

Insomnia, directed by Christopher Nolan

Once again, independent of what?

By Joanne Laurier
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Insomnia directed by Christopher Nolan. Written by Hillary Seitz, based on the film directed by Erik Skjoldbjærg and written by Nikolaj Frobenius and Erik Skjoldbjærg.

British filmmaker Christopher Nolan was interviewed in March 2001 by the web site *Film Threat—Hollywood's Indie Voice*. In the interview, Nolan speaks about the perils of working within the Hollywood studio system, into which he had just begun “dipping [his] toe” with his second movie, *Memento*. “With the sums of money involved, you know the amount of people it has to appeal to, people get very nervous about what you can put in a movie to keep that big audience or bring that big audience.”

Nolan made a point of describing himself as a “responsible filmmaker” who “personally despise[s] the fact that this industry has become so obsessed with the horse race at the box office” because “...people need to go to the movies, so they'll go to see [a film] even if it's crap. So the fact that it makes money doesn't mean it's good.”

What independence from the grip of Hollywood's marketing machine and responsibility toward an audience in need of good films has Nolan shown in his latest effort, *Insomnia*? Not much.

Nolan builds his films around psychological disorders: in *Following* it was voyeurism; in *Memento*, amnesia. *Insomnia*, a remake of the 1997 Scandinavian film of the same name, is a thriller revolving around the insomnia of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) police officer Will Dormer (Al Pacino).

Dormer, a legendary homicide detective, is sent to northern Alaska with his partner Hap (Martin Donovan) to investigate the brutal murder of a high school girl. Local novice cop, Ellie Burr (Hilary Swank), who studied Dormer's cases at the police academy, greets the two detectives when they arrive in the Land of the Midnight Sun. As they settle in to track down the murderer, Hap reveals that in order to save his own skin he is going to testify against Dormer in a police Internal Affairs investigation. Dormer has tampered with evidence in one of his previous cases and fears that Hap's testimony will destroy his career.

While subsequently pursuing the murder suspect in the fog, Dormer accidentally shoots and kills Hap. The detective claims that the hunted man has killed his partner and alters the

evidence accordingly. He cannot sleep and he cannot keep the sun out of his room. His insomnia is aggravated by late-night calls from the murderer, Walter Finch (Robin Williams), a third-rate detective novelist who saw Dormer kill his partner. “A good cop can't sleep because a piece of the puzzle is missing, a bad cop can't sleep because his conscience won't let him,” Dormer tells Ellie at one point.

Finch attempts to strike a Faustian bargain with Dormer, but in the end, the cop dies a hero's death, leaving Ellie behind to decide whether to expose her mentor or leave his reputation intact.

Leaving aside how revealing and disturbing it is to encounter yet another cop-hero in the contemporary cinema (can these people think of anything else?), Nolan's film does not stand up to any serious test of dramatic or psychological plausibility. First, the insomnia business is not convincing. If Dormer wanted to darken his room, he obviously could have done so. Watching Dormer's recurring efforts to block out the Alaskan sun is both irritating and pointless. In reality, it is unclear what the insomnia has to do with the working out of events. He shoots his partner the day after he arrives, before the conditions of sleeplessness begin to plague him.

Nor is it necessary to sledgehammer the viewer into awareness that in reality Dormer's physical and mental unraveling stems from conscience-induced, not sun-induced insomnia. Added to this is the fact that the film does not offer any serious explanation as to why the Los Angeles Police Department would fly a detective of Dormer's stature to a remote part of Alaska for one easily solved killing. One might also question whether such a veteran cop, who has put people away by cooking evidence and who so deftly and dispassionately covers his tracks in Hap's death, even has a conscience.

This raises another question about the film's core premise: that the possibility of being exposed as Hap's killer is the main source of Dormer's insomnia and thus the reason that he embarks on his cat-and-mouse game with Finch. At a time when cops are hardly ever brought to justice for the most brazen acts against innocent victims, is it plausible that Dormer would be concerned about Finch's accusations against him, the accusations, moreover, of a psychopathic killer? From a legal

standpoint, even if Dormer had admitted to shooting Hap accidentally during the pursuit of a perpetrator, surely Finch, not Dormer, would have been held responsible. Dormer was never in any serious legal danger and he would have known that.

