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George Faithful

**Salvation from Illusion, Salvation by Illusion:
The Gospel According to Christopher Nolan**

You are not really paying attention to reality. Nor should you, according to screenwriter and director Christopher Nolan. You do not need to know the truth. What you need is the perfect lie. Therein lies your hope of salvation. The perfect lie will save you from lesser lies but will also protect you from the destructive austerity of the truth. That has been a consistent theme in Nolan's cinematic corpus.

While this article will limit itself to his science fiction works – *The Prestige*, *Inception*, and his Batman trilogy – the theme of salvation from and by illusion is significant in Nolan's other works in its negative form: the truth destroys. His first feature film, *Following* (1998) depicts a writer who follows random strangers as a means of finding material for his written fiction. He finds himself framed for murder after he attempts to find out what is really going on in the lives of his subjects. In *Memento* (2000), based on a short story by his brother Jonathan, Christopher Nolan shows one man's vengeful quest for the man who raped and murdered his wife. Because the protagonist, Leonard, cannot form new memories, he must leave himself notes on scraps of paper and on his own body in the form of tattoos in hopes of finding the murderer. While viewers discover that the killer is probably long dead and that Leonard has been manipulated by those around him for their own ends, he himself cannot realize or remember any of this, remaining thus locked into his life of false purpose. Directed though not written by Nolan, *Insomnia* (2002) similarly shows the destructive power of truth and the potentially helpful nature of lies: a police detective's career unravels once his pattern of planting evidence on guilty suspects has been discovered.

In Nolan's vision, illusion is both the object and means of redemption; that is, it is both the thing being redeemed and the thing by which redemption is possible. This problematizes the trope of Gnosticism which Jeffrey Kripal has identified in science-fiction media, for Nolan presents an anti-Gnostic Gnosticism.¹ For the purposes of the present discussion, the following broad, working definition of Gnosticism will suffice: secret teachings about the ultimate truth of reality reserved for a select few. Nolan's vision is Gnostic in the sense that his ideal represents the induction of new believers into a secret way of seeing the world. Yet his vision is anti-Gnostic, in the sense that this way of seeing does not represent knowledge or truth, but, rather, represents an illusion. Because Nolan conveys his anti-Gnostic Gnostic Gospel in the form of film, he provides the opportunity for his viewers to question and critically engage with their viewing experience, their understanding of his stories, and their own experience of reality.

As in many variants of Gnosticism, we can see the influence of Platonism here. But, in this case, rather than a soul's ascent into the fullness of formerly concealed truth, we see a variation on a concept from Platonic political thought. Nolan's "noble lie" primarily serves for the cohesion of the individual's psyche, rather than being imposed on the lower classes by the philosopher kings for the sake of the cohesion of society. Granted, Batman's final noble lie does serve a social purpose, at least in part.²

In *The Prestige* (2006), two magicians are engaged in a blood feud. Their craft hinges on their ability to deceive their audiences, with the purpose of filling the lives of the people with wonder. That is what gives the magicians' lives meaning. The production of wonder is of primary importance; the magicians' methods are secondary, though many viewers long to know them. The methods of Borden are mundane; to know his true methods would make his illusions

¹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 24, 42-43.

² For the original noble lie, see Plato's *Phaedo* 114d and *The Republic* 414b-c.

pointless. For example, he teleports by using a double; technically, there are two Bordens who are twin brothers. Angier, his rival, makes the mistake of developing true magic – the ability to clone himself – for the purpose of mimicking Borden’s purported teleportation. In order to use that secret on stage, Angier must kill a new clone of himself night after night, until he ultimately loses his own life at Borden’s hand.

Imagine a world without wonder, a world without enchantment. The illusions that Borden and Angier offer rescue their viewers from that. Set in the late 19th century, an age dominated by modern science’s increasingly apparent ability to dispel every mystery, the magicians had the power to give life meaning. It is fitting that in the film *Nikola Tesla* provides Angier with a magical device. A foil to Thomas Edison, Tesla represents the road untaken by modern society, for his scientific insights and inventions could still be described as a form of wizardry. Tesla’s methods were mysterious and, upon providing Angier with a machine that did almost what he desired – allow him to mimic teleportation by producing duplicates of himself – Tesla urged the magician to destroy the machine. Tesla anticipated that cloning was too morally problematic for the machine to be worth salvaging; the true mystery was too destructive to be safely put into human hands. But “the customer is always right” and Angier paid his bill. He deemed that what he presented to his audience, the false mystery rooted in an illusion masking a darker truth, to be worth maintaining at any price.

