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The Exacting, Expansive Mind of Christopher Nolan

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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Although many of Christopher Nolan's movies happen simultaneously in the past, present and future, he almost never works on weekends. He made an exception, though, on a Saturday early this fall, while he was in New York on the sort of errand almost no director takes up, or has to take up, these days: He was visiting theaters to make sure they were properly prepared to project his new movie, "Interstellar." The final cut of the movie had been delivered, as is characteristic for him, ahead of schedule, back in June, and he was rapidly running out of tasks within his control before the premiere.

In an industry where status means not having to care about the value of other people's time, Nolan never keeps anybody waiting. At 10 a.m. sharp, he was greeted at the Bow Tie Cinema on 23rd Street in Chelsea by Adam Cole, who had flown over from Los Angeles with the film print, which had its own ticket. Cole, who has been Nolan's postproduction coordinator for the last two films, had been there since 7 in the morning. He was wearing a bow tie, only slightly askew; this might have been an understated homage to this particular theater — one of only 240 or so nationwide that would be projecting the movie on actual film rather than digitally — or might merely have been an expression of the odd sartorial discipline that all of Nolan's collaborators seem to share, their shirts tucked in like barracks bedsheets. (Brad Grey, the chairman and C.E.O. of Paramount Pictures, told me the set of "Interstellar" was the best-dressed set he ever visited. "Everyone was in suits and ties, and I thought, Who are these folks, everyone talking very nicely to each other, all civilized?")

Nolan's own look accords with his strict regimen of optimal resource allocation and flexibility: He long ago decided it was a waste of energy to choose anew what to wear each day, and the clubbable but muted uniform on which he settled splits the difference between the demands of an executive suite and a tundra. The ensemble is smart with a hint of frowzy, a dark, narrow-lapeled jacket over a blue dress shirt with a lightly fraying collar, plus durable black trousers over scuffed, sensible shoes. In colder weather, Nolan outfits himself with a fitted herringbone waistcoat, the bottom button left open. A pair of woven periwinkle cuff links and rather garish striped socks represent his only concessions to whimsy or sentimentality; they have about them the sweet, gestural, last-minute air of Father's Day presents.

Despite the civilized and civilizing exterior, Nolan was a little anxious that morning. He is comfortable with the fact that his filmmaking practice rests on the expertise of his team — he calls himself a jack-of-all-trades and emphasizes the "master of none" — but film projection, the final gate before the audience, was a dying art, and there were fewer and fewer people around he could trust. Like most theaters, the Bow Tie now shows most of its movies in digital projection, which Quentin Tarantino has called "TV in public." Over the last 10 years, Nolan has emerged, along with Tarantino and Paul Thomas Anderson, as one of Hollywood's most visible advocates for film, with its exacting texture and granularity of hue, over the Styrofoam flatness of digital. Nolan is a gestalt thinker and entertainer, and he thinks that it's technical details like these, even the ones we register only unconsciously, that make the theatrical experience a vivid and continuous dream: "At the movies, we're going to see someone else put on a show, and I feel a responsibility to put on the best show possible." Nolan was at the Bow Tie to optimize the show. The theater hadn't projected film in some time, so Paramount had called in their New York head of technical operations to get everything in order. "They've only got one rack of sub," Cole said, indicating that the sound system perhaps wasn't ideal for such low-end sounds as roars and booms, of which this film has its share.

Nolan wanted to screen Reels 2 and 3 (of an eight-reel movie) for the rocket launch — “Interstellar” takes place largely in space — whose rumble might correspondingly suffer. “But you can’t just start with the rocket launch or you’ll blow everybody’s ears out.” You have to start with Reel 2, he exposited, which is full of the informative dialogue that brings the audience up to speed.

We navigated in the descending dark toward Nolan’s preferred seats, third-row center, swinging briefly by Nolan’s assistant of four years, Andy Thompson, to wordlessly exchange an empty takeaway cup of tea for a fresh thermos. (“Andy can get me tea on a glacier,” Nolan said, with a sort of puzzled appreciation.) Nolan seemed comfortable as he settled in, if a little apprehensive about the screen, which was recently installed. “When I first walked in, I worried that perhaps the screen had been hung just a little too high, but these headrests are very nice.” The screen was silver, designed for 3-D movies, and he worried his peak whites would go gray. The face of Matthew McConaughey, who stars in the film, materialized on the screen in front of us. “Those whites are O.K. Not bad. This is encouraging.”



