



4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Detweiler, Craig (2010) "Nolan's Inception," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.14.01.18>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss1/18>

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Nolan's Inception

Abstract

This is a review of *Inception* (2010).

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In his *Personal Journey through American Movies*, Martin Scorsese described movie directors as smugglers. They are illusionists, experts at creating and sustaining a mood. Perhaps this is the enduring truth of movie magic; the ability to play a trick on the audience, before they discover how it was done. Christopher Nolan is a master magician, deftly un-spooling his stories through misdirection, leading us to collective 'a-ha' moments that light up the blogosphere.

During a summer of slack sequels and prequels, *Inception* stood out as a truly original story. Director Christopher Nolan had already distinguished himself as the most original and exciting director of *Generation X*. From *Memento* to *The Dark Knight*, Nolan has explored the human psyche, especially our endless capacity for self-deception. His flawed characters are heroes in their own minds. They may long for forgiveness or redemption, but bury that impulse under the job they feel compelled to complete. So *Inception* shined as a beacon of hope, one smart film amidst a sea of forgettable cinematic flotsam. It earned my opening night dollars!

Inception combines elements found in *James Bond* films, *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Matrix*—sharp cinematic sources. Its literary reference points include Juan Luis Borges and William Gibson. Older critics schooled in these precursors have found *Inception* less awe-inspiring, more assemblage than original. Younger moviegoers have embraced *Inception* as a cinematic breakthrough, an

instant masterpiece. It is a hackers' delight, full of detailed protocols, like a beta-tested video game.

My affections lie somewhere in the middle. I share cineastes' penchant for the rigorous work of Stanley Kubrick and Andrei Tarkovsky. Yet I recognize that our current state of cinema demands blockbuster franchises. Christopher Nolan has emerged as independent cinema's brightest light. He manages to loosen the studio's purse string, without overplaying the audiences' heartstrings. He resists Spielberg's sentimentality, opting instead for the haunting echoes of Hitchcock. Nolan offers cautionary tales about the dark side of the human condition. To a generation enamored with virtual worlds, *Inception* arrives as a bracing wake up call. Nolan understands the temptation to design cities and cathedrals, but reminds us to never consider Second Life a substitute for a real spouse and kids. Fanboys and girls need Nolan's cinematic kick in the head.

The alleged intractability of *Inception* never surfaced for me. Nolan spends so much time explaining the action through the architect-in-training, Ariadne (Ellen Page) that as a viewer I never felt lost. Each dream features distinguishing sets and style. I recognize how much *Inception* borrows from other films, but admire its seamless style and subconscious power. It is another brilliant edifice constructed by Nolan and company. Like our most ambitious buildings, they demand respect

and invoke awe. One may not want to live or work in them, but there is so much to admire in the craftsmanship.

Inception is about planting an idea in one man's mind. Master extractor Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is hired by a Japanese tycoon (Ken Watanabe) to plant an idea in his competition. Saito wants to break up a rival energy company owned by an ailing Maurice Fischer (Pete Postelthwaite). Dom and his ace assistant, Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) are to set their sights on Fischer's grieving heir, Robert (Cillian Murphy). On the surface, *Inception* is about corporate espionage. And that may be its greatest weakness. Why should we care whether one energy tycoon beats another? Having suffered through the fallout of so much corporate malfeasance, do we really want to see how far one billionaire will go to outmaneuver a rival? *Inception* could have been an intricate, but ultimately, un-involving mind game – yet it is more than that.

The intrigue arises from the “how” rather than the “what.” Our interest hinges on Cobb's methods rather than his assignment. To accomplish his task, Dom needs a team of experts. *Inception* unfolds like a caper film, adding one specialist, (Eames the Forger, Yusef the Chemist, and Ariadne the Architect), at a time. Instead of breaking into a bank, these thieves must crack the subconscious. We aren't told how they will dupe Fischer. Pleasure arises from surprises. As they drill

three layers down in the young tycoon's psyche, complications ensue. Cobb admits, "No idea is simple to implant in someone's head."

Amidst a heady plot, *Inception* derives its emotional "kick" from family matters. Like Nolan's breakthrough film, *Memento*, *Inception* is rooted in regret. It is about shattered dreams, nightmares that continue to haunt us. On the soundtrack, Edith Piaf sings, "Non Je Ne Regrette Rien"--"No, I Regret Nothing." Like Saito, she asks the musical question, "Do you want to become an old man full of regret?" Cobb has regrets about walking out on his kids. He wants to go home. Unfortunately, he's been blamed for his wife's death. Evidently, Mal (Marion Cotillard) was in the same business, engaged in subconscious skullduggery. What initially seemed attractive, idyll walks on imagined beaches, turns ugly. An idea planted in her head grows from inception to deception. Her grasp of reality becomes blurred. For Mal, suicide becomes a deadly leap of faith. Dom has buried their painful last night together in the basement of his subconscious. Will Cobb follow Mal, a classic femme fatale, down the same path?

