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# Embedded dialogue and dreams: the worlds and accessibility relations of *Inception*

## **Abstract:**

In this article, Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007) and Ryan's model of fictional worlds (1991a, 1991b) are both applied to Nolan's blockbuster film, *Inception* (2010) to explore the multi-layered architecture of the narrative. The opening two scenes of Nolan's screenplay are analysed using Text World Theory, with particular attention to the embedded nature of character dialogue, or, more generally, 'represented discourse' (Herman, 1993), otherwise known as Direct Speech (Leech and Short, 2007). Based on this analysis, I suggest a modification to the way in which Text World Theory deals with represented discourse, which improves the framework's applicability to all text types. Moving from the micro-analysis of the screenplay text, to a macro-analysis of the film narrative as a whole, I outline the various different worlds that make up the reality, dream and 'limbo' layers in the film, explaining how most of the action takes place at a remove from the world at the centre of the textual system. I use Deictic Shift Theory's terms PUSH and POP (Galbraith, 1995) to describe the movements between the ontological layers of the narrative and suggest that these terms are better suited to describe hierarchies of ontology rather than deixis. Ryan's taxonomy of accessibility relations is used to describe the ways in which the film differs from reality, as well as the ways in which the dreams differ from the internal reality of the film. The complex ontological structure and asymmetric accessibility relations between the worlds are ascribed as the reason for many viewers' difficulty in processing the film's narrative. With its attention to discourse-world factors, Text World Theory is then used to account for the myriad of reactions to *Inception* – as expressed on online discussion forums – which range from engagement and enjoyment to frustration and resistance.

**Keywords:** Text World Theory, Possible Worlds, Fictional Worlds, Direct Speech, Represented Discourse, *Inception*, Christopher Nolan, Narrative, Screenplay.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Christopher Nolan's (2010) film, *Inception*, has received much critical and scholarly attention, from film critics to philosophers (see for example Botz-Bornstein, 2011), yet no stylistic analysis of the film has been published until now. This article explores the complex narrative structure of *Inception* and its effects on viewers, using Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007) as the principal method of analysis. Although Werth made claims to the applicability of Text World Theory to all text types, he developed the framework by basing it mainly on examples from narrative prose. More recently, several scholars have sought to test Werth's claims, by testing its applicability on poetry (e.g. Semino, 1997, 2010; Gavins, 2012; Gavins and Stockwell, 2012), drama (e.g. Cruikshank and Lahey, 2010), advertising discourse (e.g. Hidalgo Downing, 2003), and tabloid journalism and football commentary as well as other text types (Gavins, 2007). Broadening the scope of the model's applicability has led to refinements in how it deals with discourse and, in particular, Gavins' (2005, 2007) modifications to Text World Theory constitute the most significant contribution to the workings of the model itself, specifically in relation to the way it deals with modality. In Section 2, I propose a further modification to the way in which the Text World Theory deals with directly represented discourse, motivated by the analysis of the first two scenes of the *Inception* screenplay (Nolan and Nolan, 2010). It should be noted from the outset that, following Herman (1993) and Oropeza-Escobar (2011), I prefer to use the term 'represented discourse' in place of 'Direct Speech and Thought' (Leech and Short, 2007), as interlocutors do not always directly quote others, but can (and often do) hypothesise or invent others' discourse; thus, such discourse is not always directly plucked from another context, but rather embedded within the current discourse as 'represented discourse'. By testing how Text World Theory copes with an extract from *Inception*, I hope to contribute to the development of the model as a robust method of stylistic analysis

applicable to all discourse types and better equipped to deal with directly represented discourse.

In Section 3, the complex ontological structure of the film narrative as a whole is outlined. While I do not attend to audiovisual aspects specifically, they are intrinsic to my description of the *Inception*'s system of worlds. These worlds are defined according to their ontological differences – that is, their various degrees of separation from reality – and I employ some principles of Deictic Shift Theory (Duchan et al., 1995) to explain the movements that the characters and the viewers make between each ontological layer, from reality to fiction, dream worlds and back.

In Section 4, I supplement the text-world analysis of *Inception* with Ryan's model of fictional worlds (1991a, 1991b), which, like Text World Theory is founded in possible worlds philosophy (Lewis, 1973; Rescher, 1979). Ryan's taxonomy of accessibility relations is used to account for the differences between reality, the film and the film's dream worlds. The complexity of the ontological structure and the asymmetrical accessibility relations between the layers go some way to explain the difficulty that many viewers have found in building a coherent text-world for *Inception*. Having demonstrated the complexity of the narrative's accessibility relations, Section 5, then, re-employs Text World Theory in order to describe some viewers' relationships with the text-world of *Inception*. Given its consideration of the context in which texts are produced and received (i.e. the discourse-world), Text-World Theory is better equipped than Ryan's model to describe possible interpretations and difficulties in creating a coherent text-world for *Inception*. Nevertheless, both frameworks can be used in tandem to account for the layered ontological architecture of Nolan's narrative. Of course, there are many other aspects of the film other than its narrative structure that contribute to the viewer's overall experience, not least specific

elements of the audio-visual channels such as the score and the cinematography. However, as the plot and the narrative structure are the main topic of discussion amongst the film's viewers in their online discussions (e.g. Nolan Fans, 2012; Understanding Inception, 2010), it stands to reason that this is a salient aspect of the film and the one that merits further analysis.

## **2.0 Text World Theory**

Drawing from work in Text Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics, Werth (1995, 1999) devised Text World Theory in order to describe the mental representation of discourse that language users generate when participating in discourse. The central tenet of the model is that users co-construct a mental representation of the discourse using the text, as well as any knowledge and experience they may bring to that text, and furthermore, that the resulting 'text-world' is continually updated with incremental information as the discourse proceeds. Werth described the framework as a Cognitive Discourse Grammar (1999: 50-60), which, firstly, entails a commitment to the consideration of the cognitive processes that language users undergo when dealing with discourse. It attempts to account for textual features, as well as the myriad of factors that contribute to top-down processing, such as individual experiential features, physical contextual factors, and cultural knowledge. Secondly, being a Cognitive Discourse Grammar entails a commitment to studying *whole* texts, alongside the contexts in which they are produced and received. Text-world theorists have thus far used a selective schematic diagramming method (outlined in Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007), extracting salient aspects of texts for stylistic analyses. Elsewhere (Lugea, 2012), I have developed a method of diagramming whole text-worlds in greater detail, by using a free software programme called VUE (Tufts University, 2013) that, I argue, better

captures the dynamic multi-dimensional nature of text-worlds than a 2-dimensional page can. As we are confined to the dimensions of the page here, the diagramming method employed below follows the standard method, concentrating solely on the ‘world-building’ features (Werth, 1999: 182-190), which specify the referential information. Focus on the world-building information is sufficient for the present analysis, as I am concerned with the various worlds that make up *Inception* and their distinguishing characteristics.

