

A Skeleton Key to Inception

Despite the sheer number of reviewers that have attempted to untangle the meaning of Inception, Christopher Nolan's masterpiece remains almost universally misunderstood. A look at the film from the perspective of literary analysis, at least, suggests it is much less ambiguous than most critics believe.

The first clue to recognizing this comes in Inception's opening shot of the ocean, a traditional symbol of the subconscious and death in English literature. No stranger to water symbolism, Christopher Nolan has used it similarly elsewhere, such in his Batman trilogy where the dark waters of the subconscious lurk in the caverns below the city, aptly symbolizing the impulse to violence that also lurks in the subconscious of its flawed hero. The symbol also appears in many other contemporary films ranging from Artificial Intelligence to Skyfall, but there is no need to leap to them to assert the intentionality of this reading, for Nolan gives it to us directly midway through his film, cutting to a shot of the ocean at the exact moment the word “subconscious” is heard on the soundtrack.¹

This hidden layer of meaning is the reason water imagery grows more intense and destructive the further Inception takes us into the world of the mind.² As the dream levels mount, we pass through a light rain, thunderstorm, and snow-drenched avalanche before plunging into an ocean that exists “on the shore of our subconscious.” The connection between water and the inner-mind is also strengthened through the relative dryness of Inception's waking worlds, with the notable exceptions coming only at those key moments in the narrative where Cobb's subconscious intrudes with hallucinogenic force, such as in the Mombasa sequence where he suffers a vision of Mal while washing his face, or the two drinks which send him and Fischer to sleep on the plane.

The significance of this opening shot – the turbulent ocean – is then reinforced by the first major allusion Nolan uses to structure his film: the image of the false children of limbo building sandcastles on the beach. This visual, which recurs frequently throughout the movie, is so crucial to unlocking its hidden meaning that Nolan even highlighted it in an interview with Wired magazine, stressing that:

There's a relationship between the sand castle the kids are building on the beach in the beginning of the film and the buildings literally being **eaten away by the subconscious** and falling into the sea.³

1 “We wound up on the shore of our own subconscious,” 1:16 into the DVD version of the film.

2 As Ariadne observes, the journey into the dream is also a journey into Cobb's subconscious, with the danger to the mission being that “as we go deeper into Fischer, we're also going deeper into you.”

3 Emphasis mine. Interestingly, in addition to alluding to water as the subconscious here exactly as this reading does, Nolan also implies that the house the true children are building at the end of his film is qualitatively different from the

As later scenes in the film emphasize, with one even depicting Cobb and Mal literally building the city of limbo out of sand, the relationship is one of symbolic equivalence, with the castles on the beach representing the city of limbo in microcosm. And while the reference may not be obvious to critics without a background in literature, the allusion is to the dominant Christian parable about building on sand: the story of the wise and foolish builders from Matthew 7:24:

And every one that hearest these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which build his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.⁴

If we look beyond the obvious points of comparison – the way this parable accurately predicts the culmination of both heist sequences with scenes depicting the destruction of the world by water – we can see that this Christian allusion connects to the message in *Inception* in a deeper way. For what we have in this parable is – in short – a story cautioning that death (the ocean waves) will inevitably destroy the world of human consciousness (the castles on the beach). The message is of the transient nature of existence and consciousness, with the original passage going on to encourage its readers to live a life free of sin, metaphorically presented as building their houses on the unshakable “rock of God.”

And what does this allusion unlock but the core meaning of the film? First and foremost, by associating limbo with the mortal world, what Nolan is telling us is what the script hints at in many other ways: that the dreams in *Inception* are meant to serve as metaphors for our own mortal world, a “shared dreamspace” into which all of us fall through birth and exit through death, and in which we all have the power to be architects of our own lives.⁵ The script repeatedly draws connections comparing life to a dream. And on a more subtle note, it's worth mentioning how this allusion also explains several of Nolan's stylistic decisions, such as his depiction of Mal as a negative temptress in the noir tradition. While most critics recognize the significance of Mal's ominous name, none seem to have picked up on the reason for her dramatic malevolence: as the character who prefers to live in limbo and build castles on the beach, Mal is the

sandcastles the false children are building at the beginning. This is another key conclusion of this reading that we will get to later when explaining the significance of the final scene. [http://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/all/].

