IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND AMBIGUITY
IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S FILMS

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Abstract: This article examines the connections between thematic similarities in director Christopher Nolan's films and the development of an auteur persona for Nolan. Nolan's films, despite their seemingly disparate natures, remain in many ways thematically and stylistically similar. This similarity can be credited to the role of Nolan during their production. The author, it has been argued, provides a unifying force behind his or her texts which can help to clarify and expose meanings for the audience. Thus, while the ultimate meaning of a text is determined by the viewer, the framework of comprehension is presented by the auteur. It is achieving this unifying force that partially determines who is an auteur in contemporary Hollywood. Nolan's films are filled with ambiguity and unease, which are partially transmitted through journeys of identity construction and through the films' endings. These points engage with the audience and also ensure links between Nolan's films that attempt to ensure a group of films that develop an auteur persona for Nolan which is eventually reinforced through extra-textual sources. The identity crisis of the films' characters and the ambiguity of the endings contrast with the relative stability of Nolan's auteur persona in extra-textual materials, such as interviews, suggesting how to understand Nolan's claim to contemporary Hollywood auteur status.

Christopher Nolan's films, despite their seemingly disparate natures, remain in many ways thematically and stylistically similar. This similarity can be credited to Nolan's role during their production. A contemporary Hollywood auteur, or author, can be recognised by providing a unifying force behind his or her texts which can help to clarify and expose meanings for the audience. Thus, while the ultimate meaning of a text is determined by the viewer, the framework of comprehension is presented by the auteur. Achieving this unifying force partially determines who an auteur is—someone who can be considered an artist, instead of simply a director.

Furthermore, a contemporary Hollywood auteur, in this case Christopher Nolan, is someone who creates both a sense of unity within his films and a complementary auteur persona surrounding those films. This auteur persona incorporates the romantic notion of the traditional auteur (Caughie, ed. 1981) – a director who puts his or her personal vision in each film – and the commercial auteur (Corrigan 1991) – a director who uses the extra-textual materials to develop a personality apart from his or her films – into a revitalized auteur concept utilizing emerging technologies and interactive opportunities with the audience (Hill-Parks 2010). Michel Foucault suggested that "the author is what gives the disturbing language of fiction its unities, its nodes of coherence, its insertion in the real" (1981: 58). Nolan's auteur persona can be seen as providing the author function, which allows the viewer to create meaning from a set of disparate texts. However, while Nolan's auteur persona is the nodal point for these texts, the place where a system of signs and references is devised, he does not create these references in a vacuum, but within specific social contexts. This article claims that the current Hollywood auteur is one who is established through the various levels of discourse, but he or she always begins as an auteur with the quality of the films produced, whether the quality is traditional Hollywood, such as high production values and attention to narrative and character development, such as in the case of Nolan's films, or alternative, such as the realism and play with narrative seen in much of American independent film.

The following article focuses on the themes of ambiguity and identity construction, which are primary features of all of Nolan's films, to determine how he addresses ideas of authorship and identity within his films, which are also transmitted through his auteur persona outside of the films. Although mise-en-scene is normally analyzed in auteur studies, due to space limitations and because the discourses examined further in this research focus on Nolan's films' themes rather than style, themes will be the central preoccupation of the following analysis. It is through the quality of mise-en-scene and the thematic content of his films that Nolan's auteur persona, as an intelligent, innovative, and independent, though remote, director, emerges.

Nolan's films are filled with ambiguity and unease, which are partially transmitted through journeys of identity construction and through the films' endings. Identity is a frequently discussed but amorphous concept both in society and in film, since

> no one has only one identity, in the sense that everyone must, consciously or not, identify with more than one group, one identity. This is about more than combining multiple identities in an 'additive' way. […] Different forms of identity, then, should be seen as interactive and mutually constitutive rather than 'additive.' They should also be seen as dynamic.
>
>   (Lawler 2008: 3)

Thus, identity is a multi-layered and changeable concept. The characters in Nolan's films can be seen through different versions of their identity in this way. For example Bruce Wayne is seen as a son by his parents and butler Alfred, a friend to Rachel, a playboy to Gotham society, a hero to those he saves, and an enemy to those he fights. Additionally, most of the characters are actively seeking to confirm the multiple parts of that identity. The characters in Nolan's films struggle both to define and evolve their identities, so it is not only identity that is explored, but also the importance of *developing* that identity and the resulting ambiguity in the conclusions that marks the characters in Nolan's films.