The space in which the language event takes place is called the *discourse-world*, and the interactants are the *discourse participants*. The discourse medium has bearing on the discourse-world; face-to-face conversations share temporal and spatial coordinates, telephone conversations share temporal, if not spatial coordinates, and written or pre-recorded audiovisual media differ in time and space. When temporal and/or spatial coordinates are not shared by all discourse participants, this is known as a *split discourse-world*. Each and every discourse participant brings a fresh set of experiences and knowledge to the discourse-world, which helps account for individual interpretations of texts. In relation to the extract from the screenplay of *Inception* (Appendix i), my interpretation of it is shaped by the individual experience and knowledge stores I bring to the text, as well as the situational factors of the split discourse-world: my spatio-temporal location, the head-cold I am experiencing, and the drilling noise next-door. Every reader of the text will produce a text-world shaped by their discourse-world experience, and in this way Text World Theory allows for the myriad of interpretations of a single text.

The next level of Text World Theory is the *text-world*; it is defined by the deictic and referential information provided from the outset of the discourse, which lays down the spatio-temporal coordinates of the text-world and the entities therein (Werth, 1999: 180-209). Linguistic reference to space, time, persons and objects come together to form our

mental representation of the discourse. Temporal expressions locate the text-world in a particular time zone; note that the *Inception* screenplay (Appendix i) simply notes that it is “DAWN”, without specifying a cardinal time. Temporal deictic features, such as tense and temporal adverbs, anchor the text-world in relation to the discourse-world. In the screenplay, the use of present tense (“The waves toss a bearded man...”) renders the text-world concurrent with the discourse-world. This is standard in dramatic texts, where stage directions usually take the present tense, closing the temporal distance between discourse-world and the text-world. The inhabitants of the text-world, in Text World Theory termed ‘enactors’ (Gavins, 2007) are, in the opening paragraph of the *Inception* screenplay, the bearded man and the little blonde boy and girl. The writer of the stage directions, in this case Christopher Nolan, is a member of the discourse-world and has only a narrative presence in the text-world (for a text-world account of narratorial presence in stage directions, see Cruikshank and Lahey, 2010).

Although there is no specific reference to the scene’s location in the first paragraph, reference to objects that can be found there – surf, waves, sand and a sandcastle – may activate the reader’s schematic knowledge of beaches, which serves to flesh out the text-world spatially. The scriptwriter uses ‘iconicism’ (Enkvist, 2009) by introducing the objects in the text-world in the order in which they are perceived by the protagonist (and – incidentally – the viewer of the film), establishing a textual viewpoint from which the narrative takes place. In the second paragraph, the initial beach schema is maintained with reference to the cliff, a geographical feature often found at the sea; however, other referential information related to location and person complicate matters: the Japanese Security Guard wielding a gun, his colleague standing by a jeep and the Japanese castle on the cliff. Each of these entities and objects may activate schematic knowledge about security and defence, probably in a Japanese setting.

Before the dialogue begins, the stage directions have provided the key referential information to build the initial text-world. The text-world diagram captures this information in the schematic representation below (Figure 1). The basic discourse-world features of my context of reading are listed, although, as mentioned above, these will differ for every reader that approaches the text. The text-world level includes the key referential information imparted in the first two paragraphs of the screenplay.

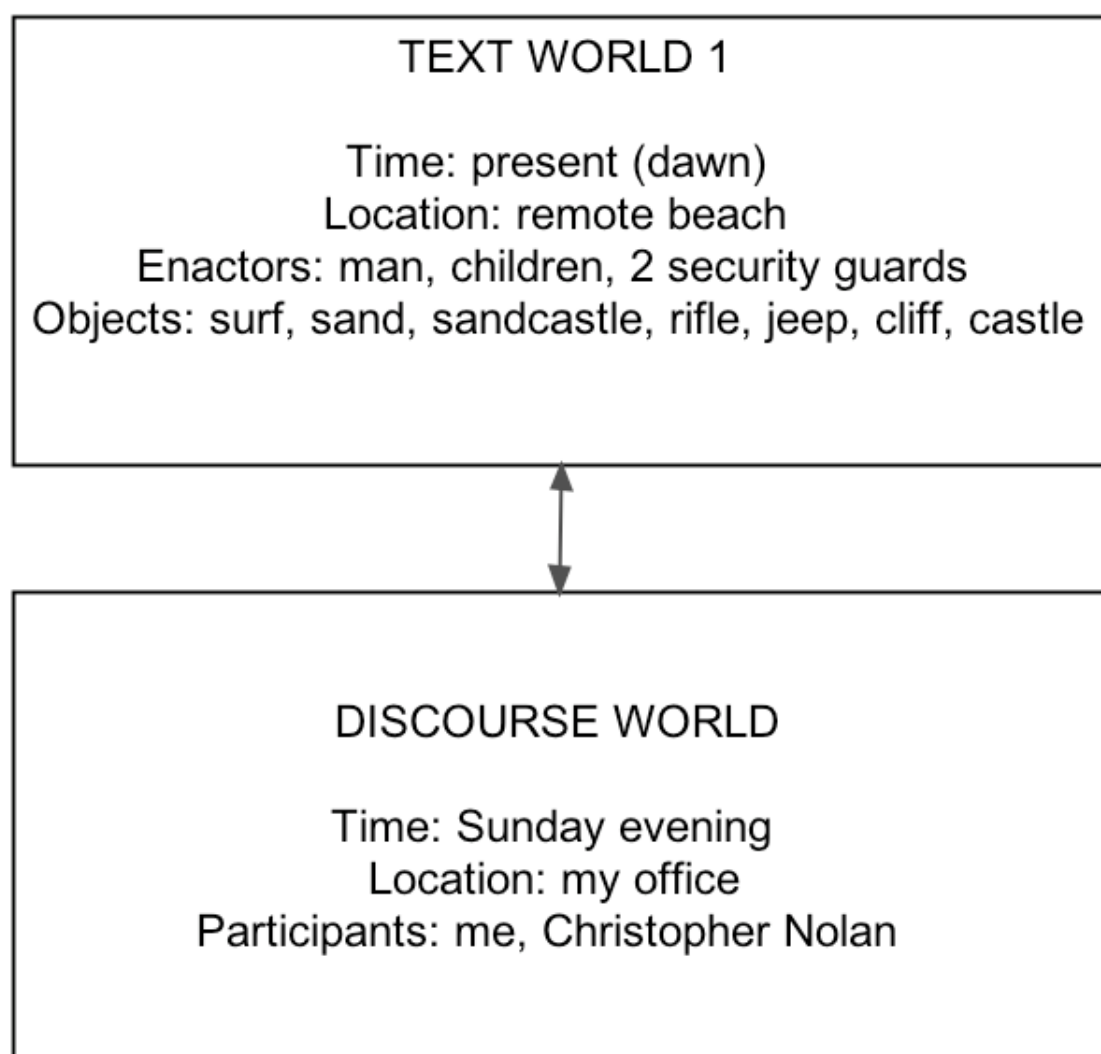


Figure 1. *The Discourse-world and Text-world*



Moving beyond the first two paragraphs of the screenplay, the stage directions baldly mark the change of space and passing of time: “INT.[erior] ELEGANT DINING ROOM, JAPANESE CASTLE – LATER”, making use of typographical cues in the letters’ case, as well as referential ones. Text World Theory describes changes to the spatio-temporal coordinates as a *world-switch* (Gavins, 2001, 2003, 2007: 45-52). These can be spatial, temporal, or both, as in the current example, where the action has moved from an exterior to interior location and time has passed, expressed by the temporal adverb *later*. Figure 2, below, shows how this can be captured in the text-world diagram.

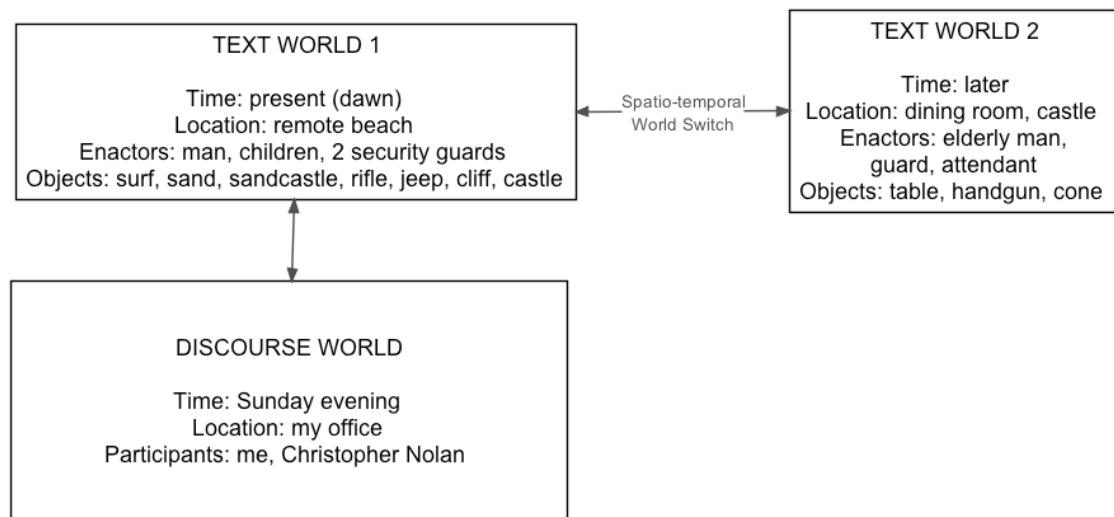


Figure 2. *World-switch*

Despite the switch in spatio-temporal coordinates, the resulting world-switch is not a departure from the text-world level; it is simply a continuation of the text-world in a different spatio-temporal location, with a new set of deictic parameters. This includes a revised set of enactors, amongst whom we now have an elderly Japanese man, seated at a dining table. However, not all textual information is stored at the text-world level, as the remainder of this section explains.

Once the referential information is established by the stage directions, the dialogue begins. I contend that Text World Theory – as it stands – does not satisfactorily account for directly represented discourse. Werth, who largely used narrative prose as the basis for developing the model, suggested that embedded dialogue represented a temporal world-switch, entailing a shift from the past tense narrative, to present tense dialogue (1999: 221). The following example, which I have drawn from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (2008) *The Cut Glass Bowl*, demonstrates this temporal shift:

‘My dear,’ said the curious Mrs Roger Fairboalt, ‘I love your house. I think it’s quite artistic.’

‘I’m so glad,’ said the beautiful Mrs Harold Piper...

As in most narrative prose, the past tense reporting clause introduces present tense dialogue, entailing a temporal deictic shift between the narration and the dialogue. However, while a temporal world switch in Direct Speech may be the case in typical narrative texts, it does not account for the use of represented discourse in drama, as Cruikshank and Lahey (2010) explain and the *Inception* screenplay demonstrates; in dramatic texts both the stage directions and the dialogue are usually in the present tense. Furthermore, previous research using Text World Theory with spoken narratives (Lugea, 2012) has shown that this approach does not account for the use Direct Speech in present tense narratives, or formulaic jokes (of the kind, “A man walks into a bar and says...”). In all of these text-types there is no temporal switch between the first-hand discourse and the represented discourse.

In addressing Direct Speech, Gavins suggests that the switch is a personal one, where “each time an enactor speaks, a world-switch transports readers of the text to that enactor’s *origo* for as long as the speech is ongoing” (2007: 50). Similarly, Cruikshank and Lahey understand dramatic dialogue as “a *perceptual* shift from the *origo* of the play-text’s controlling voice to the deictic centre of the play’s characters” (2010: 70, emphasis in

original). Thus, these text-world theorists acknowledge that directly represented discourse is not always a temporal shift, and instead focus on the shift in the deictic category of person, suggesting that directly represented discourse therefore generates a personal world-switch.

However, I believe this approach to represented discourse is not yet satisfactory- it implies that every time a character speaks a personal world-switch is generated. Aside from the fact that it is possible for a discourse participant to directly represent their own speech without any personal or temporal deictic shift (e.g. “And so *I* say to him, ‘*I* hope you’re not serious”), there is another reason why this approach is untenable within the Text World Theory framework. To begin with, Text World Theory holds that the text-world is *co*-created by all discourse participants and that individual contributions (spoken, cognitive, or otherwise) come together to create a *jointly* negotiated text-world. Moreover, a central tenet of Text World Theory is that each level is subject to the same rule: “sub-worlds consist of the very same elements in the very same kind of patterns as text-worlds” (Werth, 1999: 353). Therefore, the enactors’ discourse must be subject to the same rules as the participants’ discourse. As such, I suggest that character dialogue generates a *character text-world*, which exists on a separate layer, and may be envisaged as embedded within the originating text-world. It can be surmised that the inhabitants of the text-world, the enactors, understand that text-world as their discourse-world and that when they engage in dialogue they create their own text-world. Just as with discourse-world participants, the enactors’ dialogue co-creates and negotiates the character text-world. It may be helpful to think of this as a Russian Doll effect, as Figure 3 illustrates.

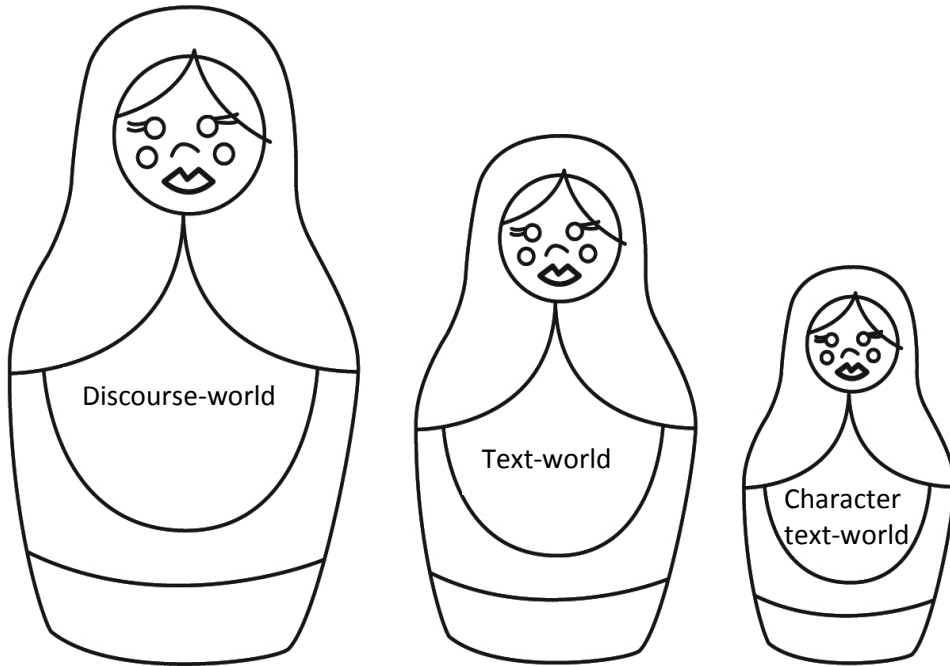


Figure 3. *The Russian Doll Effect: Embedded Discourse*

Using this modification to the system of worlds in Text World Theory, the character dialogue in the screenplay of *Inception* can be diagrammed in the following way, adding to the earlier text-world diagrams:

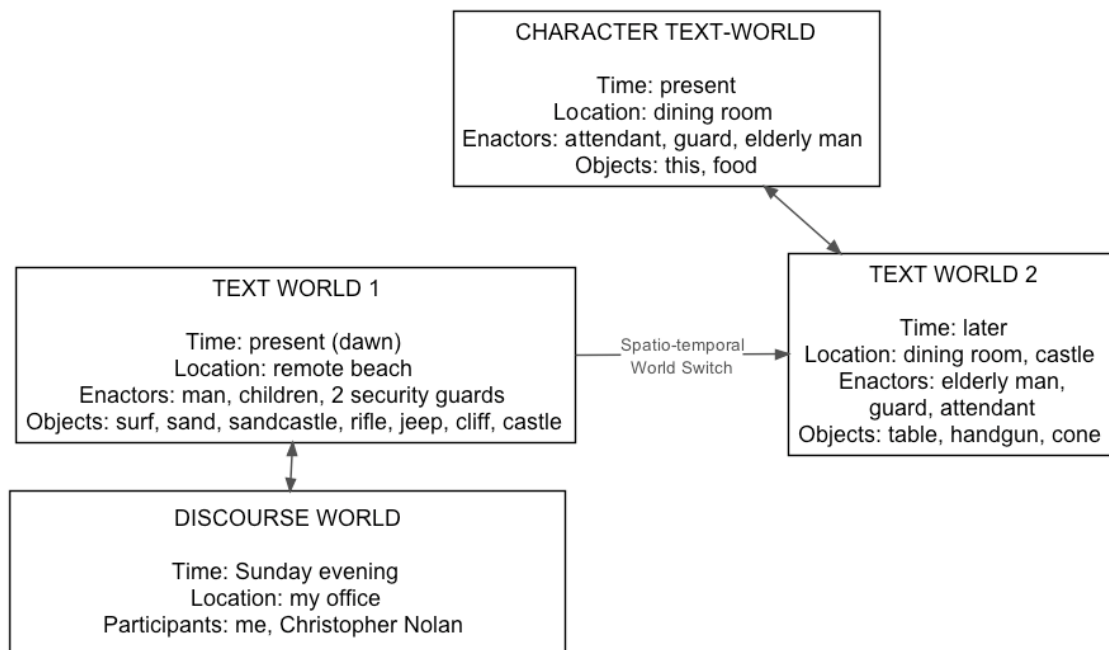


Figure 4. *The Character Text-world*

Thus, while our discourse creates a text-world, discourse generated by the inhabitants of a text-world creates a character text-world. The character text-world is not generated by any formal triggers, which are variable across different types of represented discourse and can be anything from temporal and personal deictic shifts to intonation and pitch (consider comedic impressions of others' speech). Instead, character text-worlds are distinguishable by the simple fact that the discourse is not first-hand, but directly represented. Not only does this modification improve how Text World Theory copes with dramatic texts, but it is also a solution that can account for all instances of directly represented discourse embedded in the text-world, whatever the discourse type.