- 4 The passage about building on rock reads: “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded on a rock.”
- 5 This is a message hammered home by the script in many other ways. Note its description of dream worlds as places of “shared consciousness” into which characters “fall” and “spend a lifetime” before they die and “wake up.” Edith Piaf's recurring swan song announces the soul's lack of regrets as it swoons into death. And there are multiple images of the city of limbo standing tombstone-like behind the main characters, with the visuals of the city resembling nothing so much as a cemetery of death, a message also made in the film's own waiting-for-a-train parable.

personification of the foolish builder from the biblical parable, and thus a symbol of faithlessness and death.⁶

So forget the overly-complicated explanations of Inception that litter the Internet, trying to dissect the plot and map out who-is-dreaming-what-and-when-and-where. What we have in Inception is a story that operates on the level of symbolism and allegory. And this is why the opening heist plays out as it does, introducing Cobb as a thief who is obsessed with wealth and consumed by the importance of “buying his way home.”⁷ As Cobb's mission progresses, we see him make moral error after moral error: placing his faith quite wrongly in the corporal reality of Mal's existence (a mistake which triggers a biblical fall and blasphemy) and then embracing violence when betrayed. His coarse treatment of Saito in the scene which follows – throwing the man to the rug and threatening him with a pistol – also backfires, serving only to undo the entire nature of his multilayered deception. And then as our heist closes we witness Cobb's selfishness as he abandons his colleagues to be hunted by the organization which hired him (“it's every man for himself”), and for a mission which failed due largely to his own faults.

True to the nature of allegory, Inception requires its protagonist to undergo an internal moral transformation as a prerequisite to achieving exterior success. In the case of Cobb, this spiritual transformation starts with his refusal to take vengeance on Nash (“that's not how I roll”), a rejection of violence which opens the possibility for a greater “leap of faith” in the form of the second heist. And by the end of this second mission, Cobb's transformation is complete, and we see him as a gift-giver rather than thief (incepting rather than extracting) with no financial stake in the heist. All four of his major character flaws (greed, violence, faithlessness, selfishness) from the first heist are deliberately reversed here. Rejecting Mal where he trusted her before, Cobb now renounces violence even when attacked, and then risks his life to rescue an imperiled team-member, a final act of self-sacrifice that transforms him into the prophetic figure of his final encounter with Saito, a figurative Christ descended into the mortal world bringing the message of salvation.

In this light, it is hardly accidental that Cobb's victory over Mal triggers Fischer's reconciliation with his father, for by the end of the second heist Inception is operating

6 Cobb's rejection of Mal is primarily a rejection of faithlessness, with her temptation (“you don't believe in anything anymore, so choose to be here”) serving as a thematic temptation of faith. But Cobb's rejection of her is also a rejection of limbo in its manifestation as a world of death and suffering, something we get not only through water imagery, but also downward directional symbolism, as well as limbo's association with the Greek underworld as the dwelling place of “shades” and “figments”.

7 The idea of purchasing one's way to heaven is frowned upon in the bible: “And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.” (Acts 8:18)

almost entirely in the realm of metaphor, and veering towards an ending the significance of which is almost entirely symbolic. For what is Cobb's dive into the river but a baptismal inundation symbolizing the death of the body and rebirth of the soul? Passing downward through the waters of death, Cobb awakens in the metaphorical heavens restored to youth as in the Christian tradition.⁸ The rush of images which follow continue this Christian theme, presenting Cobb's judgment and forgiveness of sins (at immigration), his reunion with his father, and his restoration to the heavenly garden where his children James and Philippa (both aptly named after Christian apostles) fulfill the significance of their names by building a "house on the cliff" in the film's final line of dialogue. The ending thus brings us full-circle to the opening parable of the wise and foolish builders, except now in the reversed and positive form of the faithful who construct their house on the "rock of God." The cinematic journey which began on the "goddamned beach" of the spiritual desert reaches its end with a return to the Eden-like garden from which Cobb was earlier expelled.⁹

The prevalence of Christian imagery at the climax of *Inception* makes it an open question whether Nolan intends us to read Cobb's journey as a literal passage to heaven, or whether his "leap of faith" is suggestive of a more abstract kind of psychological death and rebirth. But regardless of how seriously we take *Inception*'s religious subtext, a look at the other philosophical and mythological themes in the film confirms that religious skepticism about the fundamental reality of our human lives forms the basic framework on which the film is constructed.