Nolan's films rarely take clear moral stands thus complicating the boundary between good and evil which in turn leads to a conscious absence of concrete resolutions. While the films are loaded with visual signifiers that often determine the sympathy of the (usually) male protagonist, Nolan does not actually allow the audience any clear allegiances. Furthermore, the endings of the films are left in an uneasy truce between characters and meanings, with the audience being offered only a partial resolution. The ambiguity frames possible resolutions, but forces the audience to examine their own understandings, which also highlights the multiple ways identity is understood for each viewer. This process is mirrored within and outside of the films in the development of Nolan's auteur persona. The auteur persona is a stable but changeable one that requires a specific set of criteria to make it distinct, but needs the ability to evolve in response to changing industrial, cultural, and social conditions. Like the identities of the characters analyzed below, the auteur persona is always situated socially and is influenced by outside discourses including official, critical, and audience discourses.

While issues of identity are not unique in cinema, Nolan's films nonetheless offer a picture of how identity can be worked through the cinematic medium. There are many ways to examine identity construction; however, in this essay identity in Nolan's films will be viewed in regards to the social and performative acts used to form identity in contemporary culture (for example,

Goffman, 1971; Doniger, 2005). To look at identity in terms of performance and presentation in the social also allows for consideration of how postmodern thought has influenced identity, for "if the *modern* 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* 'poi' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open" (Bauman, 1996: 18, emphasis in original). The characters in these films are both modern and postmodern in the sense that while they strive to develop an identity, they can never create a stable or fully integrated persona. Adopting multiple performances which then obscure what is the real or authentic identity, if one even exists, however, reflects a postmodern sensibility in relation to identity, as "from the postmodern perspective, as the pace, extension and complexity of modern societies accelerate, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile" (Kellner, 1992:143). In Nolan's films, and in the construction of the auteur persona within and outside of the films, there is constantly a breaking apart of stable identities despite an attempt to reconstruct some semblance of continuity and wholeness. This article will briefly examine four of Nolan's seven feature films, *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), *Batman Begins* (2005), and *The Dark Knight* (2008), in relation to how Nolan portrays identity construction, especially relating to fragmentary and performative identity, demonstrating a part of Nolan's "auteur signature" within the films. This auteur signature, as mentioned above, consists partially of a commitment to use narrative and visual techniques to put the viewer in the mind of the character, while still remaining somewhat ambiguous, participating in construction of the identities.

Following and *Memento*

Nolan's earliest films centre on concepts of identity construction, exploring through narrative and style the essence of how an individual creates, or fails to create, an identity, establishing Nolan's interest in investigating the formation of identity and notions of agency and authority, both in terms of the individual characters and for Nolan's place as the auteur. As Steph Lawler notes, "the very construction of an identity is configured over time and through narrative" (2008: 17). This can refer both to the narrative that one communicates to others, but also the narrative one internally believes. Both the writer (Jeremy Theobald) in *Following* and Leonard (Guy Pearce) in *Memento* are confused about who they are, and they each attempt to construct an identity through repeatedly providing the narrative for others, unlike the characters in *Batman*

Begins and *The Dark Knight*, discussed below, who tend to act out rather than tell their narratives. Through his position as writer and director – the auteur – Nolan reflects his characters' narration by providing the stories and identities for those in the film. He primarily uses an unconventional narrative structure to interrogate identity construction, creating a situation which asks the audience to actively participate in forming meaning by watching carefully to make sense of the time and status of each character.

Following introduces Nolan's interest in creating a sense of unease for the characters and the audience. None of the protagonists, including the narrator, are clear about what is occurring in the film. The young writer, herein known as Bill, tells a police officer (John Nolan) "the following, it's my explanation. Well, more of an account of what happened,"[i] positioning the film from the beginning as one version of a story, not the truth. As in classic films noir such as *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946) or *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941), the central character is shrouded in mystery from the start of the film despite often acting as narrator, almost challenging the viewer to seek an actual truth outside of the specific story being told. By structuring the film partially to recall these older films, Nolan placed *Following*, and later *Memento*, within a particular genre framework, engendering specific expectations for the audience. These characters, though being presented as straight-forward and simply surrounded by untrustworthy characters, can often be seen to be hiding something. This incredulity towards the narrative is heightened by the frequent cuts to different points in the chronology of the story. As the audience sees Bill's version of events, near the end of the film they are also allowed to see character interactions that happen outside of Bill's presence, further calling his narrative into question. The breaking of the narrative, and with it a sense of linear time, creates a tension and suspense in the film, not just about the events of the film, but how the truth of any situation or identity is established. Offering unorthodox methods to view time could change how the audience considers their own relationship with time (Harvey 1990: 205).

