Below *Following* (1999)

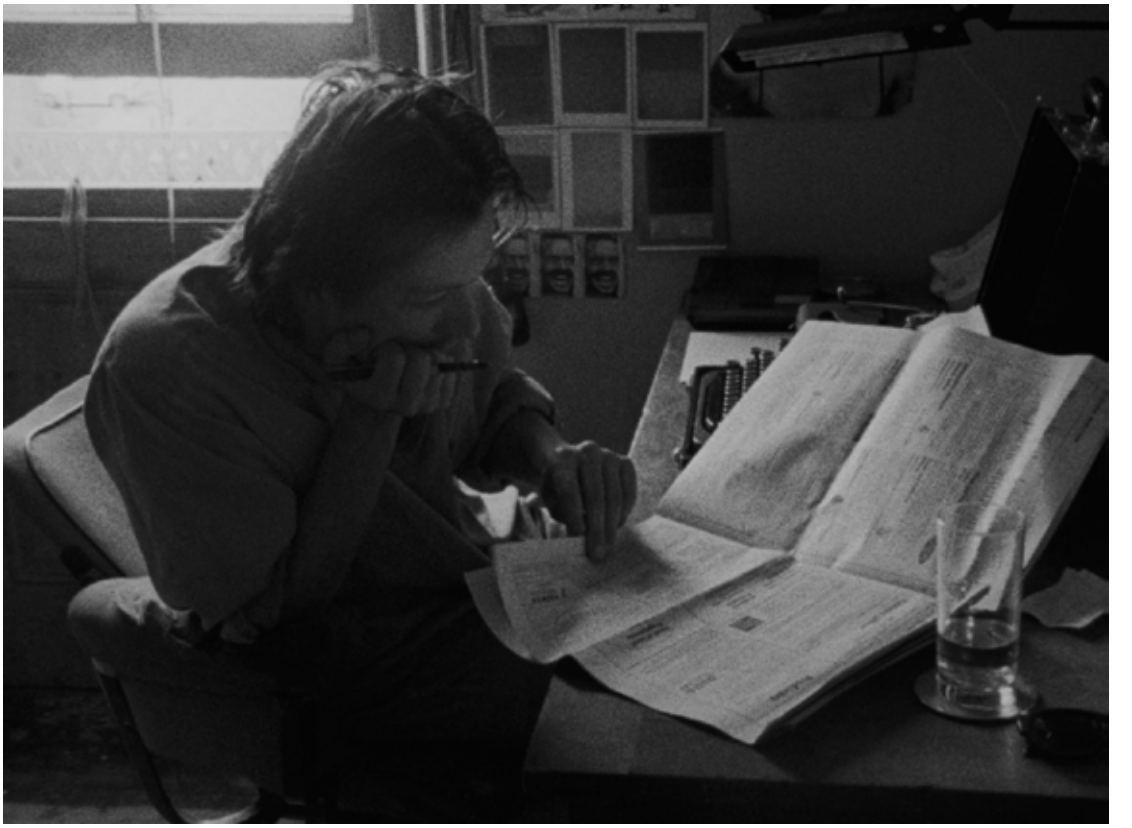
CINEMATIC INCEPTION

Christopher Nolan and *Following*

By Chris Neilan

In 1997, Christopher Nolan, an ambitious 27-year-old English-lit graduate from University College London (UCL) who had been using cameras since he was 7 and was making a living directing corporate videos, shot and edited his third short film, *Doodlebug*. The three-minute Kafka-esque short concerns a man obsessively chasing a bug around his flat, only to discover that it is a miniature version of himself whose movements predict his own by a few seconds. After crushing his tiny doppelgänger, a giant version of his face looms behind him, and he is crushed. A kinetic chase narrative with a closing twist which subverts our concepts of the self and our perceptions of reality, *Doodlebug* offers an intriguing foreshadowing of the director's future career, but is decidedly amateurish. The schism between it and the industry-leading work Nolan is doing now, seventeen years and ten feature films later, is a pleasingly astonishing thing to consider.