While audiences may leave the theater thinking about how to guard their dreams, *Inception* is also about celluloid dreams. It is a movie about the power of movies to plant ideas in our collective heads. Director Christopher Nolan pulls an inception on an unsuspecting audience. He pulls together the finest actors, cinematographers, editors and composers to distract us, to lull us into a waking

dream, where we're open to suggestions. What idea is he implanting? Reconcile with your loved ones—whether spouses, parents or kids.

Dom says, “In a dream we create and perceive our world simultaneously.” Filmmakers cannot afford such spontaneity. Their inceptions must be planned out, shot by shot, months in advance. Like Cobb, filmmakers assemble a talented team of specialists: production designers, make up artists, costumers and stunt people. Cobb talks about the ability “to build cities and cathedrals that never existed.” His team sketches out elaborate plans. Filmmakers operate with similar blueprints, storyboarding shots and sequences. Yet, *Inception* is consciously devoid of computers. As the team hatches a plan to pull tricks on Fischer, so Nolan and his crew constructed a hotel and elevator where gravity is suspended. Nolan's nightmares are constructed as three-dimensional sets.

Films are also constructed in three acts, with stakes mounting in each one. *Inception* crosscuts between a Los Angeles street scene, a high-class hotel, and a mountain top fortress. Dom and company take their mark through three levels of dreams. The final act of their inception (and the film) plumbs a fourth level, a state of limbo. This is where the stakes are highest, the pressure most intense. Here Nolan alludes to classical sources. Action goes beyond the labyrinth designed by Ariadne (named after the Greek goddess). Has Mal become a bad shade, drawing Dom down to the underworld? Will Fischer ever unlock his inner cave, to satisfy his ailing

father's aspirations? Cobb (and the audience) must go deeper into the subconscious, to areas that are crumbling from neglect.

Nolan plays with dreamtime. Cobb suggests our dreams take place at a different pace – a week, 6 months, 10 years. Movie time operates in similar ways. It can be compressed, reversed, slowed down, or expanded at warp speed. Andrei Tarkovsky famously described the filmmakers' job as "sculpting in time." In *Inception*, a van tumbles off a bridge for thirty minutes. It plummets towards the water a few frames at a time. In Mombasa, we see a room full of people asleep, tapping into a shared dream. Isn't this the promise of the movies? We experience two hours in the dark, laughing and crying and screaming together. As the chemist concocts a potent narcotic to fuel our dreams, so Christopher Nolan pulls an inception on his adoring audience. He puts us into a collective dream state.

What makes these dreams so deceptively attractive? *Inception* crosses over into science fiction, but without an over-reliance upon special effects or space travel. I admire Nolan's commitment to practical effects. *Insomnia* could have descended into digital tricks (like the mind-bending Parisian street). Instead, Nolan places Dom and Ariadne on the sidewalk of a Parisian café. Fruit stalls and sidewalks erupt in a powerful and poetic way because Nolan relied on old-fashioned explosions. Only minimal digital effects are layered onto the foreground. Dom and Ariadne remain still amidst a sea of real (staged) explosions.

Like a master magician, Nolan hides his exposition of the plot with clever tricks. As Ariadne tries out dream logic, we see her push and pull mirrors on a Paris street. Those are real mirrors constructed and used in creative, cinematic ways. Arthur takes Ariadne up a staircase constructed to M.C. Escher's disorienting specs. These are old-fashioned mind games designed to distract audiences long enough to explain the plot. Even the mind-blowing freight train rolling through downtown Los Angeles streets is rooted in real effects. Evidently, they reconstructed a vintage train atop a flatbed truck chassis and rolled it down the street. While our dreams may deceive us, our eyes can identify the real within the reel.

The film's status as 'unqualified masterpiece' probably hinges on whether it delivers genuine emotional kicks or mere cinematic tricks. *Inception* is fueled by our subconscious yearning for reconciliation. Cobb's job is to prey on the emotional gap between an ailing father and his son. But we've seen so many tearful scenes played out on *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* that the Fischers' deathbed moment borders on cliché. Stanley Kubrick did it much more eerily and effectively in *2001*. Dom announces that we'd rather have a positive ending, to see father and son share a moment of connection. The ambiguity of *Inception*'s ending plays upon our same hopes and dreams. It is a cinematic Rorschach test. Those who read it hopefully want a positive conclusion, parent and child reunited. Those who bring a cynical note feel that Dom is trapped in his own personal limbo. The entire film had been

one long self-generated nightmare. That echoes the recurring theme I've identified in Nolan's work: our endless capacity for self-deception (For a more detailed analysis see my chapter on Nolan in *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, Baker Academic, 2008).

In *Memento*, a self-anointed hero creates a personal mythology to deal with crippling guilt. In *Following*, a thief (named Cobb!) was shocked that someone would steal from him. *Insomnia* explored the thin line between cops and criminals. In *The Prestige*, a magician couldn't believe somebody was playing tricks on him. Nolan's themes reached new depths in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. Bruce Wayne faces doppelgangers like the *Scarecrow* and the *Joker* who hold up a cracked mirror to Batman's psyche. So *Inception* arrives as another wake up call, to kick us back to reality, to propel us toward our spouse, to hug our kids before it is too late.