

## Christopher Nolan's Riveting Story Shines Brightest in Imperfectly Cast 'Interstellar'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It was Monday, Nov. 3, 2014 at 10:15 p.m. Leaving Navy Pier IMAX, I was driving north on Lake Shore Drive – a constantly busy, multi-lane highway that hugs the east of Chicago and separates it from water. What I saw next with fellow staff critic Patrick McDonald might have been normal for 3 a.m., but discussing Christopher Nolan's new sci-fi "Interstellar" and being the only one on the road in either direction felt otherworldly.

While certainly unusual, it speaks to my state of mind and how the film hit me with a ton of bricks. It felt epic and simultaneously intimate – being one of only a few dozen critics comfortably spread out among 440 seats – and could have only been experienced correctly on a 6-story, 60-by-80-foot screen. Don't make the mistake of seeing this film in anything *but* IMAX.



Anne Hathaway and Matthew McConaughey in "Interstellar".

*Image credit: Melinda Sue Gordon, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures*

The problem with being Christopher Nolan is having to top himself time and time again. The three-time Oscar-nominated writer and director injected himself on the scene with 2000's "Memento" and then went especially mainstream with "Batman Begins". Continuing with "The Prestige" and eclipsing the \$1 billion global box-office mark with "The Dark Knight," "Inception" became Nolan's biggest cerebral challenge. While "The Dark Knight Rises" and "Man of Steel" came next, "Interstellar" returns Nolan to the brains of "Inception" plus the epic splendor of "The Dark Knight".

Think twice before even remotely comparing 2013's Oscar-winning Alfonso Cuarón film "Gravity" with Nolan's "Interstellar". Aside from both taking place in space and there being a similar emotional relationship between Matthew McConaughey/Anne Hathaway and George Clooney/Sandra Bullock, they're nothing alike. "Gravity" makes you feel alone while "Interstellar" feels huge.

It's challenging to view "Interstellar" as a copycat of another film and also impossible not to make comparisons. "Interstellar" more borders Danny Boyle's brilliant 2007 film "Sunshine" with Cillian Murphy and Rose Byrne because it shares some of its "space madness" and goes to seriously out-there places. So does "Interstellar" reminisce back to "Star Trek: The Next Generation" with its focus on black holes, quantum theory and the space-time continuum.





Writer and director Christopher Nolan on the set of "Interstellar".  
Image credit: Melinda Sue Gordon, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures

Along with others including Ron Howard's 1995 film "Apollo 13" starring Tom Hanks, the genre always comes back to Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece "2001: A Space Odyssey" with the intelligent computer H.A.L. 9000. And none of it would be possible without the sci-fi fathers Arthur C. Clarke and "Star Trek" creator Gene Roddenberry who dared to dream it all.

The realities of an ever-evolving Hollywood have forced formulaic concessions to appease financial necessities. Each film being its own business with investors to satisfy, these formulas have caused blockbuster films to take fewer risks. Playing it safe usually causes the story to suffer. Films try to Band-Aid the fact with "A"-list stars who attempt to make the mistake forgivable.

Nolan knows he's got money people to placate, but artistically he bangs to his own drum and wouldn't have it any other way. It's tough to be anything but blown away by "Interstellar". Bucking the play-it-safe trend for big-budget films, it's even harder not to laud him for taking titanic risks.



Jessica Chastain in "Interstellar".



*Image credit: Melinda Sue Gordon, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures*

He's figured out how to make the universe – and even other dimensions in it – feel as huge as it most certainly is while simultaneously intimate. Nolan successfully humanizes such a complicated interplanetary and multi-dimensional story through the connection between one man and his daughter *literally* spanning space and time.

Not all of it makes perfect sense or is perfectly rooted in science or even science fiction, but he has successfully braved a new world of imagination and will inspire you to push your own boundaries of thought. Nolan makes you feel small within a vast universe and also gives you the potential to find meaning and purpose in it.

That said, casting wasn't his strong suit this time. I wouldn't have necessarily picked Matthew McConaughey as my lead farmer guy who returns to his NASA space flight days and treks to space. He's shown remarkable range in films like 2013's award-winning "Dallas Buyers Club" and others such as "Mud" and "Killer Joe" – and he *gets by* in "Interstellar". McConaughey was a risky and unlikely choice that ultimately pays off – not as Best Actor for himself, but so the film as a whole can rise above for potential Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay consideration.



Matthew McConaughey in "Interstellar".

*Image credit: Melinda Sue Gordon, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures*

Matt Damon also feels somewhat out of place but equally satisfactory as Dr. Mann: the human who has been spacewrecked in a very wet sleep for a long, long time. In small and forgettable roles, Topher Grace is another unusual choice – he's not believable as a doctor nor is his role needed at all – as is the soft-spoken Casey Affleck. But Jessica Chastain works perfectly and the film couldn't be what it is without Nolan's go-to classic Michael Caine.

Now what I've written next is something I rarely ever do. Certainly the actors are the ones who bring a story to life, but the star-studded "Interstellar" isn't one of my favorite films of 2014 because of them at all. Nolan truly is the star of this film and it is his filmmaking that actually rises above any actor in the body of work.

You can't imagine "Good Will Hunting" without Matt Damon, "Napoleon Dynamite" without Jon Heder, "Juno" without Ellen Page or "Fight Club" without Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. I'd have been fine with "Interstellar" having an entirely different cast so long as it had the same writer and director. Nolan's biggest fault with the film is casting satisfactory actors (and adding some fluff roles we didn't need) who don't rise above the script.





Mackenzie Foy and Matthew McConaughey in "Interstellar".

Image credit: Melinda Sue Gordon, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures

The film does feel somewhat narcissistic as if Nolan is obsessed with impressing himself. But whether you feel this to be arrogance or genius, "Interstellar" is so damn entertaining, thought provoking, boundary pushing and constantly tense that I just don't care about some clear missteps and even some pseudo-science that doesn't make sense.

A rare quality these days from a Hollywood blockbuster, "Interstellar" consistently keeps you guessing – never adhering to a formula or giving you the opportunity to predict what's coming next – and constantly inspires you to wonder.

What would a fifth dimension be like? What is on the other side of a black hole? Is there another planet that can sustain human life? Are we alone? Can time only move forward and must it progress in seconds as we know it to? At what cost are we willing to save mankind? Is saving millions of earthlings you don't know more important than losing your own children and family?

These are some vastly important questions, and as the best filmmakers do, Nolan poses them without necessarily answering them. And he does it over the course of nearly 3 hours with few dull moments so these questions scratch your brain, inspire your forward thinking and treat you to one hell of a mind-altering thrill ride.

*"Interstellar" stars Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, Michael Caine, Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Topher Grace, Casey Affleck, Ellen Burstyn, John Lithgow, Wes Bentley, Mackenzie Foy, Elyes Gabel, Collette Wolfe, Leah Cairns and David Oyelowo from writer and director Christopher Nolan and writer Jonathan Nolan. The film, which is 169 minutes, is rated "PG-13" for some intense perilous action and brief strong language. The film opened wide on Nov. 7, 2014 and is also available in IMAX.*



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