

# THE MEME & THE MAZE

## INCEPTION

Roger Tucker

"... people tend to think that there are very clear rules to what an audience can handle and what they can't handle. And this movie is a double barrel shotgun at those expectations."

Jonathan Nolan

*INCEPTION* is surely the most complex movie that has ever been accredited as an international box office smash hit. Built on five levels of reality, each with its own time scheme, and extensive cross-cutting between them, there are also major flashback sequences — even flashbacks within lucid dreams, flashes forward, recurring memory images and subjective perceptions. In addition each level has at least two lines of action which are crosscut. with a plot involving bluff and counter-bluff, and a shape-shifting character who changes appearances on different levels. In view of this hyper-complexity it would be no surprise if the resulting movie turned out to be a dismal flop, but quite the reverse was proved to be the case. *Rolling Stone* called it a "wildly ingenious chess game," and added "the result is a knockout."<sup>2</sup> In his

review for *Variety*, Justin Chang praised the film as "a conceptual tour de force"<sup>3</sup> *Los Angeles Times'* Kenneth Turan wrote, "If you're searching for smart and nervy popular entertainment, this is what it looks like."<sup>4</sup> Richard Roeper, of *The Chicago Sun-Times*, gave *Inception* a perfect score of "A +" and noted that it is "one of the best movies of the [21st] century."<sup>5</sup> One adverse voice commented that perhaps the film is not so much *complex*, as just *complicated*.<sup>6</sup> Either way, it is clear that this movie has gone way beyond current screenplay paradigms and is, perhaps, the first benchmark script since *Pulp Fiction*. Let's look at how this extraordinary feat of artistic daring and big-budget devil-may-care has been achieved?



**Once upon a time** a story started with a *set-up*. "It tells the audience everything they need to know to understand the story that follows"<sup>8</sup>. This is the pattern that was established in the nineteenth century novel, where it was customary to provide the reader with extensive background information on the major characters before development

**COBB**

**You never remember the beginning of your dreams do you? You just turn up in the middle of what's going on.**<sup>7</sup>

began. When Syd Field introduced his renowned screenplay *paradigm*<sup>9</sup> he called the first act *The Setup*. At the Disney Company they likened the first act to a plane on the runway, starting up the engines, taxiing into position; it was not until the first turning point and the beginning of act two that the plane (and story) took off<sup>10</sup>.

This is not the way *Inception* begins. On the contrary, the audience are immediately plunged into a welter of abrupt and bewildering images, that are more akin to a climax than an intro. The first images are gentle enough: a man on a beach looks up from the surf to watch two children playing in the sand, but, before any explanation is given, the barrel of a gun is thrust into his neck and he is yanked off to an audience with an old man in a Japanese castle. His spinning of a spinning top takes us into a long flashback where the startling subject of *neurosecurity* is raised. This is then followed by cuts to a filthy bathroom, the compartment of a bullet train, and a climactic confrontation with an elegant woman on a roof

terrace. Nothing is set up, nothing is explained in advance.

Facing the problem of holding an audience over a premature initial commercial break, American TV started the practice of putting a foretaste of the exciting stuff to come right up front. This became known as 'The Hook', and was, in effect, like attaching a trailer to the front of the show. Soon, however, the form was adopted by popular movies that already had a captive audience, notably in the early James Bond films. One can liken this to another device that became popular around the same time; that of reversing the shot grammar of establishing-shot/long-shot/mid-shot/close-up, and starting a scene with a close shot of a detail. In both cases the audience are abruptly plunged into the midst of the action without immediately knowing *what* or *why*.

*Inception* begins with an extended hook that bombards the unprepared audience with the themes and mythos of what is to follow. *The Hook* raises questions that demand answers; what follows, which I call *The Tell*, answers them bit-by-bit by progressively orientating the audience to what is still in the process of happening. Originally only added as a prelude to the beginning of a conventional story structure, once established the form of *Hook & Tell* can be extended in a fugue-like pattern, so that **the audience are forced to continually play catch-up**. On the one hand the conventional story progression of set-up/development/climax & resolution can be used to create suspense; on the other, **Hook & Tell\*** can be used to inject surprise. In this way the audience are continually kept off-balance, and, as in *Inception*, the full explanation will be deferred until the end, and perhaps, beyond.



MAL

Judging by the decor we're in your mind,  
aren't we, Arthur?"

**Guerilla Ontology\*** is a term coined by Robert Anton Wilson, and introduced in his book *The Illuminati Papers*, as a way of undermining the false certainty of people with rigid world-views:

"Ontology is the study of being; the guerrilla approach is to so mix the elements of each book that the reader must decide on each page 'How much of this is real and how much is a put-on?" <sup>11</sup>

Wilson called this, *Operation Mindfuck*, a term by which some recent movies have been categorized by Jonathan Eig<sup>12</sup>, Mathew Baldwin<sup>13</sup>, and others. Applied to films it is the undermining the audience's propensity to suspend disbelief and accept what appears on the screen at face value. Some of the most celebrated examples have been, *The Sixth Sense*, where it transpires that the main character has been dead for most all the film, *The Usual Suspects*, where near the end it is revealed that the entire film has been a tall tale spun by the narrator, and *The Crying Game*, where it is revealed that the femme fatale is, in fact, a man.

