

## A Psychoanalyst Views *Inception*

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**The author, a psychoanalyst, discusses the 2010 film, *Inception*, discerning the parallels and differences between cinematic dreaming states as shown in the film and psychoanalytic processes. The movie presents the unknown and un-psychoanalytic phenomena of group shared dreaming, manipulation of other people's dreams with criminal intent, and multiple structured layers of dreaming. In parallel, however, the lead character appears to work through a complicated state of derealization, mourning, guilt, rage, and loss in the course of dreaming. (*Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 2013;19:234–237)**

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At the request of our local psychiatric residents' organization, I agreed to meet with them on a movie night for food and conviviality, and to view and discuss the film, *Inception*. Not being a great science fiction aficionado, I had missed the film when it was in the theaters in 2010, so I thought I'd better see what I was getting into. I knew it had something to do with dreaming and mind control, therefore as a psychoanalyst I ought to have something to say about those things. So I got it from Netflix and settled in for two and a half hours of mind-bending, surreal, sometimes beautiful, fleetingly poignant, often violent excursions into the far reaches of subjective experience. My emotions ranged across perplexity, fascination, disbelief, numbness, anxiety, moral indignation, and eventually compassion as the human story took shape.

*Inception* was written and directed by Christopher Nolan. It stars Leonardo DiCaprio and has a fine cast that includes Marion Cotillard, Ellen Page, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Dileep Rao, Ken Watanabe, and Michael Caine. DiCaprio plays Dom Cobb, an expert on the manipulation of dreams who currently makes his living stealing the closely guarded secrets of corporate titans by invading their dreams to the

deepest "subconscious" level of thoughts. For reasons we gradually discern, Cobb is an expatriate, a fugitive from justice in the United States. In the movie's scenario, he is tested and then hired by Saito, a captain of industry (Ken Watanabe), not to steal secrets but to influence the son of a dying competitor to break up his father's giant corporation instead of taking over its leadership. The capacity of Cobb's method to accomplish this kind of task is unknown and unproven.

The method, "inception," is the induction of shared dreams in a group of people, including the "target" of the operation. This group of people all live and interact in a common dream space. It is noted that "we can create and perceive our world simultaneously." The dreams for this mission are pre-designed and complex, building a dream within a dream within a dream, so that three levels of dreams are going on, each with elongated time frames that expand with each deeper level. Minutes on the upper level may support hours, days, or weeks of dreamed experience as the levels go deeper. Once the three levels are induced, the camera jumps abruptly among them. A dreamer emerges from a level by experiencing a "kick" which may be a sudden sensation of falling or being about to die. (Dying in a dream can be bad, very bad. The dreamer cannot emerge from the dream and spends eternity in limbo.) A team member signals the termination of a dream by playing a phrase from Edith Piaf's rendition of "Non, je ne regrette rien..." Dreamers who are manipulating their dream states carry a "totem" that assures that they can come back, if the totem is operative. Cobb's totem is a small spinning silver top that has a history. The mutual dreaming state is facilitated by a special hypnotic drug and a dream machine attached to the dreamers. As they doze off on their chaise lounges or beds, the dreams unfold.

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For this challenging operation, on the advice of Cobb's father-in-law and mentor (Michael Caine), Cobb's team recruits Ariadne (Ellen Page), a brilliant architecture student. Her first test is to draw a maze, which she does deftly. In Greek mythology, the goddess Ariadne, the wife of Dionysius, was often associated with mazes and labyrinths because of her involvement in myths about the Minotaur. A labyrinth plays a part in this story, as well as the Penrose stairs, an endless staircase that illogically becomes a rising, closed loop. Both of these devices come across as metaphors for the timeless, bafflingly complex, circular, and boundless ambiance of dream states. Ariadne is a quick study and quickly grasps the methodology of managing dreams. She mills out her totem, a gold chess bishop, and joins the team.

The viewer gradually becomes aware that Cobb has been married to a beautiful woman named Mal (the French word for evil) played by Marion Cotillard—and that his wife may be dead and he has apparently been accused of murder. She or his two small children appear as disturbing images at unexpected times in the dream. Mal is deeply troubling to Cobb. The children are always looking or moving away, longed for and unattainable. More about the plot I cannot disclose without issuing spoiler alerts.

*Inception* was a box-office triumph and its mythology aroused detailed exegesis on the Internet.<sup>1,2</sup> Whether it was a success from a psychoanalytic perspective is an open question.