The magicians in *The Prestige* save their audiences from boredom and the ordinary. With his dying breaths, Angier explains to his nemesis, the surviving Borden twin, why he did what he did: “The audience knows the truth: that the world is simple, miserable, solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, you could make them wonder. Then you

got to see something very special: the look on their faces.”³ If you have been paying close attention, you will realize that this is a half-truth: yes, the magicians do fill their audiences with wonder; but the audiences do not know the truth, for life is anything but simple, solid, and safe. The audience believes one illusion and, through the magicians, exchanges it for another.

The magicians lead the audience to reject the illusion that life is boring and ordinary; they do so by providing an illusion to insulate the audience from the truth. Life is far more dangerous than any of them could imagine. The forces of the universe cannot be tamed. There is a darkness deeper than what the human soul can comprehend, both within the human soul and in the world beyond it. Angier shot one of the Borden twins in the hand, so the other twin chopped off the top halves of his two smallest fingers on one hand, so that the illusion could be complete; both twins sacrificed healthy marital and family lives so that they could take turns as Borden the Magician, with the other disguised as his silent assistant. As a result of her incongruous experience of the affections of the two men, believing them to be one, Borden’s wife lapsed into madness and substance abuse, ultimately committing suicide. Angier cloned himself and shot his clone night after night. He later told Borden, confessing with his dying breath, “It took courage to climb into that machine every night not knowing if I’d be the Prestige or the man in the box,” that is, the survivor or the man who drowned unseen beneath the stage.⁴ But Angier misunderstood or did not seek to understand Tesla’s magic. The machine did not merely produce a lesser version of him, but rather a second instance of the same man. Angier survived every performance because one Angier killed another Angier, one of his doubled selves. To get what they want, some people in this world will kill in revenge or sentence an innocent person to die. A man may sacrifice his enemy, his friend, his wife, or even himself, all in the name of the greater good.

³ *The Prestige*, DVD, directed by Christopher Nolan (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2007).

⁴ *Ibid.*

“Are you watching closely?” Borden asks in the opening seconds of the film.⁵ The question is rhetorical, for the answer is soon readily apparent: you are not watching closely, nor should you wish to. Indeed, in the closing line of the film, Cutter, Angier’s mentor and technician, tells the audience: “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 want to work it out. You want to be fooled.”⁶ The truth is too terrible. We need an illusion instead, something to save us from the ordinary, but also something to save us from the truth.

The characters need such salvation. Neither the Bordens nor Angier reflect on the full implications of their actions. They are agents of salvation, enriching the lives of others with wholesome illusion, but, in the end, they are as willfully oblivious to the truth as those whom they artfully deceive.

Inception (2010) follows a team of industrial spies who seek to plant an idea in the mind of a mogul’s heir, Robert Fischer, manipulating him to break up his father’s empire at the behest of his rival, Saito. The team does so by invading several layers of his dreams. They hope to succeed because people long for redemption, as the team’s leader Cobb explains: “We all yearn for reconciliation, for catharsis.”⁷ They sugarcoat the idea they are planting into Fischer’s mind with a false memory of reconciliation between Fischer and his estranged, now-dead father. Meanwhile, Cobb (perhaps as the result of his own team “incepting” him) comes to accept that he was not responsible for his wife’s death and that, whether or not the world of his senses is the real world, he should embrace it and embrace what family he has left.

As in *The Prestige*, in *Inception* the truth is bleak; and as in *The Prestige*, *Inception*’s characters must avoid it. Robert Fischer’s father does not love him in any demonstrable way.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Inception*, DVD, directed by Christopher Nolan (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2010).

Cobb's wife, Mal, would rather live in solitude with him in a dream world than in the real world with their children and the rest of humanity. When she was alive in the real world, believing the real world to be less real than the dream world, Cobb's wife framed him for her murder shortly before jumping to her death before his eyes. After her death, Cobb lingers in the past, reconstructing memories that he claims are "the moments I regret, the memories that I have to change," rather than living in the real world or even in a new dream world created by him *ex nihilo*.⁸ When Cobb visits the dreams of others, his projection of Mal haunts his every step, trying to ruin his missions and kill him, just as she did in the real world. Yet he cannot let her go. He struggles to accept that she is no longer alive. According to *Inception*, people are wounded, needy, selfish, and destructive to themselves and to those around them, including those they love.