Still more unbelievable is the critical scene in which, Dormer, his guard apparently lowered by lack of sleep, blurts out his secrets in an “ends justifies the means” speech to a conspicuously anonymous hotel clerk. (Maura Tierney’s role is a waste, a mere sounding board for Pacino’s messy confession.)

Dormer reveals that in a previous case he tampered with evidence to obtain the conviction of a child murderer, defending this illegal act on the grounds that a jury which had “never looked into the eyes of a child killer” might find there was reasonable doubt of his guilt. His 30-year career of hunting down society’s dregs had apparently endowed him with the right to be both judge and jury. He also rather oddly muses about whether, on the subterranean level, shooting Hap was really an accident. The latter was about to ruin Dormer’s career by cooperating with Internal Affairs investigators, whom Dormer accuses in an earlier outburst of being men behind desks who never dirty themselves in society’s sewers.

In essence, the film backhandedly argues that Dormer is prevented from righting wrongs by inexperienced juries and desk men who go by the book. In the end, this is yet another hackneyed film about a hard-working, diligent police officer who is being hamstrung by juridical restrictions in his pursuit of the perverts and criminals who hold society hostage. Although Nolan has Dormer wrestle with the morality of police misconduct, the arguments against the latter are formal and weak. In the end, the audience is led to feel that everything Dormer has done does is understandable, even necessary. Speaking about the casting of Pacino in the role of Dormer, Nolan states: “I wanted a legendary cop. As soon as you see him on screen you trust him.”

There are other strikes against *Insomnia*. Largely, it is poorly acted. Nolan impressed certain critics and spectators by drawing supernaturally cold, “postmodern” performances from his actors in *Memento*. Faced here with the need to create dramatic moments and confrontations, the director goes seriously astray. Pacino can be a fine actor, but when he is allowed to chew up the scenery, the results are unfortunate. Williams is peculiarly stiff. There is also the fact that Nolan has his camera meaninglessly and pretentiously linger longer than it should in certain shots. A very unpleasant (and, again, gratuitous) twist is the nasty and unsympathetic treatment of the slain girl’s high school friends.

And then there is the real nature of the LAPD’s history of brutality and gangsterism, to which the film is presumably making passing reference. In 1999-2000, information surfaced that revealed a widespread pattern of abuse, over 9,000 cases of unjustified arrests, drug dealing, witness intimidation, illegal

shootings, planting of evidence, frame-up and perjury. There were also chilling revelations of outright police murders and attempted murders. Police officers routinely and arbitrarily punched, kicked, choked and otherwise beat suspects or bystanders. These were thugs in uniform. The LAPD violence against primarily poor and minority sections of the population is part of the ongoing assault on democratic rights, which has escalated sharply under the Bush administration.

In *Insomnia*, Nolan reveals himself a conformist who is sadly ignorant of social realities. In a recent interview in *USA Today*, the director criticized “many studio movies” for not being thought provoking. “The characters don’t wrestle with moral issues, particularly in cop movies. They don’t throw up any ambiguities,” said Nolan. There is little ambiguity in *Insomnia*’s defense of the police or in its attitude toward crime and “evil.” Certain of the film’s arguments are imbued, one would like to hope unwittingly, with an Ashcroftian flavor.

Nolan’s trajectory as an “independent filmmaker” is worth noting. He appeared in 1998 with a 69-minute low-budget work, *Following*, which achieved a certain success as a cult film. He was able to leverage that success into the production of *Memento* two years later with a larger budget and better-known cast (Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss). About the latter film, Nolan states, “I made it as small as I needed to keep creative control of it. That was the equation.”

There was no such equation for *Insomnia* with its multimillion-dollar budget and Hollywood stars. The question is again raised: independent filmmaking is independent of what? It has increasingly come to mean filmmaking that simply has not yet made money. Nolan and others create works that are disturbingly devoid of critique and protest, and disturbingly saturated with a complacent and submissive attitude toward both society and the film industry—“the whole big machine,” as Nolan himself puts it.

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