The film captures the ambiance of dream states, especially on first viewing. Images are surreal and they morph into each other. Boundaries of time and space are fluid and undefined. Gravity may be suspended or reversed, so that people walk on walls and ceilings or float in space. The transitions are dizzying. There is no logical order. Monumental, forbidding castles explode and cities crumble. The structures are labyrinthine. Fighting is ferocious and acrobatic but, despite the hail of bullets, the central characters rarely die. The dreams on a particular level usually end with a fall through space or deep into water. The main action takes place in the period of time in the top level dream for a van carrying all the dreamers to hit the water after plunging through a barrier on a high bridge.

Early in the film, Cobb's team encourages us to think in a psychoanalytic frame by casually referring to psychoanalysis, the "subconscious," free associations, and the psychoanalyst's injunction to hold

nothing back as things come to mind. The formal elements of the dreaming in *Inception* can easily be described in psychoanalytic terms as what Freud called primary process. The apparent absence of logic or time structure, intrusive associations to unrelated things, abrupt transitions, and, in particular, the morphing of images suggest that. However, only in one respect do these dreams illustrate some of the key elements Freud<sup>3</sup> described in dreaming: condensation, dissociation, displacement, reversal, symbolism, unexplained emotions, or associations to both distant past and the "day residue" of preceding waking experience. That one exception is Cobb's personal dream.

I think of the subjective experience of dreaming as being consistent with the current theory that memories stored during the preceding waking period are being conveyed during sleep from short-term memory banks to long-term memory and integrated with all sorts of associated bits of information that are stored there and generally unconscious. I imagine that the dreamer has a residue of subjective awareness that is catching bits of data of all sorts that are flashing past, and (consistent with Freud's ideas) that whatever remnants of ego function are still operative in sleep synthesize them into images on the fly. In that secondary elaboration that involves some degree of processing function, some psychological defense mechanisms, such as projection, introjection, reversal, denial, and displacement, come into play to ward off the unpleasant implications of what is perceived. If things become too threatening, the dreamer wakes up.

But when we consider what Cobb is doing, the analogy to the psychoanalytic experience of dreams breaks down. For one thing, the dreams are consciously designed and directed by the team, rather than arising spontaneously from the dreamer's unconscious mind. Cobb's team systematically crafts a sequence of interventions to induce the target to participate and take in the desired thought pattern—that he should pursue his own way (break up the company) rather than be an extension of his father. Descriptively, the dreams in the movie are too structured, with the dreams very well defined architecturally, layer beneath layer to the third level. There are times when someone dreams that he is dreaming within his dream, but for the dreams to remain discrete, playing out a sustained, semi-coherent story within another sustained story within still another, is like an infinite regress of mirrors. It's too

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organized, and relatively little of it comes from the dreamer himself. Real-life dreams are more chaotic and idiosyncratically personal than that. However, from an artistic point of view, the concept is appealing, and it makes for a gripping story. The craft of it all shows up in the ongoing debate on the Internet: did Cobb really wake up into real, waking life at the end, or was that still in itself a dream from which he never emerged? As Plato pondered, what is reality?

In another respect, the film is decidedly un-psychoanalytic. There is the whole exploitative motive with which Cobb undertakes his mission as a paid dream invader. Even in the ordinary terms of civilized life, that is an assault on another human being. For a psychoanalyst to do it would be a major breach of professional ethics. Without qualification, the ethical standard of psychoanalysis is that, when one undertakes psychoanalysis with a person, it must be for the sole benefit of that person, not for personal gratification, manipulation, exploitation, or meeting the needs of a third party. Cobb is out to benefit his employer by decimating the competing firm that the “target” will inherit. Not a benign endeavor, even though it turns out in the end that he might have done the target a service by freeing him from his father’s domination to be himself...at least in his dreams.

The idea of systematically invading an unknowing other person’s dreaming—taking it over and molding it—strains credulity. The shared dream in *Inception* is an entity of its own in which the participants’ subjective lives are held captive. Such phenomena are not unknown to psychoanalysis, as when a person with poorly established self and object representations and permeable boundaries unconsciously uses projective identification and induces an unusual state in another person (such as a therapist) that incorporates an externalized part of the originator’s mentality. Some people speak of it as “colonizing” the other. We see this in working with patients with borderline personality disorder. Once the transference enactment is recognized, it can open a path to new understanding and mastery of unconscious mental processes. Ideas, moods, and attitudes are transferred unawares from one person to another through empathy and identifications in normal human relations and development. Preverbal and somatic states or images particularly lend themselves to such transfers because they do not involve the focused meaning of words. Unconscious thought transfer in intense relationships may help to explain folie à

deux, hypnosis, telepathy,<sup>4</sup> uncanny perceptions, and “brain-washing.”

