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Jochen Mündlein

## Book Review

# Jesse Russell, *The Political Christopher Nolan*

## Liberalism and the Anglo-American Vision

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023, 171 pages, ISBN: 978-1666906196

Jesse Russell offers in his new book a nuanced analysis of the political dimensions in Christopher Nolan's films. Across seven chapters, the author discusses selected films: *MEMENTO* (US 2000), *BATMAN BEGINS* (US/UK 2005), *THE DARK KNIGHT* (US/UK 2008), *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* (US/UK 2012), *INCEPTION* (US/UK 2010), *INTERSTELLAR* (US/UK 2014), and *TENET* (US/UK 2020). In a concluding chapter, Nolan's film *INSOMNIA* (US 2002) is revisited and contrasted with the main body of films under discussion.

Russell, a Professor of English at Georgia Southwestern State University, adopts a distinctly political perspective on Nolan's work, tracing the films' messages in interplay with societal and political developments in the United States. The foundation of his political reading lies in the neoliberal and neocapitalist ideology of the United States, coupled with the experience of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Russell addresses the political transformations following 9/11, including the presidencies of Bush, Obama, and Trump, as well as key political and societal events such as the Iraq War, the financial crisis in 2008, and U.S. anti-terror policies, situating Nolan's films within this broader context (pp. ix–xvi).

Russell places particular focus on Nolan's *BATMAN* trilogy (pp. 19–73), which forms a distinct, self-contained body of work within the director's filmography. Chronologically crafted, these films highlight facets of political ideology and agendas in the United States that are closely tied to the collective experience of fear and the response to Islamist terrorism. The tri-

logy's strong connection to real-world events is underscored by its setting – Gotham City – which serves as a symbolic reference to the United States.

Russell interprets the character of Bruce Wayne, alias Batman, in the first part of the trilogy as a narrative representation of the United States' response to the traumatic experience of terrorism post-9/11 (p. 20). The film portrays Wayne's trauma following the murder of his parents and his journey towards overcoming it, culminating in the creation of Batman as a symbol of (political) hope in a world marked by corruption. Wayne's development into Batman is viewed as a form of collective representation. As a child, Wayne witnesses the arbitrary murder of his parents and subsequently develops a profound fear of bats. He must find ways to cope with and overcome this fear.

This process of overcoming takes Wayne to the East. In these Asian countries, he encounters poverty and eventually meets the League of Shadows, an underground organisation that trains him in techniques of hand-to-hand combat, deception, and symbolic representation. Russell interprets Wayne's journey to the "Orient" as a meeting of the ancient world of the East with the technologically advanced West (p. 28). The League of Shadows is read as a group of ideological extremists intent on destroying Gotham, symbolising the United States or the "West". Wayne, as the vanquisher of these Eastern terrorists, embarks on a journey of understanding the old world and integrating its skills. His return to Gotham and the creation of Batman are particularly significant, as they rely heavily on military equipment. Russell interprets this militarisation of Batman as a form of anti-terrorism. Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman is seen as a resolution of his fear of bats, which Russell frames as a liberation from the United States' experience of powerlessness post-9/11 (pp. 19–35).

The confrontation between East and West is, according to Russell, deeply influenced by economic motives (p. 30). The League of Shadows' critique of Gotham and the USA is directed against the hyper-capitalist system of the United States. At the same time, Batman's fight against the League of Shadows represents a rejection of the perverted communist ideology espoused by the League. The political messages in Nolan's work, Russell argues, are fundamentally critiques of economic systems. Furthermore, Russell highlights the close relationship between religion and politics embodied in the character of Batman. On the one hand, evil is linguistically charged with religious connotations (pp. 22, 67). Batman's adversaries often present themselves through religious imagery, such as devils or mythological be-

ings emerging from the world's hidden shadows. On the other hand, the conclusion of the second film in the trilogy is interpreted as a Christian act of redemption, with Batman sacrificing himself. His return in the third and final film of Nolan's series is then seen as a reimagined resurrection of the protagonist.

