



# CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

## PLAYBOY INTERVIEW:

*A candid conversation with the era-defining filmmaker on the through-lines that bind his sprawling canon—from Memento to The Dark Knight trilogy to his new World War II epic*

The gateway to the Los Angeles compound of Christopher Nolan, director-screenwriter of such cosmic brain-twisters as *Inception*, *Interstellar* and the *Dark Knight* trilogy, is a bit of an illusion, a false front. Visible from the tree-lined street is a gated, late-1930s Spanish-style home and a generic economy car squatting in the driveway. With the right lighting, the location could serve as one of those ostensibly benign and potentially lethal southern California backdrops in *Memento*, Nolan's noirish 2000 thriller about a man with faulty short-term memory who struggles to find his wife's murderer. Nolan once resided here, but now it serves as his postproduction facility; the garage contains his editing suite. Exit the building's rear doors and the bottom drops out as dramatically as one of the trapdoors in *The Prestige*, Nolan's 2006 tale of two rival magicians. A rambling expanse of green gives way to another head-spinning shift: Nolan's primary

residence, a much larger and more modern setup that faintly recalls the bold serenity of a Frank Lloyd Wright design.

"You can tell a lot about people from their stuff," observes a character in *Following*, Nolan's self-financed 1998 feature film debut. Indeed: Inside the soaring structure, light-suffused but somehow hushed and *Batman* moody, the living room is done up in cool, muted tones and furnished with low-slung chairs. Connecting shelves neatly lined with books reach the ceiling. A large framed photo of Stanley Kubrick's empty director's chair, a gift from *Interstellar* star Matthew McConaughey, occupies a place of honor. The abode, like the 46-year-old writer-director-producer who inhabits it, along with his wife, producer Emma Thomas, exudes good taste, intelligence, confidence—and a certain mysterious formality.

Christopher Nolan, creator of some of the most ambitious and challenging blockbusters

of the past 20 years—grossing more than \$4.2 billion in global aggregate box office and counting—was born in London on July 30, 1970. His father, Brendan Nolan, ran his own advertising agency, and his American mother, Christina, was a former flight attendant and later a teacher. The middle brother of three, wedged between the eldest, Matthew, and the youngest, Jonathan, Nolan grew up in London and Chicago. Dazzled by his first viewing of *Stars Wars* in 1977, he borrowed his father's Super 8 camera and began to make short films, casting his friends and, occasionally, action figures.

Nolan attended Haileybury and Imperial Service College and, later, University College London, which he sought out for its filmmaking facilities. There he met his wife-to-be, and with the technical equipment the school afforded its students he began to spend his off-hours shooting the short films *Tarantella* (1989) and *Larceny* (1996). Upon graduating, Nolan traveled



*"The Dark Knight Rises expresses what I'm afraid of—that our shared values and our cherished institutions are far more fragile than we realize."*



*"When I was about seven, my dad lent me his Super 8 camera, which, at the time, was expensive and high-end. I literally taped it to the bottom of our car and smashed it to bits."*



*"Dunkirk is all about physical process, all about tension in the moment, not backstories. It's all about, 'Can this guy get across a plank over this hole?'"*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAVIN BOND



the world, directing corporate and industrial videos and filming another short, *Doodlebug* (1997), in which a man driven to distraction by an insect finally hammers it with his shoe—only to discover he has flattened a tiny version of himself. In 2000, he and Thomas married; today they have four children.

In 1996, Nolan began shooting and Thomas began co-producing, on weekends, the self-financed, micro-budgeted *Following*, in which Jeremy Theobald plays a struggling writer who, desperate for raw material, shadows strangers through London and uncovers more about the city's criminal underbelly than he bargained for. Mounting success and acclaim followed, as well as a few unrealized projects (including an as-yet-unfilmed Howard Hughes movie, which Nolan considers his best script), but everything changed when, girded by the good reviews and box office for 2002's *Insomnia*, he met with Warner Bros. brass to propose a more relatable reboot of *Batman*. Three angsty and financially dizzying *Dark Knight* films later, Nolan found himself atop the movie-making universe, praised as a rare filmmaker who could breathe eccentricity, high art and bracing intelligence into the behemoth-scale international blockbuster. As one critic put it, Nolan and company helped wipe “the smirk off the face of the superhero movie.”

