

Inside (2023 Film)

Directed by Vasilis Katsoupis. Screenplay by Ben Hopkins. 105 Minutes. Distributed by Focus Features; Released in USA March 17, 2023

Reviewed by Adam Bernstein, MD, and James Knoll, MD

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Cats die. Music fades. But art is for keeps (Ben Hopkins, line spoken by character Nemo).

Inside is a gritty psychological thriller in which the main character, Nemo, attempts to steal three paintings by famed expressionist Egon Schiele from an art collector of enormous wealth. Nemo, played by Willem Dafoe, is both an art lover and art thief. After being dropped off on the top floor of a New York City skyscraper by helicopter, Nemo quickly finds himself trapped inside when the security system is triggered. His new prison is a cathedral-like, luxury apartment reflecting brutalist architecture, technology, and exquisite works of art. Nemo is cut off from society, utterly forgotten and abandoned. The movie is replete with spiritual, correctional, and existential metaphors.

At first, Nemo tries to chisel his way out through the ornate, heavy wooden front door, only to find a metal door behind it. He then gazes up to see an impossibly high skylight in the apartment's midcentury-style spire. It looms above him as though it were a church steeple and conduit to freedom and heaven. Nemo sets about painstakingly lashing together the apartment's exquisite furniture, as though he were building a tower of Babel. But his labor is not without trials. He must first secure food and water, which he finds in short supply in the vast apartment. Although the apartment is a smart home, its cutting-edge thermostat begins to malfunction and fluctuates wildly. The broken smart thermostat serves as an absurd representation of seasonal cycles, as well as the notion that technology will automate one's very life and death. As his food supply runs out, Nemo begins to lose his grip on reality. He begins to hallucinate, talk to himself, and develops a relationship with a dying pigeon that is trapped just outside

one of the apartment's massive floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

Throughout his odyssey, we begin to see Nemo transform. He sees death approaching and transmutes his hallucinatory energy into creating art. We begin to realize that Nemo is sublimating his last energy into performance art, turning blank walls into canvases and furniture into a large altar-like structure. At one point, Nemo sits before his altar chanting "I am dying" as though it were a Buddhist ritual. Yet, throughout his imprisonment and trials, Nemo never gives up on his will to escape and build his tower to the skylight. His last acts involve painstakingly removing the skylight bolts, one by one, and placing them on his altar. In the final scene, Nemo is physically and mentally broken. After arranging the final bolt onto his altar, he makes his last precarious ascent up his tower to remove the glass separating his imprisonment from freedom as he religiously chants "I'm going to heaven on a hillside." The camera cuts away, and we hear a loud clattering impact, as the skylight glass crashes down like an ominous thunderbolt. When the camera returns, we can only see the hollow skylight with a wavering shadow and are left to wonder, did Nemo escape? Or was he killed by the heavy falling skylight? As the credits roll, Nemo's voice returns for a final time reciting a stanza of William Blake's "The Voice of the Devil."

Inside is a one-actor tour de force with powerful themes and references to great art and literature. References to William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" are of particular interest, given Blake's theories of contraries (e.g., "there is no creation without destruction," some of the last words Nemo utters in the film). Nemo is an artist who creates, yet also is a thief who takes away. Over the course of the movie, Nemo must reconcile his own contrary nature, balancing his own inner turmoil before he can escape his circumstances. Perhaps the glass skylight is a nod to Blake's famous quote: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite." For those who appreciate intense explorations of human nature along with depth and symbolism, *Inside* will not disappoint. Consider the protagonist's name, Nemo, which is Latin for "nobody," and a reference to Odysseus as well as Jules Verne's sea-faring hero. Willem Dafoe's Nemo can be interpreted as "no one," and thus everyone, sent on an epic task from

which he must return home. But in this unexpected odyssey, he is sent to die alone in an ominous cathedral where he must purify his soul. He must undergo unimaginable trials until all his egoistic husk is burned away. Not only must he repent, but he must watch death approach while he experiences terror, sadness, and awe. He turns inward, first courting madness. After enduring much pain and uncertainty, he begins to summon his creative force.

Correctional metaphors abound. Nemo is on lockdown, where he must maintain an intense focus on the passage of time. He is, after all, a thief who is incarcerated in a space of unforgiving brutalist architecture, “for you it was a home, for me it was a cage.” Brutalism, from the French for “raw concrete,” yet again ties the prison-like apartment to William Blake: “Prisons are built with stones of Law.” Nemo’s necessary attention to food rations, escape, and unending hard labor is only briefly interrupted by seeing what appears to be New Year’s Eve fireworks celebrations, reminding him that the world outside has left him behind. He spends some of his time returning to art and sketching, as many incarcerated persons do, which provides him meaning. Life in prison has been compared with death itself.¹ There is the inexorable awareness of the passage of time and the lost opportunity to return to loved ones and freedom. At a certain individualized point, the person serving life may come to realize the importance of meaning and dignity of self.² Recall that Quakerism and the Pennsylvania system of solitary confinement were rooted in purification through theological pursuit.³ For many incarcerated persons today, meaning and dignity are found through art and creativity in all its forms. This seems to be the case for Nemo, who tells us at the beginning of *Inside* that, even as a child, he cherished art above all else. In the final moments, Nemo finds his meaning and dignity through art, even amid painful isolation.

Finding meaning is often at the heart of the forensic and carceral rehabilitation process. Art is a time-tested conduit for finding meaning, and art therapy has been utilized in carceral and forensic settings, particularly to assist with healing past trauma.^{4,5} There is a stark difference between reading about finding meaning and experiencing the process. Cinematically, *Inside* provides an up-close and unvarnished view of this process and how incarcerated individuals endure and survive in unforgiving environments. The movie serves as an intense reminder for forensic psychiatrists of the

importance of holistic mental health programs designed to enhance forensic patients’ human dignity, sense of meaning, and gratitude.⁶

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Brain Science for Lawyers, Judges, and Policymakers

By Owen D. Jones, Jeffrey D. Schall, Francis X. Shen, Morris B. Hoffman, and Anthony D. Wagner. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2024. 139 pp. \$99.00

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Brain Science for Lawyers, Judges, and Policymakers is a 139-page book, meant to be a primer on neuroscience and the law. It accomplishes this goal: it eloquently and succinctly details the contours of neuroscience and how it is relevant to the American legal system. Despite the book’s brevity, the authors manage to provide a rapid review course on brain science while explaining why legal professionals must use caution when linking seemingly objective neurological data to psychiatric impairments.