While *Inception* is a film built on dreams within dreams, Christopher Nolan is not so much interested in the strangeness of dreams as the

fact that while we are in a dream we accept it as reality — except in those exceptional occasions known as *lucid dreaming*. What is exciting is that the mind creates this world that it then perceives as real. The bizarre, uncanny, and often sexual, aspect of dreams, exploited by Bunuel and Lynch are rather viewed by Nolan as *errors* propagated by subconscious anxiety.

When Cobb takes Ariadne for a coffee in a Parisian café it looks like an ordinary café in an ordinary Parisian street — until it starts to violently implode with furniture and people swept up in a whirlwind of mayhem, and we realise that we are in a dream. Ultimately, the basic rule of the film is that at any moment anything may be warped into the scenario of a dream so that the clichés we have come to take for granted are *defamiliarized*.

Such is the uncertainty set up that the leading character repeatedly employs a test of reality — a spinning top that will spin endlessly in the dream but in the real world must eventually topple. Other characters have similar totems, but the audience has none; the *suspension of disbelief* is repeatedly cut through by the notion that everything they are watching is a projection of mind.

# EXPOSITION AND THE WHAMMO!

P A S I V

"You never want to find yourself in a scene where characters are passively receiving information in some way, because you don't want the audience passively receiving information. You want them engaged with that dramatization."

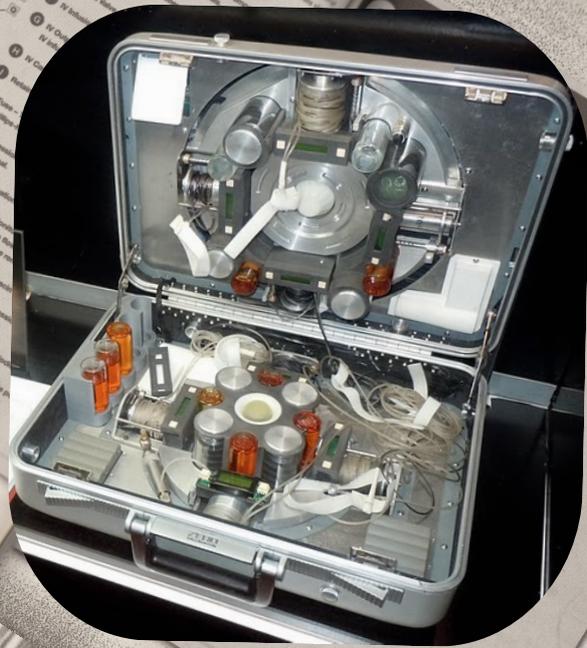
Christopher Nolan<sup>14</sup>

It is ironic that one of the main criticisms of *Inception* has been its exposition laden dialogue. After bombarding the audience with a welter of disjunctive scenes and images, Nolan seems to revert to a rather lumpen *set-up*. This does not meet the standards of those looking for a character driven drama, because, for the most part, he is not interested in character relations, but *functions*. A good deal of the dialogue is



cerebral and non-dramatic, but, this is nothing much like the usual forms of exposition which gives information about the past. Rather it is more like the low-down on the rules of a video game, and as such is future orientated. It is an induction into *The Special World*<sup>15</sup>, the world of *Dream-share*, in which the plot will be enacted.

"There are rules to the way characters use dreaming, which defines reality, which defines the dreams they enter. The characters take great pride in knowing these rules and that they apply them absolutely."<sup>16</sup>



However, this world of shared dreams remains *unpredictable* because the philosophical rationale is continually disrupted by manifestations of the dreamers subconscious which appear in the familiar form of tropes from action movies — such as men with guns, chases down narrow alleyways, explosions, and the like. This allows Nolan to pace his exposition with the rule of *The Whammo*.

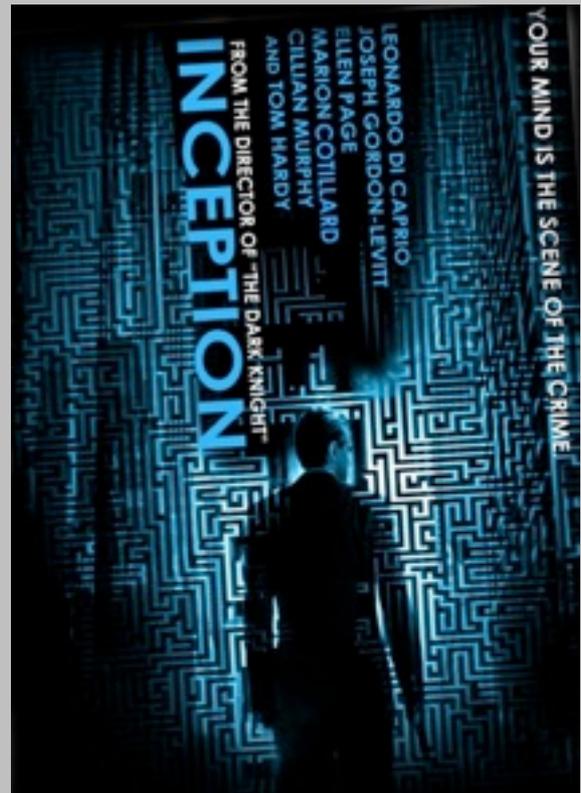
## **The Whammo Chart (a.k.a. the Eleven-Minute Commandment)**

A formula invented by producer Larry Gordon for action films. The formula calls for an action sequence every 11 minutes. Time Joel Silver films like *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Predator* and you'll see how religiously Joel believes in Larry Gordon's 11-minute commandment.<sup>17</sup>

*Inception* takes familiar elements from many popular genres — caper movies, film noir, action adventure, science fiction, etc. — and re-motivates them by putting them into a new context. Exposition is cross-cut with action which illustrates it on a visceral level. While Arthur explains the visual paradox of the Penrose Steps<sup>18</sup>, Cobb is transversing just such an impossible landscape with gun in hand.