Nolan, left, on the “Interstellar” set in Iceland, with the director of photography, Hoyte van Hoytema, on an IMAX camera. Melinda Sue Gordon/Paramount Pictures/Warner Brothers Pictures

Nolan did not settle in for long. Soon I was chasing him as he darted around the dark theater with a swift but moseying gait, moving from one corner to the next, monitoring the clarity of the sound from multiple vantages. The most important thing, he said, was the volume; he wanted a lot of simple power, and all of it coming right out of the screen. He didn't put a lot of surround in the mix, because he didn't want a lot of distraction from the sides. (Outer space, he pointed out dryly, is not known for its ambient murmurs.) He seemed content. This was not, he told me later, a chore. It seemed as if, had he enough time, he'd be more than happy to check out every seat in every theater in the country.

An emotional McConaughey rocketed into the firmament, and the broad, cascading rumble pleased Nolan, who expects things to live up to his expectations and is nonetheless pleasantly surprised when they do. After the liftoff, the film hovers in a long, gauzy silence, of the kind he acknowledges having learned from Stanley Kubrick, whose "2001" has been a monument for him. "There's supposed to be a tense feeling of having no air." But, he went on, the quality of silence would vary from theater to theater; here you'd hear the rumble of air-conditioning, there the rustle of popcorn or coats.

The house lights came up, and Nolan found Cole in the back of the theater. "Did you get the dimensions of the screen?" he asked. Cole had been able to recite the number of seats in the theater off the top of his head but couldn't recall the dimensions. "When you get a chance, before you leave," Nolan said. "Doesn't have to be now. But I want it as a frame of reference."

"When you have planets and stars, you never want to make people feel as though the screen is too small," Nolan told me. "Otherwise they'll worry there's nothing off-screen."

Nolan, whose eight movies over 14 years have together generated just more than $3.5 billion in revenue, puts an extraordinary amount of time and effort into engineering believably ample worlds. He tries to build maps the size of the territory, whole cities from the ground up in disused airship hangars (as he's done for four of his movies at a former R.A.F. facility outside London), even if he's going

to shoot just a few street-corner scenes. Sue Kroll, the president of worldwide marketing for Warner Bros., told me she once got actually lost in the ersatz rain falling on an ersatz Gotham. Nolan learned the value of such sweep from Ridley Scott. The genius of "Blade Runner," he told me, is that "you never feel like you've gotten close to the edge of the world."

Nolan's movies require this thick quotient of reality to support his looping plots, which accelerate in shifting time signatures, consume themselves in recursive intrigue and advance formidable and enchanting problems of interpretation. "Memento," the Sundance favorite that brought him instant acclaim at age 30, is a noir thriller with the chronology of reverse-spliced helix. "Insomnia," the only one of his nine films for which he did not receive at least a share of the writing credit, was somewhat more straightforward — a moody, tortured psychological thriller — but its real trick was to gain him access to studio work and studio budgets. "The Prestige," a Victorian dueling-magician drama, is a clever bit of prestidigitation, as well as a canny commentary on film and technology (Nolan on digital filmmaking can sound a lot like Ricky Jay on David Copperfield). "Inception" was a heist movie that took place in a series of nested dreamscapes. Nolan's Batman movies, though basically linear in structure, resonated broadly as shadowy political allegories.

Part of the reason his work has done so well at the box office is that his audience members — and not just his fans, but his critics — find themselves watching his movies twice, or three times, bleary-eyed and shivering in their dusky light, hallucinating wheels within wheels and stopping only to blog about the finer points. These blogs pose questions along the lines of "If the fact that the white van is in free-fall off the bridge in the first dream means that, in the second dream, there's zero gravity in the hotel, then *why is there still normal gravity in the third dream's Alpine fortress?????*"

Most people, of course, don't take their Nolaniana to such extremes. But there are enthusiasts out there who lose themselves to the limbo of Nolan's expansive, febrile imagination. The IMDB F.A.Q. about the meaning of the end of "Inception"

makes “Infinite Jest” look like a pamphlet on proper toaster installation. The Internet has become lousy with intersecting wormholes tunneled by warring pro-Nolan factions.

