

The Labyrinth of Christopher Nolan's *Inception*: Films, Dream and Baudrillard

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Abstract

Hollywood is considered as a dream selling agencies. Christopher Nolan manifests this idea of implanting dream into people's mind in the film *Inception*. It can be seen as if Nolan is taking a dig on Hollywood. Such implanting of (mis)information are as much of a terrorist act as the 9/11 itself. As Tokita in the film *Paprika* (2006) exclaims, 'implanting dreams into other people's head is terrorism.' The fact, however, remains that it is a reaction that once started cannot be controlled. This paper analyses the aspect of filmmaking within the framework of dream/reality depicted in *Inception* coupled with the idea of Baudrillard's simulacrum.

Key Words: Christopher Nolan, *Inception*, Dream, Reality, Baudrillard, Simulacrum

Introduction

Hollywood is considered as a dream selling company. Charles Warner in his book *Media Selling: Television, Print, Internet and Radio* compare Medison Avenue with Hollywood for being a dream selling agency. According to him "dream and hopes are essential to the people's well being" (Warner 06) as dreams are symbols of human aspirations. In this regards what can be a better example than the film *Inception* where Christopher Nolan deals with phenomena of implanting a dream into other's mind. It is the aspect which is being manipulated and executed by the filmmakers all over the world. The popular opinion that goes with the film *Inception* by Christopher Nolan is that the movie is a metaphor to filmmaking. A movie is what, people with different minds and geniuses agree to work on a story. *Inception* in this respect is a heist movie, and as Nolan mentioned in his interview that, "The heist movie aspects, too, closely parallel the process of making a

film. You have a team of people working together. You've got a writer, you've got an actor, a production designer, a DP" (Nolan 19). Not only this movie symbolically talks about how a film is made and what are the different layers involved, but it also shows its resemblance to so many other movies as well; from heist movies like *Ocean's* series (2001-2007) to James Bond to dramas like *Revolutionary Road* (2008) and many others. This is the great thing about this movie that it allows the audience to bring their perception of resemblances from the lot movies and they all may fit it so well. However, this movie certainly has been inspired by one of the Japanese animated movies *Paprika* (2006), directed by Satoshi Kon (1963-2010), that tells a story of the near future where an advanced technology has been developed known as DC mini, which helps to enter into the dreams of the subjects who use it. It is intended to use for clinical purposes, but it lands into wrong hands which then is further used to exploit

the nightmares of all who are using the device. This movie must have helped Nolan to develop the plotline of *Inception*.

To digress a little from the subject, in the movie when Ariadne had her first dream experience and she dies in it, Cobb tells her that it will still hurt in the dreams as does in real. Then Arthur tells her: “That’s why the military developed dream sharing – a training program where soldiers could strangle, stab and shoot each other, then wake up” (*Inception* 2010). It sounds so much like Baudrillard’s notion where he compares war with films and how films like war have become the testing ground for technology. Commenting upon Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that was based on Vietnam war, he underlines the point that, “while the war had a *physical* manifestation, that of massive and excessive expenditure, it took place as a *psychical* process: the film *Apocalypse Now* is just as much a part of the physical and psychical process as the war itself” (Lane 93). Slavoj Žižek also mentions something similar in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), where he mentions the connection between the 9/11 attacks and Hollywood movies:

The horror of the WTC attacks was intensified because we were in fact already (unconsciously) prepared for them, due to ideological fantasy. The attacks were “libidinally invested” with horrifying power insofar as we had been repeatedly warned by the media of the terrorist threat, as well as being conditioned for decades by Hollywood disaster movies. The shock of the events was intensified because “America got what it fantasized about.” Not only do terrorists develop strategies based on

Hollywood films and information widely available on the internet, but, as Žižek points out, the Pentagon even sought the advice – in October 2001 – of Hollywood directors who specialize in disaster films, in order to more effectively prepare against future threats. Furthermore, beginning in November 2001, White House advisors met with Hollywood executives to coordinate the so-called “war against terror” (i.e. the invasion of Iraq) by spreading ideological fantasies in the USA and to viewers of Hollywood films around the world. (Wood, ch.16)

So when Arthur tells Ariadne as how the military uses the dream-sharing mechanism, it is as if Nolan is taking a dig on Hollywood. Such implanting of (mis)information are as much of a terrorist act as the 9/11 itself. As Tokita in *Paprika* exclaims, ‘implanting dreams into other people’s head is terrorism. ‘However, the fact is, it is a chain reaction that once started cannot be stopped.

