The Review of Politics, page 1 of 3, 2024.

Book Review

Jesse Russell: *The Political Christopher Nolan*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. Pp. xvii, 149.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670524000160

Jesse Russell's *The Political Christopher Nolan* offers a comprehensive view of his films and offers a unifying theme around their "political" orientation. By this, Russell means that they explore human life in the current era of "Anglo-American imperialism," a "global capitalist, liberal order," the dominance of transnational corporations and demise of the nation state, "the illusory nature of postmodern existence," and the digital age in which "the divide between fiction and reality has been completely obliterated" (xii–xvii, 110, 81, 76). Nolan, he argues, reflects upon this contemporary world, offers mild criticisms, and ultimately defends it, affirming, endorsing, and even celebrating it. Russell himself neither criticizes nor endorses the positions he attributes to Nolan, for to "give an honest assessment" of his films is not to make a "moral judgement about his oeuvre" (34–35).

Russell's analysis of Nolan's *Inception* (2010) connects several elements of his thesis: the film depicts a world of fantasies and dreams, enabled and funded by large corporations that "manipulat[e] humans like chess pieces." "As a treat," we "have bold and exciting dreams, which the technology powered by capitalism provides" (76). Moreover, *Inception* is a film about filmmaking, the power it has on its audience, and "the culture and finance of filmmaking" (86, 93). Just as global corporations "have the ability to colonize the minds of human subjects," through technology that allows infiltrating dreams to implant thoughts in the dreamer, Nolan "is able to create films popular around the globe and enter the minds of his audience, incepting them." Thus "capital mediated cinema completely dominates the world," but this is "a positive good" for Nolan, Russell argues, for it is a world in which the viewer "is invited to indulge and pursue happiness" (86, 90).

Russell finds confirmation of this thesis in one after another of Nolan's films. *Memento* (2000), for example, is "a Nietzschean post-ironic affirmation of the will to live and create meaning in one's life" (xii, 3–7). In the Batman trilogy (2005–2012), Bruce Wayne (Batman) (Christian Bale) wards off challenges to Gotham, "a city emblematic of America and wider Western civilization" (54), evil villains such as Joker and Bane who nevertheless appeal to something more exciting than the boredom at the end of history. Indeed, Joker, with his "extra-capitalist values," proclaims "the emptiness of materialist things" (45). Gotham is so corrupt in the eyes of the film's villains as to

merit destruction (61), whereas Nolan (and Batman) find Gotham "redeemable" and that in spite its flaws, corruption, and lies, it remains "a city shining on a hill" (73, 140, also 47, 53–56, 69–71).

Russell's interpretations leave important questions unanswered. Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is the pathetic protagonist of *Memento* who after his wife's death is unable to form memories. His "handicap" allows him to be manipulated by others as he pursues his wife's murderer, killing one suspect after another without remembering them, and even without remembering his own role in her death. Russell argues that Leonard's "act of ludic world creation" is prompted by and implicitly endorses "the neoliberal system" (17). But might not Leonard's endless repetition of revenge and misguided murders parody Nietzsche's will to power and even his eternal return, and hence criticize any political or intellectual system that prompts them? With regard to the Batman trilogy, if Gotham comes around to "supporting Batman's re-establishment of the status quo" (63), where is the redemption in which Nolan is supposed to believe? Is the shining city on the hill just another illusion, one that Nolan is taken in by or simply perpetuates? But then it hardly matters, for as Russell says in his discussion of *Inception*, all realities are "simultaneously fake and real" (77).

The difference between reality and dream, however, does matter to the protagonist of *Inception*, Dom Cobb (Leonardo DeCaprio), who has a technology that allows him to enter into and to control the dreams of others. His deceased wife continually enters dreams along with him and begs him to stay with her and their children, insisting that the dream is real. Cobb refuses, realizing that he cannot see the faces of their children in his dreams and that the wife he has created in his dream falls short of the woman he loves. Perhaps he knows that his wife would not want to trap him in a dream. Russell does not mention this crucial exchange, in which Cobb shows that he has learned the limits of his power to create dreams and chooses reality over image. *Inception* is not "a showcase of postmodernism," as Russell says (84), unless it is a showcase in which the fakes it displays push its viewers away, as they do Cobb.

Russell omits Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) from his analysis, although the film, "one of Nolan's most explicitly political," "would seem to be a perfect fit for a book on Christopher Nolan and Anglo-American imperialism." But it is "not the same sort of film as Nolan's other works, which deal with the question of how humans form and manipulate their own realities" (xvi). To be sure, Russell is correct that the film does not highlight "Anglo-American imperialism," for it focuses on a much more invidious imperialism that calls forth British and eventually American resistance. However, if Nolan's purpose is to affirm the moral and intellectual integrity that resists "forming and manipulating realities," then *Dunkirk* is indeed a perfect fit with his other films. The reality the British soldiers face at Dunkirk cannot be formed or manipulated, and the French soldier who tries to do so by donning the uniform of a British one is found out. Although the British cannot manipulate reality, they can rescue the soldiers at Dunkirk, change

the course of the war, and save Western civilization. The film ends with the voiceover of a speech by Churchill. Nolan is celebrating the West in this film, but it is not the same West that Russell claims he celebrates.

Insomnia (2002), which Russell delays discussing until his last chapter, also poses problems for Russell's thesis. "Perhaps most unique about the film," Russell finds, "is its strong affirmation of the concept of truth in the face of lies and deception" (132). When the "very wholesome" rookie policewomen (Hilary Swank) offers to help hard-nosed LA detective Will Dormer (Al Pacino) cover up one of his transgressions, he insists that she "not lose her way." Russell admits that the undeniable implication, surprising, Russell thinks, for Nolan, is that "there is a right and wrong way" (133, 139). Like *Dunkirk*, *Insomnia* is not a perfect fit for Russell's book, which argues that for Nolan "the world is built on lies and illusions" and that "fantasy is just as real or more real than reality" (51, 140). In the end, Russell attempts to bring *Insomnia* back into sync with his understanding of Nolan's films by noting the similarities between Dormer and the film's villain and claiming that the truth shines forth only "with varnish or typical Nolanesque irony or illusion" (132).

Russell says that "it is difficult (and perhaps impossible, and even unnecessary) for critics to step outside their own *weltanschauung*." He gives the example of a Christian who sees *Insomnia* as affirming "the transcendence and permanence of truth" (139). But would Russell's own interpretation not also serve as an example? When Russell finds *Insomnia* at odds with "the bulk of Nolan's films," he implies that Nolan has a consistent vision that a critic can understand. If one spots an outlier, one might squeeze it into one's interpretation, as Russell attempts to do, or one might expand or revise one's interpretation to include that outlier. The latter requires stepping outside one's own Weltanschauung. Contrary to his doubt that this is impossible, Russell himself does it from time to time, as when he recognizes *Insomnia* as an outlier. He has given us much to ponder in the films of Nolan, especially when his interpretations reach outside of his Weltanschauung.

–Mary P. Nichols
Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA