

## When We Dream, Do We Accumulate Capital? On Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010)

William Anselmi and Sheena Wilson October 31, 2011



*“Nolan is making evident, both through form and narrative, his criticism of the sweeping radicalization of cinematic work that has privileged the technological wonder of the movies over formulations of innovative and complex narratives that deal with human existence.”*

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is first and foremost a film that unveils for the viewer the process of creating cinema as art.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as technological developments have accentuated the phantasmagorical in cinema, as illustrated by the use of digital manipulation in *Avatar*, *Inception*, by contrast, concentrates on the role that cinema has played since its outset. Besides the fantastical and entertaining elements of mainstream film, cinema has developed a blind faith in technological progress as well as an overall sustaining economic discourse that has transformed history into a titillating show of a cul de sac. For cinema has characterized a displacement that allows the viewing public a sense of ubiquity, being in more than one place at once (from the split screen onwards); embracing the exotic as the possible; and by moving through foreign lands and cultures (something that television has familiarized at the nuclear level while erasing public space as a locus of political participation. *Inception* is then a mechanism of social criticism that attempts to provide viewers the necessary “kick” to reawaken from the dream.

### *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*

The concept of the dream in *Inception* accentuates the manipulation of the public via the cinema, by exposing Hollywood as a factory of consent. The time reduction mechanism(s) of the machine and the pharmaceuticals — where a whole life can be consumed within a few hours — is a bird's eye-view if not a divine overview of Other lives, in terms of their full chronological span. In this sense, cinema situates the viewer as the divine over-viewer, in a continuous return visit to the Garden of Eden. This sense of divinity, since the inception of film, has migrated from the viewer to the actual performers now trapped in their aura of pseudo emancipation that enticed the viewing public to the so-called 10th muse: extraction or inception — it is all divine intervention — or the assimilation of the deus ex-machina.

*Inception* is a commentary on the state of current society, our relationship to history and our desire for *immediate gratification* in the *age of instantaneity* (Anselmi & Wilson):<sup>2</sup> our desire for oblivion made manifest through contemporary technological media and communicative environments capable of infinitely renewing



the American Dream. *Inception* addresses these issues by designing a complex visual architecture via the screenplay-storyline. Four levels of the subconscious are represented by the visual architecture. The film explores issues of the conscious and subconscious mind through a form of medical technology that allows Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), and his team — originally composed of Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), the background researcher; Ariadne (Ellen Page), the dream architect; and Eames (Tom Hardy), the forger — to enter into other people's dreams. This is a concept that has been poetically rendered in words, for example, by Pavic's *The Dictionary of the Khazars*, while Nolan experiments with the visual aspects of this idea. Within these filmic dreams, dreamers must work hard to remember their histories. If they cannot remember how they arrived in their current situation, they know they are not in their own dream, but rather in someone else's dream-construct. The team members use totemic objects (in Dom's case a spinning top that originally belonged to his wife) that provide a meta-physical line to reality: these totems help the dreamers judge if they are in their own or someone else's dream, because if the totem does not behave according to the laws of physics (in Dom's case, if the top does not eventually stop spinning), then the dreamer knows he or she is trapped in another dreamer's reality — a dream constructed either by the team or by someone else with the same know-how. The team of dream travelers, then, do work hard to remember their histories and track their trajectory, in order to map their own way in and out of the maze of the dreaming-mind.

As a visual metaphor, the concept of being able to control, construct, and invade the dreams of others presupposes that we are also subject to these same processes. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for current Western realities, whereby people are exposed to media and communicative technologies that function in much the same way as do the dream technologies. We connect, "hook up," to our technologies of communication (the internet via iphones, ipods, blackberrys, etc.); and being subject to the latest developments in technology and continuous updates about the latest information disseminated via news report, blogs, twitter, etc. creates an eternal present that makes it difficult to orient ourselves — are we in a dream of our own construction or someone else's? — and our ability to remember history impeded, we risk oblivion. We are seduced and possessed by the image, the *geist* of television, media, and Hollywood and thereby the matrix of the American Dream. *Inception* criticizes the Hollywood industry as the lifeline of neo-liberalism and as a false drug that spoils the material organic reality of viewers.

