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The Treacherous Architecture of the Mind in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

Over the last decade, Christopher Nolan has built quite a reputation as a filmmaker. After gaining some recognition for his film noir in reverse *Memento*, he went on to revive the Batman franchise, which he did quite successfully – the last two installments, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, each brought in a billion dollars at the box office. In between those two films, Nolan came out with a more offbeat, but still massively expensive blockbuster movie, *Inception*.[1] Compared to the overburdened Batman epics, it is a more personal project, with Nolan taking sole credit for both writing and directing.

Nolan brings a fairly recognizable style to all his movies, often described as "dark" or "gritty." The tone is relentlessly serious, and the narratives are infused with the ambiguity and pessimism of film noir. His protagonists are, without exception, tortured, obsessed men, struggling with the loss of loved ones or past mistakes.[2] Not only do these men face an uncaring world with murky morality, their sense of self is also unstable. To go along with the faulty memories and self-deceptions of his characters, Nolan also has a knack for misleading his audience with convoluted narratives. As Fisher puts it, he specializes in puzzles that can't be solved.[3] *Inception*, to my mind, makes an excellent showcase for all these themes. Therefore, through an examination of its use of space and architecture as metaphors for the mind, I aim to determine the concept of the malleable self that underlies all of Nolan's movies.

Inception deals with Cobb, head of a group of highly specialized thieves who use a fantastic piece of technology to invade the dreams of their targets. They typically use this ability to steal business secrets on behalf of nebulous international corporations. After a job gone wrong, however, Cobb is hired to instead implant an idea into the mind of businessman Robert Fischer in order to split up Fischer's vast energy empire. The untraceable implantation is referred to as "inception", hence the movie title. Cobb, of course, has plenty of issues of his own: he's wanted for the alleged murder of his wife, which means that he can't see his children back in the U.S. As a result of extended dream-time, he's also pathologically insecure about the reality of his environment and keeps checking if he's in fact dreaming. And if that wasn't bad

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1   Christopher Nolan: *Inception*. DVD, Legendary/Syncopy/Warner 2010.

2   Cf. Mark Fisher: "The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*", *Film Quarterly* 64: 3 (2011), p. 37–45, p. 37.

3   Ibid., p. 37.

enough, Cobb's ability to work as a dream-thief is also impeded by a projection of his dead wife Mal that keeps sabotaging him.

In the typical manner of heist movies, Cobb assembles a team of specialists, and since he is compromised by his personal issues, he includes an architecture prodigy named Ariadne. The gang plans a complicated scheme, consisting of three levels of dreams folded into one another. First, the rain-soaked streets of Los Angeles, second, a luxury hotel, and third, a snowed-in military base. Needless to mention, the execution of the plan runs into trouble thanks to Cobb's unresolved issues, but with the help of Ariadne, Cobb journeys to yet another – deeper – dream level, where he finally manages to get over his guilt and complete the task. In the end, Cobb returns to his children, but the audience is still teased with the possibility that it was all a dream.

The dream-within-a-dream (within-a-dream within-a-dream) structure of *Inception* proved so confusing to some viewers that helpful maps and infographics soon appeared on the internet.[4] With colorful lines tracking the journey of each character across the various levels of the narrative, some of these illustrations resembled subway maps, thus giving the impression of a meticulously constructed narrative edifice. But while the interactions of the various dream levels seem daunting, the character arc of Cobb is rather conventional. In a nutshell, *Inception* is a heist thriller with a redemption story, only it takes place inside someone's head. The tagline, after all, was "your mind is the scene of the crime".[5] That of course sounds like a highly intriguing idea, and it poses a massive challenge – how do you represent shared, lucid dreams in a movie?

Nolan's answer is pretty straightforward. *Inception* renders the fantastic space of the human mind in concrete terms, in the shape of rooms, buildings and cityscapes. Untamed natural spaces are practically absent, as *Inception*'s dreamers appear to have their minds firmly rooted in closed urban environments. It is only fitting, then, that the key member of the team is not a psychologist, but an architect, to better construct and maneuver the edifices of the mind. This choice makes for a very slick look, but it was also met with disapproval. Some critics were disappointed with how neat and ordered *Inception*'s dream worlds turned out. Dreams, they argued, should have a more surreal quality, with wild leaps of fancy instead of banal, stringent narratives and stable actors. *Inception* is thus accused of lacking imagination, of wasting

