

Perspectives of Public Pedagogy in Christopher Nolan's Cinema. Case Studies on *Inception* and *the Dark Knight Rises*

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Abstract

The educational and pedagogical impact of cinema is investigated through two popular Christopher Nolan's films *Inception* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. Analysis of his films, in the context of cinema public pedagogy, shows that Nolan's way of film-making defines a specific set of challenging and reversing messages, hidden behind the Hollywood mainstream standards. Moreover, throughout this analysis, the power of the public pedagogy of the cinematic medium is established, and cinema is approached as a powerful tool that sets the standards of private and public behavior by combining entertainment and politics, according to [Giroux, 2008]. We end up in suggesting that the public pedagogy of cinema be embedded in the educational system as a distinct educational tool.

Keywords: Christopher Nolan, Public Pedagogy, Giroux

Introduction

Cinema public pedagogy is one of the most important types of informal education of our times. Grollios (2008), on commenting related analyses of Henry Giroux, states

that “the meaning of public pedagogy demands a radical reflection of how optical technologies are produced, circulated and adapted on various aspects of pedagogic. These aspects give birth to types of knowledge being intervened with specific social relations and activate selected ideologies, stories and memories (Giroux, as referred in Grollios, 2008).” Based on the above, one could claim that the educational and pedagogical influence of cinema comes in a massive way and, thus, Hollywood has developed irresistible ways through which it can affect public behavior.

Public Pedagogy through Christopher Nolan’s Films

In the context of this claim, we approach two Christopher Nolan’s films, with which he succeeds in establishing a frame of opposing to the mainstream, although he conforms to the rules imposed by the big studios. Analysis of Nolan’s films is made on the basis of cinematic narrative and aesthetic, intertextuality, psychoanalysis and ideology as factors that compose this basis so that public pedagogy is produced and publicly accepted.

Nolan is a British-American director born in London in 1970. His projects are characterized by huge production costs and the participation of highly recognizable movie stars (*Batman begins, The Dark Knight, The Prestige, The Dark Knight Rises*). His films are to be blockbusters and comply with the rules of modern capitalistic economies in terms of being as profitable as it gets. Issues dealt with in his films are enriched by motives and stories popular in modern American society. What makes his films important is not their content but the way the content is developed and evolved. The result may seem as being set on the industry standards, although multiple views of political, existential, psychoanalytical, and controversial (but truly ideological) dimensions are hidden. Narration levels of Nolan’s films are composed of controversial elements that seem to confront to the basis of current social-economical-political status.

Inception

The film *Inception* (2010), can be used as an example of intertextuality, which includes most of the themes of cinema theory: demonstrating pictures as signs and symbols, references to Freud and Lacan, connection of the cinema to the other "Fine Arts" (visual arts, architecture), philosophical questions of a phenomenological type, references to the ideological absolutism and the creation of thought that arises from a film. The film *Inception* can be considered at the same time a psychoanalytic and ideological comment, while its narration strength can be located in the multiple *mise en scène* (dream in a dream). The intertextuality of the film includes the self-reference

of cinema itself, since essentially every dream is a well directed, almost cinematic, story.

The film has as the main character Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), who is an expert in a new specialization of the Science of Sleep. He "invades" into the dreams of unsuspecting people and steals their secrets, something that proves a valuable asset in industrial espionage. In the USA he is wanted man and as a result he is forced to be active in any other place of the planet. When the Japanese businessman, Saito (Ken Watanabe), offers him to clear him of his alleged crimes, Cobb accepts to make a risky plan. Saito asks Cobb to achieve the "inception", something truly inconceivable for Dream Invaders. The enterprise consists in planting an idea into the subconscious of Fischer (Jilian Murphy), a business rival of Saito, so that Fischer will believe that the idea is exclusively his own. Cobb with his friend Arthur (Josef Gordon Levit) enlist the young architect Ariadne (Helen Page), the forger Eames (Tomas Hardy) and the chemist Yusuf (Deleep Rao) in order to achieve his reckless plan. However, the personal subconscious unresolved issues and his guilt for the death of his wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard), pose a dangerous threat to Cobb's team.

