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Shadowlands, Myth, and the Creation of Meaning in Inception

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Shadowlands, Myth, and the Creation of Meaning in Inception

Abstract

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

Christopher Nolan has a well-earned reputation for being one of the best at creatively using film to explore difficult philosophical, religious, and ethical questions. *Inception* is perhaps his most ambitious offering yet, providing nearly unlimited fodder for those interested in the intersection of religion and film—ultimately even critiquing itself as it wrestles with problems of knowledge and truth. Like Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) and *The Prestige* (2006), *Inception* cinematically immerses the audience in the very same problems it seeks to address—always an impressive achievement.

Inception is a mind-heist espionage thriller in which master “extractor” Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a high-level thief, infiltrating others’ minds (using military-developed “shared dreaming” technology) to steal their secrets for the highest bidder. Cobb is especially skilled at circumnavigating the subject’s subconscious, which aggressively resists intrusion by means of “projections” (constructed dream-people) that converge upon the intruder like antibodies. Cobb’s tactics include building a dream within a dream to trick the dreamer into thinking he/she is awake. But the more dream layers involved, the more unstable the dream world, so managing this kind of layered dreaming requires someone of Cobb’s abilities—especially with a subject previously trained to resist extraction, thus having a “militarized” subconscious.

Powerful Japanese businessman Saito (Ken Watanabe) recruits Cobb for something far more complicated than simply stealing an idea (extraction): he must perform an “inception”, planting an outside idea into the subject’s mind—a task requiring the mind to be fooled into believing the thought was its own (circumventing the mind’s subconscious immune system) for the idea to take root.

Here the film makes arguably its most important point: the most potent and influential ideas are those so thoroughly socialized and internalized that, their origins long forgotten, they are presupposed without argument. Ideas that are assimilated indirectly, absorbed unconsciously—these are the seeds that grow to define people, that create a culture, that determine the things that will be consciously accepted and embraced. Scholars of religion are especially conscientious to draw out these deeply rooted assumptions for examination—a difficult task indeed, as it first requires dealing with one’s own presuppositions.

Saito makes Cobb an offer he cannot refuse: if he succeeds, Saito will use his connections to clear Cobb of accusations that he murdered his wife, allowing him a free return to his children in the USA. The assignment is to convince the heir of a rival energy conglomerate, Robert Fischer, Jr. (Cillian Murphy), to break up the business upon the death of his father (Pete Postlethwaite). Cobb collects his team—pointman Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt); “forger” Eames (Tom Hardy), who can imitate people familiar to the subject; chemist Yusuf (Dileep Rao), who

makes custom shared-dreaming chemicals; and a new recruit, the aptly-named Ariadne (Ellen Page), the “architect” who builds the labyrinthine dream levels for the job—and the inception attempt begins.

As suggested by the film’s recurrent use of Edith Piaf’s “Non, je ne regrette rien” (“No, I don’t regret anything”) for the musical countdown at the end of the dreams, themes of guilt and cleansing (catharsis) are central to the film. We soon learn that Cobb is tormented by paralyzing guilt, manifested through the dangerous projection of his deceased wife, Mal (a spectacular performance by Marion Cotillard), who repeatedly sabotages the work. (Projections are usually supplied only by the dream subject’s subconscious, but Cobb’s guilty subconscious has become unusually invasive.) The inception attempt thus necessarily involves a journey deep into Cobb himself as he strives to find peace—borrowing from the ancient motif of a journey to the underworld (described as “Limbo,” an unconstructed dream space) and back (e.g. Demeter, Orpheus, Dionysus, Heracles, Aeneas, Christ).

In its exploration of dreams and the difficulty of distinguishing dreams from reality, *Inception* is something of a Cartesian meditation through film—with the twist that these dreamers can wonder if they are dreaming, further blurring the lines between dreams and reality. The film’s dreams are depicted as imitations of a “reality” envisioned as “above” the dream state—a move that reflects a

fundamentally Platonic approach to the epistemological questions being addressed in the film. Of course, for Plato, the material world is the shadow of the ideal, objective, intellectual reality, so at first blush, it appears that *Inception* inverts this picture, since the wholly mental world of dreams is actually the inferior copy of “reality.”

