

Research Essay

Name: Yashika Vahi

Student no.: 21039024

Dr. Anton Bergstrom

ARTS 140 (section #010)

Date: 14th April, 2024

Dreams that know no bounds: The Originality of *Inception*

“Being original doesn’t require being first. It just means being different and better.” (Grant, 106) The release of Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* in 2010 was a major redefining moment for the world of cinema, drawing audiences into its intense universe, dividing the thin line between dreams and reality, right from the first scene up till the ending of the film. Although it might be a product of various external influences, the film remains an original paragon despite the criticism it faces of not having much character development and having an abrupt storyline. Through this essay, I would like to delve deeper into the psychological and philosophical themes incorporated into the film’s creation that led to deep contemplation by viewers on broader subjects, examine the distinct and strange narrative structure adopted by Nolan and analyse the subject-matter of the film to get to my conclusion of *Inception* being a completely original and innovative triumph.

To begin with the foundation, Nolan's uniqueness in crafting a non-linear narrative structure specifically for *Inception*, by focusing on layered storytelling, clever plot developments, and the elaborate manipulation of time, is a testament to the film's timeless worth as a product of pure creativity. In the start of the film, we see not the beginning of the characters' journey as we do in typical films but rather a glimpse into their future, where Cobb is found disoriented on a beach. This creates confusion for the viewer right from the first scene up till the middle of the film since we are shown only glimpses of the character's story and every scene has a sense of urgency that requires the viewer to be completely focused on the present scene, never leaving enough time to figure out where the story is going or what the plot is.

"Nolan has created four distinct subplots, each with its own goal, obstacles, and deadline. Moreover, all the deadlines have to synchronize; this is the rule of the kick, the spasm that wakes you up in the night and which, in Dream-Share, can eject a team member from a dream layer." (Bordwell, 36)

This clever strategy of using short and complicated scenes along with the incorporation of various dream levels having their own particular aesthetic, restrictions and laws, add to the complexity of the film. In standard movie dream scenes, we are usually able to tell whether a character is dreaming or in their reality because of some absurd and exaggerated actions taking place, making it easily identifiable as a dream or a nightmare but there is such a striking similarity between the reality and the dream world in *Inception*, that one can hardly know the difference between when they are in their reality and when they are in a dream state.

Further, what makes this narrative structure distinct is that it doesn't follow a particular known film structure, and rather uses familiar aspects like progressing the story through common filmmaking stages like the set-up, complicating action, development and so on while simultaneously creating intricately designed dream layers and hence, a long climax, with each layer having its own set of goals. There is an unknown and mysterious component integrated in every scene whether it's the climax scene of the van toppling of the building too slowly or the scene when the characters realize the threat of limbo in the dream sequences. This sense of risk in the scenes throughout the movie generates curiosity within viewers to get to the bottom of the story and understand the plot.

As humans, we are wired to pursue the things that feel difficult or complicated for us to understand and Nolan uses this potential theory to completely consume the viewers' mind and make them feel as if they too are in a dream state along with the characters, hence creating not just an enjoyable film but a real thrilling experience for the audience. While films frequently portray the emotional depth and development of their characters through scenes, Nolan, in contrast, uses the characters in his film as a means to describe and simplify the complexity of the dream world and its unpredictable nature for the viewers and puts the focus on the overall mission of the team, through the characters' explanatory dialogues.

This elaborately defined narrative structure additionally gives way for contemplation on broader and deeper concepts of life, both psychological and philosophical. Cobb's dialogue, "What is the most resilient parasite? Bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? An idea. Resilient... highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold of the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate. An idea that is fully formed - fully understood - that sticks; right in there somewhere," emphasizes the ability of one's individual ideas to not just change their personal lives but also

influence the world in great or disastrous ways. This is especially accurate for artists and people driven by passion.

As evidently explained in a scholarly article by Jason Staples, “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.” With the team’s success in planting an external idea in the mind of Fischer, Nolan portrays the philosophical value of literary or other kind of works in influencing the minds of others, planting new concepts and in encouraging deep reflection or complete eradication of traditionally held beliefs.

Further, on a psychological level, the movie also delves into the theme of addiction to forms of escapism, the concept of dissociation, and the grave consequences of using these escapes too much. As seen in the movie through the character of Ariadne coming back by herself to the team despite their lack of any convincing, after she’s been acquainted with her dream state, and Cobb and Mal’s lifetime spent in a world of their own dreams, the characters’ sense of reality significantly alters once they go into the dream world. The potential exploration of their individual ideas and thoughts and ability to craft their own separate worlds away from their limited reality, therefore, creates an addiction to this escapism through the dream world.

Being unable to distinguish between reality and one’s internal world within their mind consumes the characters in such ways that they are unable to control their urge to escape to those self formed worlds, that are unique to themselves. However, as we collect from Mal’s death and Saito’s possibility of being trapped in Limbo forever, these forms of escapism, when going too far in trying to pursue them, the characters face dark consequences and on a broader note, so will

humanity if it goes too far in its pursuit of short term pleasures and escapes. This makes viewers contemplate on their own addictions and the grave consequences of giving in to one's dark desires for too long.

The subject-matter of the film is another significant aspect that contributes to its innovative strength. Nolan's ability to grant his characters the power to create architecture for their specific dream worlds along with the concept of dream share, limbo and crafting those worlds beyond the confines of physics, like how Ariadne is able to defy gravity by turning the buildings onto a vertical angle, and the van seating the characters' floating in the air, is a unique approach to portray the world of dreams and to filmmaking in general. What makes this approach different is that although the characters are able to influence every aspect of the dreams, they still face consequences if they go too far in their advancements, like how the people in Cobb's dream start turning impatient and aggressive towards Ariadne when she starts making too many changes in his dream's architecture.

Additionally, as per another scholarly article by Craig Detweiler, "Like a master magician, Nolan hides his exposition of the plot with clever tricks. As Ariadne tries out dream logic, we see her push and pull mirrors on a Paris street. Those are real mirrors constructed and used in creative, cinematic ways. Arthur takes Ariadne up a staircase constructed to M.C. Escher's disorienting specs. These are old-fashioned mind games designed to distract audiences long enough to explain the plot."

The puzzle crafted by the rapid switch between scenes and different dream layers makes it impossible for the viewers to understand the plot without serious concentration on every detail of the film. To understand the story of *Inception*, viewers must be fully involved and intermingled into each step taken by the characters and acquainted with each dream sequence.

“The greatest shapers don’t stop at introducing originality into the world. They create cultures that unleash originality in others.” (Grant, 208) and this ability of the film to completely absorb viewers, make them contemplate on their own versions of reality and their forms of escapisms in life, hence creates an original masterpiece that goes beyond traditional standards of filmmaking.

Works Cited

1. Christopher Nolan, et al. *Inception*. USA/UK, 2010.
2. Detweiler, Craig (2010) "Nolan's Inception," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 18.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1460&context=jrf>
3. Staples, Jason (2010) "Shadowlands, Myth, and the Creation of Meaning in Inception," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 19.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1482&context=jrf#:~:text=Inception%20thus%20explores%20the%20themes,to%20the%20power%20of%20myth>
4. Bordwell, David & Kristin Thompson. *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages, 2nd ed.*, edited by David Bordwell, University of Illinois Press, 2013
5. Grant, Adam, et al. *Originals: How Non-conformists Move the World*. Unabridged. New York, Penguin Audio, 2016.