It is hard now to think of Nolan as a young upstart with a negative bank balance, but around the same time as the creation of *Doodlebug* he was beginning the lengthy process of shooting his own self-funded debut feature completely outside the realms of the film industry, paying for it out of his wages. Using non-professional actors, filming in friends' parents' flats and utilizing the assistance of cohorts from the UCL film society, Nolan was able to complete his debut feature for a total budget somewhere around the £3,000 mark, making neo-noir thriller *Following* (1998) perhaps one of the cheapest feature films ever made – certainly one of the



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cheapest non-digital features. It won awards at the Dinard British Film Festival, the Newport International Film Festival, the Rotterdam International Film Festival and Slamdance. More importantly, it was the magic brush with which Nolan painted a doorway onto the closed walls of the film industry, stepping through to discover Newmarket Films waiting with a $4.5 million budget with which to shoot *Memento* (2000).

Nolan's views on the British film industry of the time are rather damning. He describes receiving 'stacks of rejection letters', and claimed 'there's a very limited pool of finance in the UK. To be honest, it's a very clubby kind of place […] Never had any support whatsoever from the British film industry (Pulver 2005)'. Ben Wheatley, whose emergence as one of the United Kingdom's finest and most idiosyncratic contemporary film-makers can be traced back to his own micro-budget feature *Down Terrace* (2009), which he shot for around £6,000 using a mostly non-professional cast, echoes Nolan's appraisal:

> Writing a script, shooting, editing and looking at the completed film is the best film school you could have. If you do it frugally you won't break the bank or waste loads of people's time. Making *Down Terrace* was the best thing I ever did […] If I'd gone through usual funding channels I'd still be skulking around Soho, cursing the gods with my unmade screenplay in my hand. (Wheatley 2011)

Production

Following is a stripped-to-the-bone neo-noir crime thriller, concerning a lonely aspiring writer Bill (played by Jeremy Theobald, early collaborator of Nolan's and star of *Doodlebug*) who is drawn into a complicated web of deceit and criminality when he begins following random people. When plummy-voiced burglar Cobb (played by Alex Haw, who would have no further acting career) catches Bill following him, Bill is convinced to accompany Cobb on a burglary, and is soon intoxicated by the process of inhabiting people's personal spaces, allowing an intimate connection to total strangers without having to engage with them face to face. Nolan would later reuse his first antagonist's name for the protagonist of his most ambitious

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feature, Leonardo di Caprio's dream-invading fugitive Cobb in the mega-budget cerebral action flick *Inception* (2010) – a nod perhaps to his most creatively free project at a time when the success of his *Batman* series (*Batman Begins* [2005], *The Dark Knight* [2008] and *The Dark Knight Rises* [2012]) had seen him rewarded with a $160 million budget to do with as he pleased. Math enthusiasts will note that figure as being around 70,000 times higher than the £3,000 budget with which Nolan and team made *Following*, which would probably represent the biggest swing in budget size for any director in the history of cinema if Nolan hadn't also made *The Dark Knight Rises* for closer to $300 million.

Despite the film's 70-minute running time, the *Following* shoot would last a full year, with Nolan and his cast and crew (including his long-time producer and future wife Emma Thomas née Nolan) working around their day jobs and shooting only on weekends. This all came after a six-month rehearsal process, which Nolan insisted on to allow for fleet of foot during the shoot:

> I thought we could [go] to a location that we had for an hour, jump in, do a scene we'd done a hundred times before and film it, and give them one or two takes – most of the film is first takes, some are second. (McCarthy 2012)

The creditable dedication of (one assumes) unpaid cast and crew to give so much of their time to a project cannot be underestimated – without their dedication there may be no *Memento*, no *Batman Begins*, no *Inception*, and how much weaker contemporary cinema would be without, in particular, that former work of genius.