“One of the fascinating things about the heist movie, and one of the reasons I took this as the model, is that the type of exposition that in most films is problematic, boring, tricky, hard to get through — in a heist movie becomes the meat of it ... It’s part of the entertainment, simply because the process of a heist movie and that sort of procedure, the way they put things together, becomes the reason you’re watching the story.”<sup>19</sup>

I read this more as *alibi* than badge of honor, but it is a good indication of the way Nolan wants the audience to watch the film. It is not the subject-matter, but the structure that gives *Inception* its originality.



## MIRROR STRUCTURE









## RECURSION & THE MODULAR PLOT

In an interview in *Creative Screenwriting* Nolan speaks of reading Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*.

"It opened my eyes to something I found absolutely shocking at the time ... It's structured with a series of parallel timelines and effortlessly tells a story using history — a contemporary story and various timelines that were close together in time (recent past and less recent past), and it actually cross cuts these timelines with such ease that, by the end, he's literally sort of leaving sentences unfinished and you're filling in the gaps."<sup>26</sup>

This form, of **modular plot\*** construction, became big in movies with the success of Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. That this was a film intercutting different stories became immediately obvious through an achronological presentation of segments, and the largely different casts of each story. The modules that comprise the movie are not aligned for or against one grand purpose, as with the storylines in a conventional screenplay structure, however, they do have surprising knock-on effects to each other. For example, the fact that the girl of one story leaves a watch behind in an apartment results in the death of the main character from another story, someone she has never met.

The modular plot foregrounds the **practical irony\*** of serendipity, happenstance and the inevitability of fate over goal-directed action. Quite aside from the

effect intended, an action may, through **recursion\***, set off a logically unrelated chain of consequences. This series, then, is not purposive but, rather, contextual and pragmatic. It's effects may be surprising, shocking, or comic. Indeed, it has been pointed out that it is largely through the recursive effect of coincidence and misinterpretation that disparate events are connected in the old Buster Keaton movies.<sup>27</sup> We could also say that these effects are more akin to dream logic.

ARTHUR

A dream within a dream within a dream? Is that even possible?

COBB

Yes. It is.

The modular plot thrives on tension between connection and independence of its separate parts. The form relying on associational logic, rather than causal, lends itself to some form of achronological telling,<sup>28</sup> but to use the term solely for these cases seems unnecessarily restrictive. The multi-protagonist film, *Crash*, for example, has a unified time scheme, but its separate modules produce surprising recursive effects; to take one, a racist stand-off that results in blanks being sold instead of live ammunition leads to a little girl believing in her daddy's fairy story of a magic cloak that would protect her from harm.

Counter to this, the modular plot of *Inception* is unified by an over-riding aim, but it's modules are, uniquely, arranged over five levels of reality each with a distinct geography and milieu, and a different time-scheme.

COBB

It's basically a week one layer down, six months two layers down -

ARIADNE

And *ten years* in the third level. Who wants to spend ten years in a dream?

YUSUF

Depends on the dream.

These realities are stacked like an illustration to Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Calibrated to run simultaneously, each module has it's own deadline, and, further more, all these *ticking clocks* have to synchronize. David Bordwell amusingly noted:

"One thing that has long struck me about classical crosscutting is that in one line of action time is accelerated, while in another it slows down. The

villains are inches away from breaking into the cabin/ the hero is miles away/ the villains are almost inside/ the hero is just arriving. I wonder if Nolan noticed this aspect of the crosscutting convention and built it into his plot ..."<sup>29</sup>

Whatever, this scheme enables Nolan to move from the linear time-scheme demanded of the action movie to a tour de force of cross-cutting through the progressive pile-up of the different modules.

Each plot module follows a linear storyline towards a particular goal with the kinds of action and reaction that are familiar from classic genre movies. However these effects are also reflected metaphorically from one level of reality to that below. This recursive effect is clearly demonstrated in the opening hook, where the sleeping Cobb falling backwards into a bath of water is reflected in his dream by water suddenly exploding through the windows of the Japanese castle. Though, in both dialogue and diagram, Christopher Nolan refers to descending to each further dream-level, in his mind he would appear to have an image of each level balancing on top of the other. The more that are piled up the less stable they become, a disturbance at the base-level magnified with each layer of dreaming. Here the point of recursion is not just knock-on, but dimensional.

## The inception of INCEPTION ?



frames from Don Rosa's *The Dream of a Lifetime*

It has been suggested that the idea of Dream-share came from a Disney cartoon<sup>24</sup> called *Uncle Scrooge in The Dream of a Lifetime*.<sup>25</sup> Certainly there are striking parallels. In the cartoon *The Beagle Boys*, (a group of characters in the form of

cartoon ducks), with the aid of an electronic device stolen from the mad inventor, Gyro Gearloose, enter the dreams of Uncle Scrooge with the aim of getting him to divulge the combination to the lock of his vault. In each segment of the

dream things go comically wrong, but, just as in *Inception*, the Boys soon realise that "when you fall in a dream you always wake up."

In the cartoon, as in Nolan's film, the dream segments are all filled with danger and excitement and vary wildly, but each time the Boys wake they return to the same room where Uncle Scrooge is sleeping. What is original to *Inception* is the idea of stacking one dream inside another. In *Dream of A Lifetime* the Boys influence the content of the dream by making noises and introducing smells into the room where Scrooge is sleeping; in the film violent disturbance in one dream affects the dream level below, so that, famously, a rolling van can result in a spinning hotel corridor.



