Title: An Investigation of Christopher Nolan's Unconventional Filmmaking Methods

Research Question: How and why does Christopher Nolan break the conventions of modern-day filmmaking?

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Introduction

In the world of cinema, where value is placed on captivating and innovative stories, acclaimed director Christopher Nolan continues to redefine the art of filmmaking. A fantastic gateway into the mind of Nolan is through the characters he writes, "An idea is like a virus, resilient, highly contagious," (Nolan, Christopher. Inception) said Cobb, the lead protagonist in one of Nolan's most recognizable films, *Inception*. In *Inception*, characters inject ideas into the dreams of unknowing victims. Christopher Nolan has consistently shaped modern cinema by injecting his ideas, frequently breaking the conventions of modern-day filmmaking. In doing so, Nolan has cultivated a distinct cinematic style characterized by intricate narratives, mind-bending concepts, and visually stunning spectacles. His films often prompt audiences to delve deeper into the layers of storytelling, challenging them to decipher the complexities presented on screen.

Christopher Nolan is a British film director known for his contemporary narratives. Nolan was interested in filmmaking from a young age, inspired by George Lucas and Ridley Scott. He started directing corporate training videos as he worked on his first full-length film, *Following*. While *Following* succeeded at festivals, Nolan didn't receive proper recognition until he released *Memento* in 2000 (Albert, Mellisa). Since then, he has released ten feature films, all of which have been critically acclaimed. While Nolan is known as a fantastic director for many reasons, much of his success could be attributed to his habit of breaking the conventions of modern filmmaking.

Films have plenty of conventions; more popular ones include a chronological three-act structure, the use of visual effects, or the use of the final shot to create a clear

ending. Nolan sets himself apart from the standards of cinema, often breaking these conventions. Christopher Nolan's approach to filmmaking, as seen through his films *Memento, Dunkirk, Tenet, Interstellar, Oppenheimer, Inception, The Dark Knight, and The Dark Knight Rises,* breaks the conventions of modern cinema by challenging traditional story structures, primarily using practical effects, redefining the norms of cinematography, and creating a sense of ambiguity with his open-ended final shots.

Why I Chose This Topic and My Research Approach

Christopher Nolan’s filmmaking process has always fascinated me; he stands out from the vast sea of directors that dominate Hollywood today. I wanted to explore what made him different and why his films seem to really captivate audiences time and time again. After doing some preliminary research and based on my own experience watching his movies, I found that he takes a fairly unconventional approach to filmmaking, which is what sets him so far apart from other filmmakers. I wanted to explore why he takes this approach and how he is able to successfully stray away from the safety of modern-day filmmaking conventions.

To truly understand the extent of Nolan’s unique and diverse filmmaking techniques, I rewatched all of his films and researched various strategies used for each one. I referenced credible film websites that I have learned from in my film class, such as Screen Rant, Studio Binder, and No Film School. I also read through interviews with Christopher Nolan and other crewmembers who worked on his films to get a better understanding of his work from first-hand sources. Since art is subjective, I also took

into account the opinions of various online bloggers to aid in my analysis of Nolan's techniques.

As an avid film connoisseur, my goal was to personally analyze each of his films and take into consideration information from a wide range of sources to explore my research question.

Three Act Structure

Although it has been used in literature for centuries, the three-act story structure became extremely prevalent in filmmaking in 1978 when Syd Field published his book *Screenplay*. Field broke down the model, labeling the three acts as the Setup, Confrontation, and Resolution (Maio, Alyssa). Audiences became accustomed to this storytelling method, and filmmakers stuck to it due to its security. The three-act structure can be seen in most modern films; a relevant example is the story structure of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. In the "setup" of *Jaws*, a series of shark attacks in a small coastal town prompts a police chief, marine biologist, and shark hunter to combine forces to combat the shark. In the "confrontation," the three men set out on a boat to hunt the shark, failing to subdue it. Finally, in the "resolution," a dramatic battle ensues, ending in the shark's climactic death. Spielberg's execution of the three-act structure is outstanding, but unlike many of his fellow award-winning directors, Nolan strays away from the three-act structure, opting for more dynamic storytelling. In his movies *Memento* and *Dunkirk*, Christopher Nolan employs nonlinear and fragmented storytelling, effectively breaking the three-act convention of modern-day filmmaking.

