Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*: A mess in space

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Directed by Christopher Nolan; written by Christopher and Jonathan Nolan

Interstellar is the latest work from director Christopher Nolan, whose career includes commercially successful and even critically acclaimed films like *Memento* (2000), *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). *Interstellar* takes place in a dystopian near future, when dust storms are destroying crops and threatening to leave the planet without food. In such desperate conditions, agriculture becomes an essential activity. Crop production is more important than exploring space, so scientists have been forced to become farmers.

This is the situation for Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), an engineer and former NASA pilot, a widower who lives with his two children, Tom (Timothée Chalamet) and Murphy (Mackenzie Foy), and his father-in-law, Donald (John Lithgow). Cooper reveres scientific knowledge and regrets the current bleak reality: "We used to look up at the sky and wonder at our place in the stars. Now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt."

Murphy shows interest in her dad's scientific musings, but she also counters his analytical nature with apparent superstition, believing a "ghost" lives in her bookcase. Whether from a ghost or an intelligent entity from another world, Murphy receives messages. When Cooper decodes one of them, it leads him to a secret space station where he meets an old professor of his, Dr. Brand (Michael Caine), who has been planning an expedition to discover a suitable planet for humanity's evacuation. Soon, the central character, along with Brand's daughter, Amelia (Anne Hathaway), and two other crew members, ends up on a trip to another galaxy to save humanity.

Interstellar plays with the ideas of renowned theoretical physicist Kip Thorne, a colleague of Stephen Hawking and the late Carl Sagan and professor at Caltech until 2009: his relativistic theories of gravity, a five-dimensional universe, concepts like traversable "black holes" (or "wormholes"), "gravitational waves" and the possibility of time travel. Cooper embarks on a journey in space, but also on a journey through time. In the mission to find a new place where humans might live, Cooper and Amelia land on a planet where, for every hour they spend on the surface, seven years will have passed in Earth time.

Despite memorable imagery and advanced special effects technology, however, Nolan falls far short when it comes to dealing with the themes that arise from his story. First of all, it remains an almost complete mystery as to how humanity ended up in the environmental predicament depicted in *Interstellar* (reference is made to "blight," which the script does not explain). No connection is made between climate change and related issues and the present economic organization of society, where every question concerning humanity's fate, including the development of renewable energy resources, is determined by its impact on corporate profit.

Interstellar is part of a trend in contemporary science fiction movies, and cinema in general, that subscribes to the notion that everything in this planet is already lost. Brand's brilliant scheme is simple: if we cannot save the Earth, let's leave it. The idea of abandoning the planet for a fresh start in another part of the universe is alarming, irritating. Responsible scientists, artists and others need to address the present social and political challenges, instead of ignoring them or projecting them far away.

Toward the end, when Cooper awakes on board a NASA space station orbiting Saturn, it seems that people are living in harmony. As was the case at the beginning of the film, there is no reference to the social context. Is this a world with a different economic structure, with social justice, free from capitalist exploitation? Does Nolan think the discovery of another planet will automatically make human beings' relationships better? Or is

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humankind a species destined to wander through the universe without hope for all eternity?

With a running time of 167 minutes, *Interstellar* becomes increasingly tedious and predictable. One may be excited by its few suspenseful moments, but not moved by the human drama. There is a banality under the pretentious surface of the film. Nolan seems more interested in the special effects than in the relationship between his characters.

The interchanges between Cooper and Amelia are remarkably dull and meager: supposedly traveling through wormholes and such, the pair might as well be out for an afternoon drive to the supermarket. There is little drama, tension or heightened reaction (and the few doses of humor are provided by a computer, a walking monolith named TARS, an insignificant reference to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968]). In the second half, a subplot involving Dr. Mann (Matt Damon), does not add much.

Nolan lacks the subtlety to explore his characters' inner crises, their conflicts with each other, their moral dilemmas. Dylan Thomas' poem *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* is quoted repeatedly in case we do not understand its meaning the first two or three.

Interstellar has a cast of talented actors. Matthew McConaughey has proven to be an affecting, versatile, charming performer in recent years. But Nolan's screenplay and direction do not help him here: when his character faces the reality that his children have aged twenty years while he is only a few hours older, the director moves the camera towards the actor's face, so we can clearly see Cooper's tears; the scene becomes melodramatic and distant. It is painful to watch talent wasted.

Since the gimmicky *Memento*, Nolan has been a director with a tendency to indulge in the cheapest mannerisms of postmodern cinema. His style is characterized by the use of parallel action, but his handling of editing is quite rough. He cuts back and forth between two scenes so many times in *Interstellar* that the device becomes redundant.

It is fair to say that Nolan resolves a couple of scenes with imagination. In one of them, the astronauts travel through the interior of a black hole, a moment of abstract visual poetry that reveals the possibilities of the post-photographic image.

In another accomplished sequence, Cooper finds himself in a labyrinthine passageway whose walls look like the shelves of Murphy's bookcase (his daughter, then played by Jessica Chastain, is now the scientist in charge of the mission). Cooper manages to transmit data to the adult Murphy as the "ghost" of her childhood, allowing her to solve Brand's equation. As a metaphor, the suggestion that books still hold power as the main source of knowledge of an infinite cosmos has its beauty (and the sequence calls to mind *La biblioteca de Babel*, a wonderful short story by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, which conceives a universe in the form of a vast library).

Nevertheless, the overall plot resolution is ridiculous. Nolan prefers providing easy, indulgent answers to the audience rather than working through thought-provoking questions.

At one point, Amelia says: "Love is the one thing we are capable of perceiving that transcends time and space." But beyond the vindication of the family institution, the classic setting of the petty bourgeois, the film does not dare to go anywhere. Ultimately, what is so striking about *Interstellar* is the contradiction between the science and technology (including film technology) and the poverty of the ideas. It is easier for many filmmakers to imagine a fifth dimension and coming out the other end of a black hole than it is for them to study our social organization and construct a critical picture of it.

Incoherent and boring for long stretches, *Interstellar* is a galactic mess: a sci-fi extravaganza, in which Nolan becomes the prisoner of his own gravity. His work says little about the human condition, our world and its relation with the universe around us. Made for $165 million, it has already grossed more than $130 million in the US, and $225 million in the rest of the planet since its release. If Nolan's film reveals anything, it would be the mediocre state of American studio filmmaking and the undemocratic global system of distribution and exhibition.

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