The unique power of intensive psychoanalytic therapies rests on such phenomena. The process creates a distinctive psychic state around the psychoanalysis itself. In a modern psychoanalytic perspective, the two-person psychoanalytic relationship creates a third entity, a mental state that has been likened to a shared dream. It is in that space that unconscious, archaic thought processes manifest themselves in the patient’s transference to the analyst, who in turn has to be mindful of what is invoked unconsciously in his or her own countertransference. Similarly, supervising analysts describe an unconscious “parallel process” in which what is going on unawares between a supervised analyst and a patient is unwittingly re-enacted in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee—often the occasion of a breakthrough in understanding the case. Similar interactions are addressed in psychoanalytically informed group therapy. So is a group dream so inconceivable?

If we look at the unfolding screenplay as Cobb’s dream, not as the shared dream of a crowd, it begins to make more sense psychoanalytically. As the team leader, he is viewed as the prime dreamer. He has avoided being informed about the detailed architecture of the planned dream, so that he can experience it afresh. However, since the operation is goal directed, there has to be some residue of secondary process thinking with logic and intention. Ariadne was originally hired as a consultant. But she understands the “labyrinth” and the shared dreaming process so well that Cobb allows her to come along as part of the team. The team and the target sink into their shared dreams, level after level, but they meet intrusions and violent resistance. A freight train crashes through city streets, there are chases through labyrinthine alleys, fighters spray bullets at every turn. The fighters are viewed as intrusive “projections” from other parts of the dreamers’ psyches, perhaps the target’s, but more likely Cobb’s. They “persecute” the dreamer. Psychoanalysts may think of these as comparable to a symptom that fuses an impulse with a countering defense to ward off conflict-based anxiety or awareness of meanings. In Cobb’s case, many projections are visions of a beseeching Mal. She appears in his shared dreaming again and again, no matter at what level. So do his two small children, always facing or moving away

from him. We gradually learn that Mal and Cobb had been living in an idyllic, exaltedly erotic dream world and that she could not end it other than through a cruelly narcissistic, unempathic love-death. In order not to return to the reality of waking life, she has committed suicide in a contrived way that would force him to join her in limbo or else be accused of murdering her and hence be unable to return to their children in real life. (I wondered whether she had had a postpartum psychosis.) He had declined to kill himself in their shared dream, presumably returned to reality, and fled to a country that has no extradition treaty with the United States.

Repeated visual elements of castles or monumental cities crumbling into rubble invoke melancholy, hopelessness, a spirit of decay, and fear. Perhaps the savage fighting is a visual, almost bloodless, representation of rage, with the affect completely suppressed. Cobb doesn't look or act depressed, but it dawns on us that he has been unconsciously engaged in working through the death of his wife. The profound sorrow, regret, and helplessness show in the longing in his face when the images of Mal and the children fleetingly appear.

With calm firmness, Ariadne acts like an analyst. She understands that Cobb resists working through his mourning for Mal. She steadies him as he descends to the deepest level of the dreams. He tells her, "An idea like a virus, resilient, highly contagious...the smallest seed of an idea can grow and can define you or destroy you." With her in the dream, he and Mal revisit the events in the dreaming world that led to Mal's death. Mal struggles to keep him there ("you know, you believe, and then you feel the nature of reality") and Ariadne intervenes. He finally expresses to Ariadne in words his profound guilt about having subjected his own wife to inception, causing her to believe that her world was not real

and death was the only way to escape. "She locked away the truth she had known [symbolized by the silver top that was now his token] but chose to reject....My guilt reminds me of what is real." Cobb finally is able to affirm that Mal no longer exists and to make a choice. He regains his grasp of reality. He has reached a resolution that allows him to return to real life, his homeland, and his real children. Ariadne has helped this modern day Theseus slay the child-eating Minotaur, follow the thread out of the labyrinth, and escape with the saved children to Athens, the home of Plato.

There is also reconciliation with fathers. The "target" revises the memory of his father's death and reconciles with his father in a liberating way. Cobb returns to his father-in-law, who has helped him despite a strained relationship, and to his children. His exile is ended, either because of Saito's intervention in real life (the agreed upon payment for the successful operation) or perhaps because exile had been a figment of Cobb's dreaming imagination, induced by his guilt. In this respect, we sense that the cinematic fragment of "analysis" was a success, the mourning process has been accomplished, and Cobb can go home and rebuild his life.

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