That his films manage to be both mainstream blockbusters and objects of such cult appeal is what makes Nolan a singular, and singularly admired, figure in Hollywood. He is commonly found sharing discriminating sentences of praise with James Cameron on the one hand and Paul Thomas Anderson on the other; he has been anointed, without any apparent campaigning on his own behalf, the successor of both Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick. His loyalists have consistently and strenuously defended him against critics who claim that although he may be a masterful technician, he’s not a visionary or true auteur. Regardless of the visionary question, however, it’s pretty much impossible to think of a film that grossed more than a billion dollars and is better than “The Dark Knight” — or, to think of it in the way that Nolan prefers, a better film that was seen, so many times over, by so many people.

It’s also hard to see how “Interstellar” won’t make another billion-plus dollars and thus deepen Nolan’s mystique as the one studio director who’s not a studio hack, as the solitary Hollywood icon who somehow does enormous, surprising, profitable things his own way. The movie had its origins in 2006, as a collaboration between a theoretical physicist, Caltech’s Kip Thorne, and an independent producer, Lynda Obst. The project was at Paramount, and Nolan’s brother Jonathan — who goes by Jonah — was hired to write the screenplay; Spielberg was attached as director. But by 2011, the project became available, and Nolan signed on to rewrite (he and his brother have been collaborating on scripts since “Memento”) and direct, as long as the project could be a joint venture with Warner Bros., Nolan’s longtime studio home.

To hear Nolan tell it, however, the film’s true origin story begins much earlier, when Nolan was 7; his father, a British advertising copywriter, took him to see, within the span of about a year, the initial release of “Star Wars” and a theatrical rerelease of “2001.” The age of 7, perhaps not coincidentally, was also the year in which he started to make his own movies, on a Super 8 he borrowed from his dad. Those two

movies — one that helped inaugurate the auteur-driven New Hollywood, and one that inadvertently ushered in the era of the reinvigorated, blockbuster-based studio system — have remained his touchstones, and "Interstellar" represents his opportunity to repay his debt to both of them at the same time. Jonah, when he came to visit the set and saw the spaceships, said to him, "Of course we're doing something like this; this was our whole childhood."

Nolan's film is set roughly two generations hence, in a grim, shrunken, retrograde era. The plot revolves around the relationship between an iconoclastic space pilot named Cooper, played by McConaughey, and his bright, stubborn daughter, played in her youth by Mackenzie Foy. ("That lovely little girl is going to be a star," Michael Caine told me.) Armies and technology have been rendered immaterial, and a delusional "caretaker" generation is barely getting by, for the moment, on subsistence agriculture. Cooper was trained as a pilot and an engineer before the great regression, and the broader attenuation of our human drive, forced him into farming. Caine's Professor Brand, Cooper's old mentor and now the head of a much-reduced, fly-by-night NASA, persuades him to fly off into the unknown. Future NASA is led by six people around a conference table, one more instance of the professional tranquillity that acts as a necessary prelude and backdrop to his subsequent lunacy.

That's as much as you get from the trailers, which feature McConaughey's exhortation to new greatness over stock space-age footage and makes the movie look like so much "Apollo 13" schmaltz. But in fact that covers only the first 20 minutes of an almost three-hour film, the balance of which resembles a George Lucas interpretation of a Borges story. As far as sci-fi goes, it's closer to Soderbergh's "Solaris" than to Tarkovsky's. But even after everything goes satisfyingly bananas, the movie remains grounded in a basic humanism. "Someone, an adult," Nolan told me, "once told me that the meaning of '2001' was that going into outer space is like going deep into yourself." He smoothed the folds of his waistcoat and considered that for a second. "I don't think that's what it's about. In fact I have no idea what '2001' is really about. But I tried to make a film now that would be like that, a quest film like 'The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.' "