Shot using wind-up Bolex cameras and 16mm black-and-white film stock, which accounted for most of the £3,000 budget, *Following* is rather successful at cloaking its obvious lack of budget in a minimalist no-wave neo-noir visual style. The visuals of Nolan's later films are drenched in the hubristic bombast of the mainstream, but *Following* is pure punk. Nolan used available light, drenched his interiors in shadow, and employed creative editing techniques to discount the need for multiple angles (the moments when the film is weakest come during extended dialogue sequences when the cutting stops, the handheld camera hov-

ers before its two actors, and the lack of production values suddenly becomes apparent). This no-wave veneer is effective firstly because black-and-white photography is very forgiving:

> In black and white it's much more possible to hide some of your budgetary constraints. When you have absolutely no money and absolutely no resources, to achieve color cinematography is extremely difficult. It's much more possible to get some kind of level of style to the thing [in black and white], quickly and easily throwing in some lights and shadow and going with that. (McCarthy 2012)

Secondly, and equally important, a rough unpolished effect is desirable within this style: that maverick, punk-referencing style which calls to mind the first films of the 1970s new wave, and the art-over-artifice stylings of the nouvelle vague. It benefits from the feel of the outsider. Imagine Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994) or Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) shot on stark handheld DV, as they might be today: the feel of the outsider is central to the appeal of the style. The same can be said of the no-fi production values on 1970s punk records and the kind of sloppy unvarnished blues records made by Johnny Farmer and Junior Kimbrough. DV all too often imparts only the feel of the amateur.

Narrative

Following opens – on that scratchy black-and-white 16mm stock which if anything could pass for 8mm – with a series of ECUs which first-time viewers will not comprehend: rubber medical gloves pulled over hands (later used by Cobb and later still by Bill during their burglaries), a series of objects taken from an ornate wooden keepsake box (Cobb will later tell Bill that 'everyone has a box', a place where they keep their most treasured mementos). A pulsating modern soundtrack, which resembles a Trent Reznor score recreated in a teenager's garage, accompanies the images. Further images sketch the rush and bustle of central London, and the lonely anonymity of the individual lost within the crowd, before we are introduced to Bill, scruffy and alone in the throng. His voice-over tells us that the following is his 'confession'. He is telling some undefined confidant his story: he was lonely, he says, and an aspiring writer, and he became fascinated with the idea of picking a face out of the crowd and following them. Shadowing, he calls it. Not for nefarious purposes, not for anything sexual, but just to find out about them, to know them a little, to connect without connecting, and to research characters. That was how it was meant to be, he tells us, as we see him beginning to follow people. We see whom he is confessing to: some authoritative older man, perhaps police (played by the director's uncle, John Nolan). He even created rules to place some air of respectability on his voyeuristic pursuit: no following women down alleyways at night, no following the same person twice. That, he tells us, was the most important rule. And that was the rule he broke first. As the conversation takes on a darker tone the images change to unexplained visions of our scruffy protagonist: besuited, long hair cut short, on the floor, black-eyed and bloody-nosed, coughing a rubber medical glove out of his mouth: foreshadowing. Hidden amongst these images, the second- and third-time viewer will see Cobb, whose sordid world Bill will become so fatalistically entangled in, and the alluring (unnamed) woman who will emerge as Bill's femme fatale.

It's a bravura opening, at once defining genre and declaring its intentions to rise above the generic with its philosophical ideas on isolation and its art-house editing. It is unabashedly, unavoidably cheap, both in image and sound, and it doesn't matter – in fact, if anything, there is a certain thrill to be found in its cheapness, the thrill of embarking on such a skilfully deployed narrative from what is clearly an industry outsider. Insiders have commercial imperatives, careers to think of; with outsiders, you can never be sure. Audience members used to the moneyed slickness of the mainstream will balk; those interested in ideas will have discovered something.