Those who are lost in a dream world are not necessarily prisoners, even though we see them in underground dens, plugged in for days on end with wires streaming down their arms and faces. "The dream has become their reality," as the proprietor of such an establishment explains.⁹ Rather, it is those who are burdened by regret who are not free. Such was the case for Robert Fischer, before he accepted the lie that his father loved him enough to want him to break up his empire. Cobb was also imprisoned by regret before he learned to forgive himself for Mal's death and to accept that she was gone. Similarly, Saito risks being "an old man filled with regret, waiting to die alone," until Cobb reminds him that the dream world is not real.¹⁰ We should note that it is regret rather than unreality which is the prison. To underscore this point, one should note that Édith Piaf singing "Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I regret nothing") serves as the "kick," the signal for the team to prepare to leap out of the dream world into the real.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The film ends ambiguously, with Cobb's top spinning on a table, wobbling slightly, but still spinning. He walks out of the dining room into the sunlit garden, into the embrace of his children, whose faces he finally sees again, leaving his spinning top behind him. The top is his "totem," which indicates that he is in the dream world if it keeps spinning. In the end, Cobb neither knows nor cares whether or not he is in the dream world. Audience members are left to conjecture an either/or scenario, when the ambiguity itself represents the heart of the message. Self-acceptance and moving on from the past represent liberation, whether or not they are grounded in truth.

In his Batman trilogy, Nolan builds on this vision of redemptive illusion by depicting Batman as a salvific symbol. He is able to save not because of who he really is but because of his power as a symbol.

In *Batman Begins* (2005), Bruce Wayne embraces the idea that he can become more than a man by becoming incarnate as a symbol. Batman, as a symbolic, legendary figure can do far more to fight injustice in Gotham than any mere mortal could. At a surface level, the truth is that Bruce Wayne as Batman is "just an ordinary man in a cape," as Ra's al Ghul, Wayne's former mentor and nemesis-du-jour, exclaims.¹¹ Mr. al Ghul further warns Bruce Wayne that he is in danger of becoming "a vigilante... just a man lost in the scramble for his own gratification [who] can be destroyed, or locked up."¹²

Even though Wayne does not become part of a movement or organization, he does succeed in following the methods of al Ghul's League of Shadows up to a point, as explained by Mr. al Ghul: "if you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, and

¹¹ *Batman Begins*, DVD, directed by Christopher Nola (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video Inc., 2005).

¹² Ibid.

if they can't stop you, then you become something else entirely. [You become] a legend."¹³

Batman possesses power over the criminals of Gotham because he is a legend. Indeed, Wayne chooses the bat as his symbol because he wants to convey "something elemental, something terrifying," and he himself has long been afraid of bats.¹⁴

When the woman he loves, Rachel Dawes, confronts Batman about his true identity, he replies, "It's not who I am underneath, but what I *do* that defines me."¹⁵ More precisely, it is not who Batman really is but rather what Batman the legend and symbol accomplishes that defines both Batman and Bruce Wayne. As Dawes recognizes by the end of the film, the man Bruce Wayne is the false projection, the illusion, the mask, and Batman comes closer to representing the man's true self.

In *The Dark Knight* (2008) we see the dichotomy between Batman, who seeks to conceal truth in order to establish order, and the Joker, who seeks to reveal truth in order to create chaos. As before, Batman conceals his true identity. He works in the shadows, violating international treaties and the ordinary boundaries of police jurisdiction in the name of justice. His plan involves others concealing themselves as well, as in the case of Commissioner Gordon's staged death. Those around Bruce Wayne do their share of concealing, too. Alfred, Wayne's butler and surrogate father, burns the Dear John letter that Rachel leaves behind for Bruce before the Joker kills her. Bruce blames himself for her death and thinks that if she had survived and if he had given up fighting crime, they could have been together. For the sake of preserving Wayne's fragile psyche, Alfred destroys the last evidence that would undo this delusion.

For all of his duplicitous trickery, the Joker seems bent on revealing truth. He holds Gotham hostage so that Batman will reveal his true identity. He creates scenarios in which

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

people must reveal their true nature. He gives District Attorney Harvey Dent, now known as Two Face, a gun and some gentle encouragement, but the ensuing mayhem is Dent's own doing. The Joker fills two ferries with explosives and gives the passengers on each boat the detonator for the other boat, with the promise that if neither boat blows up the other, then he would destroy them both; the passengers must choose whether to sacrifice themselves or kill others for the sake of their own survival. All of this is for the ostensible purpose of revealing what human nature is. Even though one of Batman's goals is to prove that the Joker is wrong, that people are more noble than he wants to show them to be and that Gotham is worth saving, Batman's goal is not the revelation of truth, either about himself or about anything else. Batman's goal is justice, even if deception is a means to that end.

By the end of *The Dark Knight*, Batman becomes a symbol of evil in Gotham. Harvey Dent was an upstanding District Attorney before an accident destroyed half of his face and rendered him criminally insane. Rather than allow Dent's role in his crimes as Two Face to become public, Batman allows himself to take the blame. He becomes a scapegoat so that Dent's virtuous acts, committed before his transformation into Two Face, would not have been in vain. Because of this lie, Gotham's worst criminals can be locked up. Batman himself sums it up best: "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded."¹⁶ That is, they deserve to see their hopes become a reality – even if that so-called reality is illusory.

