worthy are led by angels through a kind of tubular shaft out of the darkness up to an opening full of brilliant light. In this manner, in *Batman Begins*, the motif of resurrection is broached in Nolan's work.

The part of the film in which Bruce Wayne creates *Batman* therefore also has the character of a de-transcended underworld journey. Through his misdeed, little Bruce plunges into the mouth of hell, where demons torture him; the kind father brings him back to the heavenly light, where he repentantly returns the stolen goods. Soon afterwards, Bruce's parents are murdered by a robber after a visit to the opera, which on the one hand escalates the boy's act of theft to a murderous mugging, and on the other hand reverses the order of the theft/lethal mugging as well as the appearances of the bats in the well and in the opera, respectively.³⁷ Officer Gordon then puts his jacket around the shoulders of the frightened Bruce, echoing the deed of St. Martin. However, it is not Gordon who takes over the role of the adoptive father. Instead – after another time jump – Henri Ducard alias Ra's al Ghul offers himself in this capacity.³⁸ Just as Bruce's biological father acted as a doctor against diseases, Ra's al Ghul teaches him to fight against evil. However, he lacks the kindness of Bruce's father, which is why he preaches revenge instead of pity.

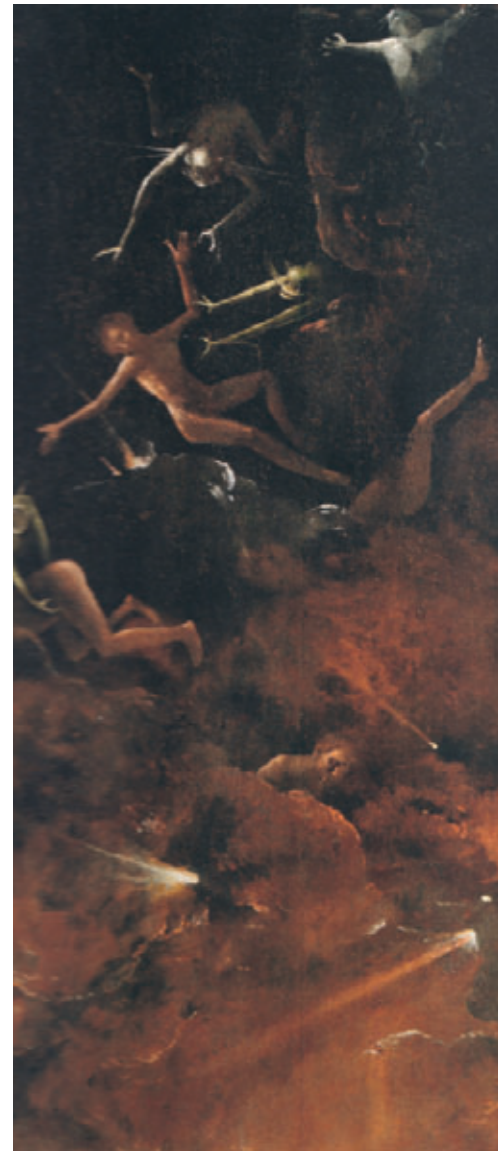
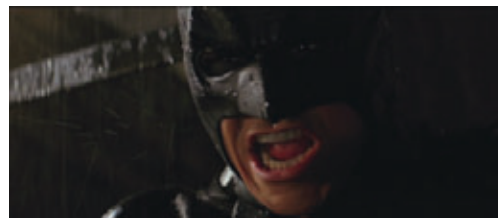
After another time jump, the heir to the Wayne empire, believed dead, returns to Gotham to kill his parents' murderer in accordance with Ra's al Ghul's teachings. However, assistant district attorney Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) makes it clear to him the path this would lead him down. Bruce comes to his senses and gives his coat to a needy man (Rade Serbedzija), echoing in his turn the action of the merciful Martin. Another film cut takes us back to Ra's al Ghul's house, where Wayne is supposed to complete his training by murdering a criminal. However, mindful of the lesson Dawes taught him, he refuses. Ra's al Ghul is not pleased: »Your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share«, he tells him. »That's why it's so important«, Wayne replies. »It separates us from them« (BAT 0:36:40).³⁹ Thus, his training has taken a very different turn from what Ra's al Ghul intended. The scene in which Bruce Wayne gives the homeless man his coat makes it clear that he has forsaken the doctrine of