For further evidence of intentionality here, consider the script's emphasis on its multiple characters who fall into dream worlds and forget truths that they once knew. Although the intellectual connection is perhaps too obscure for casual viewers, the philosophical idea Nolan is referencing here is anamnesis, the Platonic argument for the immortality of the soul. Developed in the dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo*, anamnesis holds that the soul is immortal and all-knowing, but loses this knowledge through the shock of birth as it reincarnates into the mortal world. Allegedly "proven" through Plato's example of a slave boy who learns geometry through nothing more than Socratic questioning, the idea underpinning the theory of anamnesis is the idea that all learning is simply the act of remembering truths once known but somehow forgotten. And this is where the theory connects to *Inception*. As the faithless temptress in the Christian tradition, Mal is also portrayed as the Socratic negative. Her positive counterpart is conversely Saito, whose recollection of Cobb as a man "from a half-remembered dream" stirs him to recall the

8 This is anticipated in Cobb's opening encounter with Mal. Her thematically-appropriate musings on the deathly aspect of the ocean do more than anticipate her suicide, but actually lay out the thematic trajectory of the film, inviting Cobb to reply that it may be possible to survive even death in the event one makes a "clean dive." The end of the film of course shows us Cobb making exactly such a dive.

9 Nolan uses similar Eden imagery in his *Batman* trilogy, which starts with the expulsion/fall of the children from the metaphorical garden (following the unearthing and theft of a symbol of violence) and returns them to it at the climax of the film following an act of self-sacrifice which restores Wayne Manor to its original pastoral verdure.

exact same truth that Mal forgot: the fundamentally unreal nature of the world itself. This merging of Christian and Platonic thought is seamless and Nolan even prods us to make the connection by naming Saito's company (Proclus Global) after a neoplatonic philosopher whose theory of the soul builds closely on the idea of innate knowledge.¹⁰

The themes of architecture and creation ("building things that would not be possible in the real world") also combine with these Christian and Platonic themes and reinforce our confidence in their intentionality.¹¹ As the figurative Father, Miles is a clear symbolic representation of the Christian God, a master creator who makes his son in his image and teaches him everything he knows.¹² Seen in this light, the exchange between the two in Paris plays out as an obvious discourse on free will and sin. Although berated by his father for his ethical failings ("I never taught you to steal") and urged to "come back to reality" (the Christian garden on the cliff or Platonic world of ideal forms), when Cobb ("beloved of God") asks his father for help, it is provided (Matthew 7.7) in the guise of a woman whose mythological name suggests that her role is to guide him from the labyrinth of the mortal world, an act she symbolically fulfills shortly thereafter when shattering a set of mirrors which trap Cobb in the boundless maze of his own subconscious.¹³

Inception's doubled themes of father-son alienation and reconciliation (with Fischer as with Cobb) offer more evidence that Nolan is mythologizing Christian and Platonic themes. In the scenes of Robert Fischer and his hospitalized father, for instance, what do we have but the "Fisher King" of the Christian Grail Legend? A spiritually wounded prince with a bedridden father, Fischer depends for his healing on the successful completion of the main knight's task, with Cobb replacing Perceval in this modern reworking of the Arthurian romance.¹⁴ The central themes in the original story (the limits of rationality when applied to questions of faith) are then layered over Inception's

10 The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a discussion on Proclus and his theories on anamnesis and the nature of the soul [<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/proclus/>]. The original observation about the connection between Saito and Plato comes from David Kyle Johnson's book on the philosophy of inception, where David poses the connection as a puzzle still waiting explanation.