The mythos of *Inception* provides for ubiquitous antagonists. They are envisaged as mental antibodies that are mobilised to repel invaders. In the dream world they take on many forms, from hostile passers-by, to plain clothes security men, to a whole army. Nolan draws on the idea of *neurosecurity* propagated by Joseph Moreno<sup>30</sup> and others, to provide both a profession for Cobb and a rationale for staging escalating action sequences, culminating in a commando raid on a fortified castle that is reminiscent of Anthony Mann's war movie, *The Heroes of Telemark*.

It is these armed forces springing from Fischer's subconscious that provide the opposition within the heist plot. However, beyond this is a far more formidable opposition, springing from the protagonist's subconscious, that threatens the entire enterprise. This I call the *anti-plot*. If the heist plot following genre lines is a slick but shallow confabulation with characters that are little more than functionaries, entering the **anti-plot\*** is like suddenly finding oneself in an art-house movie.

We have previously seen Nolan, in his two Batman films, take a comic book subject and invest it with unexpected depth. The comparison of the characterisation of The Joker, played by Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), with the same character played by Heath Ledger in Nolan's *The Dark Knight*

#### ARTHUR

Fischer's had an extractor teach his mind to defend itself. His subconscious is militarized.

### Neurosecurity: The mind has no firewall

Neurosecurity and the potential for so-called '*mind hacking*' has interested me for quite some time now, so I was surprised to discover that this topic was covered back in 1997 by Timothy L. Thomas. Writing in *Parameters*, the US army war college journal, Thomas warned that the American military risked falling behind in the burgeoning field of information warfare.

His particular concern was that military systems operators could be exploited as 'open systems.' "We need to spend more time researching how to protect the humans in our data management structures," he writes, "Nothing in those structures can be sustained if our operators have been debilitated by potential adversaries or terrorists who—right now—may be designing the means to disrupt the human component of our carefully constructed notion of a system of systems."



(2008), is remarkable. Here, in *Inception*, the same unfathomable darkness lies beneath the spills and thrills.

From beginning to end, Cobb's personal Limbo is ever present threatening to swallow him up should he fall through the immediate distractions of the plot. He can no longer be the architect of his own dreams because they would soon become corrupted into a mirror of the obsessions that haunt him. He needs another to devise a world so detailed that it would act as a constant distraction and diversion. For Limbo has a pull on him like a powerful drug, or death wish.



With Ariadne beside him, Cobb descends into the psychological depths. Entering Limbo we move out of the calibrated time-scheme of the plot and into a state of endlessly recycling dreams within the dream-state, where flashbacks merge seamlessly with psychodrama. It is a world dominated by the malevolent spirit of Cobb's dead wife, Mal, a woman who lost touch with reality and ended up thinking that her own children were not real.

This is a storyline that might have come from an Ingmar Bergman film but nothing like this ever before belonged to a tent-pole action movie. The horror of the vision is given testimony by an ex-schizophrenic in a message on an internet blog.

I suffered from schizophrenia for many years of my life, and maybe I will again, even though I feel healthy these days, and this movie filled me with deep sadness because some time ago I had experienced dreams that felt like reality even when I was awake. It was a terrible feeling, knowing that you don't sleep but are lost in a world of psychotic nightmares, where you don't know anymore what is real and what is not - and "Inception" brought this feeling back to me. That's why I think of it a powerful film. The hero of "Inception" can't wake up anymore, he can't dream anymore, he's floating between these two worlds, his life is hell. This is what I took with me after watching this movie, and it's enough to make me frightened for weeks or even months.<sup>31</sup>



As her mythic name suggests, Ariadne provides the thread that will lead him out of the labyrinth and, perhaps, allow him to escape. Here *Inception* follows the familiar backward trajectory of the psychological story with extended flashbacks and relived dreams as Cobb relates his story to Ariadne. It is a story of a folie à deux, where he and his wife wrapped themselves in a dream world with irreparable consequences. In effect Ariadne acts as his therapist telling him that he is going to have to forgive himself and confront his fears, but that he does not have to do it alone.

The **inner-story reveal** comes when Cobb admits that he performed inception on his own wife, that he implanted the idea that death was a necessary escape from their dream.

It becomes clear that for Nolan the state of Limbo exists through guilt and regret, through the refusal to let go of the past. Memories are turned into dreams in the hope of changing them, but that can never happen. It is significant that the trigger for the team to escape from the layered dream-world of *Inception* is a recording of Edith Piaf's song, ***Non, Je ne Regrette Rien.***

COBB:

I never thought that the idea  
I'd planted would grow in her  
mind like a cancer. That even  
after we awoke ...

[Cobb relives the scene of Mal's suicide.]

COBB:

You'd continue to believe the  
world was not real ...