Christopher Nolan's first feature film, *Memento*, follows a nonlinear story structure as it is almost entirely told in reverse rather than the normal chronological three-act structure. The protagonist, Leonard, has severe memory problems and is actively trying to solve the mystery of his wife's murder. To place the audience in a state of confusion alongside Leonard, Nolan starts at the climax of the story and moves backward, revealing a small amount of new information about Leonard's situation with each scene. Nolan also intertwines pieces of story that move forward, color-grading them in black-and-white to communicate to the audience that these segments are important and separate from the reversed timeline portrayed in the film; the inclusion of a chronological set of black-and-white scenes furthers the depth of the non-linear plot of *Memento*. Nolan uses this nonlinear structure to place the audience into the mindset of Leonard and create an ambiguous environment throughout the film. The act of telling the story in reverse forces the viewer to stay engaged with Memento, having to piece together the mystery themselves and challenging assumptions that they may make about the characters along the way (Vu, Linh). This strategy effectively engages the audience, as they are forced to follow every second of the film to understand the ever-developing plot as it traverses backward through events in Leonard's life. The reversed timeline, mixed with the chronological timeline, creates a juxtaposition of objectivity and subjectivity in the film. Throughout the film, there are numerous voiceovers from Leonard explaining his thoughts. Nolan is able to establish the objectiveness of the black-and-white shots through the use of descriptive narration while contrasting it with a more opinionated narration that overlays the colored, nonlinear segments. Through the use of an unconventional, nonlinear timeline, Nolan is able to create a fragmented

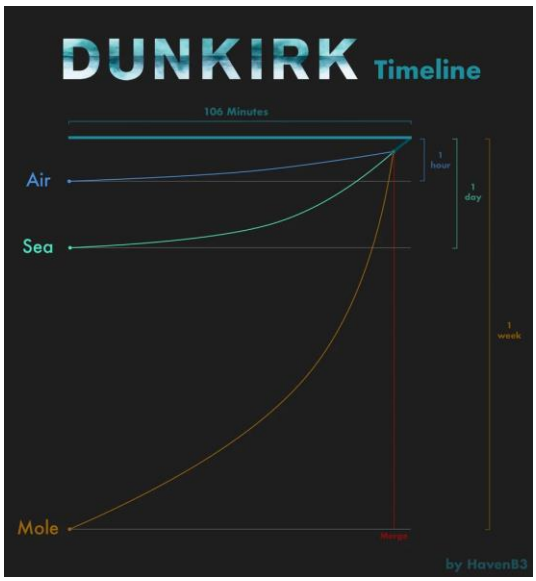
viewing experience for the audience that places them into Leonard's mind and evokes a sense of ambiguity through subjectivity.

Fragmented storytelling is defined as a “narrative that doesn’t follow a traditional path” (Gonzalez, Hector). *Memento* doesn’t follow a traditional path, but it could be subjective as to whether someone views it as fragmented. Although it is non-linear, it is primarily told in reverse chronological order, with occasional “flash-forwards.” Fragmented narratives generally have multiple stories, points of view, or timelines happening simultaneously, jumping back and forth between each. Although it wasn’t the first film to utilize a fragmented narrative structure, Quentin Tarentino’s *Pulp Fiction* is a classic example of fragmented storytelling (Gonzalez, Hector). Tarantino follows two hitmen as they carry out mobster duties for their boss, but the events of the movie happen out of order. Other notable movies that follow fragmented story structures are *Babel*, *Annie Hall*, and *Citizen Kane*. Similar to these movies, Nolan’s *Dunkirk* follows three different timelines intertwined with one another. The three timelines are told from different perspectives of the Dunkirk evacuation, a major rescue operation of 338,000 British and French troops from the port of Dunkirk in 1942 (What You Need). Each timeline starts in relation to the final evacuation. The first perspective follows the troops stranded at the port and begins a week out from the evacuation. Another follows a civilian rescue boat and starts one day out. Finally, the third perspective follows a fighter pilot and starts an hour out. Rather than telling the stories in a linear fashion, Nolan takes a fragmented approach, mixing each timeline with one another. He cuts between the different perspectives fairly equally, giving them similar amounts of screen time even though they take place over drastically different periods of time (Moran, Sarah). As the

film progresses, the audience can piece together the timelines and when they are happening in relation to each other. Finally, at the film's climax, the timelines match up, giving the audience a full understanding of the importance of each individual perspective (Figure 1). Intertwining the perspectives disproportionate to their time frames allows Nolan to emphasize the importance of each event. In the film, the actions taken throughout the three different timelines are critical to the evacuation of Dunkirk, which is why it's important to equally detail the events carried out through each. Nolan's decision to constantly cut between the perspectives adds to the disorientation of the film, effectively setting a tone for the audience similar to the confusion and terror a soldier would have gone through at the time. Nolan's unconventional narrative structure in Dunkirk serves to highlight the importance of the three different perspectives portrayed in the film and creates a disorienting atmosphere for the audience.