revenge and converted to the doctrine of compassion. Structurally, this reflects the supposedly fundamental break between the alleged God of vengeance of the so-called *Old Testament* and the merciful Son of God of the so-called *New Testament*. While there is not the slightest indication that ideas of this type should be imputed to Nolan, this configuration has links with an anti-Jewish propaganda topos, which can also be found in several other literary texts and films, but which stand in eminently stark contrast to the historical practice of Christianity. In fact, as historian Michael Wolffsohn explains, the Christian doctrine of compassion has its origin in Judaism, whereas in the past (and unfortunately not only in the past, it should be added), the Christians, contrary to their self-image, were far more merciless towards Jews than they unjustifiably accused Judaism of being.⁴⁰ This culminated in the most horrific way in the Shoah, and ending the murder of European Jews by the Nazis is the main reason for developing the atomic bomb in *Oppenheimer*.

To Ra's al Ghul's chagrin, Bruce Wayne spares the criminal. Afterwards, he creates his alter ego Batman as a way of using his own fears against his opponents.⁴¹ This makes Batman's outward appearance and his essential ethos contradictory: in the fearsome guise of a bat demon, he fights for the doctrine of compassion. This ambivalence becomes particularly vivid when he plunges the corrupt policeman Flass (Mark Boone Junior) into a dark high-rise canyon, with a rope on Flass's foot preventing him from falling to his death on the ground. While the scene reverses the one in which Bruce's father uses a rope to bring the little sinner out of the dark well shaft into the light, it also relates to *The Fall of the Damned*, the companion piece to Hieronymus Bosch's *The Ascent of the Blessed* in his polyptych *Visions of the Afterlife* (early 16th century). *The Fall of the Damned* shows demons hurling the souls of the damned into hell. Like them, Batman plunges the sinful Flass into the abyss, tormenting him in this manner until he gives up the information he requires. Flass protests that he is telling the truth: »I swear to God«, he stammers. »Swear to me« (BAT 1:15:01), Batman commands. If his inner being were consistent with his outer presentation, then this would be in line with the satanic practice of changing the rituals and symbols of holiness into their opposites. Batman, however, wishes to redeem Gotham from evil, as Christ sought to rid the world from evil: thus, this »Swear to me« is a declaration that the alleged God of vengeance has been replaced by the God of mercy. It is in accordance with this that Batman, in spite of his fearful appearance, spares Flass's life, and Flass is able to walk away – pretty shaken, but unharmed – after he has betrayed to Batman the information he needed.

From a psychological perspective, Wayne's new orientation allows him to emancipate himself from al Ghul, his father figure. Al Ghul also comes to Gotham, but, unlike Wayne, his intention is to wipe out the sinful city like the biblical God smiting Sodom and Gomorrah. The final battle between them is thus a transformed version of the battle between the Son who had been believed dead and is now resurrected appearing as God of mercy to face the Father appearing as the God of vengeance. *Batman Begins* therefore describes how the frightened orphan first becomes a revenge-seeker but then learns not to react to what has been done to him out of selfish motives. Instead – and what Nolan portrays is indeed nothing less than this – he learns to take responsibility for the community and for protecting it from destruction.

In the second *Batman* movie, the christological motifs are not quite so dominant. At the end of *The Dark Knight*, the motif of self-sacrifice surfaces, as Batman takes upon himself the »sin« of Two-Face to preserve Harvey Dent's legal legacy that freed Gotham from organized crime.⁴² Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*, by contrast, is a kind of false prophet who pretends to free the precariat, but who actually wants to bring the apocalypse to Gotham in the form of the all-destroying bomb and is accompanied by Miranda Tate alias Talia al Ghul as an echo of the Whore of Babylon. In this film, the motif of self-sacrifice is fully played out: Batman uses his aircraft to transport the bomb out of the city, over the sea, where it (probably) kills him, but causes no further damage. This ending is a transformed version of the sequence from *Illuminati* (2009) in which the camerlengo (Ewan McGregor) uses a helicop-



Transformations of Bosch's painting:
37. *Batman Begins* – The fall of the damned: Flass.
38. In the mask of a demon: Batman.

36. *The Fall of the Damned* by Hieronymus Bosch.

ter to fly up into the skies with the antimatter which is about to explode, thereby saving the Vatican and all the assembled believers whilst also seeking to pre-empt his own apotheosis. Unlike Batman, the camerlengo parachutes out, indicating the limits of his willingness to serve as a sacrifice and thus of his position as a follower of Christ. Sure enough, by the end of the film he proves to be a villain and sets himself alight, symbolising his torment in hellfire.