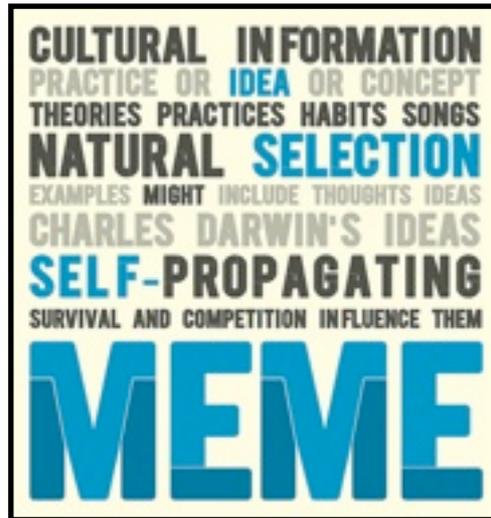
MAL

That death was the only escape

# THEME AS MEME

Ever since Sam Goldwyn said, "If you want to send a message, call Western Union," there has been a squeamishness among both film-makers and theorists in dealing with theme. At the same time, they all insist that, while best kept out of sight, it is an essential ingredient. The most widely revered source is still an early twentieth century Hungarian playwright, Lajos Egri. His big idea was that a dramatic work should contain a moral proposition, (which he, misleadingly, called a *premise*) which a dramatic work should set out "to prove".<sup>32</sup> This image of movie as moral debate, may once have served, but it is too narrow a concept for the complex movies of today, including *Inception*.

In Robert McKee's *Story* Egri's "premise" is remodeled as *The Controlling Idea*.<sup>33</sup> This would appear to differ very little but what the renaming does is move the emphasis from the beginning of the work to the end, where it acts as a beacon to the writer working towards it through all the vagaries of the plot. So the whole point of *The Controlling Idea* is to remain unchanged, so unifying the dramatic action and giving significance to the ending.



Nolan introduces in *Inception* the narrative development of an idea. It is not just an abstract argument, value versus counter-value, but an elemental motivator of moral change, or *meme*. This is a term coined by Richard Dawkins, who defined it as "a unit of cultural inheritance", analogous to a gene on a cultural level.<sup>34</sup> Examples given in the book. *The Selfish Gene*, include melodies, catch-phrases, fashion, and the technology of building arches. One might also extend the term to include a genre trope or theme of a movie. In more succinct terms Malcolm Gladwell described the meme this way:

"A meme is an idea that behaves like a virus — that moves through a population, taking hold in each person it infects."<sup>35</sup>

And, in *Inception*, we have the dialogue:

COBB

You see, an idea is like a virus ... Highly contagious ... The smallest seed of an idea can grow to define or destroy your world ...

In his Creative Screenwriting interview Nolan explained:

"The idea that you would plot something that would have to grow in a particular way and you'd have to predict the chaotic way in which that thing might grow through somebody's mind — it seemed a much bigger payoff for the premise."<sup>36</sup>

The 'something' is the meme and the 'somebody's mind' is the maze. And, how this 'payoff' can be brought about is the topic of *Inception*.

The shift of theme into meme, then, immediately takes us beyond an abstract argument; the power of a meme is in the behavior that results, not in an appeal to authority; and the moral journey is not just a switch from one value to a counter-value, but a more organic process of growth and change.

COBB

Now the subconscious motivates through emotion, not reason, so we have to translate the idea into an *emotional* concept.

It has been pointed out that the way Cobb and his team go about stripped down the idea and rooting it in an emotional core, mimics the way an actor will seek to ground his performance in a character's most fundamental needs<sup>37</sup>.

EAMES

You need the simplest version of the idea - the one that will grow naturally in the subject's mind.

It is amusing that early on Cobb states what could well pass for an Egri *premise*, or, a McKee *controlling idea*:

COBB

Positive emotion trumps negative emotion every time.

But in *Inception*, this is just treated as an operating principle rather than any higher kind of justification. Like a team of admen developing a new campaign they formulate the working proposition:

MY FATHER ACCEPTS THAT I WANT TO CREATE FOR MYSELF, NOT FOLLOW IN HIS FOOTSTEPS.

The way this is then broken down outlines a projected psycho-emotional **narrative itinerary\*** from an unquestioned certainty to its opposite.

EAMES

We could split the idea into emotional triggers and use one on each level.

COBB

How do you mean?

EAMES

On the top level we open up his relationship with his father ... "Say "I WILL NOT FOLLOW IN MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS." Next level down we've accessed his ambition and self-esteem. We feed him "I WILL CREATE SOMETHING MYSELF." Then the bottom level we bring out the emotional big guns ...

COBB

"MY FATHER DOESN'T WANT ME TO BE HIM."

EAMES

That could do it.

From finding that Maurice Fischer put a photo of himself as a child beside his father's bed, but his sick father never noticed; and that, later the paper pinwheel in the picture, that he finds in his father's safe, interests him far more than any will, they set out to pin their campaign on the core emotional truth of Fischer's love for his father. It is the evocation of that emotion that will form the ground in which they can plant the seed of inception.

EAMES

Then we take Fischer down another level and his own subconscious feeds it right back to him.

ARTHUR

So he gives himself the idea.

EAMES

Precisely. That's the only way to make it stick.

So, unsuspecting, when the time is ripe, their mark will have his *anagnorisis*<sup>38</sup>, his epiphany, his moment of self-discovery.



"I've always enjoyed film noir more than any other genre. One of the reasons I've always loved it is because so much of it is about the misapprehensions on the part of the protagonists. Often in film noir, the protagonist is his own worst enemy. Not necessarily in specific terms like in *Memento*, where it's literally kind of self-sabotage, but simply in terms of paranoia, misunderstanding what's going on, projecting their values or their ethics or perception onto other characters, like the femme fatale. These characters literally become projections of one's own self."<sup>39</sup>

In *Inception* Nolan takes a step beyond the paranoid world of film noir into the *special world* of dreams. Nolan has stated that what first took him in this direction was the realization that in our dreams we are both the creator and perceiver of the world. While in the dream the world appears to be real but after we wake what we took for real may be seen a reflection of intimate self. In the movie Cobb hires Ariadne to be the architect of dreams in the hope of escaping his own projections, but this is futile. It is not long before they start to intrude. This is demonstrated in startling fashion when a freight train comes barreling down the centre of a New York Street. It is only much later that we learn the personal significance of the train for Cobb.