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4 E.g. Cole Yokingco: "Mapping the Unconscious" http://graphikos197.wordpress.com/the-map-collection/fictional-reality/mapping-the-subconscious/ (26.09.2013); Daniel Wang: "Inception Infographic v3.5.2"
   http://images.fastcompany.com/upload/INCEPTION%20infographic%20v3.5.2_dwang.jpg (26.09.2013)
5 *IMDb*. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1375666/reference (27.03.2014)

the infinite fantastic potential of dreams by just staging three different kinds of action movie, stacked on top of each other.[6]

Despite the criticism, it would be inaccurate to assume that *Inception's* dream worlds are perfectly stable constructs. On the contrary, their architecture can be altered and manipulated at will. The most spectacular instance occurs early in the film, when a conversation in a Parisian café is revealed as taking place in a dream. As Ariadne is made aware of the true nature of her environment, she folds imaginary Paris on top of itself. The modification results in an Escher-like structure, where basic directions, up and down, are no longer applicable. Another example of spatial distortion, and another Escher reference, comes in the Penrose steps, a physically impossible arrangement of stairs that lead you back where you started. As the experienced characters explain, closed loops and mazes are essential for the dream constructs to work, as they prevent the target person from escaping, but remain subtle enough to not to reveal the illusion. The image of the maze is repeated throughout the film, not only in the construction of dreams, but also in what is most likely the real world, as the narrow streets of Mombasa form a labyrinth when viewed from above. The image is even repeated at the epitextual and paratextual levels: The logo of Nolan's production company Syncopy, visible at the start of the film, holds a labyrinth.

Evidently, architecture plays an important role in *Inception*, and not just as a setting. The creation and manipulation of buildings and cities effectively functions as a metaphor for Nolan's conception of identity: The self is always under construction. In order to substantiate that claim, I'd like to take a closer look at some of the dream architecture featured in *Inception*. The main focus is on Cobb, since his character and memories permeate all the dream levels. Most of the other characters are just visiting, but we do get a pretty good glimpse into Cobb's mind.

During a lull in the action, Cobb uses the dreamsharing technology to indulge in his own memories, a usage that has previously been warned against, and that is portrayed in terms of drug addiction. The viewer follows Ariadne, who links up with Cobb and begins to explore his mind. Cobb's memories are positioned as stories in a building, and like the dream levels designed for Fischer, they're stacked vertically. For ease of access, there's a creaky old-fashioned elevator, which might either emphasize the age of the memories or symbolize the unstable state of Cobb's mind, and which figures Ariadne's intrusion as a downwards motion. Many of the images shown at the different levels tease revelations later in the narrative, such as the nursery, which will be linked to Mal. Below that, Ariadne stumbles into fond memories of Cobb and Mal at what we assume is their real family home in the United States. Having been alerted to Ariadne's presence, Cobb takes her to the top, level 12, where he has situated memories of happy times with Mal and the children at the

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6   Neville, quoted in Fisher: "The Lost Unconscious", p. 40.

beach. If that's the high point, then the basement promises the opposite, but Cobb delays the revelation of his traumatic back story. Instead, he moves a fair way down, revisiting a sad moment of farewell from his children, which defines his motivation and sets up the movie's conclusion. At this point, Ariadne elopes and moves down to the basement, past a train, another ominous hint. At the bottom of Cobb's mind, then, she finds his emotionally and therefore spatially lowest moment: the hotel room from which Cobb had to witness Mal's suicide. As the scene concludes, the basement serves as a dungeon for a raging Mal. In summary, then, the spatial arrangement of Cobb's memories positions them on a scale from good to bad, from joyful to guilty and repressed. Going by the elevator's control panel, Cobb only holds 13 key memories, which may not seem like much for an entire human life, but serves to illustrate his narrow obsession with his wife and the guilt complex related to her death (or, perhaps less favorably, *Inception's* simplification of the human mind).

With the pervading atmosphere of mystery and dread, Cobb's memory building resembles a Gothic structure, and given the presence of Mal's malignant specter, it is fairly close to a haunted house. This parallel enables another reading: Fiedler argued that the structures of Gothic literature, the grand old houses and castles, match the Freudian model of the mind, with the superego on top, the ego dwelling in the middle, and the id lurking in the darkness below.[7] The same would seem to apply to the metaphoric usage of architecture in *Inception*. (As I was reminded during the discussion of this paper, C.G. Jung also employed the metaphor of a house for the human mind, so the influences may be broader here.[8])

Inception's model of the mind takes its cues from a sort of pop-psychology with psychoanalytic and especially Freudian roots.[9] There is talk of a subconscious that finds expression in dreams, and of projections that populate them. Mal, too, is just a projection, a compulsive manifestation of Cobb's trauma, acting out his self-destructive urges. Fitting her association with the subconscious and uncontrollable urges, Mal dwells in the lower regions of the mind, repressed in the basement of Cobb's memory construct, or in Limbo, the lowest dream level.