The depth and solidity of the relationship between Cooper and his daughter, Murphy, and the swift, sure strokes with which it is realized — she's the sidekick who makes sure he remembers his bolt-cutters — is what differentiates "Interstellar" from Nolan's other movies, where the human relationships can feel like an afterthought. Nolan needed the Cooper-Murphy relationship to coalesce because for "Interstellar" to work as an exhortative, inspirational work, it had to make sure that its monumental aspect (*ad astra per aspera!*) functioned in concert with its sentimental one (we must love one another or die). The stakes feel high enough, in other words, that only the most gnarled sort of cellar troll wouldn't feel ennobled by the movie's refrain, Caine's recurring invocation of Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

Christopher Nolan Alex Prager for The New York Times

In California, his waistcoat retired, Nolan peered across a glassed-in conference room in a nondescript postproduction facility, empty except for the lucid, yellowless midmorning Burbank sunlight, at a blank expanse of laminate table, punctuated only by two unopened, sweaty, almost botanical bottles of Perrier. With his cleft chin, widow's peak, graying blond spill of wispy forelock and rinsed blue eyes, Christopher Nolan is not without a glint of the deranged engineer; he has the affect of a Victorian barrister with a sideline in flying contraptions. His teeth are tanned a chestnut gradient, not by cigarettes but by tea. Caine, who has worked with Nolan on six movies, told me: "He always has a flask of tea in his pocket. No matter how hot it is, he has a big overcoat with a pocket big enough for his tea, and he quietly sips it. At a certain point, I thought, There must be something better than tea in there. I asked him, 'You've not got vodka in there, have you?' He said no, just tea."

It was easy to understand Caine's suspicion that something more surreal and mischievous had to be afoot. It felt peculiar, after a week steeped in Nolan's filmic multiverse, to discover that our conference-room surroundings — the kind of functional, placid, slightly uncanny atrium that often appears in his work as a veneer of normalcy — maintained their steady state around us, rather than folding out of themselves into a labyrinthine Mandelbrot sandwich. The paneled glass enclosing us neither shattered with the gunfire of psychical mercenaries nor slid away to reveal a locked safe protecting a manila envelope whose contents itemized the dark heart of Nolan's character. Nolan, however, does not find himself electrifying and does not take his own life as relevant to his work. He had taken me along on technical errands in New York and Burbank because he sees his most important work in the details of technique, in the decisions to shoot as much as he can on IMAX ("David Lean dragged 65-millimeter cameras into the desert" while shooting "Lawrence of Arabia," he told me, "and I don't know why we shouldn't have similar aspirations") and to record his score's piano on a beautiful instrument in an airy room.

Nolan's collected, tranquil mien has about it something of an achievement, because he spent his childhood shuttling around. He was born in London in 1970, to an English father — who spent time shooting commercials in Los Angeles and returned home with stories about the Beverly Hills Hotel — and an American mother, who had worked as a flight attendant. His childhood was apportioned between London and Chicago. Jonah, who is six years younger, told me that his very earliest memories were of his older brother making stop-motion space odysseys, painstaking processes of tweaking the gestures of action figures. They went to the movies constantly, and Jonah recalls that they brooked no distinction between the arty and the mainstream; they'd go to Scala Cinema Club in London to see "Akira" or a Werner Herzog film one month and then go to the Biograph in Chicago to see "The Commitments" the next. (When Jonah was 13 or 14, Nolan gave him two Frank Miller volumes, "Batman: Year One" and "The Dark Knight Returns," which the two revered.) Nolan went to an English boarding school with a military inflection and then on to University College London, where he read English literature. He chose U.C.L. because of its film facilities, which included a Steenbeck editing suite. He and Emma Thomas, his wife, began dating in their first year. Together they ran a film society, screening 35-millimeter films to make money so members could shoot 16-millimeter shorts.

