

## The Interplay between Copy and Reality: Deciphering the First Phase of Simulacrum through Christopher Nolan's *Following*

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### Abstract

Baudrillard devises the successive phases of reality; first being the symbolic order that remains true to the reality, then start phases of simulacrum where copy begins to take the place of reality and by the third phase, reality is completely subsided with its copies, he leaves the Real outside because there are only different manifestations of real that interchange meanings within themselves. Thus, the whole system is an illusion of real. This paper wishes to analyze the first phase of Simulacrum through Christopher Nolan's film *Following* (1998). To study Nolan's work within the background of these concepts gives us a deeper understanding of his movies and their relation with our society. Most of his movies appear as a linkage, forming a chain where the realization of the protagonist of his relationship with the society increases with every other movie. In fact, with the genre of noir through *Following* Nolan finds an opportunity to experiment with the spectrum of reality, the objective and subjective, mainly the confrontation between the two, and how an individual shapes himself amidst that.

**Keywords:** Baudrillard, Simulacrum, Christopher Nolan, *Following*, Reality

In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And Time will have his fancy  
To-morrow or to-day.

- W H Auden (*As I Walked Out One Evening*)

The absurdity of life is realised in the moments when we figure out that everything was for 'nothing'. Nothing becomes the definition of our life, and all our life we fight to save ourselves from this nothingness. The fecundity of life arises from the mirage of false satisfaction that we carve out around ourselves. "I see many people die," says Albert Camus,

“because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying” (Camus 5). What drives then, an individual, to lead a life that seemingly appears to be futile? The fear of death maybe, losing oneself into the oblivion, or maybe the identity itself that we have framed of ourselves with ritualized convention. What if that identity is snatched away? Will we be the same, or suicide become inevitable? Is human life but an identity and that becomes our reality? Are we nothing but the sum of the totality of roles that we play all along? Albert Camus has an interesting say on this:

But *practically* I know men and recognize them by their behaviour, by the totality of their deeds, by the consequences caused in life by their presence. Likewise, all those irrational feelings which offer no purchase to analysis. I can define them *practically*, appreciate them *practically*, by gathering together the sum of their consequences in the domain of the intelligence, by seizing them and noting all their aspects, by outlining their universe. It is certain that apparently, though I have seen the same actor a hundred times, I shall not for that reason know him any better personally. Yet if I add up the heroes he has personified and if I say that I know him a little better at the hundredth character counted off, this will be felt to contain an element of truth. For this apparent paradox is also an apologue. There is a moral to it. It teaches us that a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses. (Camus 10-11)

The problem with Western Philosophy has been that it mostly feeds on a belief that there is some entity called God or something like him that remains outside the custody of our experiences, and everything is a manifestation of that great soul. Baudrillard acknowledges the fact that the whole Western faith and all other good faiths got engaged in a war of representing that higher entity, in creating a sign that can represent him. Thus, God (Real) became simulated and ended being a part of simulacrum where every sign was not “exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12-13). Therefore, when he devises the successive phases of reality; first being the symbolic order that remains true to the reality, then start phases of simulacrum where copy begins to take the place of reality and by the third phase, reality is completely subsided with its copies, he leaves the Real outside because there are only different manifestations of real that interchange meanings within themselves. Thus, the whole system is an illusion of real. Seventeenth-century philosopher, Baruch de Spinoza (1632-77), declined the idea of God as being an external being. If we consider God to be an outside entity, that means that someone must have created God and hence, he will not be absolute. Therefore, God is but an expressive substance that has different manners of expressions. It is our limited imagination that wants to codify the higher entity in the manner

of heaven and hell. God cannot be separated and cannot be personified but is a power that expresses life (Colebrook 77). So, there is no real but its expression. Gilles Deleuze did not see simulacrum as the loss of the real. For him it is the real; the virtual power to grow ourselves to become what we have not accomplished yet. A force that enhances life. A medium that translates reality with newer expressions.

### **Christopher Nolan: Seeker/Contriver of Reality**

To study Hollywood film director Christopher Nolan's work within the background of these concepts gives us a deeper understanding of his movies and their relation with our society. Most of his movies appear as a linkage, forming a chain where the realization of the protagonist of his relationship with the society increases with every other movie. Where in *Following* we see Bill obsessed with the idea of being observed by other (Cobb) that will provide a ground of his existence. Cobb shows him how "reality" can be fabricated. The box that hides at a corner is the one that attracts most. People maneuver their box (metaphorically speaking) so as to be judged in a different light. The beginning of the movie shows us hands (of Cobb) placing objects in a box, which is revealed later that it was done to deceive Bill. The next movie, *Memento*, presents us with a protagonist who is susceptible and suspicious of his surroundings, has defined his living through habits and (re)creates his own version of reality to survive the absurdity of life. *Insomnia* gives us the story of a cop, Will Dormer, played by Al Pacino, who takes laws in his hands by placing the evidence of a crime so that a criminal can justly be punished. But then he encounters another criminal, Walter Finch, played by late Robin Williams, who witnesses him killing his partner accidentally and then manipulating the evidence to hide that he killed his partner. Dormer then finds himself in a situation where Walter questions his actions and draws a parallel between himself and Dormer. Walter being driven by guilt starts losing the sense of right and wrong. By the end of the movie, he loses the sense of his actions of why he did what he did. Therefore, he requests another cop, Ellie Burr, played by Hilary Swank, to file the right report of the events even if it costs Will Dormer his reputation so that the truth can emerge. If once someone manipulates the facts, a chain reaction starts where to hide one another lie has to be created. In *The Prestige*, Nolan ups the game with two protagonists where one has hidden the reality in his copy and the other in the obsession to find the truth starts simulating one. At the end when Borden reveals the secret of his magic trick, Robert Angier though curious refuses to see it because he believes his simulation is the best because it is the real magic. Cutter, played by Michael Caine, in the movie is cautious of the machine that simulates copies of Angier, that the world is not ready for something like this that can rupture the sense of real and illusion. Through his *Batman* trilogy, Nolan presents us with a hero, Bruce Wayne, who has created an alter ego of his in the form of Batman because he knows that he needs to become something more, something above the law so that he can right the wrong of the society. He is an extension of Will Dormer. Whereas Dormer being a part of the law was succumbed by it,

Bruce happened to become more, someone who stands outside the law to correct it. He then encounters his nemesis in the form of Ra's al Ghul, Joker, and Bane who in each turn bring forth the fact that there is no difference between them and the hero and it just needs a little push to bring him down among them. The third chapter has discussed in detail how Nolan has philosophized his outlook towards Capitalism and why such capitalist heroes need to thrive. Then comes *Inception* that has unanimously been hailed as a masterpiece, where Baudrillardian notion of reality is very much apparent within the dream within a dream a within dream concept of this movie. There can be multi-reality that can simultaneously coexist. One only needs to choose which kind of reality he wants to make for himself. In the ambiguous ending where it is still not clear whether Cobb has ended up in his dream or has come back to reality, it does not matter to him. He gets what he was willing all his life. Even if he has ended up in his dream, that is his reality now and that is the only thing that matters. In *Interstellar*, Nolan's protagonist deals within the cosmic reality, but among all the grand ideas of this movie, the root is sown into the relationship between a father and a daughter. Here, Nolan goes Kubrisque accentuating upon the theme that we, as human beings do not matter. What matters is the human species. All the talks, all the philosophy, it would not matter until and unless the human species survives. The past must support the present to make a better future. Nolan here stands against most of the cultural theorists who see our future as bleak and horrifying. The early drafts of this movie ended with Cooper dying inside the blackhole, and earth being destroyed later in future. But Nolan, not finding this ending fitting for the audience, rewrote the script and came with the current version of the movie. In the climax at the Cooper station, Cooper is awestruck to see the architecture of the space station where he sees the city being built upside down. The very scene reminds of *Inception* where Ariadne is testing the limits of dream architecture, turns a section of the city upside down that impresses and amazes Cobb at the same time. Thus, as Deleuze says about simulacra, that it let us achieve things we have not accomplished yet, Nolan weaves his cinematic dream in tune with Deleuze, dreaming a world within the hyperspace of his cinematic screen that may inspire his viewers to achieve the impossible.

### ***Following: The Loss of Real (Introduction to the First Phase of Simulacrum)***

Nolan in his first feature film *Following* (1998) attempts to trace the mystery behind the making of an individual; are we what our "make-believe" displays, or is there more to track under the sun? And that's what Bill, the protagonist of the movie, the "supposedly" budding writer, is hoping to find out through his observations (same as Albert Camus):

Bill: *Have you never listened to other people's conversations on the bus or on the tube? Seen somebody on the street that looks interesting or is behaving slightly oddly or something like that? Wondered what their lives involved, what they do, where they come from, where they go to? You watch somebody's behavior, and it raises a hundred thousand*

*questions, and I wanted to ask those questions, and I wanted to know what the answers were, and so I'd follow people to try and find out.*

To deal with the story of such a man, Nolan turned himself towards the genre of Noir that seems befitting for the theme. It is not the first, not even the last time that any filmmaker has chosen the path of noir to deal with such subject matter. The question comes first, why noir? Winfried Fluck tries to reason on this in his article "Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in "Film Noir"" that this genre particularly deals with the disillusionment, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair within which an individual is shown running around the circles to free himself from the trap. The movies show us the true colour of society which any typical movie does not. Thus, to enjoy such a movie must prepare us to face the reality of our society (Fluck 381-82). Similarly, when we go through *Following*, we do not come across the typical London that we are habitual to see in movies, rather Nolan takes us to the darker domains of the city. Also, when compared to a *gangster film* with the *film noir*, there is not much of a difference as both of them deal with the issue of crime. However, the major difference lies in the fact that in film noir the crime is committed by an ordinary citizen. In his article, Winfried Fluck discusses some of the traits of film noir that comes with the focus on the guilt (Fluck 385):

- 1) The "psychologization" of crime in film noir noted by Nino Frank in his article in 1946, "The Crime Adventure Story: A New Kind of Detective Film," that in these films the question doesn't remain as who has committed the crime but how the protagonist handles himself and the psychology of various characters who are friends and enemies at the same time.
- 2) The characteristic investigative narrative structure of film noir.
- 3) The use of flashback and voice-over as an essential trait of the screenplay.
- 4) The "dark" and often expressive visual style which attempts to give expression to subjective states of feeling.

Now, how many points does *Following* agree with? All. In fact, this genre gives an opportunity to Nolan to deal with the spectrum of reality, the objective and subjective, mainly the confrontation between the two, and how an individual shapes himself amidst that. The genre of *film noir* that he picked for this purpose, he continued with *Memento* and *Insomnia*, where the dichotomy of objective and subjective truths are apparent. The objective truth to which audience moves towards with the narrative, and the subjective truth that the characters make for themselves, and the split of the screen always keeps the intermixing of the two at bay.



*Following* is the story of a man, Bill, who aspires to be a writer. As a matter of fact, he is an ordinary unemployed man who is just bored of his life and tries different kinds of stuff so that he can bring some meaning out of his 'not so meaningful' life. While in his new pursuit of being a writer, he starts following individuals randomly who appears distinct to him so that he can get ideas of the characters for his novel. In doing so, he starts following a burglar, Cobb, who knows that the young man has been following him for days. So, he plans a trap for him, brings him under his supervision to show how to break into people's private lives and show them the worth of the things they have ("You take it away and show them what they had"). Bill falls for a girl who too is an accomplice of Cobb and becomes the cause for his doom. At the end, Bill goes to the police, to tell the truth believing, if he utters the truth then he will be trusted because the reality is supreme. However, this does not happen because police do not find any trace of Cobb, as Cobb in all his crimes succinctly maneuvered the evidence that pointed towards Bill. Thus, Bill becomes a criminal in his folly of trusting Cobb without ever thinking that he is making a deal with the devil which will never end well for him.

As simple as the story seems, it is not because of the absurd narration that Nolan chooses for this movie, also showing the early seeds of his signature style of filmmaking. There are three sets of Bill that we see in the movie; one with long hairs, the other with short hairs and with handsome appearance, and the last, the injured one. Nolan mixes all the three, giving no clue to the audience as what is transpiring on the screen, thus, entrapping audience onto the edge of their seats with the desire to know the 'truth.' However, it is not the readymade reality that we are going to be served with, instead of the reality that comes from the background of who we are. That is why, there goes on so much debate regarding any movie of Chris Nolan, on online portals and elsewhere as what the movie means, and *Following* remains no exception.

The protagonist of the movie, Bill, is the epitome of a postmodern man, celebrating the depthlessness of the society with the injections of acumen that he so proudly displays on the walls of his room, from Marilyn Monroe to Mark Rothko, similar to Prufrock who knows a lot but is afraid to do something concrete because he fears criticism. However, here is the whole point, that is, what we display is not what we are, and that is what Cobb believes. It is the tiny things, little details, memories that we hide away at some corner of our house, in a box maybe, that indeed "displays" of what we are. "Everyone has a box," says Cobb, "each thing tells something very intimate about the people. We're very privileged to see it. It's very rare." But why to intrude, why so much fuss? He reasons:

*It's like a diary. They hide it. But actually they want someone to see it.  
That's what I do. See their display. Flip sides of the same coin. This  
way they know that someone's seen it. That's what it's all about –*