As with *Inception*'s representation of dreams as cityscapes, this setup may appear too neat and simplistic. Admittedly, the vertical arrangement of memories, sorted from good to bad, may be flawed as a representation of the human mind and the complex interplay of associations and emotions. However, I think it might be more appropriate to read Cobb's memory building not as an attempt to accurately render a human mind, but instead as portraying an active effort at ordering, as a purposeful

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7   Cf. Leslie A. Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997 (1966), p. 132.

8   C.G. Jung: *Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Ich und dem Unbewußten*. 5th ed., München: dtv, 1997 (1928), p. 91.

9   Cf. Fisher: "The Lost Unconscious", p. 45.

construction of Cobb's self. Intriguingly, Cobb mentions that the basement holds "memories I need to change,"[10] which suggests that he takes some effort to reshape his memories and therefore his identity. The movie offers some precedent for that, as we learn in the final dream level.

Towards the end of the film, Cobb and Ariadne drop down to Limbo, a section of the mind that the movie defines as infinite, raw, unformed subconscious. Cobb and Mal had previously spent some time there, and occupied themselves with erecting an endless array of modernist skyscrapers. Amidst that cityscape, the various homes Cobb and Mal had shared are recreated. It's a peculiar, uncanny image – here they are given infinite time and power over their environment, and all that's left is an empty city.

One of the recreated houses takes on a special significance, as it represents a direct access to Mal's mind. Cobb claims that Mal chose to forget a truth, the knowledge that she was living a dream. The symbolic act of putting away the spinning top, established in the narrative as an indicator of dream or reality, has the effect of altering Mal's memory. Cobb later interferes with Mal's mind as well, now implanting the idea that she is living in an illusion.

Both Mal and Cobb thus engage in a competing reconstruction of Mal's self, using the spinning top as a tool. Mal willingly removes a memory, and Cobb implants her with an idea. Each action is a drastic manipulation of Mal's entire perception of reality. At the end, objective truth is irrelevant; Mal believes what she wants to believe, and then what Cobb, in a severe breach of trust, makes her believe. Accordingly, there is no essentially true self to Mal, since it is indefinitely malleable. Depending on how we read Cobb's remark quoted earlier, he may be engaged in a similar reshaping of his own self.

The above themes are not unique to Inception, but can be traced throughout Nolan's work, all the way back to the film that launched his career back in 2000. *Memento* follows Leonard, a man suffering from a peculiar condition: He can't form new memories, and therefore has to rely on a lot of notes, either written on Polaroid photos or tattooed on his body, to get through life.[11] Leonard has only one purpose, and that is avenging the death of his wife. Despite all his efforts, Leonard is easily manipulated by others, who direct his quest for revenge towards their own ends. But as we learn at the end of the movie, which is the start of the story, Leonard is also manipulating himself. It is heavily implied that Leonard himself caused the death of his wife by accident, and went on to create a murder story. He laid his own trails to chase, in order to cover up his guilt and remake himself as a more noble character.

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10 *Inception* (0:55:30–0:55:34).

11 Christopher Nolan: *Memento*. DVD, Newmarket/Team Todd/Summit 2010.

This, simply put, is the running theme of Nolan's movies. They deny notions of the self as some pure, unified entity. Instead, it is continually constructed and revised, built on lies you choose to believe, as much an artificial construction as any of the buildings in *Inception*. As Fisher remarks, "In Nolan's worlds, it's not only that we deceive ourselves; it's also that we're deceived about even having an authentic self."[12] This fundamental denial of authenticity resembles a vaguely postmodernist stance, which at least unusual for big, special effects-driven blockbuster movies whose conception of the self is usually far more coherent and affirmative. At the same time, *Inception's* postmodernism is filtered down through well-worn generic tropes, like its psychology is filtered down through pop-pyschology.

This is not to deny the impact of the movie's resolution. In the end, Cobb abandons the verification of his experience in favor of reuniting with his children, who may or may not be a dream. He may choose subjective personal happiness, but the gaze of the audience is kept on the spinning top, suspended in a moment of ambiguity. The happy end rings hollow, not only because we're denied the satisfaction of seeing the spinning top fall. It's also because we've learned that Cobb is a construct of his own design, and his peace and happiness can be as easily accomplished or erased as any building, as any human construct.

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12 Fisher: "The Lost Unconscious", p. 39.