The characters of *Inception* and the world they inhabit are in a constant state of flux between the rational, preplanned and expected, and the wild spontaneous eruptions of the subconscious. Early on it is established that Cobb's bread and butter job is neurosecurity. We might parse this as, *trainer in the process of turning dreams into action movies*. If depth analysis of action movies can reveal subconscious content, then with *Inception* Nolan turns this process on it's head. In the context of a dream an action begins life as metaphor. So, if the architect of dreams builds a fortress, the subconscious will defend it as its stronghold.

In drama there is an established principle known as *Chekov's Gun*<sup>40</sup>. This comes from a remark he made:

"If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there."<sup>41</sup>

Nolan extends this into a working proposition that Chekov's Gun is not just a rule for dramatists but a general imperative of the imagination. If a gun appears in a dream it will and must be used. Similarly:

COBB

Build a bank vault or a jail, something secure and the subject's mind will fill it with information he's trying to protect.

ARIADNE

Then you break in and steal it.

COBB

Exactly.

So too, the dreamer may be inveigled into creating meaning from thin air. Arthur tricks Fischer into creating a "locator" by simply calling out numbers that randomly come to mind. This string is initially quite meaningless, but it acquires meaning as soon

as Fischer is lead to believe that the numbers are significant. What that meaning that be will depend on the context.

FISCHER

A locator?

COBB

A number from your own subconscious. It can be used any number of ways. This is a hotel. *Room numbers.*

Again we have a rule that can be found in screenwriting manuals, for creating found metaphors from the recurrence of everyday objects and events, reapplied by Nolan within the film, to suggest that this is the way the imagination works in the wider context of life. As we descend, through layer upon layer, from one dreamer to the next, through all the modules of the plot, the reassurance

that we live as discrete beings in an objective world crumbles before us, and we are swept away into a mutable world where subconscious desire melds seamlessly with objective perception. The protagonist is frequently so confused as to whether he is in reality or dreams that he repeatedly spins his totem top for reassurance. And, the controversy among fans, that followed on the web, would indicate that the audience are too.<sup>42</sup> But this is the point: as Ian Alan Paul puts it in *Senses of Cinema*:

"*Inception* challenges us to consider the dream-world and the real world in the same way, that they are both always in a state of subjective-production which is dependent on our own process of creative perception and experience. This is perhaps the central thesis of the film, and one that leads us to question our own life in relationship to the life of the film."<sup>43</sup>