In these two films, as well as in the opening sequences of *Batman Begins*, discussed below, the alternating diary structure of *The Prestige* (2006) and the fluid, multi-levelled nature of time in *Inception* (2010), Nolan challenges how time is related to the construction of self. David Denby proposes that the contemporary trend in Hollywood to construct non-linear narratives could be a

new way for directors to interact with their audiences, and "may be trying to jolt us into a new understanding of art, or even a new understanding of life" (2007: unpaginated). Time, in the case of Nolan's films, is compounded with identity construction, and Nolan attempts to use narrative structure to emphasise the interrelatedness of identity and time, challenging the audience to engage with the film and the themes on a wider scale.

Bill constructs several personalities to present to other characters as well as the audience, and it is unclear who the authentic Bill is. The fluidity of identity is exacerbated by the fact that no one's identity is confirmed, including Bill's. The main female (Lucy Russell) is never named, but is simply known as "the woman" or "the blonde". Cobb (Alex Haw) self-reports his name as well, and knowingly gives false information about himself to both Bill and the Blonde. Each character in the film appears to resist revealing too much information about him or herself, instead relying on constructed images. The characters are carefully playing their roles, often unbeknownst to the others. Bill believes in the role that he is playing, a suave burglar defending a righteous woman, until it is made apparent to him by the Blonde and the policeman that he remains simply a writer. Despite his realisation, Bill has become so enmeshed in his role that he can no longer return to the writer role and is instead being charged for murder and theft. *Following* establishes Nolan's fascination with an unreliable central character and interest in using narrative and simple camera techniques to heighten the unease and ambiguity of the film. In the final scene, Cobb appears in a crowded West End street, standing still among the sea of people. This mirrors the first scene of the film, in which Bill stands against the crowd. However, while Bill came out of the crowd, Cobb slowly disappears in the drift as the police officer tells Bill that no record of Cobb exists. These concluding visuals emphasise the precarious position and undependable nature of Bill's narrative.

The fractured narrative and characters of *Following* represent a relatively postmodern conception of identity. Kellner suggests "modern identities – however multiple and subject to change – appeared to be more stable, whereas there currently seems to be more acceptance of change, fragmentation, and theatrical play with identity than was the case in the earlier, heavier, and more serious epoch of modernity" (1992: 174). Bill has repeated his identity narrative in so many ways to so many people that he no longer has a stable identity to rely on. Furthermore, others,

especially Cobb, have usurped Bill's identity, with his help, and transformed it beyond a simple narrative. No matter what Bill tells the police about his "version of events", the tangible evidence of identity – fingerprints, dead bodies, the murder weapon – indicate Bill as being something else. His identity remains uncertain because of the conflicting narratives offered, forcing the audience to make a determination of truthfulness within the structure presented.

The refusal to create a concrete, or traditionally uplifting, ending to his films marks a stylistic signature in Nolan's films which is mirrored in the director's portrayal of identity. While Nolan is not the only director to create ambiguous endings, the consistency with which he refuses to provide answers in or about his films is significant. To some extent, as with *Following* and the films discussed later in the article, Nolan's films continue to challenge the audience after the initial viewing by allowing several interpretations to be available at the conclusion. Although in watching a film the author holds the majority of the power because he or she chooses the symbols communicated on screen, the viewer also holds power over how he or she interprets and understands those symbols. By intentionally constructing ambiguous endings Nolan further shifts the power to the individual viewer, although always retaining some power through the structure of the film and the symbols therein. He creates a distinct auteur persona in this way by creating a frame for interpretation rather than distinct meanings. As Foucault notes "every power relationship implies, at least in potentia, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit a point of reversal" (2000: 346). Ultimately, there is always a form of struggle between creator and recipient to have power over communication and understanding, but Nolan actively encourages the audience, on some level, to participate in the struggle for power over the meaning of his films. While other directors might also participate in this struggle by encouraging the audience to make multiple meanings, Nolan's consistent engagement with the theme of identity, and the extension of that into aspects outside of his films, such as interviews and DVD extras, provides a distinctive aspect of Nolan's auteur persona.