Before moving on to consider the narrative structure of the film as a whole, it is worthwhile to observe how the levels in Text World Theory are permeable and can influence one another. Note that in the extract from *Inception*, Cobb's dialogue from an earlier scene in the form of a voiceover ("What's the most resilient parasite?") triggers

Saito's memory about past events and induces a flashback. Thus, the character text-world level contributes to the formation of a temporal world-switch at the text-world level (see Figure 5, below). This demonstrates how although the levels of Text World Theory are discrete, the principle text-world is shaped by the information we gain from all levels.

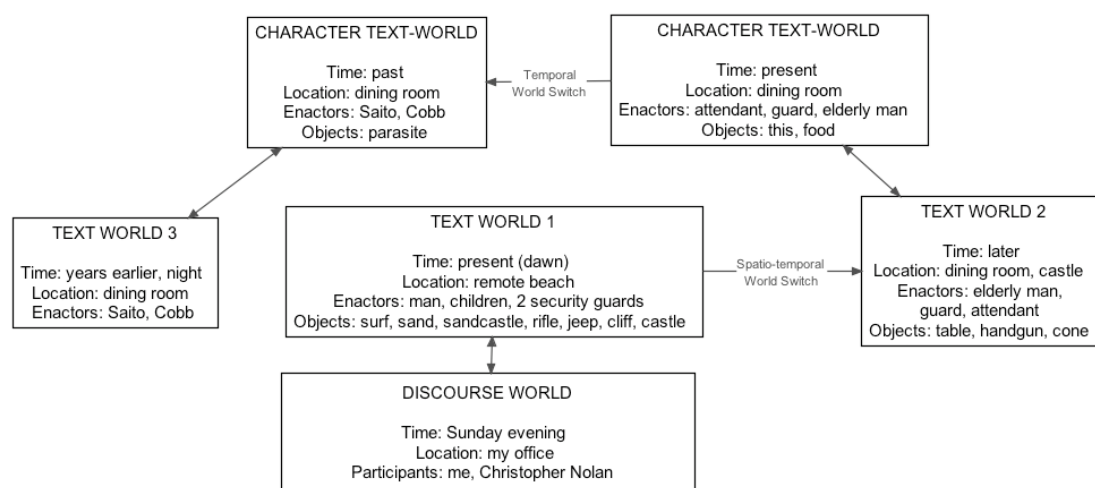


Figure 5. *The Character Text-world and World-switch*

Although there are other linguistic means of departing from the text-world, such as through the use of modal expressions (Gavins, 2005, 2007), they are not relevant to this analysis. Now that I have demonstrated the layered nature of discourse in general, and of represented dialogue in particular, I turn to an outline of the film as a whole, attending to its ontological layered architecture.

### 3.0 *Inception*

Moving from a micro-level analysis of the screenplay's first scene, I now describe the layered architecture of the fictional world of *Inception*, breaking down the ontological layers of the film on a macro level. It must also be pointed out that in this section and the next, although I deal with the film narrative in its entirety, the audiovisual aspects are not

attended to, as Text World Theory has not yet been developed as multi-modal framework and that is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the focus is on the narrative structure of the film as a whole.

*Inception* is based on the premise that, using a machine, Cobb and his sidekick Arthur can access the dreams of others by co-dreaming and building the dream world together, thus having some influence over the outcome. They are hired by a Japanese businessman, Saito, to share the dreams of a rival businessman's son, Fischer, and plant the seed of the idea to break-up his father's empire, thus leaving Saito free from competition. This act of corporate espionage is the 'inception' that gives the film its title. However, to avoid detection from Fischer in the dream world, Cobb, Arthur and their team have to enter several levels deeper into the collective sub-consciousness; that is, a dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream, leading Flourey to point out "the Russian doll structure of the film" (2011: 233), correlating with my description of Text World Theory (as outlined in Section 2, Figure 3). In order to achieve the inception, one character at a time 'hosts' a dream, as the others enter a deeper dream level. The levels of *Inception* can be diagrammed as follows:

|  |
|--|
| <p><b><u>Limbo:</u></b></p> <p><b>Time:</b> indeterminate, 12x slower, up to 185 years<br/> <b>Location:</b> Cobb's city/shore, Saito's castle<br/> <b>Enactors:</b> Fischer, Ariadne, Mal, Cobb, Saito</p>                                |
| <p><b><u>3<sup>rd</sup> Dream World: Eames'</u></b></p> <p><b>Time:</b> indeterminate, 12x slower, up to 9 years<br/> <b>Location:</b> snowy mountain fortress<br/> <b>Enactors:</b> Fischer, Cobb, Saito, Ariadne, Eames, Mal</p>         |
| <p><b><u>2<sup>nd</sup> Dream World: Arthur's</u></b></p> <p><b>Time:</b> indeterminate, 12x slower, up to 6 months<br/> <b>Location:</b> hotel<br/> <b>Enactors:</b> Fischer, Cobb, Arthur, Saito, Ariadne, Eames</p>                     |
| <p><b><u>1<sup>st</sup> Dream World: Yusuf's</u></b></p> <p><b>Time:</b> indeterminate, 12x slower, up to 8 days<br/> <b>Location:</b> rainy city<br/> <b>Enactors:</b> Fischer, Cobb, Arthur, Saito, Ariadne, Yusuf, Eames</p>            |
| <p><b><u>Text-world</u></b></p> <p><b>Time:</b> indeterminate date, 10 hour flight<br/> <b>Location:</b> 1<sup>st</sup> class cabin, Sydney to LA flight<br/> <b>Participants:</b> Fischer, Cobb, Arthur, Saito, Ariadne, Yusuf, Eames</p> |