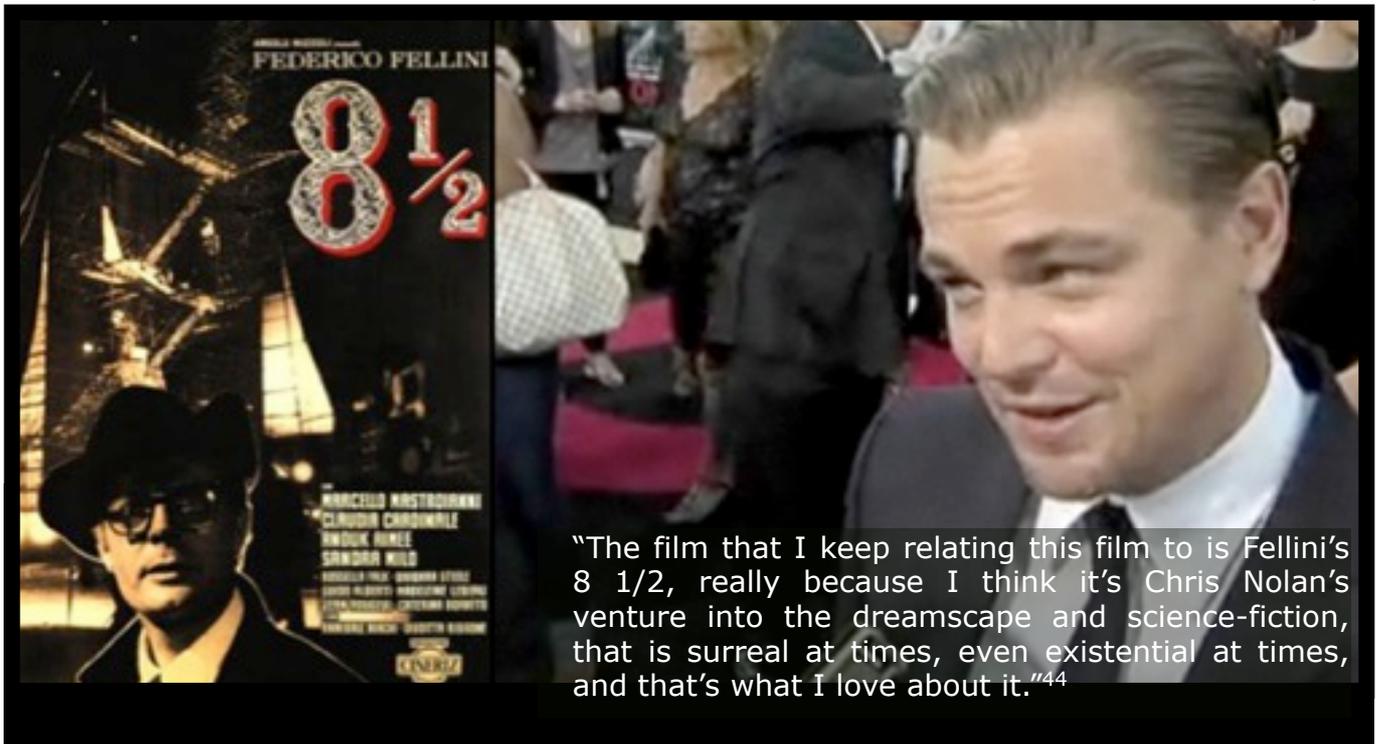


# META- MOVIE

ARIADNE

Wait Cobb - I'm lost.  
Whose subconscious are we  
going into?

Though, at the time, much derided by startled movie buffs, one of the brightest and most audacious comments on *Inception* was made by Leonardo DiCaprio in a red carpet interview:



At first sight *Inception* would appear to be very different, from Fellini's sixties, black and white, art-house masterpiece, but what joins them is the structure of a **meta-movie**\*. 8 1/2 tells the story of a film director attempting to make a science-fiction film, who becomes lost in his own dreams and reflections. The setting up of the dream-share heist of *Inception* has fairly obvious parallels with

the setting up of a film. First the team of specialists must be gathered, the sets designed, locations chosen, the scenario pinned down, the theme refined. Just as in Fellini's film the movie-within-the-movie is threatened by the director's private obsessions, so, in *Inception* the whole enterprise is threatened to be derailed by Cobb falling into his personal limbo of regret.

"Jonathan Nolan: ... your job is an interesting one because you're not just watching the movie — you're creating the movie. You're not just experiencing reality — you're dreaming it for yourself. Did you think a lot about the connections to film-making and the dream-share technology in the film?"

Christopher Nolan: You know I never made the connection at all until you said it .... it had never occurred to me that everything I'm saying about creating a thing and trying to perceive it at the same time ... relates absolutely to the film-making process. That's the whole thing you're trying to do."<sup>45</sup>

One could say that, in everyday life, watching movies is as near as we get to sharing dreams. The enigma of cinema is that behind these restless images, that appear so objective and real, is another level of reality — the dreamer behind the screen. For the audience, prior to any identification with a particular character on screen comes the subconscious identification with the filmic experience itself, the narrative flow, or the telling of the story. When a shot appears on the screen we instinctively search for the intention behind it, the whys and wherefores of being shown this. We may call this the **primary identification**\*; the more obvious identification with a character on screen, **secondary identification**\*.<sup>46</sup>

In 8 1/2, the main character, the director of the film within a film, played by Marcello Mastroianni, was a fairly obvious "stand-in" for Fellini himself, even wearing the same signature black hat. So, in *Inception* we might well consider Cobb, played by DiCaprio, as Nolan's "stand-in", or *avatar*. It is perhaps, significant that the main character of Nolan's first feature film, *Following*, was also named "Cobb". Further, DiCaprio and Nolan, with their floppy blond hair, are not so dissimilar in appearance. We might say that DiCaprio is a more handsome version of Nolan, just as Mastroianni was a more handsome version of Fellini.



"Jonathan Nolan: ... and the time-shifting of it is similar, because you get two years, say, on average, to work on the projects you've done, and that's to create about two hours worth of perception. You can see, as you watch the film, how long it took you to shoot each individual moment, and it sort of congeals into something that suddenly goes by very quickly."<sup>47</sup>

The action of *Inception* would appear to be entirely cynical; the scam is "not strictly speaking, legal", and, most certainly, intrusive and manipulative. It's aim is to turn a man's decisions against his own best interests in favour of those of a business rival. And yet what results is more like a psychodrama than a sting — because the condition for the inception to take root is Fischer's catharsis. So, in both heist and movie, catharsis is the touchstone for arriving at a satisfactory conclusion.

The feeling of the end is not at all cynical as we might have expected. The mark, Fischer, appears liberated rather than reduced to a sucker. Saito appears, not triumphal, but chastened. Indeed, all the players give the impression of having been through a profound experience. Business empires, airlines, wills — these seem important now only as symbols.

In 8 1/2 Guido abandons his film, but in his failure is Fellini's triumph. As if summoned by the sound of the circus band Guido's spirits rise and he joins all the characters from the film that now flood onto the abandoned set, as we, the cinema audience, are left in celebration of the film we have just witnessed.

When Cobb, at last, arrives home, he spins his top once more, but is distracted by the sound of his children playing in the garden. The top teeters, goes on spinning, but Cobb isn't watching. Outside his children play. Whether dream or reality, he no longer cares. This is the image that has driven him through a maze studded with metaphors like mirrors to escape the limbo of stale emotion. As he moves out of focus we are left with the spinning top and our primary identification with the dreamer behind the dream. The credits roll and the lights come up. What happens next is up to us.



\* term discussed in work-in-progress, *Cinematics: 21st Century Style* by Roger Tucker

<sup>1</sup> Nolan, Jonathan. "Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking": [preface to] Nolan, Christopher. *INCEPTION The Shooting Script*. San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Travers, Peter. "Inception". *Rolling Stone*. July 12, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Chang, Justin . "Inception". *Variety*. July 5, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Turan, Kenneth . "Inception". *Los Angeles Times*. July 16, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Roeper, Richard. "Inception Review". *The Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved July 21, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Kristin: "Inception; or, dream a little dream within a dream with me". *Reflections On Film Art*. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=9692>

<sup>7</sup> Nolan, Christopher. *INCEPTION The Shooting Script*, *id*.