A closer look, however, reveals that in *Inception* (as in Plato), it is the idea that has ultimate power, creating and shaping even the “real world.” The implantation of one thought, the smallest seed of a well-formed idea, into a single receptive consciousness radically and creatively (or destructively) shapes that person—and the world. The waking world is indeed subject to the world of ideas, even if the ideal realm can only be realized and accessed in the subjective experiences of the lower worlds. The film also gently touches the question of whether the material world is itself merely a shade of an even higher realm—this is, as we learn, essentially the idea that Mal embraced.

The construction of dream worlds for shared dreaming serves as an excellent metaphor for film itself (and “myth” in general), as it involves the creation of a virtual reality, a shadowlike imitation of the real world into which people can journey together, guided by the “architect” (writer/director). As people are naturally resistant to new or outside ideas, those media (like film) that can influence people’s thinking without drawing the attention of their (often militarized) subconscious

guards are especially powerful forms of communication and agents of cultural change. Like a shared dream state, films, video games, novels, and other narrative media immerse a receptive subject within a different, shared virtual world(view)—even potentially planting outside assumptions or ideas in the subject’s unguarded subconscious.

Such communication is not, however, a one-sided affair, as the subject’s mind is what populates the virtual realm and ultimately fashions meaning. A good architect must create a world both satisfying enough to maintain suspension of disbelief (otherwise the dream collapses or the audience leaves the theatre), and the team must be able to guide the subject along a specific narrative trajectory—all while leaving space for the subject to create his/her own meaning. As Cobb explains to Ariadne, this process of interpretation and creation of meaning is part of the very process of cognition, as each person simultaneously perceives and creates his/her world in a seamless process. Inception thus explores the themes of narrative, interpretation, and creation of meaning through media, communication, and cognition—paying special attention to the power of myth.

Throughout the film, we are confronted—together with the tormented Cobb—with the subjectivity of human experience, asking the question of “why, if everything is subjective, should we not simply choose whatever ‘reality’ we prefer, constructing our world however we like?” A key scene in Mombasa asks this very

question, referencing a group of people for whom “the dream has become their reality,” followed by the challenge, “Who are you to say otherwise?” Given the subjectivity of reality (and all that shared dreaming offers—extended life, creative control, etc.), this challenge initially seems sensible. Cobb, however, rejects this reasoning, recalling Limbo: “It wasn’t so bad at first feeling like gods. The problem was that none of it was real.”

Remarkably, when again confronted with the chance to choose his own reality—one with (his projection of) Mal—Cobb’s guilt keeps him from delusion, “always”, he says, “reminding me of the truth.” It is ultimately suffering—that fundamental of human experience of incapacity and unfulfilled desire—that serves as the persistent reminder of the human need to engage with a constitutive “Other”; without an “Other,” there cannot be a differentiated “self” (cf. Plato’s “Same” and “Different”).¹ In the face of this realization, Cobb observes that his projection of Mal is “just a shade”: inferior, unable to capture the fullness, the “otherness” of his real wife. Like Leonard from *Memento*, Cobb is ultimately forced “to believe in a world outside [his] own mind.”

After confessing his guilt and human frailty (to himself!), Cobb finds resolution, finally letting go of the past he cannot undo to “take leap of faith,” trusting an “other” (Saito) and fulfilling his own relational responsibility. Cobb’s subsequent return home is so satisfying, so human, so real, that he embraces it on

faith, no longer needing Mal's "totem" (itself a reminder of his guilt), since such a delusion would require a fantasy more real than reality itself—as C. S. Lewis (also known for his "shadowlands") once wrote it, "a playworld which licks [the] real world hollow."²

In the end, *Inception* is a tremendously enjoyable and immersive celebration of the storyteller's creative power and influence, illustrating how a shared common narrative world can reach depths no logical argument could ever touch. It is the storytellers who hold the most influence over people and society, as their stories are able to shape the unconscious presuppositions that come to define us—but they (and we) must take heed that the story creates a reality that leads to life rather than destruction.

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 35a–b.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 159.