#### *Avatar versus Inception: The Medium versus the Message*

This is one possible explanation for Christopher Nolan's refusal to use, as much as possible, certain technological developments in the cinema industry that have replaced narrative in favor of the ecstasy of technology that talks about itself: the rupture of technological narcissism. Most notably, he did not make great use of green-screen technology à la Zack Snyder's *300* (2007). Nolan instead chose other, more traditional filmmaking techniques,<sup>3</sup> as the green screen can be read as a replacement for our



unconscious. It is the basic screen that we populate with our projections, but they are not our own; they are inceptions. Nolan is making evident, both through form and narrative, his criticism of the sweeping radicalization of cinematic work that has privileged the technological wonder of *the movies* over formulations of innovative and complex narratives that deal with human existence. In other words, this film, released so soon after *Avatar*'s blockbuster success, can be contrasted with that film, in that *Inception* exposes *Avatar*'s Achilles' heel. That is, the narrative of *Avatar* is about the seduction of a technology capable of producing a possible world, a three-dimensional reality that can mesmerize viewers and leave them depressed after exiting the dream. In January 2010, CNN reported that "James Cameron's completely immersive spectacle 'Avatar' may have been a little too real for some fans who say they have experienced depression and suicidal thoughts after seeing the film because they long to enjoy the beauty of the alien world Pandora" (Piazza, "Audiences Experience 'Avatar' Blues"). In the case of *Avatar*, the message is the medium. *Avatar*, in contrast to *Inception*, is the vehicle, not to communicate a story — as it is centered around simplistic, formulaic, fable-like narratives based on primary binaries of good-evil, peace-war, exploitation-empathy — but to emphasize the importance of technology today. *Avatar* is a movie that was created to showcase and celebrate the evolution of technological developments.

Transformations in cinematic production that use film-technology for the sake of visual drama favor an infantilization of the viewing public, since this type of film stimulates its audience with the wondrous aspect of the representational apparatuses involved, to the detriment of any meaningful diegesis. This is why Nolan uses the reappearing motif of the train, even at one point dramatically disrupting a dream (representative of the cinema itself) with a train, which is the initial trope of the wonder of cinema. *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895) is an early Lumière Brothers film that shows a train pulling into the station, from a camera-

perspective very close to the platform. The audience was allegedly fearful and ran from the screen as the train approached the station. Nevertheless, the train becomes an early symbol associated with the technology of cinema. Nolan uses the train — if not as a recall of the first movie — to show how technology has altered our points of references. The train illustrates that the wondrousness of technologies (specifically image technologies) has actually derailed us insofar as it has actually colonized our inner space and become a phantasmagorical presence that has reconfigured whatever formulations the unconscious is able to produce in order to maintain stability within human subjectivities. From the stupefaction of its appearance, the moving image has actually turned into a didactic tool of submission: submission to technology as the possible replacement for our tragic lives, for the instantaneous inhabitation of a new Garden of Eden.

On the outside, the continuous anxiety produced by the synergies of technological communicative environments that continuously predict moments of crisis and apocalyptic future (ecological, etc.) and renounce the outer-space where communities can be formed— this anxiety subjugates us to withdrawal into an inner-space that is pre-fabricated like the architecture of the dream in *Inception*. This internal focus is a more complex form of the notion of alienation that was used in the 19th century to indicate how capitalism was able to displace the worker from his/her own product and simultaneously recast that worker into an object. However, when Nietzsche theorized that one way to overcome the incoming nihilistic onslaught was to embrace the creative dimension of human potentiality — in other words, the continuous transvaluation of values — he had something quite concrete as a reference point: humanity. But humanity must continuously transcend those values; and the minute that humanity falls prey to those values as a creation external to humanity is the moment that we fail and become the construction's prey, finding ourselves in someone else's dream. This is made possible by the developments of capitalism in its present form as neo-liberalism, disseminated through various means, including Hollywood cinema.