Memento presented a sequel of sorts to *Following* in terms of the central ideas and narrative conceits of ambiguity and unreliability of the notion of truth, which were explored in the earlier

film. Leonard, the central protagonist, cannot recall the immediate past and so is always in the present. He constantly repeats the narrative of the injury that resulted in his short-term memory loss, which comprises the primary component of his current identity, to the other characters in the film. The tension between having a fixed knowledge of self – Leonard believes he is a righteous avenger – and the constant introduction of contradictory information helps to highlight the conflict between a modern, internal identity and a postmodern, social identity. This tension is further heightened by Leonard's internal identity being often mediated through different forms, such as photographs and his tattoos. The narrative structure of the film emphasises Leonard's inability to remember, as well as his need to tell his narrative, by moving between a backwards and forwards storyline, intercutting at key points in the plot.

Throughout the film Leonard seems to be the victim of circumstance, trying desperately to keep control of his life by leaving himself notes, tattoos, and pictures, creating narratives of self. As the film progresses, however, it appears that Leonard's system is leading him astray and that those around him, especially Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) and Natalie (Carrie-Ann Moss), are manipulating Leonard for their own gains. These three characters attempt to construct a narrative that allows them to gain the most. While Teddy and Natalie appear to have the power in writing the narrative, it is ultimately Leonard, by setting his "detective case" of trying to find his wife's murderer and his constant repetition of the Sammy Jankis story, who drives the narrative. By positioning Leonard as an unreliable character in the film, Nolan has again forced the audience to question the validity of the information they have been given. However, because they can still trust in Nolan's authorship, due to the quality of the narrative structure and content, Nolan's place as an auteur is more secured. Nolan helps to place the ambiguous or unclear notions of the text in to a sense of reality (Foucault, 1981: 57-59), grounding the audience's understandings of the film and Leonard's character.

In the end of the film, which is the story's beginning, it is left ambiguous whether Leonard is truly in control of his identity construction or is once again being manipulated by outside forces, an ambiguity emphasised further by the DVD extras. In the director's commentary, available on most versions of the DVD, Nolan seizes upon the final scenes while recording his commentary to stress his control over the narrative structure, but simultaneously questions the nature of

authorship by providing multiple commentary endings, which are randomly selected as the viewer listens.[ii] In this way the official discourse develops concepts and themes from the films to enhance Nolan's auteur persona. As in Nolan's other films, such as the focus on Batman at the end of *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* as will be discussed below, *Memento* concludes with a close-up on the protagonist, placing Leonard as the centre of the narrative. Leonard has just declared that he chooses to believe that he is still searching for his wife's killer, claiming, in close-up as he is driving away from Teddy,

> I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe my actions still have meaning. Even if I can't remember them I have to believe that when my eyes are closed the world's still here. Do I believe the world's still here?

At this point there is a cut from Leonard closing his eyes to a black and white image of his wife, caressing a new tattoo on his chest reading "I've done it." Reverting to an extreme close-up of Leonard's closed eyes, the image is saturated with light. He continues his monologue:

> Is it still out there? [His eyes open.] Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind us of who we are. I'm no different. [Pulls up in front of a tattoo parlour] …now where was I? [Close-up on Leonard's face, smiling.]

Leonard actively rejects the evidence around him, despite saying that he is still part of the world, leaving the audience to decide if Leonard or Teddy is correct, or if neither is telling the truth. By placing the camera firmly on Leonard's eyes throughout the monologue, Nolan implies that Leonard's truth is only in his mind, not in the larger world, leaving precise meanings open for interpretation. However, each person is acted upon by a multitude of factors. Although Leonard is convinced, on some level, that his authentic identity is formed by a fundamental factor from within and can be controlled by him, Nolan has suggested that the truth, and identity, is far more complicated and unsure.