Nolan made his first film, "Following," on $6,000 over the course of a year, shooting perhaps 15 minutes of footage each Saturday. It's a very clever con-man/murder drama that owes more than a little to Hitchcock, with a sliced-up, rearranged chronology that prefigures "Memento." Emma moved to Los Angeles, for her job with the production company Working Title, and Nolan, who was having trouble raising money in the clubby world of English filmmaking, soon followed. He and Jonah discussed the idea for "Memento" on their road trip from Chicago to Hollywood. They went on to film it over 25½ days on a budget of $4.5 million.

After that, when he came across the script of "Insomnia," a remake of a Norwegian psychological thriller, Warner Bros. had the option. Nolan was interested but couldn't get a meeting. His agent, Dan Aloni, called Steven Soderbergh, an early fan of "Memento." Soderbergh told me that he "just walked across the lot and said

to the head of production, 'You're insane if you don't meet with this guy.' My sense even then was that he didn't need our help except to get in the door." Everything happened very quickly. Nolan made the film on a budget of $46 million, and Soderbergh and George Clooney signed on as executive producers. Soderbergh visited the set in Alaska. "I got there and was having a conversation with Al Pacino: 'How do you feel? How's it going?' Al said, 'Well, I can tell you right now, at some point in the very near future I'm going to be very proud to say I was in a Christopher Nolan movie.' "

The film went on to gross $113 million worldwide and showed Warners he could handle the demands of a studio movie. "Chris is legendary for being prepared, being on time, on schedule," Soderbergh told me. "We both have this attitude of approaching it with a sense that you have a responsibility to the people who pay for these things to do what you say you're going to do and do it efficiently." (Brad Grey, the president of Paramount, praised Nolan for his "fiscal responsibility," like a parent proud of a child for not blowing all of his allowance on comic books.)

"The single-most important thing was the art of working in the studio system," Nolan told me of his experience with "Insomnia." "It takes time to learn how to take notes. In the corporate structure, the people giving you the notes are not responsible for the final product. You are. It's not their job, it's yours. When you're taking notes, it's possible that you're having an interesting conversation with a very smart individual and everything they're saying is correct. But they're wrong. So you have to go back and approach it from a different angle." He continues to treat executives as, essentially, representative filmgoers. At a development meeting — at, in other words, a conference-room table — before "The Dark Knight," he had to explain the Joker's motivations. "Execs are very good at saying things like, 'What's the bad guy's plan?' They know those engines have to be very powerful. I had to say: 'The Joker represents chaos, anarchy. He has no logical objective in mind.' I had to explain it to them, and that's when I realized I had to explain it to the audience."

The success of "Insomnia" was what gave Nolan a shot at the resurrection of Warners' Batman franchise. He centered his 15-minute pitch on creating a grittier engagement with reality, one in which the Batmobile and the body armor have a clear relationship to the commercial conversations in the Wayne Enterprises boardroom upstairs. Greg Silverman, president of creative development and worldwide production, recalls that Nolan wanted to base Batman's technology on real physics and that he wanted viewers to see Bruce Wayne doing hung-over push-ups and recovering from bruises.

For Nolan, everything — the acting, the plot, the effects, the film technology, the sound — has to contribute to the weft of a film's internal logic. "I have a faith," he said, "that any audience can tell the difference between something that's consistent to rules versus something that's totally made up and anarchic." Thus the more reality he can bring in to undergird his unreality, the better he feels. Even if a scene ends with buildings crashing to earth like sand castles, it should start with a broad foothold in the recognizable. In writing and shooting "Interstellar," the chief constraints that guided him were scientific; the film proposes some potentially batty possibilities for gravity and space-time, but it felt essential to Nolan that the physics behind the movie be at least speculatively plausible. He and Kip Thorne, the Caltech scientist whose theories formed the germ of the original project, met every few weeks for about five months. According to Thorne, Nolan told him that he "wanted a movie that did not violate any well-established physical laws." Even the graphics, Thorne told me, "are perfectly modeled — precisely what I think you'd see if you went chasing light rays around wormholes. They fit with Chris's desire to have the graphics done in accord with the equations of general relativity."