11 Here and elsewhere, when the script invokes the concept of "reality" it does not mean the waking world. It instead refers to the Christian concept of the heavens or the Platonic world of ideal forms that exist beyond time and space. The real world is thus a "broom closet" with "no place to think" distinct from the world of human creation where it is possible to build "cathedrals, entire cities... things that couldn't exist in the real world."

12 Quite suitably for the patriarchal God-figure in the film, Miles is shown in his Paris office sitting in front of a blackboard covered with architectural diagrams of St. Peter's Basilica from the Vatican.

13 This is itself a visual reference to Citizen Kane, in which Welles emphasized Kane's spiritual and emotional isolation by pioneering a similar shot.

14 In the Arthurian legend, Perceval makes two trips into the Grail Castle. In the first, he fails to heal the Grail King because of an over-reliance on rational norms and social constraints. His second journey succeeds when he – like Cobb – develops a more emotional and holistic approach to life.

philosophical framework, with Cobb's major character weakness – his thematic lack of faith – now linked to his tendency to over-rationalize.

And this is the point of the tension the film draws between Arthur and Eames, who represent the rational and creative aspects of the human psyche respectively. Given the film's mythological grounding in the Fisher King story, it should hardly surprise us that the creative Eames recognizes the possibility of inception even as the rationalist Arthur rejects it, arguing logically but incorrectly that it is always possible to think one's way through to the “genesis” of an idea.¹⁵ Over-rationality in this film is blinding, the same thematic point of which is also made in the architect Nash's failure to “know” how to make a necessary prop as well as in Cobb's hesitation to shoot Mal on the snow fortress level, a failure the script promptly classifies as one of over-ratiocination.¹⁶ Like Perceval, Cobb does not achieve spiritual transcendence until he abandons his rational desire to be sure about the nature of the world and instead acts with an emotional naturalism that is grounded in his love for his children.

And just as in the Grail legend, where Perceval's embrace of childlike wonder leads to the rejuvenation of the Fisher King and his kingdom, so does Cobb's interior journey lead naturally to Fischer's deliverance, with the mythological allusion telling us that this narrative reconciliation between father and son is meant to be understood allegorically as man's reconciliation with divine grace. And indeed, while there are those who read Fischer's catharsis cynically, arguing that he has been deceived by the inception team, their reading is fragmentary and mistaken. For not only does the heist team consider itself as doing a favor for Fischer, but the undercurrents of anamnesis in the symbol of the safe (what gets locked away is the truth) remind us that all acts of memory are genuine, and what Fischer recalls is therefore a genuine truth once known but somehow forgotten: the reality of his father's love for him, made symbolically manifest in the form of the pinwheel and photograph.

While the most likely meanings of Ariadne (the guide from the Theseus myth) and Fischer (the wounded prince from the Grail Legend) thus work perfectly in this interpretation, we also have supporting evidence for it in the names of lesser characters.¹⁷

15 The distorted humanism of exclusive rationalization is also shown through Arthur's taste for the distorted paintings of Francis Bacon, something mentioned in passing during the first heist sequence.

16 “How do you know,” Cobb asks Ariadne? Further strengthening this connection, Nash would seem to be named after economist John Nash and connected with mathematical logic and rationality. Arthur shares this association through his name, which seems to come from Arthur Escher, son of M.C. Escher, as well as his association with the Penrose Staircase.

17 In the Greek myth, Ariadne helps Theseus escape from the maze of the Minotaur. In Arthurian Legend, the Fischer King is a wounded (impotent) king who is healed by the grace of God. Inception seems to be playing with a variant of the myth, in which there is both a wounded king and a wounded prince, the former of whom is confined to bed.