*interrupting someone's life . . . they'll have to think for the first time in a long time, why they wanted all this stuff, what it's for. You take it away and show them what they had.*

Regarding the "box of secrets", Todd McGowan says:

The box of secrets represents what Plato calls the *agalma*, the secret treasure that the subject has and that attracts the desire of others. According to Nolan's metaphor (which follows Plato's), our interest in others (and in the cinema) derives from the idea of a box of secrets that we believe them to possess – a hidden knowledge of what is most singular about them. When Cobb takes Bill on his first break-in, he introduces the box as the *raison d'être* of the break-in. The box, like the diary, does not hold ordinary valuables but the little treasures that reveal what a person holds most precious. These treasures represent the owners' hidden desire, the essential kernel of their being. . . . Seeing the box involves seeing what the Other is when no one is looking. In this sense, it gives the onlooker an impossible perspective on the Other. (McGowan 22)

However, the question comes, what if someone deliberately placed the objects in the box to be judged from a different angle when exposed by someone? Just as in the opening shots we see hands placing objects in the box, and later we find out that Cobb placed them as such to deceive Bill. All along the film, we see Bill pushing harder to be recognized as someone that he is not. It is more like Hegelian master-slave dialectics which Cobb teaches to practice Bill by intruding into others' private collections and showing them that *you know* what they are. But what if someone has already developed a consciousness of his own, then what? Like Cobb knowingly places the objects into the box so as to be read differently. This changes the whole equation of awareness of self by the other because what then goes is the misreading, not of the other but of one's own personae. Moreover, that is what happened with Bill who desires to be acknowledged by someone, meets Cobb, a figure who needs no recognition, gives him the illusion of celebrating the status (D. Lloyd) which he is not and can never be, and thus, lastly, he gets entrapped and is reckoned as a criminal. Bill believes that if he utters the truth, then things will go all right:

*Bill: I'm gonna tell them everything. They'll believe me because it's the truth.*

*Blonde Lady: Not if you haven't got someone to backup your story.*

*Bill: You could.*

*Blonde Lady: I won't.*

*Bill: They'll make you because your lies won't stand up to the truth.*

The interesting fact is that even truth needs recognition. Not the Truth, but the truth that we all make for ourselves. In *Insomnia*, Walter Finch says to Dormer, “you don’t get to pick when to tell the truth. The truth is beyond that.” That is exactly what happens for Bill. The (mis)recognition that he was craving for all along; he has to deal with it when he finally gets one. Everything in this world is a construction, even if one thinks to know what they know. As Albert Camus says, “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers” (Camus 16). Thus, the misrecognition becomes a reality for Bill and the Real disappears in the process.

*Following*, thus, shows the early steps that Nolan takes in his journey of filmmaking where he repeatedly measures the different facets of reality. The Cobb we find in this movie plays with the mind of Bill, placing the ideas that are not his; one other Cobb appears in Nolan’s *Inception* who again plays with the memories of his subjects (and audience as well), and lays down the rules of injecting the ideas as *genesis* of one’s mind that has the power to change the course of his future. On the other side, there is a character, Leonard Shelby, who manipulates his own memories to create realities that will help him to sustain within his mundane existence. Thus, *Following* and *Memento* become the fertile ground for Nolan where he nurtures his cinematic vision and is continually experimenting along the same line.

### Conclusion

The case with Nolan is that his interpretation of simulacrum does not come with the feeling of abandoning it. There is no abandonment but acceptance. His characters though feed upon their subjective reality, they do not, like the narrator of *Fight Club* (1999), find themselves insomniac where for them nothing remains real but a copy of a copy of a copy. They do not create an alter ego like Tyler Durden with a wish to destroy the very system of networks they thrive on. Nor does his characters like Neo in *The Matrix* open their eyes one day and see that they were sleeping all along, and our world is nothing but an illusion. Some may see Nolan as an escapist, creating his cinematic universe that encourages the somnambulism, not letting us see what reality is. The matter of fact is, it is easy to feed on negative instincts, they attract us, and they appear as justifiable. To talk about a revolution that will bring down the whole system bringing equality among all seems to be the greatest idea. However, what such a revolution will do, the catastrophic results it will produce, one cannot even fathom. Also, the reality is, if any, that no such action is going to happen that will destroy the system we live in. The growth in the idea of Nolan’s movies has been towards this direction only. The grander they grew, the more hyperrealistic they developed, the more grounded they become in their themes, providing a glimpse of the absurdity of life.



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