The resurrection trick script

According to the mythos, Christ's death on the cross was followed by his resurrection from the dead. Nolan's films contain many variations on the theme of resurrection – in a de-transcended form, because, as with the expression »prosthetic god«, there remains here merely a memory of the religious sphere. Little Bruce's plunge into the well shaft and his rescue from it have already been decoded as a journey into the underworld and a resurrection. This motif is repeated in *Batman Begins* when Wayne is declared dead due to his long absence and is subsequently »resurrected« by his return to Gotham. *The Dark Knight Rises* also follows this pattern: Bane succeeds in defeating Batman; he throws the unmasked Bruce Wayne into an underground dungeon whose design recalls the well shaft into which the young Bruce fell in *Batman Begins*. Once again, Wayne rises out of the gloom of the shaft into the light – but this time without a rope, and without the aid of his father: *The Dark Knight Rises Again*. He then defeats the devilish Bane and saves Gotham.

Further resurrections: in *The Dark Knight*, James Gordon supposedly dies, which proves to be a ruse; upon his return, the mayor of Gotham City, Garcia (Nestor Carbonell), is prompted to ask, in ironic tones: »Back from the dead?« (TDK 1:23:49). This motif is also referenced by the name of the NASA project in *Interstellar*: The Lazarus Missions. »Oh, that sounds cheerful«, is the mocking comment of Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), who is to be part of the mission. »Lazarus came back from the dead«, explains Professor Brand (Michael Caine), somewhat acidly. Cooper recalls the first part of the story of Lazarus: »Sure, but he had to die in the first place« (INT 0:30:17). Later on in the film, Cooper himself is believed dead and then returns from his space voyage to the heavens, after proclaiming the good news of how the human species is to be saved from destruction. In *Tenet*, the Protagonist takes a suicide pill and, similarly, awakes into life. Appropriately, he is greeted with the words »Welcome to the afterlife« (TEN 0:08:56) by a character significantly named *Fay* (Martin Donovan) and then, like the resurrected Christ, is sent to save the world.

The motif of returning from the dead can also be found several times in *The Prestige*. Towards the end of the film, Robert Angier, believed dead, appears as Lord Caldlow to both Alfred Borden and John Cutter. Bernard Fallon is buried alive in a cemetery then dug up, foreshadowing how, towards the end of the film, his brother will be »resurrected« by Fallon taking on the role of the executed Borden. Above all, however, the resurrection is tied to the magic trick script. Central to this is the sequence in which Bernard Fallon assists the mediocre magician *The Great Virgil* (J. Paul Moore). Bernard sees Sarah in the audience, the woman who later becomes his wife. She pays more attention to him than to the performance. Thus, Bernard takes over the function of the attractive female magic show assistant, gender-reversed: »A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection« (PRE 0:36:48), explains Cutter. Unlike Sarah, her nephew (the one Fallon will later give the coin to) watches the trick closely, true to the command of the voice from the beginning of the film. Fallon puts a cage with a canary on the table, Virgil covers it with a cloth and hits it hard. Then he whips the cloth away with a grand gesture. There is nothing to see but the bare table – the cage and the bird appear to have vanished. »He killed it«, the little boy sobs. »What? What's wrong?«, Sarah asks, perplexed. »He killed it«, the boy repeats, pointing to the magician, who is basking in the scant applause. She tries to calm the boy: »I'm sure he didn't.« Virgil takes a flower from his buttonhole and lays the cloth over it. Turning the question from the beginning into an invitation, Sarah addresses her nephew: »See? Look, now he'll bring it back.« Virgil swiftly pulls the cloth off the yellow flower, and there is now a little canary bird fluttering in his hand. »No, he killed it«, the boy insists. After the show, Bernard comes to see them, and shows the bird to the boy: »See? He's all right. He's fine. Look at him!« The boy: »But where's his brother?« He has realised that there are two birds. Fallon starts to make an excuse, breaks off and turns to Sarah instead: »He's a sharp lad [...]« (PRE 0:18:52). Behind the stage, he talks to the second bird, saying: »You're the lucky one today« (PRE 0:19:41),

39. The infernal R'as al Ghul burns down Wayne Manor.