<sup>8</sup>McDonald, Brian. *Invisible Ink*. Seattle: Liberty Editions, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Field, Syd. *Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting*. New York: Dell, 1998

<sup>10</sup> Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, Robert Anton. *The Illuminati Papers*. Berkley: Ronin, 1986

<sup>12</sup> Eig, Jonathan. "A Beautiful Mind(fuck): Hollywood Structures of Identity". *Jump Cut*. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/eig.mindfilms/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, Matthew. "Mindfuck Movies". *The Morning News*, 6/3/09, [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/reviews/mindfuck\\_movies.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/reviews/mindfuck_movies.php)

<sup>14</sup> Nolan, Christopher, interviewed by Goldsmith, Jeff. "The Architect of Dreams": *Creative Screenwriting*, July/August 2010

<sup>15</sup> term taken from Joseph Campbell, and applied to screenwriting by Christopher Vogler, *id*.

<sup>16</sup> Nolan, Christopher. *INCEPTION The Shooting Script*. *id*.

<sup>17</sup> "Hollywood: A Survival Guide". *The Independent*, 18 January 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/hollywood-a-survival-guide-432630.html>

<sup>18</sup> "Penrose Stairs", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penrose\\_stairs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penrose_stairs)

<sup>19</sup> Nolan, Christopher. interview by Goldsmith, Jeff. "The Architect of Dreams": *Creative Screenwriting*. *Id*.

<sup>20</sup> Pruter, Robin Franson. "The Three-act Structure". *Writing About Film*. <http://www.cod.edu/people/faculty/pruter/film/threeact.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Nolan, Christopher. *INCEPTION The Shooting Script*, *id*.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, Kristin. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999

<sup>23</sup> Armes, Roy. *The Films of Alain Robb-Grillet*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1981

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, Jim. "Inception of Inception: The Scrooge McDuck Comic". *Scanners*. [http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2010/08/inception\\_of\\_inception\\_the\\_scr.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2010/08/inception_of_inception_the_scr.html)

<sup>25</sup> Rosa, Don. Uncle Scrooge in The Dream of a Lifetime. <http://disneycomics.free.fr/Ducks/Rosa/show.php?num=1&loc=D2002-033&s=date>

<sup>26</sup> Nolan, Christopher. interview by Goldsmith, Jeff. "The Architect of Dreams". *Creative Screenwriting*, *id*.

<sup>27</sup> Trahair, Lisa. "The Narrative-Machine: Buster Keaton's Cinematic Comedy, Deleuze's Recursion Function and the Operational Aesthetic". *Senses of Cinema*. Issue 33, Oct-Dec 2004

<sup>28</sup> Cameron, Allan. *Modular Narrative in Contemporary Cinema*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008

<sup>29</sup> Bordwell, David. "Inception; or, Dream a Little Dream within a Dream with Me". *Reflections On Film Art*: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=9692>

<sup>30</sup> Moreno, Jonathan. *Mind Wars: Brain Research and National Defense*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006

<sup>31</sup>René (reader's comment): [http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2010/08/the\\_structure\\_of\\_inception\\_vie.html#more](http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2010/08/the_structure_of_inception_vie.html#more), August 11, 2010

<sup>32</sup> Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, New York: Simon & Schuster,, 1946



<sup>33</sup> McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York: Harper-Collins,, 1997

<sup>34</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; (3rd Revised edition edition), 2006

<sup>35</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. St Louis: San Val, 2000

<sup>36</sup> Nolan, Christopher. interview by Goldsmith, Jeff. "The Architect of Dreams." *Creative Screenwriting, id*

<sup>37</sup> Adams, Sam. "Everything you wanted to know about Inception". *Salon*. [http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/film\\_salon/2010/07/19/inception\\_explainer/index.html](http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/film_salon/2010/07/19/inception_explainer/index.html)

<sup>38</sup> term used by Aristotle in *The Poetics* to describe a moment of recognition of the truth

<sup>39</sup> Nolan, Christopher. interview by Goldsmith, Jeff "The Architect of Dreams". *Creative Screenwriting, id*.

<sup>40</sup> "Chekhov's Gun". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov's\\_gun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov's_gun)

<sup>41</sup> Gurlyand. "Reminiscences of A. P. Chekhov", in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 1904,

<sup>42</sup> on the one hand: <http://www.chud.com/articles/articles/24477/1/NEVER-WAKE-UP-THE-MEANING-AND-SECRET-OF-INCEPTION/Page1.html>; on the other: <http://www.fictionalhead.com/blog/full/INCEPTION-ANALYSIS-MY-CASE-FOR-REALITY>

<sup>43</sup> Paul, Ian Alan. "Desiring-Machines in American Cinema: What Inception tells us about our experience of reality and film". *Sense of Cinema*, Issue 56, October 2010

<sup>44</sup> DiCaprio, Leonardo, (video interview), <http://blastr.com/2010/07/leonardo-dicaprio-why-nolans-inception-is-like-fellinis-8-12.php>

<sup>45</sup> Nolan, Jonathan. "Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking": [preface to] Nolan, Christopher. *INCEPTION The Shooting Script. id*.

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, Roger. "Audience Subjunctive": *Cinematics #7*, <http://www.rogertucker.co.uk/>