With an unbroken string of hits from *Memento* right up through 2014's *Interstellar*, Nolan is now about to unveil *Dunkirk*, a brawny, laconic World War II passion project that stars Tom Hardy, Mark Rylance and Kenneth Branagh, among others—including pop star Harry Styles in his first substantial acting gig. Even to critics and fans who have been prodding Nolan to make a more obviously personal movie, the PG-13-rated *Dunkirk* is a high-stakes gamble—but then, so was every other project he's taken on. We'll soon know whether Nolan's obsessive internet superfans, dubbed “Nolanites,” will follow their celluloid god into theaters to watch a real-life saga of stiff-upper-lip self-sacrifice, heroism and esprit de corps.

**Stephen Rebello**, who last interviewed Nolan's *Interstellar* star Matthew McConaughey, spent an afternoon at Nolan's live-work compound and filed this report: “Nolan's unblinking gaze, rich vocabulary and agile mind make it clear that he is, indeed, the visionary who, in *Inception*, sent Leonardo DiCaprio through the City of Light as it folds in on itself. Volleying ideas with him can almost make one feel like a character in one of his films—absorbed, spooked and often a step or two behind. As he sipped cup after cup of

Earl Grey tea, he let our conversation range from the nerdy (Brownian motion) to the playful (the irrefutable appeal of Harry Styles). He is averse to pettiness and bullshit, and though candid, he pumps the brakes when the conversation drifts outside his comfort zone. Several of his associates warned me that this interview would be ‘uncharted waters’ for a man as private as Nolan. But he navigated the sometimes choppy seas just fine.”

**PLAYBOY:** The *Dark Knight* trilogy, like most of your films, is drenched in paranoia, guilt, chaos and, sometimes, powerful depictions of societal collapse. What scares and unsettles you in real life?

**NOLAN:** In today's world, anarchy scares me the most. Both the Joker in *The Dark Knight* and Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* tap into things that are very powerful to me in terms of

## The thing that appalls me about the state we find ourselves in is that it feels increasingly self-inflicted.

the breakdown of society. With Bane, it's the fear of demagoguery and where that can lead. *The Dark Knight Rises* is far more extreme in that regard than I think anybody realized while watching it. In the first two *Batman* films, we'd had the threat of the breakdown of society, the threat of things going horribly wrong. With *The Dark Knight Rises*, we wanted to make a film in which we said, “Okay, let's actually go there,” so we thought about people in Manhattan being dragged out of their Park Avenue homes. We really tried to go there, and we did, and I think we got away with that one. [laughs]

**PLAYBOY:** Got away with it because some moviegoers and critics completely miss that kind of pointed political commentary when it's couched in a comic-book movie?

**NOLAN:** I never saw these films as comic-book movies. My thought was, I am going to try to make great movies first and foremost. But an iconic character like *Batman* does give you

certain latitude with the audience. They'll follow you to places they wouldn't follow you without that familiar icon in the center. *The Dark Knight Rises* expresses what I'm afraid of—that our shared values and our cherished institutions are far more fragile than we realize. A lot more people than there were a year ago are as afraid of that as I am now.

**PLAYBOY:** Considering your fear, how pessimistic or optimistic are you that our shared values and cherished institutions will survive?

**NOLAN:** When the chips are down, I've got a lot of faith in humanity and faith that things will work out. Some of my friends will be amused to hear me say that I'm an optimist, because I often present myself in a very pessimistic light. I worry and complain about a lot of things in today's world. I want the world to be better than it is right now, and I have faith that, eventually, it will be. Right now, though,

it's looking like we are condemned to live in interesting times. The thing that appalls me about the state we find ourselves in is that it feels increasingly self-inflicted. We were making great progress in the world. Things were going well. We have had two generations of prosperity, two generations in the West that didn't have direct experience of war. I'm very frightened that this leads people to not remember the gravity of how wrong things can go in this world.

**PLAYBOY:** The power of dreams and nightmares is one of your many themes in *Inception* and elsewhere. Do you have persistent dreams or nightmares?

**NOLAN:** I've never fought in a war. It's my worst nightmare to do so.

**PLAYBOY:** A majority of critics and fans seem to welcome the non-

linear storytelling, complexity, ambiguity and cutting-edge science you bring to your movies. Do your detractors ever confront you about making movies that are too chilly or just plain baffling?

**NOLAN:** I've had a lot of that response. I've skipped out of the back of movie theaters—like at the end of *Inception*—before people could catch up to me. Alan Parker once observed that all cinema is manipulative, and I suppose that's true. I try not to be overly manipulative—or I try not to be obvious about it. That gives people a little more freedom to interpret the movies their way, bring what they want to it. I've had people write about my films as being emotionless, yet I have screened those same movies and people have been in floods of tears at the end. It's an impossible contradiction for a filmmaker to resolve. In truth, it's one of the things that is really exciting about filmmaking, though. I seem to be making films that serve as Rorschach tests.



**PLAYBOY:** So, unlike old-time Hollywood director Howard Hawks, who admitted that even he couldn't make heads or tails of the plot of his classic 1940s detective thriller *The Big Sleep*, you can explain every twist and turn of your movies?

**NOLAN:** I think Hawks knew exactly what was going on but was probably making a point about what matters. Premise matters as opposed to plot—plot being the stuff than can fall away. I have to be fully in control of the mechanism and underlying reality of the film, even if I want an ambiguous response from the audience. I had an interesting moment with my brother Jonathan during the Venice Film Festival in 2000, the first time we ever showed *Memento* publicly. I had no idea whether we would get booted out of the cinema, but we got a standing ovation that went on and on. Afterward, I was asked at a press conference what the meaning of the ending was, and I gave my response. While I was having dinner with my brother later, he said, "You can't ever do that." I was like, "Well, I just answered the question." He said, "The point of the film you made is that your opinion isn't any more valid than anyone else's." I hadn't thought of it in that way, but a lightbulb kind of went off. The film has a productive ambiguity to the end, as does *Inception*. I have to know the truth as I see it for that ambiguity to be genuine, as opposed to it being an evasion. But the point Jonathan made to me and that I've carried with me ever since is that I can't ever tell people what I think, because they will always elevate that above the ambiguity, the mystery. And they shouldn't, because the text, the grammar of the film is telling you: *You can't know these things*. They're unknowable, because they're unknowable for the character.

**PLAYBOY:** Speaking of ambiguity and mystery, over the past few years your collaborators have publicly described various unique personality traits of yours. It has been noted that you constantly drink Earl Grey tea, especially when you're working on the set or on location. Considering how you've been doing just that since this conversation began, let's call that rumor true. Do you also carry your American and British passports at all times?

**NOLAN:** At all times? That would be—

**PLAYBOY:** Okay, at most times?

**NOLAN:** In 1999, after the Rotterdam film festival, I left for the airport to catch a plane to London for a meeting. I didn't bring my passport. Travel is very important to me. My mom was a flight attendant, and when I was 15 we got free airplane tickets, so I was able to travel the world. Always being efficient at travel, I never check a bag. This once, I went, Oh, it's

the EU—and therefore I wouldn't necessarily need a passport. It was a complete brain fart. Finding yourself at the airport with a plane to catch without your passport? I still travel so much that, yeah, when I'm working, I keep my passport with me at all times, in a safe place.

**PLAYBOY:** Checking out another rumor, can you be reached by e-mail?

**NOLAN:** No. I don't have an e-mail address.

**PLAYBOY:** If I were given a phone number, told it was yours and decided to call it—

**NOLAN:** Nothing would ring. I don't have one. [laughs]

**PLAYBOY:** And you don't allow cell phones on set?

**NOLAN:** I don't tolerate distraction, so I don't tolerate people using their phones on set because they are exiting the bubble of our creative process, exiting the reality we're creating. Their brain is off somewhere else. They're no

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longer collaborating. We've been through different phases. We used to have people not bring their phones at all, but that's not practical now. Now it's that they're switched off, so no one uses them. If you need to use the phone, leave, go use it. That way there's no pretense of sneaking a glance. I've had crew members who chafed at that but actually came to value it, because they can lose themselves in the work for the whole morning and then catch up with messages at lunchtime. I also don't tolerate lateness. If somebody's on time and engaged, anything else is fair game.

**PLAYBOY:** You're very dapper and buttoned-up right now in a blazer, vest and pocket square. Barring extremes of weather or terrain, is this how you dress on set?

**NOLAN:** Other crew members get to dress in a practical manner for the job they have to do. I've always worn a jacket like this. Back in school, I had a uniform and got very used to the jacket pockets and having my things right with

me. When I started making properly budgeted movies with real crews, I remember going to pick up a sandbag and realizing I'd offended the crew because that's not my job. I've always felt I should dress just the way I dress when I'm writing or doing anything else. I dress the way I'm comfortable, because directing isn't a physical job for me.

**PLAYBOY:** Everything looks uncomfortable—and physical and immersive—in your new movie, *Dunkirk*, about the evacuation of Allied soldiers who were cut off and surrounded by the German army during World War II's Battle of France.

**NOLAN:** I've been drawn to the story over many, many years. It's not a battle as such; it's an evacuation, a race against time, a communal effort to save the day, so it's more a survival story than a war film. But one of the appalling things about war or conflict is that we send

our children to fight them. I didn't want to do what movies always do, which is to cast 28- and 35-year-olds as 18- and 19-year-olds. We cast a very wide net, pulling people out of drama schools, people who were deciding if they wanted to go to drama school, people just finishing high school, people who didn't have agents, particularly when we had to search for the lead role we call "Tommy," who is played by Fionn Whitehead.

**PLAYBOY:** How did it work out filling a key role with a genuine international pop star—One Direction's Harry Styles?

**NOLAN:** He's fabulous in the film. Again, we auditioned many people. He earned it. He's a superb talent and really delivered the goods with great passion. I'm excited for people to see what he's done in the

film. We're trying not to oversell that, because it's an ensemble film. But he's pretty terrific, in my opinion.

**PLAYBOY:** Tom Hardy plays a Spitfire plane pilot, and his scenes are solo, airborne and sometimes with an oxygen mask covering the bottom half of his face. Having gotten so much blowback from audiences complaining how they couldn't understand much of Hardy's dialogue as Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*, let alone the complaints you got about sound effects and music drowning out the dialogue in *Interstellar*, are you risking an encore?

**NOLAN:** It's always interesting when people take you on about technical issues. It's completely fair, but people don't know what goes into the process. Armchair technicians don't understand that, whether it's *The Dark Knight Rises*, *Interstellar* or *Dunkirk*, I've spent eight months listening to every sound, balancing everything incredibly carefully and precisely, modulating it and listening to it in different



theaters. On *Interstellar*, with our sound crew and the composer Hans Zimmer, we were trying to do something exciting, beautiful and different—something raw, real and crude at times, the way Hoyte van Hoytema's camera-work was. We weren't completely shocked by the response, because we knew we had gone pretty far with some of these things. But people seemed a little angrier than I expected. With Tom on *The Dark Knight Rises*—I mean, he's such an extraordinary actor. We spent a lot of time talking about it. He put a lot of work into it, and what he did was fascinating. I had him try a more moderate version of what we were shooting. It didn't work. The voice is inextricably linked with the character, which for someone whose face you don't see and whose mouth you don't see move is pretty amazing. To this day on the dub stage we do that voice all the time.

**PLAYBOY:** Hardy's aerial scenes in the Spitfire should, especially for audiences who see *Dunkirk* in IMAX, pack a punch.

**NOLAN:** The Spitfire is the most magnificent machine ever built. I got to fly in a two-seater version, and the power in that—there's just a grin on your face from take-off to landing. There's a very immersive quality to the way we've done the flying sequences. To be able to give audiences that experience, we needed to have special lenses built, we needed all kinds of technical things to happen. We've done things nobody has ever done before, taking actors up in a real plane and shooting real cockpit shots in a large-film format. It was a huge ambition for the film, and my team really pulled it off. Flying in that plane was like nothing else I've ever done.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you generally a daredevil, a sportsman?

**NOLAN:** I don't do anything particularly interesting. I try to get a little exercise. I like the ocean. I like getting out on a stand-up paddleboard. But it's only once a movie is done, shipped, everybody has seen it and it's come out that I can relax. That's when we like to travel and get a big long holiday.

**PLAYBOY:** Some of the *Dunkirk* actors seem to be part of some unofficial Christopher Nolan stock company, including Tom Hardy and Cillian Murphy. On previous movies you've worked several times with Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Marion Cotillard and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. What's the dynamic between you and actors?

**NOLAN:** I've always loved what they do and have been a good audience for them. I don't look at a monitor. I'm really paying attention to what they're doing on the set, just as an audience

member. My filmmaking style is very tactile. I do a lot of close-ups, and actors feel a concentration from the camera, as well as from me, on what they're doing. On *Dunkirk*, we spent weeks with Mark Rylance and Cillian Murphy on this tiny boat with a huge IMAX camera right up in their faces. I had to warn them that IMAX cameras get very loud, but I had to be that close because I'm interested in the minutiae of the performances, trying to capture the layers of all that in a form that's readable for the audience. Actors recognize that I don't have the slightest bit of ego or expectation when it comes to performance. I'm not trying to control or puppeteer; I'm trying to give them the space to do something that excites me. If it's not quite right, I'm trying to help them.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you worry that fans of your trippy sci-fi and superhero movies may not follow you into World War II?

**I wouldn't be doing my job right if I weren't uncomfortable with each film for some reason. It feels right.**

**NOLAN:** There's definitely risk with that; definitely discomfort. At the same time, Emma, my wife and producer, and my other collaborators felt very much the same way with this one as we did with *Inception* and *The Dark Knight*. We've always tried to push the boundaries of what we've done. I wouldn't be doing my job right, wouldn't be doing myself any justice, if I weren't uncomfortable with each film for some reason. So yes, it makes me nervous, but that feels right. I have an enormous amount of freedom and trust from the studios that work with me, particularly with Warner Bros., which I've worked with almost exclusively. As a filmmaker who has earned that trust, I have a responsibility to try to do something with that freedom and make the film I really believe in, one that might not fit squarely in the usual Hollywood model. *Inception* was a radical proposition for the studio at the time, but we were coming off *The Dark Knight*, which was Warner's biggest film to date. We felt

strongly that we had to do something with that great opportunity.

*Dunkirk*, for different reasons, has a similar feeling for us. It's a huge story, one of the great stories of human history, in my opinion, and it works its way into pop culture in all kinds of ways. The idea of the communal effort to save the day, victory from the jaws of defeat—there are all kinds of primal elements in this story, and it has never been told in modern cinema. Why is that? Well, one of the reasons is it requires a substantial set of resources. It requires the backing of a major studio. It requires a grand scale to do the story justice. And so my feeling was, I can get this done now and I should; otherwise it isn't going to get done.

So yeah, I see that as something of a responsibility. That is to say, if you've earned a bit of trust and freedom from the studio, you really want to try to do something with it that couldn't get done in another way.

**PLAYBOY:** How persuasive is it to Hollywood that you tend to bring your films in on schedule and within budget?

**NOLAN:** I started working that way for very pragmatic reasons. When studios give you millions of dollars for your film, the best way to secure yourself some creative freedom is to stay on time and on budget. If you're the one they're not worried about as you're shooting, if you're not the fire they have to put out, they'll leave you alone. If they don't feel taken advantage of, that's a huge asset to you as a filmmaker, in terms of your creative freedom, and they reward you for it.

**PLAYBOY:** Did the fact that Warner Bros. didn't feel "taken advantage of" help get your *Dark Knight* trilogy off the ground?

**NOLAN:** Yes—and people always miss this key piece. After *Memento* I did *Insomnia* for Warner Bros., with Al Pacino, Robin Williams and Hilary Swank. I worked with movie stars. It had action. It had locations. So I did my \$3 million film *Memento*, and then I got to do a \$47 million movie. That gave the studio a kind of comfort with letting me go to the next step with *Batman Begins*. That was fortunate, because filmmakers today aren't being given that same chance. People are being taken straight from Sundance and then given \$250 million films to direct. When I'm used as an example of how that can work, you want to put your hand up and go, "No, that isn't what happened." I value that I got to do a medium-budget studio thriller or drama. Those are getting harder and harder for people to make. At the time, Batman was kind of up for grabs, and the studio was open to someone coming in and telling them what they wanted to do. They wanted to invigorate it. I kept talking about





the origin story and the 1978 *Superman*. Although it has some dated elements now, it was the closest thing to what I had in mind—an epic film with a realistic texture.

**PLAYBOY:** Getting back to genre films: When you see superhero movies, which seem to be coming out every week now, and so many of them follow what feels like a dark, gritty template, what's your reaction?

**NOLAN:** My reaction is complex. I remember some of the *Dark Knight* trilogy came out and I think *Iron Man* also came out. Marvel was gearing up what it was doing. I remember having a lot of conversations with marketing and distribution: If the comic-book movie is a genre, then we're worried about being overcrowded. But if you don't view it as a genre—if you just view these as temporal movies—then there's plenty of room. As with everything, you reach a point where things get a little overcrowded in terms of how much of one particular product has been made, but for us and our relationship with the Batman films, we always wanted to view them as movies in their own right. That felt like the most respectful way to treat beloved subject matter. It's like, Trust us, we're just going to make as good a film as we know how to make. And I think the world has changed since we made this film. I think fans are more particular about the color of the movies they want to see and how closely they want those to adhere to what they've seen on the page. We were given a lot of freedom and trust by the fans, and hopefully we did right by them.

**PLAYBOY:** Part of that realistic texture of the *Dark Knight* movies came from the screenplays and, of course, definitive performances such as Heath Ledger's Joker. What do you most remember about him in that role?

**NOLAN:** He unveiled the character to us very gradually through the hair and makeup tests, through the early conversations and when he had to read a scene with Christian Bale. He'd do a little bit of the voice, just a taste, and then, as he tried on the wardrobe and experimented with the makeup and shoot tests, he'd move a little bit this way, talk a little bit that way, just slowly unveiling it to the crew. It was

electrifying. Then he did this scene of the Joker in the kitchen—a lot of lines, a big monologue. We shot his close-up. There were a lot of actors around the table, and when we got to the end and I said “Cut,” they broke into applause. I have never seen that before or since.

**PLAYBOY:** How did he react?

**NOLAN:** Very modestly. I feel privileged that Emma, my editor Lee Smith and I are the only people in the world who got to see that performance before he died. His achievement stands totally independent of his life and, indeed, his death, and I'm one of three people who actually



know that. It makes me very proud to have been involved with such a fine piece of work.

**PLAYBOY:** That's extraordinary. Getting back to *Dunkirk*, did you and your team look at other movies?

**NOLAN:** We screen film prints of a lot of movies before each film we do. I usually try to find things that have some relationship that isn't necessarily entirely obvious, like the silent film *Greed*, which I always come back to because it's so incredible and heartbreaking, as incomplete as the existing version is. We also looked at the silent film *Sunrise*, which I hadn't seen before. It has the elemental quality of a fable

and a simplicity of design. It's tough for some people in this day and age to tap into watching a silent film. You have to embrace silence the way audiences of the time would. The fabulous thing about silent films for filmmakers is that there is so much to be inspired by—or, to put it in more crude terms, you can steal from silent movies. [laughs]

**PLAYBOY:** Did you look at war films or films set during wartime?

**NOLAN:** Early on in my process, we took a look at *The Thin Red Line*, a great favorite of mine. It feels like it could be any war, any time, and it's very poetic, but that didn't feel right for what we were doing. We watched *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which James Jones described in an essay as a film that says war turns men into animals, and the longer they're at war, the more animalistic they become. After that, what else is there to say? Steven Spielberg lent me his print of *Saving Private Ryan*, which was as shocking and unpleasant as I had remembered. The second those bullets start flying, you didn't want to be in the theater. That pushed us to go in a more Hitchcock direction, to create a different kind of tension, one that allows you to look at the screen a bit more and not hide your eyes.

I was daunted by the idea of approaching war head-on because I've never fought in one. As I said, it's my worst nightmare. But I was able to tackle *Dunkirk* in a confident way, knowing the mechanics of suspense and the thriller, and putting the audience in the perspective of the people on that beach, who would just see planes coming and bombs dropping.

That's extremely frightening. Taking a more suspense-based, thriller-based approach actually freed me up. *Dunkirk* is all about physical process, all about tension in the moment, not backstories. It's all about “Can this guy get across a plank over this hole?” We care about him. We don't want him to fall down. We care about these people because we're human beings and we have that basic empathy. There's a very intense quality to *Dunkirk* and we put the audience through a lot, but there's tremendous positivity that results from that.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you have to go to the mat for classic film with *Dunkirk*?





**NOLAN:** People have no idea what's being lost with the digital intermediate process. It's very difficult to talk to the studio folks and post-production guys because they'll say, "Well, you believe in magic," or "What you're saying is mystical." I just had to embrace that and go, "Yes, I suppose I am." Everything in movies is about mystery and magic and things beyond our understanding. Those hundreds of hours of decisions that in and of themselves are meaningless? Well, added up they're not meaningless, because in the end you feel something. Why does *Vertigo* work in a way that so many other films like that don't? It's the color, the different things that come together. It's mystical, it's emotional—an emotional connection we have with the experience of seeing a story on the screen on film. Just look at visual effects in films from 10 years ago. At the time you were fine watching them, but they don't hold up now. What's the difference? Our perception, to a certain extent, because we have an eye that develops over time. So whenever engineers turn around and say, "We've solved it. We've made video look like film," I say, "Well, you've done a good trick. For now." David Fincher loves to shoot digitally, and that's his right, but for me, the photochemical process is different. I'm not sure they're ever going to look the same, however many bits the technicians crunch.

**PLAYBOY:** David Fincher's actors have talked about his penchant for many, many takes. Rooney Mara reportedly had to do 99 takes on a scene in *The Social Network*, and several *Gone Girl* actors have spoken of doing 50 takes. He has also released a director's cut of *Zodiac* and an "assembly cut" of *Alien 3*. Are you anything like that?

**NOLAN:** I always say that the audience tells me what the film is. That doesn't mean we always agree. But audiences seeing the film—that's the final piece of the creative process. It's like exposing copper to the elements. It changes what the thing is. But it doesn't make me then want to go back and have it at it again. I've always viewed the filmmaking process as almost like a life performance or something. I would do reshoots if I had to, but I trust the production period. It's like, Okay, I've got six months to shoot the film and then I've got three months to do my first cut. I've always tried to trust those pressures and limitations and stand by the film by the end of it. Otherwise, where would you stop? You'd never finish. It's an imperfect medium. It always has been. Every film is imperfect. If there's something I've been unsatisfied about, you leave it and trust what it was. The impetus is to try to do better on the next film.

**PLAYBOY:** You wrote the *Dunkirk* script solo—that is, without your brother Jonathan, with whom you worked on *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Interstellar*. Was he too busy creating and writing for TV, on both *Person of Interest* and *Westworld*?

**NOLAN:** I never wanted to be a writer. I started writing because I needed to have the material to be a filmmaker. I discovered I couldn't write a novel, because I'm embarrassed and I find it difficult to find an authorial voice. But in screenplays, there's neutrality; you're describing some other reality in objective terms. I find that form especially liberating because of the way in which I write. I try to leave a lot of things out, and I try and leave a lot of things for the actor. The *Dunkirk* script is very short and has very little dialogue rela-

## Dunkirk is one of the great stories of human history, and it works its way into pop culture in all kinds of ways.

tive to my other films. I try to write a skeleton with a structure and write the bones of it, but I invite people in and collaborate. On the *Dark Knight* films, Jonathan and I were in the closest collaboration. I would drag him around the world, scouting locations, writing in cars, airplanes or wherever it took to get it done as we were mounting production. I wrote the scripts for *Following* and *Inception* on my own. I've done it both ways. We usually get in the room, throw a few things around, and then one of us will be writing a draft on our own and, later, passing the ball back and forth. That was particularly the case with *The Prestige* and *Interstellar*; he wrote drafts for years and later I worked on them. With us, in a funny sort of way, the process winds up being much the same because I always have him read the stuff I'm doing and we're always talking. I just don't pay him. [laughs]

**PLAYBOY:** What was it like at home for you, with a father who worked in the advertising

industry and a mother who, as you mentioned, was a flight attendant?

**NOLAN:** We grew up in England and America at different times, but mostly England. My dad ran his own business in product development for many years. He started out as a copywriter and was a very creative man and very encouraging to me. I wanted to make my own movies, and when I was about seven, he lent me his Super 8 camera, which at the time was as expensive as a high-end video camera of today. I literally taped it to the bottom of our car and smashed it to bits. He wasn't thrilled, but he was very encouraging creatively. My mom was a flight attendant right out of college for a few years. When she met my dad and got married, she was forced to retire, because back in the day, they wanted flight attendants to be young and single. When there was a class

action lawsuit that was eventually resolved in 1985, they had to offer her old job back, 20 years later, with seniority. In the meantime, she'd been teaching English as a second language, adult literacy programs and so forth and made a real career out of it.

**PLAYBOY:** How was it that you lived in both London and the U.S.?

**NOLAN:** Because my mom is American, we'd go back there to see her family in the summer when I was young. And later, the family decided to move to the U.S. The way film distribution was in those days, in the summer we would see all the movies that wouldn't come to England until Christmas. My dad and I first saw *Star Wars* at a suburban movie theater in Ohio or something, and I have a very vivid memory of being seven and on the

first day of school in England in September of 1977 trying to explain *Star Wars* to people: "Well, there's a bad guy who's got a mask and then there's these bad guys who have white suits and they look like robots but not really." I was the first guy in school to see it. It made a huge impression on me, and my dad took me to see it again in London when it opened in 70 millimeter at the Dominion Theatre on Tottenham Court Road. I remember going to see *2001: A Space Odyssey* with him at the Leicester Square Theater, which has since been knocked down. *Interstellar* was the last film to play there.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you and Jonathan as close as you are now?

**NOLAN:** I was off at boarding school, so I was sort of the outsider. I don't want to talk too much about our upbringing just because I don't want to speak for my brother. Jonathan is almost six years younger than I am. As we've gotten older, we've gotten closer, and closer as



well as with the creative collaboration that started very much with *Memento*.

**PLAYBOY:** As a kid, what inspired you? What posters did you have on your walls? What did you collect?

**NOLAN:** The seminal influence was Ridley Scott and his movies. At some point, after seeing *Blade Runner*, I had somehow connected it with *Alien*—different actors, different story. Everything’s completely different, but there’s the same feeling. That was my first sense of what a director does. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen *Blade Runner*. I know everything about it. I was absolutely obsessive about it, and at a time when there weren’t many people interested in it outside of a small group. I remember talking to my dad about Ridley Scott and him revealing that he’d actually worked with and knew him a tiny bit because of where he produced some of his commercials. Ridley Scott was my hero.

There was a place in Soho called Vintage Magazine Shop where I would buy black-and-white stills from *Casablanca*, *Diva*, *Blade Runner* and put them on the wall in my room. It was the 1980s, when I was entering into what I call an open phase of really wanting to absorb new things, new culture, new music, new movies.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you persuade your father to try to find a way to meet Ridley Scott, or did you ever write him or anyone else a fan letter?

