
How Christopher Nolan Has Used Powerful Cinematic

Interstellar, which Christopher Nolan directed, tells the story of the voyage of several astronauts whose sole purpose is to save mankind from utter destruction. The film poses an interesting question; what is more important, the individual or society as a whole? Throughout the film, the resounding answer is that ultimately the hope of humanity and societal needs trump those of individual lives. Among the many cinematic tools used to convey this theme, the most powerful are the production design, acting, sound design, and cinematography.

The lighting and filters used to create the feeling of Interstellar were big contributors to the theme of the film. Most of the film is very mute, with colors ranging between blues, greys, and browns. On Earth, the farmhouse where Cooper and his family live has a very brown and dirty feel to it. The overall effect is suggestive of the Dust Bowl in the central states during the Great Depression. Despite this mood, there are signs of life, particularly in the cornfields that populate much of the landscape. By contrast, both of the alien planets that the team visits are stark and grey, with little contrast between colors. Interestingly, both planets are completely covered by water (ice being frozen water), which is absolutely vital for life. Yet both planets are completely inhospitable. This use of lighting and filters is important because it shows the lack of hope for the situation. Because each planet, earth included, is completely uninhabitable, sacrifices must be made to ensure the survival of the race as a whole.

Throughout the film, Nolan makes several nods to the classic sci-fi film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Most notably is his use of monolith like shapes, which are reminiscent of the monoliths in Space Odyssey. This reference is an important piece of production design because it recalls themes and ideas presented in that film, namely the inhumanity of humanity. However, Nolan now uses the shape to show the collectivity of humanity. Instead of appearing cold and sinister, the box shaped robots of Interstellar act and sound like humans. The monolith like boxes on the NASA base at the end of the film are warm and welcoming, with faces and videos streaming across them. Nolan is saying, in opposition to Kubrick's timeless film, that humanity is not lost. Despite the sacrifices they are asked to make, and the hardships that the species faces as a whole, the communal humanity is able to overcome all and leads to survival.

A lot can be said about the phenomenal acting by many of the main characters in this film. Matthew McConaughey's performance is both moving and pertinent to the theme. In the scene where he watches the years of messages left by his children, the pain of a father asked to sacrifice too much is obvious in his contorted face and uncontrollable sobs. Here we see the true sacrifice that Cooper has been asked to make. By giving up his children, Cooper made the ultimate sacrifice for the good of humanity. This scene allows the viewers to see the emotional pain that such a decision causes, and McConaughey beautifully delivers a performance that is hard to swallow, as is the message that it sends.

Another terrifically acted scene is when Murph learns from a dying Professor Brand that Plan B was the real plan all along. Jessica Chastain, who plays adult Murph goes from loving bedside attendee to rigid and cold as the realization of the lie sinks over her. Her entire body and face perceptibly harden as she realizes the hard truth that the professor has shared with her. Later when she is in her bedroom and realizes that the messages she received come from her dad,

her voice gushes with emotion as she realizes how much her dad has done to try and save her and humanity.

One particularly powerful use of sound to convey the theme is in the scene when Cooper is driving away from his home and his children. The shots are accompanied by Murph's desperate shouts for her dad, and the countdown of the spaceship preparing for launch. The juxtaposition of these two sounds is heart wrenching. It gives the audience a sense that Cooper's departure is final, and that he will not be returning to Murph, at least not in the way he left her. The countdown is symbolic of Cooper's decision to put the needs of humanity before his own honorable desires. Even though he loves his kids and wants to be with them, he must leave them behind in order to save the future of humanity.

Throughout the movie, cinematography and editing are used to highlight the smallness of the individual compared to his surroundings. As the astronauts trek across the frozen landscape of Mann's planet, a wide overhead shot shows how insignificant they are both in size and color to the endless icy world. When Cooper drives his truck through the cornfield in order to follow the drone, overhead shots once again show the truck's seeming insignificance compared to the surrounding plants. The flying spaceships are often shot from a wide angle, easily portraying the immensity of space in contrast to the ship. Collectively, these camera techniques are used to show that individuals are small and inconsequential. When viewed in this manner, it is easy to see why the needs of the general population, which in itself is immense, should come before the desires of an individual, no matter how good and just those desires might be.

Angles become very important in one of the final scenes when Cooper is stuck behind the bookshelf and is able to help Murph solve the equation that eventually helps save mankind. The angles allow us to see the scene that happened so many years ago, now through Cooper's eyes. It is also important to note how the scenes are edited between past Murph, present Murph, and Cooper. In this scene we are able to see not only what Cooper does to communicate, but also how the "fifth-dimension" beings have been helping him all along. The way the shots are edited together helps the audience understand that everything that they have done for Cooper was really for the greater good of humanity. Despite his desire to reach out to his daughter, eventually his need to save humankind outweighs his desire to communicate with his now adult daughter. The combination of good camerawork and flawless non-linear editing help make this climatic scene understandable for an audience that probably understands very little about physics and inter-dimensional relations.

One more important case of editing is when the film jumps between shots of Dr. Mann selfishly attacking Cooper in order to save himself, and Murph selflessly making the difficult choice to abandon her family in order to continue her work on the equation that could save humanity. We are also given a small flashback to when she was a child and her dad promised that he would come back for her. All of these cuts put together powerfully question the individual versus the whole. They show how one person's selfishness can endanger the entire species, while another person's sacrifice of self can lead to its survival. Eventually the needs of the whole overcome the desires of the one, and Mann ends up dying, but these scenes are one of the most powerful indicators that selfishness must be avoided for the good of the community.

Interstellar constantly questions throughout its plot whether individual lives or humanity as a whole is more important. As you can see, the cinematic elements used throughout the film make it abundantly clear that ultimately mankind's survival as a species outweighs our individual

desires and concerns. Nolan's breathtaking work serves as a good reminder of our comparably small individual part in the greater whole.

Turning now to my own development as a viewer, I have at the very least noticed a detectable change in the kinds of movies I want to see. Now that I have learned to recognize and appreciate things like production design, editing, and directing choices, I feel a stronger desire to see films that will showcase these techniques. Rather than being attracted to cheap Hollywood artifices like CGI, big-name actors, or movies made from my favorite books, I want to see things that are beautiful and will make me think. That's not to say that I don't still enjoy movies with great special effects or based on popular novels. However, I feel a desire to see more of the art behind film. I think that as I continue to develop my tastes and my ability to see these facets of films, I will expand my horizons and probably see many films that I would have never seen before. I have also become more aware of why I do or do not watch certain films. I have stepped out of my comfort zone, both for this class and on my own time. By doing this I have come to appreciate a wider range of films and styles.

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