Consigned to infamy and wounded for Gotham's transgressions, Batman's role as Christ figure reaches its logical conclusion when he gives up his life in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). His one article of faith has been that Gotham is worth saving. Gotham has been worth fighting for and lying for. Now Gotham is worth dying for. This is a truth that Bruce Wayne must believe

¹⁶ Ibid.

for him to achieve freedom – for him to climb out of the prison chasm where his new nemesis Bane has left him, no longer burdened by the safety rope that would catch him, should he fall; and for him to find life after Batman, once the symbol is dead. That Gotham is worth saving is not a static, self-evident truth. One could argue that it only becomes true because Bruce Wayne has believed it and lived in light of it with such ardor for so long. Equally plausible and certainly compatible with that position is the further proposition that Gotham’s true redemption lies not in its mere physical rescue but in Batman’s affirmation in word and deed that Gotham is worth dying for. Whether Gotham’s citizens will continue to rise to the occasion – as some, such as Catwoman and more than a few fearful cops, do under his leadership in the insurrection against Bane – remains the task for future Gothamites.

At any rate, Gotham does not need to know that Gotham is worth saving for Batman to succeed in doing so in the short run. Gotham does not need to know the truth. Gotham needs Batman to fly the neutron bomb out of the city and to give up his life in the process. Yet again, this is a noble lie. Bruce Wayne lives on after Batman. As an alter ego, Batman is dead, but Bruce has ensured that the legend will live on forever, resurrected and redeemed now in the public eye, a statue in his honor gracing city hall.

As a side note: Nolan’s version of Superman also portrays the integral role of illusion in salvation. Nolan was involved in co-writing the story for *The Man of Steel* (2013), although he did not write the final screenplay or direct it. The story highlights Kal-El’s alien identity, which becomes the basis for his Messianic Secret: it is imperative for the public to know that they have a savior, but also for them to remain ignorant of the fact that he is an extraterrestrial.

Like a Gnostic, Nolan urges those who will receive his message toward something hidden. It is a revelation not of truth but of illusion – an illusion that rescues its holders from

lesser illusions but that also protects them from the destructive force that is truth. Those who are saved might gain a sense of wonder in a world that seems mundane but is actually horrific; they might achieve freedom and peace with themselves in lives formerly paralyzed by regret; or they might find justice and peace with each other in a world that no one thought was worth dying for. Those truly possessed of such pseudo-gnosis might even provide such wonder, freedom, peace, and justice for others, blessing them with the noblest of lies.

We, the viewers, possess a paradoxical relationship to Nolan's version of the truth. On the one hand, we see the truth: Nolan shows us the true price of the characters' actions and the depths of human moral depravity. But, on the other hand, Nolan prevents us from reflecting extensively on such things, at least during the heat of battle. After providing us a clever plot twist or three and some dazzling special effects, Nolan produces an end result that serves primarily to entertain, saving us from the ordinary by virtue of his fictions. Whether or not we pursue enlightenment of any kind in light of his work is the grist for efforts of our own. Both the form and contents of his work lend themselves as much to distraction and diversion as to philosophical and theological reflection.

The salvific power of a noble illusion is a theme in the work of other contemporary directors. Such was the conclusion of the Wachowskis' *Matrix* trilogy. The bulk of humanity must remain oblivious to the fact that they live in a fabricated reality as slaves of machine overlords, lest all of life become unsustainable for both humans and machines. A similar theme dominates *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), in which an East German young man must convince his psychologically fragile mother who has just emerged from a coma that nothing has changed, despite the fact that the Berlin Wall has just fallen. We live in a time when many assume that

they can construct their own reality. “Everyone has their own truth,” as my students frequently remind me. Such is the spirit of the age.

What is distinctive about Nolan’s vision, what he articulates with particular narrative and visual elegance is that those “truths” can be lies, but can, nonetheless, serve to save. In fact, for being false, they may be all the more salvific, at least in a this-worldly sense. In essence, Nolan presents a worldview in which functionality trumps veracity: what works matters more than what is actually true; while, at the same time, he remains poignantly self-aware of that disconnect.

Like all of the best preaching, film, and science fiction, Nolan’s work presents a vision of who we are and who we ought to be. He calls us to be heroes defined by illusion. We need to show the world what it needs to see, not how things actually are; we need to say what it needs to hear, whether or not that is the truth; and we need to act like the people the world needs us to be, if not the people it deserves. By pretending, we become – if not the thing we pretend to be, then at least something more than ourselves. Then we will know the perfect lie, and the lie will set us free.