As Nolan's productions and their budgets have grown — "Batman Begins" cost $150 million, "The Dark Knight" $185 million and "The Dark Knight Rises" $250 million — those, too, have become another set of equations to optimize, and he has said that he writes his scripts to fit the production methods he'll use. Nolan is clearly cautious about the way he describes his own relationship with "the big-budget-movie machine." He accepted almost every one of my questions with a thoughtful, curious attitude, only occasionally interrupting to spare me the energy

of finishing a question he'd understood three words in. But the one thing that raised some hackles was a question about the compromises he has made en route from "Memento" to "Interstellar." "I never think of it as compromise," he said abruptly, "but rather as register — like the register of language."

Movies are different, he explained, from books or theater, because movies are invariably first experienced as a mass medium. "We all find films through Hollywood. Nobody watches Godard when they're 10 years old." (Though, he later admitted, he did show his 4-year-old "2001," but that was unusual, and Emma felt she had to qualify it. "It's not only *those* movies they see!") He went on: "With books, not everybody goes through a Stephen King phase — I didn't — but with movies everybody does. In your teenage years, maybe you turn to more challenging filmmakers — Terrence Malick, Nicolas Roeg. But I always work within the register of what I would want that particular movie to be. 'Batman Begins,' I never saw that as a compromise. I just went into it asking what I would want and expect from it as an avid moviegoer."

Nolan knows, however, that the natural target of the blockbuster is the lowest common denominator, and he's had to build into his filmmaking practice personal safeguards against what he calls "chasing an audience." In preparation for each film, he spends a week or two bashing out a little précis, on the same typewriter his father gave him when he was 21. (It appears as a prop in "Following.") Often that précis doesn't even talk much about the plot; it's supposed to represent the feeling he wants to elicit, the texture of the fable. He keeps it in a file and returns to it from time to time to make sure he hasn't lost touch with his original idea. He also doesn't do traditional scored research screenings or focus groups, choosing instead to show his films to a handful of people at a time as he's editing.

Nolan prefers not to talk about his increasingly large films as a matter of "production scale" or budget but of "audience scale" — communicative ambition. Though he was making his first Super 8 films at 7, it wasn't until he'd made "Following," in his late 20s, that he really began to understand film as a mode of mass communication. He toured festivals with that movie, and it was only when he saw 400 people in a room in communion with his film that he understood how

dependent he was, and the film was, on their response. There are, of course, plenty of filmmakers in the world who would have been content to continue making films for audiences of 400. Soderbergh told me he would be curious to know if Nolan ever had any desire to go back and make a film on the scale of “Memento.” I asked Nolan that, and he replied: “Hollywood, when it functions at its best, has a scope that’s unmatched. In the back of my mind, that scope was always something to aim for — never to the exclusion of other things, just a larger and larger canvas. At the budget level I’m able to work at, I really try to give the audience the most technically compelling experience I can give, with picture and sounds, something they haven’t seen before.”

A week after Nolan’s investigation at the Bow Tie, Emma dropped him off at his postproduction studio in Burbank. He picked up a sheaf of the morning’s printed-out emails from Thompson — Nolan claims not to have an email address — and joined a few collaborators in the screening room. The movie appeared on a split screen, with the original film on the left and a digital version — for the movie theaters that could no longer handle film and for which they’d be fine-tuning the color — on the right.

Nolan, left, with Guy Pearce on the set of “Memento” in 2000. Everett Collection

Nolan had immediate and specific reactions to the levels. “I think you need a little more yellow here.” “We added a point of magenta to this one, yes?” “Two points?” “Let’s just split the difference.”

But in general, though Nolan is frequently called a perfectionist, he seemed perfectly happy to leave well enough alone. In one early scene, there was an irreconcilable sky-ground issue: If the sky was right, the ground wasn’t. Nolan said they should live with a blue sky and move on. If they kept futzing with it now, “you just end up chasing your own tail.” Nolan makes movies about people who chase their own tails, but in his own life he appreciates a plot that marches forward. When he did ask for improvements, he presented them not as auteurial fiat but via suggestive metaphors, as if allotting his deputies a roominess in how they might respond. He wanted a little more “grubbiness” in one sky and didn’t like the “crunchy” contrast of some ice.