Figure 7. *The Layered Worlds of 'Inception'*

In the first layer of the narrative, the text-world of *Inception*, all of the characters are on the business class section of a long-haul flight. Once the target, Fischer, has been sedated, they hook up the machine and enter a joint dream world. Yusuf is the host of the first dream world, a city scene with torrential rain. He admits the rain was not part of the design, but he drank too much water before entering the dream— so the sensation permeates into the dreamscape, revealing some degree of physical accessibility between the layers. Fischer's sub-conscious is aware that it is being hijacked, and sends hitmen after the



inception artists to remove them, resulting in a car chase with Yusuf driving the van and the others asleep in the back. The passing of time in the dream is slower than it is in the text-world level of *Inception*, where 5 minutes of ‘real time’ is one hour of ‘dream time’; this gets exponentially slower for every subsequent dream level.

While Yusuf stays in his dream to host it and drive the van, the others are hooked up to the machine to go one level deeper, entering Arthur’s dream, set in a hotel. At this level, the car chase and gunshots in Yusuf’s dream produce tremors in the hotel, showing another physical accessibility relation between the dream levels in the film. When Yusuf eventually drives the van containing all the dreamers off a bridge, the feeling of weightlessness is translated to the hotel dream level. Again, the host (this time Arthur) stays at this dream level, while the remaining characters enter Eames’ dream, a snowy mountain fortress. At this level, Fischer and Saito die from gunshot wounds, and, having died in a dream state, enter limbo, the ultimate level of *Inception*. Cobb and Ariadne follow to rescue them from limbo.

Once the mission has been accomplished, the film shows how the characters ‘ride the kicks’ back up each dream level, the expression they use for waking out of each dream successively to arrive back to consciousness. Although it is not clear how (or if) they leave limbo, the snowy mountain fortress is exploded, the hotel elevator provides a jolt, and the van lands in a river, with each ‘kick’ successively sending the dreamers to a more conscious plane, until they wake on the airplane (see Figure 6, above). This process of entering and leaving embedded dreams can be likened to the PUSHes and POPs of Deictic Shift Theory (Galbraith, 1995). According to Deictic Shift Theory, when we engage in a narrative, we can momentarily suspend our own deictic centre and enter into the world of the narrative. Galbraith borrows the terms PUSH and POP from computer science to describe the vertical movements between deictic fields. Each movement to a more remote deictic plane

is called a PUSH, exemplified through picking up a novel, suspending one's deictic centre and donning that of the 'focaliser' (Genette, 1980). Galbraith describes how further PUSHes can be made through changes in the tense or spatial adverbs, which alter the deictic coordinates to a more remote plane; for example, flashbacks or dream sequences (1995: 47). Conversely, a move towards a more available deictic plane, such as returning from a flashback or dream, or closing and putting down a novel, is called a POP. It is clear there are parallels to be drawn between Galbraith's POPs and the 'kicks' in *Inception*.

However, some scholars (McIntyre, 2006: 108-11; Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010) have pointed out that the terms PUSH/POP are unsatisfactory in describing deictic shifts, as they imply a hierarchical or vertical movement between worlds and that a shift in time or place is not always to a more or less *remote* plane. This assessment corresponds with Text World Theory's architectural structure, where deictic world-switches do not constitute a further vertical layer but simply a horizontal alternation within the same plane (see Figure 2). In the case of *Inception*, these hierarchical movements between the worlds are not necessarily deictic but they are ontological. The dreamers (and the film's viewers) enter successively deeper ontological planes of reality, which constitutes a PUSH. Conversely, the 'kicks' that the *Inception* characters make back up and out of the embedded dream worlds are comparable with POPs. As such, I would suggest that – while the terms PUSH and POP may not be suitable for switches in deictic coordinates as the Deictic Shift Theorists intended – they may be useful to describe the vertical layers of successively more remote ontological worlds that make-up a text such as *Inception*. In such texts, each embedded world is further remote from reality and less verifiable; it is this ontological remoteness that makes the deeper dream levels of *Inception*, including limbo, successively and more dangerously distant from reality, in temporal, physical and psychological ways. Likewise, the layers beyond the initial text-world in any discourse, including modal-worlds and the

character text-worlds that I proposed earlier, are further from the world at the centre of the system and so their contents are less secure; if much of the propositional content is held there, that system is destabilized.

In this section, I have outlined the layered ontological structure of *Inception's* narrative, explaining the embedded nature of the limbo and dream worlds to the text-world of the film. The terms PUSH and POP from Deictic Shift Theory were used to capture the movements the characters make in and out of dream levels, where a 'kick' in the film is equivalent to a POP. It was argued that while they may not be useful in capturing horizontal deictic world-switches, the terms can be used to describe movements between hierarchical ontological layers in narrative, where embedded worlds are increasingly remote from the world at the centre of the textual system. The next section considers the relationship between the discourse-world and the various worlds that constitute the *Inception* narrative.

#### **4.0 Accessibility Relations between the Worlds**

In philosophy, possible worlds theory accounts for how a proposition that is untrue in the real world, may hold true in a *possible* world (Lewis, 1973; Rescher, 1979). Possible worlds theory can help explain the ontological status of fiction to a certain degree, in that it accounts for how fiction is (usually) untrue in the real world, yet creates a possible world in which its own internal logic holds. Ryan's (1991a, 1991b) influential model of fictional worlds goes beyond simply accepting there are alternative possible worlds, to describe how fictional texts create worlds that differ from the real world in systematic ways, forming 'accessibility relations' between the two. According to Ryan, when reading a fictional text, the reader momentarily suspends consciousness of the Actual World (AW) to consider the Text Actual World (TAW), which is the world at the centre of the systems of worlds that

make up the universe of a text. As Ryan explains:

we can through certain mental acts depart from this world, select another world as actual, and create through further mental acts a network of alternative possible worlds around the new center. This recentering occurs in dreams as well as in children's games of make-believe, and it constitutes the fundamental gesture of narrative fiction