Coming back to the discussion of how this movie talks about filmmaking; in the scene where Cobb takes Ariadne for the first time into the dream-world, he lays out the grounds that filmmakers exploit while framing their story onto the screen. The conversation goes like this:

Cobb: They say we only use a fraction of our brain’s true potential. Now, that’s when we’re awake. When we’re asleep, our mind can do almost anything.

Ariadne: Such as?

Cobb: Imagine you’re designing a building. You consciously create each aspect. But

sometimes, it feels like it's almost creating itself, if you know what I mean.

Ariadne: Yeah, like I'm discovering it.

Cobb: Genuine inspiration, right? Now, in a dream, our mind continuously does this. We create and perceive our world simultaneously. And our mind does this so well that we don't even know its happening. That allows us to get right in the middle of that process.

Ariadne: How?

Cobb: By taking over the creative part. Now, this is where I need you. You bring the subject into that dream and they fill it with their subconscious.

Ariadne: How could I ever acquire enough detail to make them think that it's reality?

Cobb: Well, dreams, they feel real while we're in them, right? It's only when we wake up that we realize something was actually strange. (*Inception* 2010)

Now, as far as we are in the theatre watching a movie, we become a part of that story, and only when the movie finishes, we mull over its authenticity. How do we become a part of a fiction or a story? To elaborate upon that, Cobb tells Ariadne that the way our mind sees this world and then perceives it accordingly, it is a continuous process; in between which come the artists who through their work accentuate certain aspects of our world that afterward becomes a part of our subconscious/unconscious. That is why art and artists influence people as they not only articulate our desires but also stage it. Slavoj Žižek has an interesting say on this:

I think that the key point, usually overlooked, is the way that Lacan articulated the notion of fantasy which is, 'OK, fantasy stages a desire, but whose desire? My point is: not the subject's desire, not their own desire. What we encounter in the very core of the fantasy formation is the relationship to the desire of the Other: to the opacity of Other's desires. The desire staged in fantasy, in my fantasy, is precisely not my own, not mine, but the desire of the Other. Fantasy is a way for the subject to answer the question of what object they are for the Other, in the eyes of the Other, for the Other's desire. That is to say, what does the Other see in them? What role do they play in the Other's desire? (Žižek 40)

One of the essential elements of cinema is to allow the staged fantasy of filmmakers to captivate the minds of the audience. In *Inception*, we can see such an ensemble functioning together to make a story derived from a simple idea to seed it into the mind of Fischer. If seen in a different light, the characters of this movie will resemble with technicians involved in a movie in general. Dom Cobb can be the Director of the movie, who assembles a team for the Studio, which, by the way, is Saito, for which he is working to make the desired story work. Arthur is the Producer who arranges everything required by Cobb and makes necessary preparations. Ariadne is the Director of Photography (DP) who has the job of designing the set as needed by the director. Yusuf is in charge of the Special Effects department whose fine brushing helps the audience into the believability of the movie. Eames is the actor who changes his features as required by the role. Miles is the inspiration of the

director from whom he has learned the art of moviemaking or inspires to become like him. Now, what can be Mal? She is the subjectivity of the director who hinders his project every time, and he needs to shun her and view the product objectively because it not only belongs to him but also is of the whole team. What do Cobb's children represent? They are the desired/end results that any director wishes to achieve.

Apart from this, different stages of a movie are shown, depicting the level of employment of the artists into it. That being said, it does not mean that one's job is better than the other. It is an ensemble piece whose success depends upon the coordination of the artists on different levels. And that is what this movie describes so aesthetically. Yusuf is left on the first level of the dream, Arthur on the second, Eames left on the third. In limbo, Cobb goes along with Ariadne to search for Fischer, who died on the third level. Later, when Fischer is rescued on one side, the other side in the third layer of the dream, Saito dies who then is lost into limbo. Fischer being captured by Mal in limbo manifests the idea of the audience being hooked up by the subjectivity of the director who further is rescued at the end having a catharsis. The director is the one who voyages into the deepest corners of the movie, whose companion becomes the director of photography because only DP comes closer to the understanding of the vision he wishes to articulate. However, if the audience has to be provided with a satisfactory ending, with tangible emotions, the director has to shun his subjectivity to produce such effects. If not, it will deeply hurt even the studio (Saito

might have forever been lost into the limbo if Cobb did not have expelled Mal and went to search for him).

