

# Inception: But where are the ideas?

Kevin Martinez  
3 August 2010

*Written and directed by Christopher Nolan*

During the summer, the average filmgoer will be bombarded with a good number of stupid and dull films ranging from the clichéd romantic comedy to the latest superhero sequel, and worse. Along comes a film that at first glance makes one hope, “Maybe this will be different.” British director Christopher Nolan (*The Dark Knight*, *Memento*) has made a new film that seeks to be that, an oasis in the desert. Upon closer look, however, *Inception* is just another mirage.

The story concerns a team of corporate spies able to travel inside a person’s dreams to obtain valuable company secrets on behalf of very wealthy clients. Part-science fiction, part-heist movie, *Inception*’s main protagonist is Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), an “extractor,” who is offered one last job before he will be reunited with his children and able to put the memories of his recently deceased wife Mal (Marion Cotillard) behind him.

Cobb is prevented from seeing his children because he is accused of murdering his wife, although in fact she committed suicide. A rich industrialist, Saito (Ken Watanabe), offers to take care of this problem if Cobb accepts this final assignment. His mission is to enter the subconscious of the heir to a rival corporate head and implant an idea that will break up his dying father’s company.

Accompanying Cobb on this potentially dangerous mission is his friend Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a forger named Eames (Tom Hardy), a young student Ariadne (Ellen Page), who can design buildings and more in the dream world, and Yusuf (Dileep Rao), a chemist who specializes in powerful sedatives required to help the team remain in deep sleep.

How it’s possible to enter someone else’s unconscious, let alone inspire an individual to do something against his or her will, is never fully explained by Nolan, but no matter. Audience members

are simply asked to go along for the ride and leave a good portion of their logic in the lobby.

Nolan explains in the film’s production notes, “Once you start examining what the dream experience might mean, it invites people to think about their own dreams and what they reveal. It raises interesting questions about how we assess the nature of our own reality.” This is one of those amorphous statements, so popular with a particular type of artist at the moment, that could mean almost anything. “Interesting questions”? Yes, but along what lines?

In any event, for a film that proposes to investigate our sleeping state, Nolan plays it pretty safe with his imagery. There isn’t a hint of the influence of surrealism or psychoanalysis that one might expect to encounter in an artwork dealing with the dream environment. Tellingly, all Nolan can offer are images of city blocks being raised to the sky, magic mirrors and other optical illusions. This reviewer, for one, feels sorry for people who dream about nothing but trendy clothes, upscale hotel bars and various banal settings.

The media has made much about Nolan’s artistic innovations and how he is always incorporating the latest technology and special effects into his movies. Indeed, many of the action sequences—whether it be Cobb escaping enemies on foot in Mombasa, Kenya, or a scene where a freight train is unleashed in downtown Los Angeles—are no mean feats.

From the technical side, *Inception* is well edited and crafted. Sorely lacking, however, are genuine emotion and thought. The characters are not seriously developed; they lack the depth necessary to make the audience really care about their efforts and fates.

Cobb’s motivation—the desire to be reunited with his children and put his past behind him—is supposed to evoke strong feelings in us and give the film its motive force. DiCaprio comments in the production notes, “No matter how surreal the dream state, everything needed

to be grounded in our connection with the character; everything had to be emotionally charged. From Cobb's standpoint there is something very real at stake, so all of his choices, his reactions, and how he deals with the people he's working with is a means to one end: getting back his life."

But the character of Cobb's dead wife Mal, the object of his desire, is not convincing or worked out as a personality. Mal and Cobb, we later learn, used to share dreams with one another before she became distraught and wanted to stop dreaming and living altogether. In order to remind himself that he is dreaming, Cobb uses a spinning top as a mnemonic device, a trick that Mal taught him. But if Mal were concerned that she was losing her grip on reality, why didn't she use this aid herself, as it would have reminded her what was real and what was a dream? There are numerous plot holes like this and the closer one pays attention to the details, the more *Inception* falls apart.

The characters themselves don't stand up to scrutiny. What universe do these people inhabit? Where does a man like Cobb come from? Why is his profession in such high demand? Concrete analysis and criticism are not the route that Nolan would have us go down.

At any rate, the most fanciful sequences borrow heavily from much better films such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*. *Inception* takes itself far too seriously in relation to the threadbare character of its content, while trying to remain cool and cynical at every moment. Is Cobb stuck in a dream the entire time? Why should we even care? Whether the action takes place in the mind or in the real world, the whole scenario seems detached from the world as the majority of us experience it.

What a pity that so many fine actors had to be associated with this unimpressive work, among them Michael Caine, Ken Watanabe, Joseph-Gordon Levitt, Ellen Page, Cillian Murphy, and, of course, Cotillard and DiCaprio. No amount of elaborate and self-conscious visuals makes up for poor dialogue, including the following exchange:

Cobb: You create the world of the dream. We bring the subject into that dream and fill it with their subconscious.

Ariadne: How could I acquire enough details to make them think that it is reality?

Cobb: See dreams, they feel real while we're in them

right? It's only when we wake up then we realize that something was actually strange!

The last hour or so of the film centers on an elaborate plot to enter the mind of a corporate rival, in several unconscious dimensions—in other words, dreams within dreams. This feels like an artificial device designed to keep the audience preoccupied with the action, in a state of suspended animation as it were. These sequences become tedious before long and *Inception* finds itself in the all-too-familiar territory of an action movie (with a love story).

This last operation is supposed to be the "perfect crime," entering an individual's head without his knowing it, but its ridiculous and needless complications—involving creating a dream within a dream, and then another dream, to probe deeper into the target's subconscious, etc.—lead one to think that someone on the team would simply say, "There has to be a better way!"

In making such a film, Nolan perhaps wanted us to question whether or not the world around us is "real." But to do that we must first figure out what is *not* real, and *Inception* merely emphasizes the *unreal* (and unappealing) aspects of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking: (over)cleverness, visual effects as a substitute for real ideas, and evasion of the burning questions of our day.



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