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Inception

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Inception

Abstract

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

With seven brilliant, thought-provoking, visually distinctive, major motion pictures in twelve years – 1998’s *Following*; 2000’s *Memento*; 2002’s American remake of *Insomnia*; 2005’s *Batman Begins*; 2006’s *The Prestige*; 2008’s *The Dark Knight*, and the brand new *Inception* – Christopher Nolan has fittingly become known as one of the most visionary, industrious, and bankable working auteurs in the Western hemisphere. *Inception* represents the director’s most ambitious and direct exploration of the themes that he has been studying throughout his work – chief among these is the obsession with understanding reality.

Nolan previously had terrific opportunities to investigate the search for truth with the profoundly disoriented perspectives of his noir anti-heroes in *Following*, *Memento*, and *Insomnia*; Bruce Wayne’s struggle to achieve freedom from fear in *Batman Begins*; the magicians trying to figure out each other’s illusions in *The Prestige*; and Gotham City’s various, competing moral ideologies in *The Dark Knight*. By addressing dreams, memories, projections, imagination, and the very nature of reality head-on, however, *Inception* gives Nolan his widest canvas yet for thinking through not only his chief concern but also other obvious interests such as remembrance, mourning, justice, violence, time, space, consciousness, conscience, and...well, inception.

Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is the world’s best and most elusive “extractor” – the go-to guy for a very unique kind of corporate espionage. Using a

defunct military technology that allows for shared dreaming, he can enter the mind of a subject through his or her dreams and extract vital information for a price. It's dicey work because everyone's subconscious is wily, domineering, unpredictable, and incredibly defensive. It creates obstacles for the extractor in familiar forms – secrets are literally kept under lock-and-key and unresolved issues take the shape of aggressively violent attackers, for example. Creating a dream within a dream can get the job done quicker and help throw the mind off the scent of invaders, but the more one tricks the mind, the more complicated things get for everyone. Cobb's ability to pull off layered dreaming – despite his inability to keep his own dangerous projections of deceased wife Mal (an ethereal Marion Cotillard) from entering these situations – makes him a cut above the average extractor.

His latest charge, Saito (Ken Watanabe), needs this skill for an inception – the planting of an idea, rather than the theft of one. The target is Robert Fischer, Jr. (Cillian Murphy), a businessman who stands to inherit an energy monopoly from his father (Pete Postlethwaite). Saito – and the rest of the world, really – needs Fischer to want to break up the monopoly. Information gained from spying on the family's advisor, Browning (Tom Berenger), suggests the distinct possibility of a successful inception. Of course, inception makes the subconscious an even more formidable foe: while extraction can be overlooked as forgetfulness, it's much harder to trick the mind into thinking that a planted idea is the product of its own

thought. But Saito makes Cobb a compelling offer: if he successfully performs the inception, his criminal record will be cleared so that he can return home to his children in America with his father-in-law Miles (Michael Caine). So Cobb, along with his partner Arthur (played with welcome comic mischief by Joseph Gordon-Levitt), architect Ariadne (Ellen Page), who weaves the world of the dream, “forger” Eames (Tom Hardy), who can impersonate others within dreams, and amateur anesthesiologist Yusuf (Dileep Rao) take the case.

Like other intricately plotted, deeply philosophical, emotionally powerful science fiction films such as *Blade Runner*, *Stalker*, *The Matrix*, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Nolan’s film has enormous resonance for scholars interested in religion and film. (In her review of the film, *The Washington Post*’s Ann Hornaday¹ even quipped about *Inception*’s “inevitable Talmudic interpretations.”) For one thing, creation – an ability that is on more than one occasion likened to the power of “gods” – is central to *Inception*. This is beautifully represented and explored through the heavenly paradise city constructed and lorded over by Cobb and Mal, where they once lived in a shared dream state for the mental equivalent of decades. This meditation on the power of invention naturally segues, like the various dream layers of the plot, into an examination of what might be likened to the “Fall of Man”. In one scene, for example, after Ariadne flees from her first experience of doing dream architecture, Cobb coolly reassures his

colleagues, saying, “She’ll be back. Her reality won’t be good enough for her ever again.” This, in turn, opens another portal to more personally felt topics such as remorse and regret. “You keep telling yourself what you know, but what do you believe? What do you feel?” the specter of Mal asks Cobb in one scene. “Guilt,” he replies, having come to grips with the grave consequences of his interference with the workings of subconscious minds – including his own. Conversely, the wholesome, productive opposites of these qualities are taken into account as well: as it turns out, the better the psychological self-care, the better the extractor. In one scene, as the team considers an offensive move, Cobb reminds them, “No! Positive emotions always trump negative emotions.”

However, it is *Inception*’s main concern with what is “real” and what isn’t that offers the most to scholars of religion and film, and specifically those with an interest in the wisdom of the mystical traditions. Dreams are a useful device in the film’s analysis, just as they have been useful throughout history for mystics to talk about the experience of those disconnected from truth in its most divine form. *Inception* asks many of the same big, challenging, and often unsettling questions that spiritual sages of the past have about how we distinguish between the phantasmal and the authentic. “Dreams feel real while we’re in them,” Cobb says to Ariadne during her training. “It’s only when we wake up that we realize

something was actually strange.” But, of course, Nolan, like the mystics, is not so naïve to believe that it is easy to define what “real” is.

In fact, when *Inception*’s questions finally become reflexive, turning back on the film itself in much the same way that the city of Paris folds over on top of itself in a memorable moment, one might be reminded of Meister Eckhart’s analogy that the material universe is to God as “the production of our dreams is to the world of our awakened intellect.” Similarly, when that final shot of the film comes, viewers will probably see the wisdom in Indian Buddhist pundit Atiśa’s exhortation to “regard all phenomena as dreams.” Though the characters all use a small, personal totem as “an elegant solution for keeping track of reality,” Nolan chooses to leave the audience with no such guide when all is said and done. Like the mystics, we’re left instead with the questions and the knowledge that to advance spiritually one has to learn, as Cobb does, to “let go.”

Though it is overwrought (but enjoyably so), heavy on the chases and gunplay (and light on those affecting dramatic moments), and a little unwieldy (it practically demands multiple viewings just to be clear about the narrative), *Inception* is nonetheless as technically astounding, thematically rich, and ultimately vivid a movie-going experience as Nolan’s tour de force *The Dark Knight*. Its pleasures increase exponentially when one considers the enormous range of possibilities here for thinking about the insights of religious contemplatives.

Watching *Inception* gives us the opportunity to see played out cinematically, through the character of Cobb as he dreams within dreams within dreams, what the Sufi mystic Rumi learned in his own hard way:

No matter how subtle the sleeper's thought becomes,
His dreams will not guide him Home.
Whether the sleeper's thought is twofold or
Threefold,
It is error multiplying error. (trans. Kabir Helminski)

¹ The *Washington Post*'s Ann Hornaday's 15 July 2010 review of the film even quipped about *Inception*'s "inevitable Talmudic interpretations. See *The Washington Post*.