(1991a: 554)

It is clear that Ryan's theory of fictional worlds, in recognising the capacity for a text to create a system of worlds, has much in common with Text World Theory and this is because both Ryan's and Werth's frameworks draw from possible worlds philosophy, albeit to different degrees. While Ryan's model is founded in possible worlds philosophy and employs it to account for fiction, Text World Theory has a definite cognitive and linguistic basis. That is, it describes the cognitive processes language users undergo when constructing discourse in relation to linguistic criteria. But their differences do not mean the models are mutually exclusive; as other scholars in Stylistics have demonstrated (Hidalgo Downing, 2000; Vassilopoulou, 2008), where Ryan's model can support a text-world analysis is in describing how the characteristics of a text differ from our real world and how the alternative worlds within the text differ from the world at the centre of the textual universe. To this end, Ryan provides a taxonomy of nine 'accessibility relations', which chart the ways in which the worlds can differ. What Ryan terms the Actual World (AW) corresponds to the *discourse-world*, her Text Actual World (TAW) to the *text-world* and her Text Actual Possible Worlds (TAPWs) to the 'dream worlds' of *Inception* that were described in Section 3. As Ryan's terminology captures these dream worlds, it is adopted for this part of the analysis, where I chart the relationships between these three kinds of world in *Inception*. Ryan (1991b: 32) describes the transworld relations as follows:

Since a text projects a complete universe, not just an isolated planet, two domains of transworld relations should be distinguished: (1) the transuniverse domain of the relations linking AW to TAW, and (2) the intrauniverse domain of the relations linking TAW to its own alternatives (TAPWs).

I have identified six of Ryan’s accessibility relations as relevant to the ways in which the film *Inception* differs from the Actual World (Ryan’s number 1, above) and, in turn, to the way in which the dream worlds differ from the world at the centre of *Inception* (Ryan’s number 2, above). These six accessibility relations are charted in Table 1 below (I have not included Ryan’s accessibility relations F, H and I, as they are not particularly relevant to the fictional world of *Inception*). The first column depicts the kinds of characteristics that pertain to the Actual World, the second column shows whether these hold in relation to the Text Actual World of *Inception* and the third portrays whether the dream worlds in *Inception* (the TAPWs) are accessible from the central text-world of *Inception* (TAW).

| <b>Actual World</b>             | <b>Text Actual World of <i>Inception</i></b>  | <b>Text Actual Possible Worlds of <i>Inception</i></b>  |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>A. properties of objects</b> | ✓ The objects that exist in the TAW of <i>Inception</i> have the same properties as those objects that exist in our AW. | ✗ The architect does not always get the properties of object details right; that is why the dreamers carry a ‘totem’. |
| <b>B. inventory of objects</b>  | ✗ The Actual World has no dream machine.  | ✗ the dreamers invent from imagination.   |
| <b>C. members</b>               | ✓ TAW members are identifiable from the Actual World.   | ✗ Mal exists only in the TAPWs, not in <i>Inception</i> ’s TAW.   |
| <b>D. time</b>                  | ✓ TAW time is identifiable to our Actual World.   | ✗ Time runs slower in the TAPWs than in the TAW.  |
| <b>E. natural laws</b>          | ✗ The ability to share dreams is not possible in Actual World.  | ✗ The suspension of gravity is not possible in the Actual World nor in the TAW.                                       |
| <b>G. logic</b>                 | ✓ Contradictory truths are presented as possibilities, but not as both true at  | ✓ Contradictory truths are presented as possibilities, but not as both true at once.                                  |

|  |       |  |
|--|-------|--|
|  | once. |  |
|--|-------|--|

Table 1. *Accessibility Relations*

According to Ryan's (1991b: 51) principle of minimal departure, unless it is suggested otherwise, we conceive of the world that a text represents as similar to our own. Therefore, unless an accessibility relation is broken, readers and viewers assume the world of the text shares the characteristics of the real world. In relation to accessibility relation A, the objects that exist in the TAW of *Inception* have the same properties as those objects that exist in our AW. However, because the shared dream worlds are furnished by one dreamer (called an 'architect' in the film), the properties of objects in the TAPWs of *Inception* are not always the same as those in the TAW. For this reason, the characters carry a 'totem', an object whose tactile and physical properties are known only by its owner, so as to be able to tell the difference between a dream and reality. For example, when Saito realizes that the carpet – otherwise familiar – is made from nylon and not wool, he recognizes that he is in a shared dream where the architect has failed to replicate the properties of an object that is familiar to him in reality.

This accessibility relation is only slightly different to accessibility relation B, which holds between the *inventory* of objects across worlds. The TAW of *Inception* has a dream-sharing machine, a non-existent object in the AW and, as such, our real world and the film are incompatible in terms of the inventory of objects. A key principle of shared dreaming in the film is that one should always invent the dream world from imagination, not from memory. Even if the characters do not always adhere to this, the fact is that many of the objects in the dream world are invented. Consequently, there are objects that exist in the TAPWs, such as the vault in the snowy mountain fortress, that do not exist in the TAW, creating an incompatibility between the dream worlds and the real world of the *Inception*

with regards to accessibility relation B.

Accessibility relation C states that the “TAW is accessible from AW if TAW’s inventory includes all the members of the AW, as well as some native members” (Ryan, 1991b: 32). The film *Inception* is indeed populated with members that reflect our own human race, including identifiable nationalities and sociological traits such as age and gender. Of course, the characters of the film do not exist in the AW but they constitute native members, which Ryan exempts from the rule. The character of Mal, however, is dead in the TAW of *Inception* and exists only in Cobb’s dreams, meaning the TAPWs are incompatible with the TAW with regards to members.

Time passes in the TAW of *Inception* in a way that is identifiable with the AW, meaning that with regard to accessibility relation D, which assesses chronological compatibility, the film and our real world are compatible. However, a central tenet of the dream worlds of *Inception* is that five minutes of time in the TAW equates to one hour in the dream, or the TAPW, and this gets exponentially slower with every successive TAPW. Therefore, there is no temporal compatibility between the dream worlds.