Visual Effects and CGI

Modern-day filmmakers frequently use visual effects and Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) to display uncommon or dangerous scenarios, such as explosions, natural disasters, or unrealistic backgrounds (Figure 2). Christopher Nolan, in order to cut down costs and create a realistic environment, prefers practical effects, the use of real-world elements to create visual effects (Nieves, Maralee). In a behind-the-scenes interview for Tenet, Nolan stated, "The audience is always aware on some



level of the difference between things that are animated and things that have been photographed" (Warner Bros.). Almost every Hollywood blockbuster uses CGI; allocated CGI budgets generally range from $34 million to $79 million, bringing the average CGI cost per minute for feature films to $570,000 (How much). As a perfectionist, Nolan wants to use the budget as efficiently as possible, which is why he has opted to display scenes in a practical manner, as well as contribute to a more realistic look for his films. Christopher Nolan's use of practical effects rather than CGI in *Tenet*, *Interstellar*, and *Oppenheimer* serves to create a more realistic aesthetic and cut down on cost.

Figure 2 (Emmerich, Roland. 2012)

Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* follows a complex story structure; the main premise is that the characters are able to invert the flow of time but have to face the consequences of doing so. In order to break into an airport, the two main characters, Neil and "The Protagonist," devise a plan to crash an airplane into the side of the building as a distraction. During the film's production, Nolan was tasked with the dilemma of shooting an airplane crash scene in the most realistic and cost-efficient way possible. Initially, Nolan planned on using visual effects and miniature replicas to create the illusion of a plane crash, but he was always drawn to the idea of crashing an authentic plane for realism. (Jaswal, Maneesha). When shooting *Tenet,* it was realized that its shooting location, Victorville, California, had a surplus of decommissioned planes. Nolan's team determined that purchasing and crashing a decommissioned 747 Boeing would be more

cost-efficient than using visual effects (Jaswal, Maneesha). Nolan was already adamant about shooting the scene practically, and the newly found cost-efficient method allowed him to do so. The logistics were figured out, and Nolan successfully crashed the 747 Boeing into a building in one take (Figure 3). Nolan's use of practical effects instead of CGI or visual effects when shooting the airport crash scene in *Tenet* allowed for a more authentic shot and helped disperse the budget to other parts of the movie.

For the opening setting in *Interstellar*, Christopher Nolan used practical effects instead of CGI backgrounds, which benefited the authentic look Nolan was striving for and actually contributed to the budget of the film. The setting is a farmhouse surrounded by hundreds of acres of corn. Nolan wanted the scene to look realistic, but he had to pinpoint a shooting location that fit the setting. While it would be easy to design a set with corn surrounding the farmhouse's direct vicinity, one scene, in particular, required an extensive cornfield. It follows the protagonist, Cooper, as he and his two children chase down a large drone in their truck. To stay on the drone's trail, the group is forced to cut directly through the cornfield, effectively smashing all of the corn in their way (Figure 4). Generally, a filmmaker tasked with doing a scene of this nature would use miniature replicas or shoot the scene on a small strip of corn and digitally replace the background to make it seem as if there was a vast cornfield. Staying true to his belief that films are better received by audiences when what they are seeing has actually been photographed, Nolan decided to plant 500 acres of corn to authentically

Figure 3 (Nolan, Christopher. Tenet)

shoot the scene (Nieves, Maralee); he was inspired by fellow filmmaker Zack Snyder, who planted crops for his film *Man of Steel* (Dhruv, Saloni). The farm took an initial investment of approximately $100,000 (Dhruv, Saloni), and rather than letting the corn go to waste, Nolan sold it for a profit that contributed to the film's budget (Nieves, Maralee). Nolan's genius and strategical use of practical effects created a completely authentic setting for the farmhouse and cornfield chase scene. Since CGI significantly chips away at a film's budget, his pivot to planting the corn saved hundreds of thousands of dollars in post-production. Rather than taking this budget hit, the practical effects positively impacted the budget, adding to the already brilliant notion of Nolan's filmmaking techniques. Christopher Nolan's use of practical effects for the opening setting of Interstellar contributed to the film's authenticity and significantly benefited the film's cost.