Batman Begins and *The Dark Knight*

One of the most visible places identity is worked through in popular culture is that of the superhero, and Nolan continues his exploration of identity formation within the Batman legend. Similar to other superhero films, the Batman legend's most obvious interaction with identity is in the issue of dual personas (similar to Clark Kent/Superman, Peter Parker/Spider-Man). In *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* the double identities portrayed by the characters – such as Bruce Wayne, Henri Ducard, and Jonathan Crane – do not merely act as devices to hide the

character's alter ego, but also function as the key factor in the motivations of several of the characters. For example, the dual personas also fuel a high level of duplicity within the films, especially in *Batman Begins*; however, this duplicity is incorporated as part of the identity construction of the characters in all of Nolan's films. For example, in *Batman Begins* Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) meets Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson) who teaches him how to fight evil, both physically and mentally. However, Ducard reveals himself later as Ra's Al Ghul, the head of the League of Shadows, who is intent on destroying Bruce's Gotham, and so must be killed by Bruce/Batman. This is similar to *Memento*, discussed above, when Leonard realises that beliefs he has held as true – that he is seeking vengeance for his wife's death – have been challenged by Teddy's double personas, so he plots to kill Teddy and thus keep his beliefs intact. In these somewhat extreme examples, double identities which are purposely hidden from the protagonist amount to duplicity, which then forces the protagonist into action to retain, or construct, a certain identity. The characters' duplicity also encourages the audience to actively engage in the film to discern the characters' true identities and motivations.

Because of the focus on identity construction, rather than a static notion of identity, Nolan's characters also must negotiate their identities through multiple ways of being, helping to present a more realistic and character-driven version of Batman than in past film adaptations. Stuart Hall notes, "identities are never unified and, in late modern [or postmodern] times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions" (1996: 4). In *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* Bruce Wayne struggles internally, and then externally, to attempt to determine what he believes to be his authentic identity. To achieve this, however, Bruce must perform an alternate persona. In the 1950s sociologist Erving Goffman (1971) suggested that in social interactions individuals *perform* roles in society, rather than simply being these roles. However, as Steph Lawler suggests, Goffman "is arguing for something much more profound than the ideas that we play roles: he is arguing that roles, or performances, far from making the 'true person' (as is commonly assumed) are *what makes us persons*" (2008: 106, emphasis in original). Thus Bruce Wayne's performance as Batman helps to make him into a more complete person, rather than being a distinct persona that is only enacted to disguise the true self, as each person performs at least one aspect of their identity. Therefore, Batman is another facet of

Bruce's identity, helping to shape him into the person he is, rather than a completely separate identity. This also suggests that multiple narratives guide each person's identity, although they are intricately related. The playboy and Batman both exist because Bruce Wayne can fund them and because each narrative provides a crucial part of his overall identity. In deciding to become Batman, Bruce comments that "people need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy. I can't do that as Bruce Wayne – as a man. As flesh and blood I can be ignored. I can be destroyed. But as a symbol, as a symbol I could be incorruptible. I can be everlasting." Bruce realises that he needs to *perform* an identity beyond his own to become what he needs to be, which ultimately evolves into a new form of the Bruce Wayne identity.

The construction of the character is further emphasised through the narrative structure leading to the decision to perform Batman. Nolan inserts frequent flashbacks throughout the early part of the story so that Bruce's past and present are woven together without clear delineation between the two. For example, the film begins with young Bruce (Gus Lewis) playing in the garden with young Rachael (Emma Lockhart) before Bruce falls down a well. The film then shifts without obvious transition to an older Bruce in a Chinese prison camp meeting Ducard and the League of Shadows before returning again to the incident in the garden with young Bruce. There is little indication apart from the age of the actors that one scene is occurring in the past and one in the present. Since neither scene fits the traditional notion of the Batman narrative presented in earlier films, the hyperconsciousness of popular narrative (Collins, 1991), along with possible knowledge of Nolan's previous films' narrative structures, might lead to the audience assuming that the entire sequence, including the prison scenes, is a form of flashback. It is only with Bruce's speech, quoted above, that it becomes clear how the past has informed the present, leading to the formation of Batman. The jumping of narrative time reflects ideas of postmodern identity formation, as it can be considered that postmodern identity can lead to the "*fragmentation* of time into *episodes*, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self contained. Time is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools" (Bauman 1996: 25, emphasis in original). In real life identity can feel, not like a linear path, but like specific events in time that combine to inform the identity one performs. The presentation of the early construction of the Batman persona mirrors the fragmentation of identity through time and space, but also offers an example of how these multiple parts can result in a more cohesive

identity. The narrative structure helps to stress the fragmented nature of identity, but also because the multiple parts are placed together as a singular narrative under Nolan's authority and auteur persona, the viewer trusts these fragments develop into a more or less stable identity.