The developments over the last 40-odd years show us that science fiction as a genre, like the noir-detective genre, is not only capable of questioning and criticizing present reality, but is also able to envision artistically the developments within Western society that have turned our dreaming-of-a-better-world into a continuous reassessment of a technological dystopia. *Inception* answers back to a number of science fiction films that have appeared in the last decade that, we shall see later, are actually grounded in a process of filmmaking and spectator engagement that goes back to Stanley Kubrick. When, in *Inception*, Dom Cobb's internationally composed team partakes of the same dream, they have to hook up, which both recalls and places the film into a dialogue with *The Matrix* (1999). In *The New York Times*, June 30, 2010, Nolan is quoted as saying that “*The Matrix* showed how a mass audience could embrace ‘a massively complex philosophical concept in some sense’” (Itzkoff, “The Man behind the Dreamscape”). In *Inception*, as in *The Matrix*, the characters inject themselves in order to enter into the architecture (matrix) together, and, as in *The Matrix*, Cobb's team is subjected to violent repercussions in the dream-world that have ramifications on their organic bodies. The significant difference between the two film narratives is that, whereas in *The Matrix*, if a character dies in the matrix his/her organic body also dies, in *Inception* a quick release from the dream is to kill oneself in the dream-world in order to reawaken (save in the one final mission).

#### *A Political Difference: Escaping the Dream, Eden, with Knowledge*

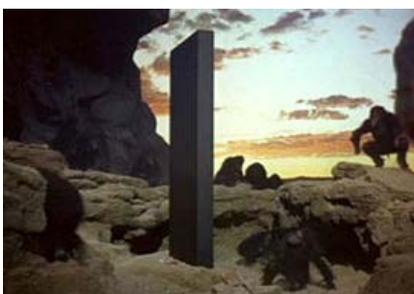
This difference between *The Matrix* and *Inception* is a political one. Nolan, a decade after *The Matrix*'s release, empowers the viewing subject with the ability to escape with knowledge from the construction. The Wachowski brothers, instead, cannot see beyond altering the matrix in order to let the actual human subjectivities live: so that it is a regressive political position, as if there is a sense of



inescapability/doom, an apocalyptic state. Nolan has a progressive attitude and manages to sustain, to keep alive, the distinction between fiction and reality. Viewers always have the option to gain control of their own narrative, their individuality; and in fact the ending of the film allows viewers to make their own choice. Alternately, with reference to *Avatar*, *Inception* reconfigures *Avatar* through *The Matrix*, from 10 years earlier, and shows us how naturalized for us the idea of “plugging in” has become. The technologies of the dream, much like heroin, create dependence. However, it is a psychological rather than physical dependence. This dependency on the dream-state, accessed through the dream-technology, is representative of our contemporary dependence on image technologies. Most of us are embedded into technology, and it becomes difficult to replace the artificial with the organic. Not only that, but technology has spiritualized and rendered sacred the processes of “plugging in.” The Hometree in *Avatar*, for example, is the database of the whole planet. It is now nature that has become the metaphor for technology, and this is a process of colonization and falsification of the human experience through someone else’s inception. In this sense the political energy that comes from political agency is neutralized and stilled by a film, à la *Avatar*, since it gives viewers a sense of participation in global issues (environmental, for example) that is recuperated by emotionalizing our responses to images, and thereby actually decontextualizes our participation in the world, in favor of a continuous state of emotional stupefaction. *Inception* denounces this process of technological stupefaction. And is technological stupefaction not simply disenchantment with humanity in favor of a new spirituality? Isn’t this what neo-liberal thought is actually working toward?

#### *Solipsism: The Final Frontier*

*Inception* contains this idea of the colonization of outer space and inner space. Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) opens with the scene of the apes and the black monolith. The black monolith is planting the seed in the mind of the ape. *2001* provides a material visualization of this concept playing out in physical space. *Inception* responds by playing out this concept within the realm of inner space, the psyche, the dream. In the ’60s, the future is ahead of us. We can conquer it. We can conquer outer space, and Kubrick is already giving us a critical reading of this outer space, with a touch of mysticism. Half a century later, that dream has failed, just as the American Dream has failed. The closing of outer space has made us turn inward in society.