Figure 4 (Nolan, Christopher. Interstellar)

Oppenheimer, a biopic on the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the inventor of the atomic bomb, required the recreation of the Trinity Test, the first attempt at exploding an atomic bomb (Figure 5). Generally, directors would turn to the editing room to create large explosions with visual effects, but Nolan felt that this wouldn't feel threatening enough (Suryavanshi, Aditi). Instead, he strategized a way to use no CGI while recreating the on-screen explosion. To achieve the shot, Nolan had to meticulously plan through harsh weather conditions in the desert of New Mexico (Suryavanshi, Aditi). The weather wasn't the only challenge faced when creating a massive explosion; safety

concerns also arose. Nolan was faced with the problem of deciding how close to get when actually filming the explosion. According to *Oppenheimer's* special effects supervisor, Scott R Fisher, Nolan used forced perspective—a filmmaking strategy where the camera is placed closer or further away from an object to make it seem as if it were smaller or bigger than it actually was (Suryavanshi, Aditi). This allowed him to carefully place cameras in certain locations to make his explosion seem like a sky-high atomic explosion. The explosion displayed in the movie looked perfect due to Nolan's strategic planning and the atmosphere created by his decision to shoot in the vast New Mexican desert. The proportions of the explosion in the film were also seemingly accurate due to the use of forced perspective. Nolan's effective practical effects in *Oppenheimer* served to create a better sense of realism in the film; his unconventional use of practical effects works both artistically and logistically.

Figure 5 (Pictures, Universal)

Cinematography

In the modern era of filmmaking, there are specific rules of cinematography that most filmmakers follow. One fundamental is the rule of thirds, "the process of dividing an image into thirds, using two horizontal and two vertical lines" (Dunham, Brent). Filmmakers are expected to place the subject either on the left third of the frame or the

right third of the frame, where the lines on this mental grid meet (Figure 6); this has been the commonly accepted way to shoot a subject.

Figure 6
(Dunham, Brent)

Another fundamental of filmmaking is the frequent use of close-ups. They are commonly used in conversation, cutting back and forth between close-ups of two main subjects as they speak to each other (StudioBinder). There are examples of conversational close-ups in most modern-day blockbusters. In *Whiplash*, director Damien Chazelle frequently uses them to show a contrast between the emotions of the characters (Figures 7 and 8). In the case of *Whiplash*, conversational close-ups are necessary due to how the story's plot heavily revolves around the characters' interactions and the emotions evoked by these interactions. These cinematography conventions are popular and effective in modern filmmaking, but Christopher Nolan intentionally breaks them.

Figure 7
(Chazelle, Damien)

Figure 8
(Chazelle, Damien)

Christopher Nolan is notorious for his attention to detail, especially with his set design. Close-ups, while important for showing emotion, heavily limit what the viewer can see. Of course, Nolan still uses close-ups to emphasize characters' emotions or certain physical aspects, but he strategized on how to keep the focus on conversations between characters while simultaneously displaying their surroundings. To keep the audience engaged with on-screen conversations and still display some of

the backgrounds, Nolan turned to a medium shot that slowly zooms over the course of a conversation (Wu, Rubidium). For example, in a conversation between two of the main characters of Inception, Cobb and Mal, Nolan starts in a medium shot and consistently pushes in on Cobb's face throughout the conversation (Figures 9 and 10). Nolan effectively pivoted from the uniform close-up shots, allowing the audience to see his carefully construed set and the emotions of the characters. Close-ups are still used throughout Inception, but incorporating the medium zoom shot allows Nolan to demonstrate more creativity. The medium zoom shot also physically draws the audience into the conversation, making them feel as if they were really a part of the scene, listening to Cobb's commentary alongside Mal (Wu, Rubidium). Nolan's strategic cinematography allows a far more immersive experience for the viewer and effectively breaks the convention of conversational close-ups.

Figure 9 (Nolan, Christopher. Inception)

Figure 10 (Nolan, Christopher. Inception)

The theory of the rule of thirds states that if a subject is placed at the intersections of the grid, a much more natural image will be produced for the audience (Dunham, Brent). While this is commonly believed and likely effective, Nolan purposefully breaks them to bring more attention to important scenes. As Cooper is exploring the "inhabitable" planet in *Interstellar*, Nolan places him in the center of the frame (Figure 11). By breaking the rule of thirds, Nolan places the full

focus of the audience on Cooper. It also displays a symmetrical background, further emphasizing the barren wasteland of a planet that Cooper is exploring—which employs a sense of irony because the characters were led to believe that the planet was inhabitable, similar to Earth. Another example of Nolan breaking the rule of thirds is when the detectives visit the Joker in his holding cell in *The Dark Knight* (Figure 12). Nolan also places him in the center of the frame, making it feel like the Joker is looking directly at the audience. This jarring decision also makes him stand out from the background as his bright colors juxtapose his bleak surroundings, a contrast that wouldn't be as effective if the Joker wasn't centered in the frame. The Joker is literally the centerpiece of the scene; Nolan effectively puts all focus on him with this shot, paralleling Joker's importance to the film as a whole. Christopher Nolan jarringly breaks the rule of thirds in his films to emphasize certain aspects of the subject or background.