Russell's interpretation of the Joker in the second film of the trilogy is particularly intriguing (pp. 39–51). On one level, the Joker represents chaotic, uncontrollable, and terrorist threats that become invisible within Gotham's impoverished working class, exposing the darker side of neoliberal policies and problematic counter-terrorism efforts. The relationship between the Joker and Batman is portrayed as one of mutual dependence: the Joker exists only because Batman has irrevocably changed the world through his surveillance and pursuit of criminals. On another level, the Joker is heavily imbued with religious significance, embodying absolute evil. He operates outside economic and political systems, undermining the capitalist structure and stripping it of its supremacy, as exemplified when he burns half of the Mafia's wealth. Both the Joker and Bane, the antagonist in the trilogy's third film, are seen as creations born out of Batman's anti-terrorism efforts.

From Russell's political perspective, Nolan's films collectively portray the triumph and superiority of the neoliberal, postmodern United States as a stand-in for the West (pp. 72–73). While the films consistently critique the political and economic status quo, Nolan's resolution suggests that, ultimately, the existing system represents the best of all possible options. The morally driven pursuit of improvement and the return to ethical values and norms serve as justification for the neoliberal and neocapitalist policies of the United States. To maintain and legitimise this system, even the hero's use of deception is deemed an acceptable means to protect the world.

The concept of the "noble lie" runs as a central theme throughout Nolan's work. Russell refers to Plato's political concept of creating a false but necessary myth, which he sees explored in Nolan's films. According to Russell, this "noble lie" highlights the importance of stabilising political and economic systems: the hero's sacrifice occurs within the framework of this "noble lie". It is through ignorance and deception that the salvation of the United States and the free Western world is ultimately achieved. In Nolan's films, political and economic ideology is elevated to a universal principle, which is then expanded into space in *INTERSTELLAR*.

Russell's conclusion that the neocapitalist and neoliberal political system of the United States is presented as Nolan's ultimate solution to combating

terrorism, climate change, and human frailty falls short (pp. 131–142). The films' reference to the U.S. political system is undeniable. However, the narratives also depict the transformation of the protagonists and the openness of their endings. For instance, the *BATMAN* trilogy concludes with the definitive disappearance of Batman. This could be interpreted as a critical impetus towards dismantling the existing anti-terror policies. In the *BATMAN* films, evil only ever vanishes temporarily.

Similarly, in *INTERSTELLAR*, humanity is saved, and the American flag symbolises expansion and colonisation in the vastness of space. Yet Nolan's films remain open-ended, leaving questions about what the new world will look like after leaving Earth or following the staged death of Batman.

Russell provides an engaging political examination of Nolan's films through his highly detailed analysis. He frequently highlights the intricate interplay between various cultural systems and ideas, incorporating elements such as motifs from religious traditions, economic concepts, and social family structures. Interpreting the films as an ultimate endorsement of the neoliberal and neocapitalist ideology underpinning U.S. politics and the global order is certainly a thesis supported by the films. Russell himself acknowledges that this interpretation is explicitly his own and notes that Nolan does not view his films as political works (pp. 72–73).

In his discussion of the films, Russell allows for a variety of critical perspectives and compiles relevant reception sources. The work stands out for its thoroughness, depth, and multifaceted approaches. Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's renewed election, it will be fascinating to see how Nolan might address such developments in his films, and how Russell might interpret these films in turn, in a continuation of his analyses.

## Filmography

*BATMAN BEGINS* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2005).  
*INCEPTION* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2010).  
*INSOMNIA* (Christopher Nolan, US 2002).  
*INTERSTELLAR* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2014).  
*MEMENTO* (Christopher Nolan, US 2000).  
*TENET* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2020).  
*THE DARK KNIGHT* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2008).  
*THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2012).