The initial classification of the film to the type of fantasy films – although simplistic – is exceptionally accurate. It is a paradigm of fantasy film, which combines at the same time adventure, spectacle, continuous action, suspense, unbroken narrative, unexpected development, romanticism and a clear-cut philosophical-political-social background.

Cinema – through the film of Christopher Nolan – proves to be the ideal reflection of subjective and subconscious reality. It is the personal dream-like reflection and the visionary mirage of the creator that becomes the personal experience of the spectator. Like a dream inside a dream, where the boundaries and the limits are blurry and – as a result – easy to change at any moment. Through the dream, the "inception" of an idea is implanted with surgical precision in the victim-target's subconscious, by brilliant scientists and con artists. At the same time, it is also implanted in the spectator's subconscious, since he is also an abuser (he participates actively in the development of the story through the process of identification) and a victim (he also suffers the "inception" with the process of the spectacle). The con man, scientist-artist in the *Inception* is the director Christopher Nolan, who insists with his films in exploring the instincts of man inside a modern environment, which creates new urban nightmares and insecure and iconic, for himself and his work, characters. The original character in his case is the fact that his films constitute the essence of mainstream while, at the same time, they demonstrate his personal anxieties, masked by

Hollywood's business philosophy, which has as its motto the phrase "give the people what they want".

The philosophical structure of the *Inception* becomes clear and understandable from the first sequences of the film. Dom Cobb, the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio, is particularly persuasive when he develops his arguments regarding the existential and philosophical origin of the Idea: "The most resilient parasite?... An idea! A single idea from the human mind can build cities. An idea can transform the world and rewrite all the rules". It is an obvious and perhaps simplistic parallelism with modern reality. The powerful media daily overwhelm citizens with "simple parasitic ideas", and consequently it is easy to shape-transform the world, according to the will of those who are in power. The Ideas (that is the idols of the real objects that are created in the mind and at the same time, every abstract concept) are the most powerful parasites, when they are used like this.

Nolan structures the film creating three levels, as many as the dreams in which the characters of the story invade into. "Dream inside a dream" (like babushka dolls), until Cobb and his company manage to enter into the depths of the subconscious of the subject-target. The "Inception" is designed completely. Cobb is the director-inspirer of the three dreams and operates as the alter ego of Christopher Nolan, who builds his film on three levels using the same mechanism. Integral pieces of the films –like the one of the dreams– the architecture, the identification and, finally, the flight, the basic structural components of a successful film experience. The architecture expresses the decor-environment (artificial or natural) over which spectators start to feel a gradual familiarity with the characters of the film. Cobb needs an architect to build an environment, on which the heroes (and through them the spectators themselves) will experience "dream inside the dream". Cobb's architect is the young student Ariadne, who will provide the "thread", the means for him to find a way out from the complicated situation in which he found himself and thus escape Oblivion.

The complete identification of the spectators comes with the achievement of the "Inception", that is with the implantation of the parasite-Idea. The identification is multiple, successive and parallel. The spectators in the first dream are identified with Yusuf, who is trying to escape the persecutors-projections of Fischer driving a van, which moves in the highways of a big city. In the van there are, in a state of hypnosis, the rest members of the team. At the same time, in the second dream they are identified with Arthur, who gives his own, unimportant, battles with Fischer's bodyguards in a vaguely familiar hotel. In the third dream, spectators identify with the rest of the characters: Cobb, who faces his own personal insecurities, his lost wife

Mal, Ariadne, Saito, Eames, even the group's target, Fischer, who through the deceptive "Inception" he sees his past under a different light. The flight of the heroes and of the spectators as well comes at the ending (it is melody).

All these take place at the same time, in succession, fully harmonized and masterfully designed in the multiple and complicated *mise en scène* planned by Nolan. That is, we have a *mise en scène* inside a *mise en scène*. Action inside action. Plot inside the plot. A film inside another film. An adventurous Odyssey from Memory to Oblivion and back again, with the invaders of the subconscious and with them the accomplices-spectators (perpetators and victims) to return constructing and deconstructing the dreams-realities, using signs and symbols. The film, according to the views of Daniel Frampton about cinema (2006), obtains its own autonomous thinking and is defined as a new entity with its own intelligence.