Figure 11 (Nolan, Christopher. Interstellar)

Figure 12 (Nolan, Christopher. The Dark Knight)

Final Shot

The final shot of a movie is generally the most impactful one; its purpose is to leave an impression on the viewers. They can tie up loose ends in the story or reveal a final piece of information that the audience craves. For example, in the final shot of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the heroes of the story are honored in a celebration, confirming their victory to the audience and ending on a clear-cut, happy note (Figure 13). The shot is fairly standard but effective; it wraps up the movie well and gives viewers a sense of relief and satisfaction. Nolan, on the other hand, will often take a different route, incorporating ambiguous endings into his films. In the final shots of *Inception* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan breaks away from the standardized resolution, forcing the audience to interpret the ending on their own.

Figure 13 (Lucas, George)

The concept of *Inception* can be overwhelming to viewers; it follows the protagonist, Cobb, as he traverses through other people's dreams. The deeper he goes into such dreams, the more disconnected from reality he becomes. Throughout the movie, he continues to go deeper, which inevitably results in his forgetting of how far he has gone. To track whether he is in the dream world, he spins a top as a test. Through trial and error, he has found the top will indefinitely spin in the dream world and will oblige by the laws of physics and come to rest in the real world. At the end of *Inception*, Cobb reunites with his children but is still not fully confident that he is in the actual world. For the film's final shot, Cobb retrieves his top and spins it on a table but walks away without seeing the top's results (Figure 14). Nolan cuts to credits before the top's status is revealed to the audience, leaving it up to interpretation whether Cobb was in

the dreamscape or real life (Sherlock, Ben). Nolan's decision to cut to credits not only allows the audience to decide about Cobb's fate but also tells of Cobb's character. Cobb has finally found peace in life, always wanting to be able to spend time with his children; he takes the opportunity, uncaring whether he is in a dream or not. Nolan utilizes the ambiguous final shot to create a conversation amongst the audience about whether Cobb made it to reality and to put them in the same perspective as Cobb.

During the climax of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne seemingly sacrifices himself, flying Bane's bomb out to the ocean and effectively saving the city from the explosion. In the film, Wayne's butler, Alfred, mentions how he would always imagine seeing Wayne across from him at a restaurant on vacation. These comments would serve to foreshadow the film's final shot as right before the film cuts to credits, Alfred glances up at Wayne—who has already been declared dead in the movie—sitting across from him at a restaurant (Figure 15). Nolan's final shot of Wayne could be interpreted as Alfred's fantasy, as previously mentioned in the film, or as an authentic event. It is left to the viewer to decide, but it is important to note that just before the final scene, it's revealed that Wayne installed an autopilot system, making his escape feasible but still unlikely.

Figure 14 (Nolan, Christopher. Inception)

Nolan’s intentionally ambiguous ending forces the viewer to decide on Wayne’s fate, a rather unconventional but fitting finish to the dynamic trilogy.

Conclusion

Figure 15 (Nolan, Christopher. The Dark Knight Rises)

Christopher Nolan's distinctive approach to filmmaking, exemplified in works such as *Memento, Dunkirk, Tenet, Interstellar, Oppenheimer, Inception, The Dark Knight, and The Dark Knight Rises,* transcends the conventions of contemporary cinema. His deliberate and strategic deviations from the norm set him apart from other directors, creating an unparalleled cinematic experience. These deviations serve a dual purpose—they immerse the audience in the narrative, placing them alongside the characters, and introduce an element of ambiguity that leaves the films' meanings open to interpretation. His methods spark conversation and debates amongst viewers, allowing for his films to live outside the realm of theater and television screens. By breaking away from standardized storytelling structures, such as the three-act model, he invites audiences to engage actively with the narrative, decoding the complexities presented on screen. His use of practical effects over CGI provides a tactile and realistic feel to his films. Nolan's dedication to authenticity is not just an artistic choice but a strategic one that contributes to cost-efficiency, showcasing his pragmatic approach to filmmaking.

His unconventional cinematography further immerses audiences into his films but also creates jarring or eye-opening shots by breaking the rule of thirds and finalizing his films with ambiguous shots. Christopher Nolan's unconventional filmmaking goes beyond mere deviation; it defines his creations. It reflects the subjectivity of art and challenges the notion that storytelling rules are set in stone. His body of work stands as a testament to the idea that, in cinema, rules are meant to be broken, and art is meant to be subjective.

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