Therefore, *Inception* becomes an intriguing movie when compared with the aspects of filmmaking. These were a few of the analogies that are drawn between the structure of this movie and making a movie itself. There are n numbers of examples that can be taken out from it that reflects how Nolan in his "subconscious" mind perceives moviemaking.

***Inception* and Jean Baudrillard**

Does Baudrillard inspire *Inception*? It appears so. The different layers of dreams appear akin to the different stages of reality that Baudrillard has proposed in his *magnum opus, Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Baudrillard mentions the successive phases of reality as such:

It is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance – representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance – it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation. (Baudrillard6)

Baudrillard when categorized these phases, he was mentioning about the successive stages of capitalism from pre-industrial era to postmodern era. Watching successive

phases of dreams in *Inception* certainly rejuvenates the theory of Baudrillard but in a different light. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard talks about a map, a map of an empire whose length increases with the extension of the empire. Lastly, the map grows the size of the empire itself and later when the empire crumbles, all its subjects are left with is the map, and the map has become their reality at the end. In a way like the HBO TV series, *Game of Thrones*, which is a fiction by the way, begins with its opening credit, displaying a vast array of empires scattered around the map; a map of a world, which is lost, but we are still celebrating the lost empire through the display of television.

Cinema stands in-between the world and how a subject perceives it. It guides people to identify places that they have not witnessed before. It is similar to the map that Baudrillard talks about, and Nolan in *Inception* develops this idea. In one sequence in the movie, Ariadne is shown experimenting with the mirrors in the dream world, where infinite projections are displayed one after another. The very scene becomes a metaphor for multi-reality that co-exists simultaneously, and there is nothing like *absolute* reality. She develops the mazes of the dreams that are closed loops but create the illusion of reality. This Arthur calls the "Paradox," which helps to disguise the boundaries of the dream. Now, when Baudrillard talks about the fourth stage of reality; that is, the world of hyper real, where the simulated reality becomes *the* reality and reality as such is nowhere to be found. Nolan presents this idea in the

form of limbo but has an interesting say on that.

First of all, the character of Dom Cobb, if analyzed carefully, it is very much apparent that he works in a capitalist empire and is a subject absolutely devoted to the idea of it. He believes that if he accomplishes the job for Saito, then he can get back to his family and can lead a happy life. Confronting his obsession with the projection of Mal, Cobb tells Ariadne about the limbo, as to how while exploring the world of dreams he penetrated deeper with Mal into the subconscious and reached to the deepest level where they possessed the "power of God." This is the utopia for both of them, representing a world where they can accomplish anything and everything. However, the thing with limbo is that it is a shared universe. That tells so much about our present scenario where the world is marred by capitalist exploitation. If the radical philosophy of two think tanks is different for their world, it can certainly prove destructive for the world. That is why utopia can be a dangerous idea to work upon. Clint Jones in his article, "Limbo, Utopia, And The Paradox of Idyllic Hope," elucidate his idea on this topic:

Ultimately, the most frightening thing about Limbo is that it's a shared state. This might work out well for a married couple, like Mal and Cobb, who can come to an agreement about what an ideal existence is like. But if you shared Limbo and tried to make an ideal world with someone whose vision of an ideal world was radically different from yours, Limbo might turn out to be hell. In fact, inhabiting someone else's utopia is a prospect our characters worry about.... So,

in many ways, the most utopian element of the story is also dystopic. We ourselves may, ultimately, want to avoid utopia for similar reasons.