The Dark Knight Rises

An example regarding how the projector creates a clear ideological substratum and at the same time a powerful pedagogic influence to the mass public, with direct measurable influences to society itself, is the trilogy of Christopher Nolan's films with central character the comic hero Bruce Wayne/Batman [*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)].

The *Batman* trilogy was based on the popular comic with the same name by DC COMICS and is a powerful figure of the American popular culture that deals with the known stereotype "good against evil". Bruce Wayne, a wealthy businessman, with a strong "feeling of justice", is transformed into a masked vigilante, in order to face the criminals that institutional justice can't or won't arrest. That is, he is a vigilante who operates outside the legal framework. This in itself is an issue that troubles society for centuries. The limitations of the "Law and Order" that provide asylum to big time criminals, through bureaucracy and the corruption of public servants, allow the appearance of masked-vigilantes, which will try to give justice, as it is necessary. Usually, these masked vigilantes are rich, noble and philanthropists and have an intense sense of justice, always within the framework set by the status quo. Such famous characters of popular culture are Robin Hood, Zorro and others, whose actions provided plenty of material, both for films and TV series.

Batman by Christopher Nolan tries to restore the system of corrupted city (Gotham City) into an operational situation, fighting outside the system against mafia and organized crime. He doesn't wish to overthrow the system, but to make it even more humane. He is not the overthrower but the one who maintains the status quo. In the

three films by Nolan, interesting are the "villains". In the first film, Ra's al Ghul, who wants to destroy the corrupted city of Gotham, in the second is Joker who comes to create panic and upheaval into a declining city and state, while in the third city, the terrifying Bane, who clearly shapes the ideologically profile of the villains and through some amazing scenes seems to justify them. For Nolan villains are ideologists, who try to overthrow the system through violence. They are terrorists with crystalized ideological and political attitude. Apart from the first (easy) reading of the film, Nolan manages to specify his own, revolutionary, almost of terroristic ideology, character through a blockbuster production. The whole story is structured around Bane, who is the opponent of the tired, disappointed Bruce Wayne/Batman. Bane (actor Tom Hardy) pushes Batman (Christian Bale) even more into the background, weakens him ideologically and comes as a tornado to destroy everything. "Victory defeated you", he says ironically to the resigned and without ideological and personal motives Batman. The capitalistic businessman Bruce Wayne, who wears the uniform of the vigilante Batman, is presented tired and compromised since he is invited to defend the status quo of Gotham, which is based on lies and corruption. Behind the apparent calm of the city with the low levels of criminality, the oppressed citizens who live in the sewers of the city are ready to offer their lives, since Bane promises them "death to the rich people of Gotham". The outcasts of society, the despised homeless are ready to sacrifice themselves in order to build a new world, where there will be no corruption. As a matter of fact, "... they have nothing to lose but their chains".

Through Bane, Nolan preaches violent revolutionary overthrow. Film producers, faced with the certain profits from the tickets of the Batman films, seem to ignore the production of anarchist ideology of Nolan. The anarchist manifesto of Bane, in the middle of the film speaks for itself:

"We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you... the people. Gotham is yours. None shall interfere. Do as you please. Start by storming Blackgate, and freeing the oppressed! Step forward those who would serve. For an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests, and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure. Courts will be convened. Spoils will be enjoyed. Blood will be shed. The police will survive, as they learn to serve true justice. This great city... it will endure. Gotham will survive!"

The Machiavellian Bane gives hope where hope does not exist. He sets popular courts and eliminates the rich and powerful giving his own kind of justice, reminding the following day of the French Revolution. Bruce Wayne/Batman, in the second half of the film, he understands that in order to subdue Bane he must not become like him. He understands that he must desire the insatiable desire of Bane to achieve his

objectives. "Desiring the desire of the other" according to Lacan (Stam, 2006) and thus Nolan's film is justified, apart from ideologically and psychoanalytically. Through this process of identification of desires, the spectator desires Bane's desire for justice that is imposed by instincts and which will come with an uncontrolled social entropy.