As Bruce builds the character of Batman through a trial and error process with Alfred and Lucius (Morgan Freeman), he also establishes a third persona, that of "Bruce Wayne" the playboy. Alfred reminds Bruce that although he has now dedicated himself to a life of crime fighting, he must still appear to be the millionaire-playboy to the world. If Bruce simply disappeared into Wayne Manor, his home, as Alfred explains, "strange injuries, a non-existent social life. These things beg the question as to what exactly Bruce Wayne does with his time and his money" and so Bruce has to explain himself in regards to the social standards set for him. In essence, not only is Bruce pretending to be Batman, but also pretending to be himself. Wendy Doniger suggests that the theme of impersonating yourself "tells us that many people must put on masks to discover who they are under the covert masks they usually wear, so that the overt mask reveals rather than conceals the truth, reveals the self beneath the self" (2005: 3). Bruce is not simply himself or Batman, but something in between. He invents "Bruce" so that Batman may be hidden; however, in the end it is unclear which character is the authentic identity.

In Nolan's *Batman*, Bruce is moving further from an internal identity to one that is more socially defined. Rachel (Katie Holmes) admonishes "Bruce" for acting the playboy; "it's not who you are underneath; it's what you do that defines you." It is the identity that is on display for the world, interacting with others, that ultimately, for Nolan's characters, defines who they are as "identity needs to be understood not as belonging 'within' the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations" (Lawler 2008: 8). Similarly, Bill's and Leonard's primary identities, in *Following* and *Memento* respectively, were the most public ones, not necessarily their internal senses of self. The identities formed by both the characters and Nolan are never fully stable or declared authentic, but always left with some unease. Douglas Kellner notes "one is never certain that one has made the right choice, that one has chosen one's 'true' identity, or even constituted an identity at all. The modern self is aware of the constructed nature of identity and that one can always change and modify one's identity at will" (1992: 142). Kellner, following the general argument by Huyssen (1986), argues that identity is always in flux

due to changing context and influences. Following this, because the importance of social aspects the personas created by Batman or Nolan are always able to be changed given certain conditions or moments of history.

Emphasising the changeable and uncertain nature of identity presented in the film, *Batman Begins* refuses to have a concrete ending, with a coda that leaves questions rather than resolving them. Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman) informs Batman that things will only get worse with inmates from Arkham Asylum, including the Scarecrow, escaped during the siege in the Narrows and a new villain appearing, one who leaves joker cards at his crimes. Although this could be seen as simply an opening for the inevitable sequel, it can also be read as a refusal of a resolution. Bruce/Batman seems to have become comfortable with his internal struggle of dual (triple) personas, but he ignores the larger picture presented to him. He has not fought and won; he has changed the nature of the fight, which has now become more difficult. Placing this as the last scene of the film, rather than the light-hearted dénouement in the ruins of Wayne Manor with Alfred and Rachel, Nolan has chosen to challenge the audience's ideas of good versus evil by suggesting that Batman's war against crime, and his own identity construction, are unfinished.

Figure 1 – *The Dark Knight* Poster (courtesy: Warner Bros.)

While *Batman Begins* focuses on the internal development of Bruce/Batman/"Bruce" and the influence of the social on that development, there are also external individuals, such as Henri Ducard/Ra's Al Ghul and Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy), who act as opposites to Bruce and help define his performance of identity. However, outside individuals, acting as a sort of double, play a larger role in shaping Batman's identity in *The Dark Knight*, primarily in

regards to the characters the Joker (Heath Ledger) and Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). The three men form a triangle of specific ideals, forming doubles of each other as well as each performing individual dual personas (see Figure 1). The Joker is introduced with no back-story, except for the one he tells about his facial scars, which he alters for each telling. The lack of a specific origin for the Joker contrasts markedly with Bruce/Batman, since *Batman Begins*, which is referenced in *The Dark Knight*, is primarily concerned with the details of Batman's origin. This situation positions the men as opposites; Batman has a distinct beginning and alternate persona while the Joker is undefined, preaching chaos as a unifying theory. Both men create a narrative around themselves, and "through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves" (McAdams 1993: 11). The stories told – one of unity and one of chaos – define how the other characters and the audience view the men.