Uncle Peter, who holds Fischer's company in trust from his father, echoes the disciple Peter who acted as steward for the early church. Joseph, who holds the keys to the world of the dream, also mirrors his biblical counterpart. We see this narratively not only in his role as provider of the necessary sedative to unlock the lower dream levels (a figurative key of sorts), but even literally in one scene where he jangles a set of keys to his basement, a place which symbolizes the cave of the inner-self (a hell which can become the world to those trapped in it) and a journey into which leads Cobb to encounter his own inner demons, personified in the guise of Mal who appears in the mirror/window of his soul as the Minotaur lurking in the labyrinth within.¹⁸

There is a tremendous amount of this sort of detail in *Inception*. But rather than dissect the film scene-by-scene, let us simply move on to the final major subtheme of note: *Inception*'s extension of the maze into a metaphor for life itself. An extension of the Theseus myth as well as of the medieval Christian concept of life as a moral test through which only the virtuous escape (through death), this subtheme is communicated in *Inception* primarily through the script's insistence that all dreams are mazes in which characters “get lost” and “spend a lifetime,” as well as its insistence that architects of dream worlds build them in paradoxical and maze-like forms. This intellectual subtext – the idea that life itself is a paradoxical maze – is the reason that labyrinth imagery – as unlike water imagery – transcends the dream worlds and appears in the rooftop visuals of Paris and Mombasa.¹⁹

And this abstract imagery is where *Inception* really takes flight. For when Ariadne proves her worthiness by drawing a circular maze (a thematic recognition of the paradoxical nature of life itself), her circle should draw to our minds not only the circular image of the Penrose staircase or the circular nature of purgatory (limbo) as manifest in the rings of Dante's *Inferno*, but even the circular nature of consciousness itself, expressed in Plato's vision of the soul as a circle or in the loop Cobb draws to explain how consciousness must simultaneously perceive and create the world of its own existence. Operating at its most abstract in these scenes, *Inception* draws its multiple themes together into the suggestion that it is our human sense of consciousness itself that constitutes the prime paradox of existence.

In an age where film criticism centers primarily on aesthetic commentary and eschews the value of examining texts for implicit meaning, it feels decidedly old-fashioned to suggest that any film – and a commercial blockbuster no less – might contain a serious message and deserve to be treated as art. Yet for those capable of seeing film as more

18 Her placement at the lowest floor of Cobb's dream elevator also makes the point that she symbolizes the central psychic obstacle.

19 Ariadne's red sweater recalls the red yarn from the Greek myth, while the connection between the Theseus myth and the Christian worldview also explains why Ariadne is the character who accompanies Cobb to the gates of immigration.

than a black pool reflecting the gaze of their own prejudices, it is refreshing to note how this reading leads us independently to the exact same claims about *Inception* as those made by Christopher Nolan in his rare attempts to discuss the film. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, for instance, Nolan acknowledged that the ending of *Inception* is ambiguous on the narrative level, but nonetheless characterized his film as having an unambiguous and “sincere interpretation” which operates on a meta-level far above the perception of its protagonist. For Nolan, it is only us – the audience – who have the proper perspective to understand the significance of what we have seen.²⁰

And this reading certainly suggests a similar conclusion. For while the totem is ultimately a minor symbol in *Inception*, what it represents in this view is the same sort of spiritual faithlessness associated with Mal, the woman who created it. Introduced to us as a tool used by those who lack conviction in the true nature of reality, the totem is only of use to characters who are – as Mal describes Cobb – “confused” or “lost” or who “don't believe in one reality anymore.” All of these characteristics are associated through maze imagery with the spiritually faithless, which makes the spinning top irrelevant by the final scene. Having already taken his “leap of faith” into a metaphorical heaven, Cobb's rejection of the totem at the close of the film marks his only sensible action: a symbolic reaffirmation of his earlier rejection of Mal in favour of his children “up above.”

Seen in this light, *Inception* offers a brilliant mixture of religious, philosophical and mythological ruminations bent into a cinematic whole: a hyper-intelligent blockbuster which hides a distinct yet unambiguous message beneath its maze-like exterior. Yet – once the religious, philosophical and mythological subtexts of *Inception* are recognized, it becomes hard to avoid the conclusion that *Inception* is also more ambitious than has been previously recognized, being the first example of a meta-heist film ever produced.