When Mal and Cobb are unanimously building their world, it structures itself really like a “dream” world. However, as their path differs, it turns into a ruined specimen of their dream. Their limbo appears similar to the hyper real city like Las Vegas, or Dubai, where they created their world amidst something where nothing thrives. On another angle, they even appear as the “Ghost Cities”¹ that are waiting to be populated with their projections. When searching for Fischer, Ariadne sees the childhood home of Mal; she suspects that Mal might be here. Cobb says negative and takes her to a posh-apartment and tells her, “We both wanted to live in a house, but we loved this type of building. In the real world, we’d have to choose, but not here.” They indeed have designed their limbo like Vegas, and that is why having entertained the privileges of luxury for long, Cobb gets tired of the artificiality of it and wishes to return home (similarly, as one cannot spend his life in Vegas or in Disneyland, and has to return to their home back). Since, spending as much time as fifty years in the limbo, Mal lost track of reality. So to make her commit suicide, Cobb planted the idea of her world not being real into the head. Later when they

¹In China, civil engineers and architects are provided jobs by giving them plans to make cities, which after completion remain unpopulated or abandoned. Such cities are termed as “Ghost Cities.” To know the reason behind China’s strategy of putting such an idea into action, an article by Owen Hatherley, “Ghost Cities of China by Wade Shepard Review – unpopulated replica towns explained,” can be read, published online on May 8, 2015 in *The Guardian*.

returned to the real world (as said by Cobb, though I suspect), the idea remained with her that her world is not real like limbo. It sounds pretty much like Baudrillard who maintains that the world outside Disneyland is as unreal as Disneyland itself. The fantasy land of Disneyworld has been designed to cover the unreality of the world outside of it. Hence, she again committed suicide.

However, the thing is, as the rules of dreams suggested by this movie that after committing suicide in a dream, one goes one level up. That means, after committing suicide, Mal and Cobb were still stuck in their dream world. So, after committing suicide, Mal would have either gone to an above level or may have stuck to some other dream world. Who knows how many layers Cobb penetrated with Mal to enter into the limbo. The idea of totem that everyone carried in the movie is to check whether they are in reality or in someone else’s dream. But what if one has accepted the dream as their reality?

Conclusion: Does it matter if your world is unreal?

Robert Nozick (1938-2002) came up with a thought experiment where he brings up a scenario where we are attached with an experience machine that will provide us any experience we desire. If we want to write a great novel, want to be a movie actor, read a pleasant novel, and so on, it will provide us with all these endless experiences. But the question is; would we like to be attached with that machine forever, or come back to reality? Nozick thinks later because he somehow believes that people want to be attached with the reality, living an active life

rather than dreaming a fantasy (Katharine 83). However, the case with *Inception* is different from what Nozick proposes. The subjects in dreams are not passive but actively creating their own stories. The chances are massive with Cobb that he never came back to reality from limbo with Mal. He might have got stuck into some other realm of the limbo or in some other dream world. At the end also, when he returns with Saito, the atmosphere around is brighter against the dark tone of the whole movie. He spins his top but before he can see whether he is in a dream or reality, his children come to him and he takes off with them. The movie cuts to black with the top still spinning (though wobbling) suggesting that Cobb is still in his dreams. Christopher Nolan answers over the ambiguous ending of *Inception* and the fate of Cobb in his Graduation Speech at Princeton University in 2015 that, "The way the end of that film worked, Leonardo DiCaprio's character Cobb — he was off with his kids, he was in his own subjective reality. He didn't really care anymore, and that makes a statement: perhaps, all levels of reality are valid. The

camera moves over the spinning top just before it appears to be wobbling, it was cut to black" (Ashley Lee).

We see the top wobbling, and it might have even fallen down, which Nolan does not show us. But the reason behind wobbling must be, as soon as Cobb accepted his dream as reality, getting what he wants, being with his children who are a world to him, it does not matter to him anymore whether he is in dream or reality. As Nolan points out, he is in his subjective reality and that is what matters most. Some viewers might feel cheated, or others may laud the ending, but the thing is that it puts an exciting view regarding our perception of reality and this world. The world outside Disneyland maybe as unreal as Disneyland itself, but is it a thing to be worried about? To consider Nolan's point of view, No! It does not matter. What matters is that people get to be back to their family, to the people they care about. The abstract feeling of human connection, that matters, which cannot be simulated or faked by any means; an "idea" that he expands upon in his 2014 film, *Interstellar*.

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