Previously we dreamed of the new/last frontier; now the inward turn is the final frontier because technological gadgetry has turned us inward. It is the inner space that has become rife for exploration, exploitation, and colonization. *Inception* is thus an answer to the *Matrix*, *Avatar*, and *2001*. In this arc of 50 years of filmmaking, *Inception* shows us a passage from outer to inner space, all illustrating that ultimately we are left adrift. Inner-outer space can be used as a couplet, which can be exploited ad infinitum, since the two concepts are so related it might be said they are the DNA of human subjectivity.

#### *The American Dream: International Export Commodity*

*Inception* questions, at many levels, the dream — the American Dream — that has been sold to the international spectator, represented by the international dream team. The characters’ names and nationalities indicate cross-cultural, cross-linguistic knowledge, as well as an awareness of history, via literature and other means: Greek myth, the Qu’ran, Latin liturgy, French pop culture, etc. The American Dream, as it has been marketed globally, is the promise of a new beginning, filled with individually forged successes, a place free of responsibility to others and to the past that is narcissistically sustained (the original Garden of Eden prior to ingesting the ambrosia of knowledge). Throughout the course of the film, Dom overcomes the rigorous challenges presented by the many levels of the dream-world, much as Ulysses faced numerous challenges to his return to Ithaca, one of which included confronting the lotus eaters that threatened forgetfulness and oblivion. In *Inception*’s final scene, the top is spinning and the screen cuts to black (recalling the end of the *Sopranos* series), and the purpose is not only to keep us wondering whether he is dreaming or not, but to make blatant the “realities” of the American Dream that neo-liberalism forces us to participate in through consumption, but that are not our own — ideas, identified by Italian media critic Danilo Arona as *mediatic possession*, that have been planted in the mind. These realities include the construction of a complex social architecture by dream masters that we populate with our own lives, objects, and families, echoing how the dream relationships function in the film. The illusion of neo-liberal reality is represented in the film by Ariadne, the architecture student turned dream-team architect, who is able to construct a dream-world for other dreamers. She constructs the dream, and the dreamer populates it with his/her own subconscious

projections. To debate whether the top topples in the final scene or not is really a debate about whether Dom, or any of us, can ever return to his/our own reality, or whether that return is simply the return to another dream that has been constructed for us: the American Dream mass produced by neo-liberalism.

The American Dream, as enacted by Dom, becomes the guilt attached to the enterprise of the *thanatos* that accompanies the hegemonic project. Dom returns to America the first time from the dream-state by convincing his wife to exit the dream by planting the notion that her existence isn't real: she needs to kill herself to get back to reality. This, then, is the original inception that results in her death and his expulsion from the Promised Land. He can only return to America and the American Dream the second time by pursuing yet another target for inception, and to succeed in that project, he must overcome his guilt and face his demons: *hismal de vivre*.



When he can reconcile his personal history, then the internationally assembled team can accompany him in his voyage back to America, destination Los Angeles, the synecdoche for Hollywood, the visual birth place of the all-consuming dream of freedom and the pursuit of happiness without responsibility, referred to as the American Dream.