**NOLAN:** I used to think about doing that a lot. I’m just too shy, too self-conscious. I didn’t ever do that, and part of me now wishes I had. I was at a party once, and Sydney Pollack was across the room, not really talking to anybody. I had spoken to him on the phone once but had never met him in person. I thought, I should go talk to him. I didn’t. But I really wish I had. He passed away fairly soon after.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you also shy around women growing up?

**NOLAN:** I don’t really want to answer that other than to say Emma and I met on our very first day at University College London.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you two share a class or just meet randomly?

**NOLAN:** Same dorm—“dorm” in the American vernacular, “hall of residence” in the British. We met the first night. I don’t think I should say any more on that.

**PLAYBOY:** Both personally and professionally, yours is a long-lasting and productive relationship.

**NOLAN:** I had a very nice conversation with my 13-year-old son about colleges, and he said, “When you went to college, did you know anyone?” I said, “No, I sat in my room in my hall of residence the first night and heard a bit of

a party going on in the corridor. I thought, I don’t know anyone; I’d better get out there and say hi.” I opened the door and, as I said to my son, “Who was the first person you think I saw?” Emma.

**PLAYBOY:** Lucky you left your dorm room.

**NOLAN:** I would not have on most nights, but it was the first night. I’m very glad that I did. Emma and I ran the great film society at University College London.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you have similar tastes in films?

**NOLAN:** It wasn’t that. I sort of drew Emma into production right away. In the film society they’d give you a roll of reversal film, and you could shoot a 16-millimeter movie and edit it on their Steenbeck editing machines. I drew her into helping on the films I made there.

**PLAYBOY:** Including your 1989 Super 8 short *Tarantella*, which was shown on a PBS show-

## The Spitfire is the most magnificent machine ever built. There’s just a grin on your face from takeoff to landing.

case for indie projects. Your 1996 film *Larceny* showed to acclaim at the Cambridge Film Festival. After college, you funded, directed and shot with friends your first feature, *Following*, which got noticed at film festivals and was reviewed by *The New York Times*.

**NOLAN:** As the films get bigger and more involved and longer, Emma has always been there helping out in whatever way makes the most sense. She’s developed an extraordinary ability to understand all sides of the filmmaking process from the ground up in a way that few people who meet her would necessarily see. She knows more than any producer about how films are actually put together. She’s very self-effacing and doesn’t talk a lot about what she knows. She allows people to sit and lecture her until it’s to the point where she has to point out, quietly, politely, that she knows what she’s talking about.

**PLAYBOY:** What kinds of movies do you like to see as a family?

**NOLAN:** We have a very good projector here at the house. I’ve shown our four kids movies since they were a very young age. They’ve watched the silent version of *Ben-Hur*, and they all wound up seeing *2001* for the first time when they were three or four years old. I’ve run *Blade Runner* just once because it’s a little more grown-up and there’s a spread of age. I showed them *Citizen Kane* when they were pretty young, and they still complain about it. They know that it winds me up to complain about *Citizen Kane*. They know a lot about movies and have a good grounding in film history. I did have an awful moment when I said, “Maybe they’re all going to be film critics.”

**PLAYBOY:** Because you and your wife work so closely together in a high-pressure environment, how do you strike a balance?

**NOLAN:** The crossover in our professional and personal lives is very much two halves:

the half of our lives before kids and the half afterward. Once kids come along, they ground you. You have to put things to one side at some point. You have to be living a family life and shutting off the work life. Emma has always been very good at asserting that discipline at the appropriate moment, even though we’re living and breathing what we do all the time. We’re also engaging the kids in that and take them on location wherever we go. But Emma has always been great at seeing the need to put work to one side and concentrate on family at the appropriate time.

**PLAYBOY:** What’s on the docket post-*Dunkirk*?

**NOLAN:** I’ve never been good at doing more than one thing at a time. For me, *Dunkirk* won’t be finished until it goes out in the world.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you still tempted by the prospect of doing your own *James Bond* or *Star Wars* movie?

**NOLAN:** A Bond movie, definitely. I’ve spoken to the producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson over the years. I deeply love the character, and I’m always excited to see what they do with it. Maybe one day that would work out. You’d have to be needed, if you know what I mean. It has to need reinvention; it has to need you. And they’re getting along very well.

**PLAYBOY:** So is it a good time to be Christopher Nolan?

**NOLAN:** It feels great, even though this is the scary period, when I’ve done the things I can to make *Dunkirk* the most it can be. You get obsessed and pour yourself into the technical finishing of it because it’s your last chance to make things as good as they can be. Now comes the period of putting the film out there in the world. That never gets any easier. ■