Nolan goes out looking for technical challenges that help him establish the sorts of rules that comfort and tether an audience. He prefers, for example, to work on location rather than on set. He says he is inspired by “the claustrophobia, the restrictions involved in trying to make your story work in a real location, versus the anything-goes mentality on sets.” He does as many of his special effects as he can in camera, rather than in postproduction, for the same reason; his ideal special effect is accomplished with the old-fashioned winches-and-belts artifice that created the zero-gravity jogging illusion in “2001.” (Cole, his postproduction coordinator, says he has worked on romantic comedies that had more effects in postproduction than “The Dark Knight Rises.”) When Nolan accepted the Visual Effects Society’s inaugural Visionary Award in 2011, he said: “I know visual-effects people pride themselves on doing the impossible. I’d just like to encourage you to say no to the unreasonable.”

His insistent realism extends even to the actors’ experiences. “Interstellar” features scenes with “2001"-style video-Skype calls back to Earth, and the videos for the Skype calls were *themselves* shot in 35 millimeter. His actors and crew relentlessly praise his pragmatism and resourcefulness. Nolan is “a magnificent problem solver,” McConaughey wrote me via email. “It can be the biggest action

sequence in the film," he continued, and "everyone can think it's going to take two days to shoot, and before the smoke has cleared before lunch on the first day, he's marching off to the next shot."

Nolan can take this to both weatherly and technical extremes. Anne Hathaway remembered that while filming in Iceland, the set was shut down by a windstorm on a glacier. Nolan looked outside and said, "I don't think it's so bad," as raw chunks of asphalt were being torn off the road in front of them. (Lest I get the impression that his sets are anything but safe and comfortable spaces, Hathaway immediately followed up with a second anecdote: On the set of "The Dark Knight Rises," she had to stand on a scaffolding that was going to fall nine or 10 stories. Nolan reassured her. "It looks high," he said, "but it doesn't get up to a really considerable speed." Hathaway asked how he knew. "Well," Nolan said, "I did it myself.")

The recursive structure of his movies, the way they seem to be commenting on themselves, emerges from the relationship between the part of Nolan that wants the science to be at least speculatively plausible (the realist) and the part of him that wants the adventure to be expansive and novel and absorbing (the fantasist). There is almost always one character who feels he must call skeptical attention to the stray fabulism of another character, and in that way the movies comment on their own fictionality. Toward the end of "Batman Begins," Liam Neeson's Ra's al Ghul looks at Christian Bale in his cape and mask and says, with a mixture of admiration and contempt, "You took my advice about theatricality a bit . . . literally." This resounds as a commentary on the movie's own pageantry. The spaceship miniatures used in "Interstellar" look both wonderfully real and wonderfully like the sorts of miniatures used by Kubrick or Lucas; they appear both as what they represent (real-looking spaceships) and what they actually are (real-looking miniatures). These are his small bulwarks against overly literal subscription to the fantasy.

Nolan's movies are often about people doing their best to get back in touch with consensus reality — against our tendency to be swept away by delusion ("Inception") or demagogy ("The Dark Knight Rises") — so it feels organic, rather than gimmicky, that they would periodically gesture toward their own stagy

conceits. Where the villains of Gotham often seek to introduce mass hallucination, an involuntary susceptibility to somebody else's powerful fiction, Bruce Wayne creates a symbol that campaigns for voluntary belief and action — just as Nolan does.

Nolan is known for making movies that hold themselves open to various interpretations, but it's an effect that can be created only when the director knows, in his own mind, exactly how he sees it. For the director's commentary on "Memento," Nolan recorded three different, equally plausible interpretations of the final scene that the DVD serves at random to viewers. But he insists he has a full, definitive interpretation that he keeps to himself. "The only way to be productively ambiguous," he told me, "is that you have to know the answer for you — but also know why, objectively speaking. If you do something unknowable, there's no answer for the audience, because you didn't have an answer. It becomes about ambiguity for ambiguity's sake. There has to be a sense of reality in the film. If you don't have rules, then what I'm doing would be formless. I feel better with consistent rules."

He looked away, then looked back. "But you try not to be pedantic about it."