#### *Inception: A Dynamic Feedback Loop*

Dom makes it back home to rejoin the American Dream, but there is a sense of incompleteness to it because his wife is dead: finally, both the real wife and the zombie-wife who wandered the halls of his guilty prison subconscious. This indicates that if you implant you are also implanted. Implantation is a two-way street, and Dom never realizes this within the duration of the film. Ariadne tries to make him aware of it — to provide him a red string out of his maze — but he never fully becomes aware that as an implanter, he too is affected beyond the prison of his guilt. In the first instance, with his wife, he implanted a death wish in order to get her to come back to reality. He told her that her existence was not real. However, she carried that back to reality, and she could no longer distinguish between the dream and the real, which led to her depression and death by suicide, which led to his depression and expulsion from the American Dream. All the dreamers are then impacted by the fact that *thanatos* has now replaced *eros*. In the first inception, Dom unwillingly kills his wife: the synecdoche for wife-mother figure. In the second inception, Dom is the leader of the team that manages to kill the Oedipal father: Maurice Fischer. The team's goal is to plant an idea in the mind of their mark Robert Fischer, son of dying energy mogul Maurice Fischer, so that the son will be inspired to break up his father's energy company when he inherits. This is all done in order to satisfy the demands of Saito, the man hiring the team, the man who also happens to be a business competitor to Fischer. Due to the successful inception, the young Fischer is able to reconcile his memories of his father and his father's deathbed wish to inspire him on a process of individuation, not as a man in his father's image pursuing the goals that his father established for the company and for his son. The viewer understands that the result will be the dismemberment of the empire the father constructed. This metaphor represents that out of the destruction of this empire, capitalism will renew itself, since in the age of neo-liberalism, it seems that it has emancipated itself from humanity insofar as it is capable of recuperating the life process while instilling the death wish in humanity, in a continuous cycle, a closed loop, whose final result is having placed humanity into a state of limbo.

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1. At a press event for the film's release, Christopher Nolan replied to a question about the similarities between creating dreams and creating motion pictures: "From my point of view as a director, now that I look at *Inception* as a finished film it is probably as close as I want to get to making a film about film-making . . . when I watch the scenes in the film where these guys — this team — are putting the plan together it reminds me very much of a lot of the processes we go through in film-making." (Beames, "OWF at the *Inception* Press Conference" [\[2\]](#))
2. In another article, "Technologies of Memory, Identity and Oblivion in *Persepolis* (2007) and *Waltz with Bashir* (2009)" (forthcoming U of Athabasca Press), we coin the terms *age of communicative instancy*, or the *age of immediacy gratification*. These two terms refer to the current socio-cultural condition created by technology: on the one hand, where we can be in multiple spaces simultaneously, and, on the other, where the grand narrative of postmodernism has transformed History into a plethora of diluted/deluded narcissistic performances/stories for commercial use. [\[2\]](#)
3. Film writer Robert Beames cites the cast's and the director's responses to two different questions regarding the film's technology. Beames writes: There is, of course, a lot of CGI in the film but where possible practical effects were used, improving the action scenes, as Joseph Gordon-Levitt explained: "[Nolan] had built these enormous contraptions and various devices and techniques, the floor really was spinning out from under my feet and I really was ten stories up in the air with nothing beneath me and I think that makes the scenes more compelling. . . I think those sequences look really different than your average digitally created action scene and I think that's why they are so good to watch." [ . . . ] And the film-maker, who prefers shooting on film, also gave his thoughts on the newer technologies, including one of the more positive and balanced assessments of the much derided post-conversion process that turns 2D movies into 3D in post production: "I wouldn't want to bore everyone to death, but people who know me know I could speak about this for hours passionately. The bottom line is, we made the film in a traditional way so we shot on film, we cut the negative, we photochemically timed the film. The reason I do that is it's the best way still to get the highest quality in the shortest amount of time for the least amount of money, so it's in my opinion by far the best way of doing things technically and it gets better and better as fewer and fewer people do it because you go to the lab and they give you a lot of attention now . . . As far as future developments . . . I'd love to see IMAX develop smaller more lightweight cameras, but at the same time the R&D costs are extensive considering how few people shoot with those cameras. 3D is something I'm looking at, but I see at the moment significant technical limitations to the presentation format: mostly the dimness of the image and the fact you have to wear the glasses. The post-conversion process can be done very effectively actually; we did tests on it for this film, decided we didn't have time to get it to the standard we wanted, but it's perfectly possible to do it; if you're acquiring a high-quality film format you should be able to do a high-quality conversion with enough time" ("OWF at the *Inception* Press Conference"). [\[2\]](#)



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