Bill's opening voice-over is crucial. It informs the audience of the downfall they are about to witness, creating suspense and dramatic irony, which together form a motor propelling the narrative through its upcoming establishing sequences and later plot developments. As any regular film festival attendee will tell you, the inability to create and sustain these two precious cinematic commodities – suspense and dramatic irony – is perhaps the most obvious and detrimental flaw in most independent debut features (and a fair few sophomore features too). Innovative characters and engaging dialogue are laudable, but they do not constitute drama – rather they lay the foundations from which drama must be conjured. This issue represents the difference between a writer and a dramatist. It is the difference between, for instance, Hitchcock and Godard, or even Melville and Godard; between the

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Dardenne brothers and the mumblecore movement; between Lena Dunham's lauded festival borefest *Tiny Furniture* (2010) and her engaging and entertaining drama series *Girls* (2012–onwards).

Fragmentation

Nolan's mastery of narrative is what has defined his career, what marked him out from the crowd when *Memento* won so many admirers, and what elevates his enormo-budget blockbusters from their Hollywood trappings. And it is also the most striking and significant element in his £3,000 debut. Nolan has called *Following*'s structure a 'modal narrative': he introduces us to what he calls the 'headlines' of the story (key characters, Bill's emotional background, the central shadowing concept, the rules which will be broken, the violent depths Bill will plummet to) before leading the audience into a narrative comprised of three separate timelines (timeline A, timeline B and timeline C), fragments of a master timeline, the fragmentation of which maintains the suspense and dramatic irony which he initiated with his opening voice-over and imagery. Nolan's decision to fragment his narrative in this unconventional manner emerged from his awareness of noir conventions:

> In a compelling story of this genre we are continually being asked to rethink our assessment of the relationship between the various characters, and I decided to structure my story in such a way as to emphasize the audience's incomplete understanding of each new scene as it is first presented. (Charles 2011)

Following's master timeline is nothing too special. A typically noir-ish tale of betrayal and self-destruction, lonely Bill is caught following burglar Cobb, becomes drawn to one of their female victims, embarks on a relationship with her, is persuaded to rob her gangster employer only to find out Cobb and the woman were setting him up, tagged off with a closing second twist in which we discover a grander con wherein Cobb betrays and murders the woman, setting up Bill in a sting he will not be able to escape from. It's a fairly engaging generic nar-

rative crafted relatively skilfully with a double twist. The fragmentation of the timelines, however, conjures extra levels of suspense and intrigue, disorientating the audience whilst deploying enough information to keep them on the leash (for instance, the visual changes in Bill's appearance which clearly identify the separate timelines as we switch between them: the long hair and dirty clothes of timeline A, the suit and short hair and confident swagger of timeline B, the black eye and bloodied nose of timeline C) and succeeding in surpassing our genre expectations. It's a masterstroke of innovation, the kind we see from maverick first-timers, occasionally in low-budget sophomore efforts, so rarely from established directors: look at the risks Tarantino took in *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and the relative safety of the narratives in his subsequent films, which tend to follow typical present/flashback patterns.

And this is significant, because there are many similarities to be drawn between the narrative Nolan crafted in *Following* and the one so brilliantly executed in what remains his masterpiece, *Memento*. Like *Memento*, *Following*'s opening scene becomes also its closing scene, forming a narrative loop, as we understand that Cobb's 'confession' to the authoritative man played by Nolan's uncle is indeed a confession to a police officer. *Memento* of course opens with amnesiac widower Leonard killing detective Teddy, before proceeding backwards away from and forwards toward that moment in its two parallel timelines, the timelines finally merging to reveal Leonard's fatalistic decision to kill Teddy. *Following*'s narrative sticks to a rigid formula after its opening scene, alternating from timeline A to B to C and repeating until timelines A and B merge, leading to the finale. *Memento* is similarly rigid, alternating between its two timelines before they merge, leading to the finale. *Following* differentiates its timelines with visual cues related to its protagonist's appearance; *Memento*'s backwards timeline is presented in colour, its forwards timeline in black and white. The success of Nolan's second film and it's demonstrable emergence from the skills he shaped on his debut bare out Ben Wheatley's observation: finding a few thousand quid and a camera and just shooting a feature may well be the best kind of film school if, especially if, it leads to such iconoclasm.