As Nolan has grown older, his sense of his audience has changed. As Emma put it, "Where, in the past, he never made movies for any reason other than the fact that he wanted to see those movies himself, now he wants to make films he can watch with his kids." In our conversations, Nolan always preferred to dwell on the familial dynamics of "Interstellar" rather than its intergalactic ones. "The story spoke to me as a father, more than anything," he said. Once he heard about it, Nolan couldn't get it out of his head — and not because the hard science behind the movie was so appealing, although it was, but because of the family separation at its center as well as the way it might be affected by the rewrapping of the space-time continuum. "Having children," Nolan said, "absolutely fine-tunes your sense of time and time passing. There's a desperate desire to hang on to moments as your kids grow up."

Nolan's work is crowded with substitute and alternate fathers, reliable men of wry composure amid the noise and unreality. "One day I was at my house in the country, on a Sunday morning, and the doorbell went," Michael Caine told me. "There was a man standing there with a script, and I thought it must be a messenger, and he said, 'My name's Chris Nolan.' I knew who he was from his earlier films. He said, 'I've got a script for you.' I was expecting something like 'Memento' or 'Insomnia,' and he said, 'It's called "Batman Begins." ' I said, 'Oh, that's fantastic, what role do you want me to play?' He said, 'The butler.' I said, 'What do I say, "Dinner is served?" ' He said: 'No. The butler is much more important than that. After the parents have died, he's the foster father.' "

Caine told him, "I'll read it and have my driver bring it over tomorrow." But Nolan, who is notoriously secretive about his projects, said he'd stay and wait. "He had a cup of tea with my wife while I read it," Caine told me. "I said I'd do it. Then he took the script away, and I never saw it again." (Nolan defends his predilection for secrecy with the good sense of one of his paternal figures. "We all want to unwrap our Christmas presents early," he told me, with a tone as sympathetic to childlike curiosity as it was firm in its tut-tutting advocacy of the greater pleasures of deferral. "But we all know we'll be disappointed if we do.")

Nolan's last three movies count among the 100 highest-grossing films of all time. Almost all of the other entries on that list from the last 15 years are movies either for children or for adults seeking childish diversion. Though two of Nolan's works on that list are ostensibly about a superhero, he makes highest-common-denominator movies for adults. In fact, if you try to set forth a series of propositions that might define art for grown-ups, you find that you've pretty well described the moral universe of Nolan's work. Art for grown-ups acknowledges the constraints of systems and structures, while preserving some narrow but meaningful field of autonomy for the actors trying to get by within them. It holds these actors to account for the decisions they make. It gently dissipates the wishful thinking that some powerful authority is going to sweep in and solve our problems. It encourages us to be wary of delusion, on the small scale, and demagogy, on the large one. It presumes to tell us that we have an obligation to others, especially the

old and the young and the weak. It posits the inevitability of conflict, the incompatibility of desires, and asks for our forbearance and good will in the midst of our frustrations. In sum, it represents the reality principle.

Nolan may not be a visionary, and I'm not sure he'd want to be. Visionaries are temperamental and driven by inner demons. It takes a lot of time for us to get used to the vocabulary and scenery of their dreams. Nolan is methodical and strategic, and his inner necessity has taken the form of public professionalism. He did not want to talk to me much about his personal life. This was in part because he protects the privacy of his family. But it was also because he seems to see his public role itself as the greatest possible expression of his personal commitments. We equate the auteur with the expressionist, the revealer of the self's private visions. Nolan just wants to constrict the role his own self plays in all of it. He's a moralist, and his moral artistry — in the way he makes his films, in what his films are about and in the response he seeks to inspire — is one of grown-up and ambitious compromise.

"Interstellar" regrets the diminished ambitions of the space age, but it also regrets the diminished ambitions of the same age in cinema — the art form that, for the moment at least, reaches the most disparate people in the most far-flung places. "Interstellar" is about the recovery, in the greatest mass medium, of hope and drive and intelligence, about the very promise of a robust, elevating middlebrow. Perhaps all Nolan does, as one of his critics has put it, is "invest grandeur and novelty into conventional themes." But at interstellar scale, that's good enough.

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