The reviewers who have come closest to noticing this are the ones who have chosen to read *Inception* as a commentary on the nature of filmmaking.²¹ Critics like Devin Faraci point out quite properly that not only is the medium of film itself a sort of shared dream for the audience, but that there are many curious ways *Inception* compares itself to its own dream sequences. On a technical level, a minor example of this comes in the way *Inception* ends with the very swan song it uses to mark the close of the dream, or the way the film's runtime of 2:28 hours curiously echoes the 2:28 minute length of the

20 For example, “I’ve always believed that if you make a film with ambiguity, it needs to be based on a sincere interpretation. If it’s not, then it will contradict itself, or it will be somehow insubstantial and end up making the audience feel cheated. I think the only way to make ambiguity satisfying is to base it on a very solid point of view of what you think is going on, and then allow the ambiguity to come from the inability of the character to know, and the alignment of the audience with that character.” [http://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/all/].

21 This is the crux of Devin Faraci's reading [<http://www.chud.com/24477/never-wake-up-the-meaning-and-secret-of-inception/>].

same song.²² The script is generally much less subtle. When Ariadne analyses the nature of world creation during a dream sequence in Paris, for instance, her comments about the primacy of emotion and tone are clearly the self-referential thoughts of the screenwriter applied to the art of filmmaking. Much of the dialogue that follows serves a similar double purpose, such as Cobb's reminder that too many arbitrary manipulations of audience expectations can provoke hostility from minds made aware of their own manipulation.

We should be skeptical of claims Nolan intended *Inception* as a metaphor for filmmaking – the filmmaker has explicitly denied this – yet there is a reason the film compares itself so frequently to a dream, and this is the requirement of genre. For just as heist films are required to hide their crimes in plain sight, with the twist of the genre lying in the requirement to explain to the audience the truth of what it has already seen, so is *Inception* required to explain the exact rules it will follow as it structures its own dramatic crime against the audience.²³ Reviewers like David Bordwell who praise Nolan for his stylistic embrace of expository dialogue miss this point: when the gang reviews the requirements for *Inception* in the garage of the first dream level, the script is less interested in explaining the plot than engaging in sleight-of-hand, informing us of exactly how Nolan will implant his ideas in our subconscious. And we can see that the film follows these rules quite precisely, even down to the point of centering its emotional resolution in a simple act of positive catharsis.

The sense that it is us – the audience – who is the ultimate target of Nolan's heist is a point made in the film's original theatrical trailer, which insisted that “your mind... is the scene of the crime.” From its opening shot of the Syncopy logo as a labyrinth, *Inception* makes the same point by transforming itself into an intellectual maze comparable to the labyrinths in the film. Nolan's circular narrative structure is deliberately used to misdirect the audience, as is the closing shot of the spinning top.²⁴ And the core message of the film is hidden in symbolism and allegory. In this sense, Nolan seems to offer an explanation for how exactly *Inception* is possible. For just as Eames relies on symbolism and subtext (in the form of the pinwheel) to speak to Fischer's subconscious mind, so does *Inception* communicate in supra-rational and creative language. The image is of the artist/director himself as a forger – a shapeshifter who communicates in disguised forms.

22 David Kyle Johnson's book is filled with a tremendous amount of this sort of detail.

23 “I didn't intend to make a film about filmmaking, but it's clear that I gravitated toward the creative process that I know. The way the team works is very analogous to the way the film itself was made. I can't say that was intentional, but it's very clearly there. I think that's just the result of me trying to be very tactile and sincere in my portrayal of that creative process” [http://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/all/].

24 Saito's opening remark that Cobb is a man possessed by radical notions immediately precedes the film's diving into a flashback sequence in which Cobb speaks of the transformative power of ideas. While Saito's remark seems to refer to this belief, as the end sequence makes clear he is in fact referring to the underlying point of the film, in Cobb's belief that “the world is not real.”

And leaving the film on this point, consider one final piece of evidence for this claim: the surprise appearance of the title credits at the end of the film. Although otherwise unremarked upon, the strange structure of the closing title serves a double purpose in this reading: and less significantly for its role in naming the film than in celebrating its success at its intellectual heist on the audience. For just as the act of inception on Fischer is complete only when his dream concludes, so is Nolan's inception of his audience complete only when the film itself ends.

End Comments:

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