Discussion

According to Grollios (2008), "many theoreticians of cultural studies, following the works of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, recognize the primary role of culture in education. They argue that culture, as an area of production of meaning and social interaction, is important because it there that, through struggle and negotiation, the different types of identities and values are created, although always in a framework of unequal power relationships". According to Giroux (2008) "given the important role of popular culture, including cinema, the influences it exercises are pedagogic and political, determining identities and values and wider social practices that characterise a continuously increasing postmodern culture, in which the electronic media and visual forms are the most powerful educational tools of the new millennium" (p. 591). Giroux (2008) also emphasised that cinema as a medium of public pedagogic combines entertainment and politics, while it creates an atmosphere that helps shape individual behavior and public beliefs with multiple and complicated ways, consciously or unconsciously. The films, which were analysed in the present paper function as models of a state pedagogic, which invites citizens to question and to stand with scepticism in front of the status quo. This is interesting and peculiar, since the specific films are products of the status quo itself, expressed through the powerful film industry of Hollywood. Christopher Nolan with his films behaves like a "functional" intellectual according to Gramsci's analysis of "hegemony". During the opening night of *The Dark Knight Rises*, the "pedagogic" influence of his films in the mass public, was "measured" with human casualties. This took place on the night of the 20th July 2012, in the pack-filled dark hall of a cinema in the city Aurora of Colorado, which was characterised by the press and the internet as exciting (like watching a film!...), disturbing, terrifying, ominous and at the same time expected. The twenty-five year old James Holmes, (PhD Candidate at the University of Denver, in the field of neuroscience), dressed in Joker's costume, opened fire against the spectators that were watching the midnight show of the Batman film, killing 12 people and wounding over 50. In conclusion, it doesn't matter who was the neuroscientist, or why he did it (a young woman who knew him since high school said that he was a "cool guy", but she was puzzled that he was identified with the "villain" in the action films). What is important is that James Holms, did this on the specific place, dressed as one of the basic characters of the story, during the opening night of

one of the most successful films ever shot, something that demonstrates its influence of the medium to the people and the masses.

The dimensions of the film reality are confused with the dimensions of the actual reality and the object of art (the film or the location of the projection) "occupies" the subject (man, who passes into a different dimension and becomes literally the unsurpassed hero of the film). The object becomes the subject through an amazing confusion or the retraction of the realities into a subconscious procedure that demonstrates the strength of the medium. Cinema influences ideologically both on mass and private level, it changes the spectators, educates them and finally it "transforms" them.

The mimesis of film characters consists a vehicle of behavior, both in the unconscious everyday life of people and in exceptional cases like the one of Aurora. Another case of this kind is the attempted assassination of the President of the USA Ronald Reagan in 1981 by John Hinckley Jr. The aspiring assassin, before attempting to murder Reagan, has seen fifteen times the film by Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1981). Hinckley attempted to do exactly what the hero of the film did, the taxi driver Travis Bickle (the actor Robert De Niro played the part), who planned the assassination of a candidate for the Presidency.

Conclusion

According to what has been discussed so far, the initial claim that the public pedagogy of cinema is one of the most powerful massive pedagogic means nowadays, as it creates formulas and models of private and public behavior, throughout the combination of entertainment and politics. Christopher Nolan's films, although being produced in the frame of the massive film industry, promote an alternative view that seems to doubt on the mainstream. This view encourages the audience to rethink on the way that society is built, either through the ideology and the parasitic-ideas (*Inception*) or through the rapture of the current status-quo (*The Dark Knight Rises*). The detailed study on Nolan's films could lead to new directions on this dimension of public pedagogy, while an additional plan on future analysis could deal with research of similar cinema projects and Hollywood directors that work on a public controversial pedagogy. Furthermore, taking into account all the above and in the frame of general audiovisual education, we suggest the research and development of a system that includes the public pedagogic of cinema, as a distinct educational tool, in all types of the typical educational levels.

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