District Attorney Harvey Dent is also situated as an opposite to Batman, but with similar ideals rather than contrasting ones. Both Dent and Batman work to rid Gotham of criminals, but the former works within the legal system while the latter evades the legal system, even when enlisting help from Gordon. Bruce sees an escape from Batman and "Bruce" through the ideals espoused by Dent. Apart from the narrative parallels and contrasts of the characters, there are specific visual aspects linking the men. All three characters are portrayed early in the film in action, with Batman fighting criminals in the car park, Dent attacking a would-be assassin in the court room, and the Joker performing a magic trick for Gotham's underworld bosses. Each character is developed in relation to each other rather than individually as in Nolan's earlier films, resulting in the construction of what a hero actually is, a theme throughout the film. Nolan leaves the idea of the hero undefined, which allows the audience to interpret the meaning in the film in several ways. However, as in his other films, the framework for meaning is always firmly established by Nolan.

The Dark Knight creates an ambiance of unease throughout the film by constantly shifting identities and allegiances. There is no clear good guy or bad guy, with the Joker standing up to the crime lords, Dent dissolving into Two-Face, and Bruce retreating into Batman. In the final scenes of the film, the Joker and Batman ultimately refuse to kill each other, while Dent attempts

to shoot a boy. To protect the ideals he shared with Dent, Batman adopts the role of anti-hero, rejecting traditional notions of good or bad, explaining to Gordon, "sometimes truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." The creation of an anti-hero, or at least a non-heroic protagonist, to help preserve a semblance of morals and ideals occurs throughout Nolan's films, but most prominently in the traditional superhero role of Batman. Although some members of the audience would recognise the work of Frank Miller's Batman graphic novels influencing this focus on Batman as an anti-hero, it also continues the idea of the postmodern identity. As Lyotard suggests "the narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (2004: 124). It is no longer possible, in the world created by Nolan, to have traditional heroes or villains. However, as with his other films, in the end this in itself may be a performance, as there are still certain morals and guidelines. The final scenes of the film indicate an end to a world of heroes, and Gordon notes Batman is "not a hero. He's a silent protector, a watchful guardian, a dark knight." As in the end of *Batman Begins,* Nolan positions the resolution as incomplete, full of explosions and confusion, rather than the "good guys" beating the "bad guys", because it is unclear who falls in to each category. Many of the characters in these films, especially with Bruce, must pretend to be a specific role – the anti-hero, the clown, the saviour – to ultimately reveal who they really are – the hero, the criminal, the fallen idealist.

Conclusion

Within Nolan's films lies a concern with the formation and mutability of identity. Although identity is a frequent theme within film, it is the consistency with which Nolan's films centre on the confusion of identity as a central theme that marks it as a significant point to consider. The ambiguity with which identity is constructed is reflected in the endings that refuse to present clear resolutions. Identity is a process in these films, as it often is in life, and the decision to avoid closure in the films both offers a way for audience members to provide their own interpretations for the films. However, at the same time Nolan is asserting his authorship and power over the film by seeming to hold the "true" answer just out of reach. This is most explicit in *Inception*, where the film cuts to black on the spinning top. Nolan engages with the viewers by leaving them with an unresolved question, but retains power through the structure of the film. The identity crisis of the characters and the ambiguity of the endings in Nolan's films contrast

with the relative stability of Nolan's auteur persona in extratextual materials, such as interviews, to provide a helpful avenue to understand his claim to contemporary auteur status. The conflation of he films' themes with his external auteur persona, that of a creative and independent Hollywood director, creates a unified filmic world and secures an identity, at least for now, as an auteur.

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Notes

[i] All film dialogue transcribed by author from the DVD versions of each film.

[ii] There are four endings to Nolan's DVD commentary. In the first version, Nolan's voice is played backwards, so is garbled and incomprehensible. In the second version he describes the action and some basic trivia. In the third version Nolan states that Teddy has lied throughout the film, and is continuing to lie, and so should not be believed. In the fourth version, Nolan says that Teddy is telling the truth to Leonard. See Douglas Bailey (2002) and Johannes Duncker (n.d.) for a map to the DVD extras.

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