Legacy

Like the majority of the *Following* cast, lead actor Jeremy Theobald would not break into the industry in the same manner as his director. His most noteworthy appearance post-*Following* would be a very brief role as the Younger Gotham Water Board Technician in *Batman Begins* – surprising, since his performance as Bill is rather good. Uncle John Nolan would also appear in *Batman Begins*. Alex Haw, who played Cobb, made no further impact in cinema, becoming instead an architect, and leaving an attractively mysterious legacy as Nolan's first bad guy, an unlikely gatecrasher on a list alongside Heath Ledger and Tom Hardy – quite the ammunition for dinner parties. Only Lucy Russell, who played the femme fatale who tricks Bill only to be double-tricked by Cobb, would go on to a serious acting career, the highlight being her work with Eric Rohmer.

Following is by no means a flawless film – it is, I believe, impossible to make a flawless film for such a budget – but it is a very impactful film, and at the heart of this impact is the impression that it is the work of a lone maverick, or lone crew of mavericks, existing completely outside the safe and somewhat sanitized bounds of any systemized industry, working exclusively on artistic imperatives and not on commercial ones, engaged in a conversation directly with its audience, not filtered through the obfuscating kaleidoscope of investors, public relations and financiers, which audiences usually agree to ignore in return for their entertainment. This is also the reason why *Memento*, clearly Nolan's most brilliant work, remains his most appealing film. Aside from its obvious narrative genius, *Memento*, with its budget of under $5 million, retains to some extent the feeling of the outsider. *Memento*'s success led to Nolan moving with both feet inside the industry, and the slick skilfulness of subsequent works like *The Prestige* (2006) feels dull by comparison: all style and no teeth, the narrative brilliance still evident but the sense of newness and unpredictability killed. And this is perhaps why *Inception* thrilled so many critics – it was the big-budget work that had been freed from studio shackles, the $160 million freebie Nolan's commercial successes had earned him, and whilst it retained all the slickness which now envelopes Nolan's films, it brought back to his work a feeling of maverick unpredictability not felt since *Memento*: the feeling that Nolan's audience was being allowed a conversation more or less directly with him.

But by this point, the syntax of Nolan's conversations had been changed. Nolan is a brilliant director, but he is no longer a director with teeth. He is no longer one of us. He is at best a hugely admirable one of them. *Memento* is an animal that still has its teeth and

Following is nothing but teeth. And I for one would happily take 50,000 *Following*s (total cost: £3,000 × 50,000 = £150 million) or 50 *Mementos* ($4.5 million × 50 = $225 million) over one *Inception* (production budget: $160 million).

Contributor's details

Chris Neilan is an author, screenwriter and critic. His first novel *Abattoir Jack* (Christopher Neilan, 2009) is available from Punked Books.

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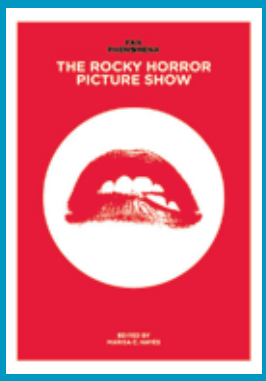

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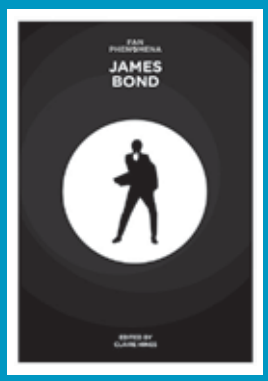

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