Accessibility relation E is concerned with the cross-world compatibility of the natural laws of physics. For a start, the TAW differs from the AW in the sense that the *Inception* characters can share dreams, a physical possibility not available to us in the AW. This is of course related to the incompatibility of objects, where the *Inception* characters have access to the dream-sharing machine that does not exist in our world. In all other physical respects, however, the TAW of *Inception* is identifiable with our AW and, according to the principle of minimal departure, we assume it to be so. The physical laws that hold true in our AW and in the TAW of *Inception* are broken at the dream levels, where the surface of the earth is turned on its head at the architect’s will (as in the scene where Ariadne curves the streets of Paris up and over the dreamers’ heads), and the laws of

gravity are momentarily suspended. The latter phenomenon occurs when the van containing the first-level dreamers falls from a bridge and the feeling of weightlessness that the dreamers experience is carried through into the second-level hotel dream, where because of the temporal incompatibility, the feeling lasts twelve times longer. Thus, the rules of accessibility between the worlds interact to produce unusual effects, alien to our AW, and the subject of much debate among the film's viewers. Auxier (2011) notes that some have criticized the 'physics' of *Inception* for being 'selective', in that only some phenomena (such as water and music) permeate the layers between the dreams.

The final accessibility relation G is discussed in the following section, where the logic of *Inception* and its relationship to the viewer's experience is explored, re-introducing Text World Theory to describe possible interpretations - or difficulties in interpreting - the narrative.

## 5.0 Building the *Inception* Text-World

Among the abundance of online discussion surrounding *Inception* and its internal logic, many commentators try to unpick these complex interwoven accessibility relations and their instantiations in the plot. Some viewers, such as the following one, discuss the clues that support their various interpretations:

one theory i've heard on how you can tell if anything is reality or not, is wether [sic] or not he's [Cobb] wearing a wedding ring. In the dream world he has it because there he is still married to Mal, and in reality she's dead so he doesn't wear it. And if you watch every scene after they wake up on the plane, it seems like the camera shots are intentionally done to hide his hand so that you can't see whether or not he's wearing a ring...

This viewer, Tom, makes this comment in response to Hall's (2010) blog entry and he uses the 'inventory of objects' accessibility relation to determine whether the film ends in a dream or in reality. Many such interpretations and discussions can be found online (see for example, Understanding Inception 2010; Nolan Fans 2012). While some of the



manifestations of the accessibility relations may be inconsistently portrayed in the film – and part of some viewers’ pleasure is in trying to identify those inconsistencies (see Radford, 2010) – it is very difficult to find examples of how *Inception* might have inconsistent logic, flouting accessibility relation G. Some have pointed out that a rule that applies to the dreamers in the first and second dream worlds, is flouted in the subsequent dream worlds:

**Minor Plot hole:** One of the rules of *Inception*'s universe is that what happens to the dreamer's body will affect the physical aspects of his/her dream. Thus, when the van is falling in the first dream level, the second dream level has zero-gravity....but then, for no reason, there is still gravity in the 3rd level while the dreamer of this particular dream (Eames) is experiencing zero gravity. Even if the effects had to be smaller than in the second level, a change in gravity had to happen in the 3rd level.

(Movie Plot Holes, 2013)

However, others have dismissed this as having a logical explanation, noting that “Cobb states that Saito will feel less pain the farther he descends into the dream world. Presumably perception of physical sensation is harder to accomplish realistically within dreams within a dream, so by the time they are three levels down, the imagined weightlessness of level one has no measurable effect on them” (Hall, 2012). Thus, the logical transworld accessibility is one that is debated amongst viewers. As far as I can tell, there is no world in the universe of worlds that make up *Inception* that presents two alternative truths at once. To do so would be to break the rules of non-contradiction and extended middle, as is commonplace in absurd or postmodern texts, where impossibility is part of their fiction (on absurd worlds in fiction, see Gavins, 1999, 2000, 2013; Vassilopoulou, 2008). Therefore, accessibility relation G, which charts whether the TAW and the TAPWs have the same logic as the AW, is compatible between our world and the worlds of *Inception* (see Table 1). By respecting the laws of logic across the fictional worlds, Christopher Nolan earns this viewer’s trust that – even when so many other familiar laws are broken – there is some knowable internal logic to the film.

However as was mentioned in Section 2, if the majority of the propositional content is held at a remove from the world at the centre of the system, the entire text is destabilized. Because much of the film takes place at the TAPW-level, the viewer must rely on the ontologically remote dream worlds to build a representation of the TAW at the centre of the system. Considering the complex accessibility relations between the AW and the TAW, and the TAW and the various TAPWs, this is not an easy task, leading to what Ryan calls an “unknowable center” (1991b: 40). As a result, the TAW may “fail to solidify” (Martínez-Bonati, 1981: 115) for viewers. Such is the unreliability of the world at the centre of the *Inception*, that one philosopher (Floury, 2011) has suggested that the majority of the film’s action is a dream, experienced by a sleeping Cobb on the airplane, and many other theories pertaining to the ontological status of the narrative layers of *Inception* circulate the web. Before going on to list some of the prevailing theories, one reviewer (Rastogi, 2010) comments that:

*Inception* may have left us emotionally cold, but it did make our brains overheat. The puzzlelike [sic] film is stuffed with so much detail it threatens to collapse in on itself, just like that folding city- while also providing enough material for careful (obsessed?) viewers to excavate several plausible interpretations.

So this reviewer notes the relationship between the complexity of the *Inception* text-world and the material this provides the viewer for engagement. On the one hand, some viewers relish the demand on cognitive processing that *Inception*’s complex ontological architecture and accessibility relations entail. In response to a poll about the film’s ending (POLL, 2010), one fan argues, “the film is brilliant because you can have ur [sic] own take on the ending (there's evidence it's reality and there's evidence it's a dream) i choose to believe reality”. On the other hand, by creating so many embedded worlds with such complex compatibility relations between them, Nolan runs the risk of confusing, and perhaps frustrating his viewers. One commentator describes the increasing difficulty and

frustration in keeping track of the narrative as it progresses into deeper ontological planes: “Basically, it all works out fine until the snow world, but as soon as they start going deeper than that the writers got lazy and it all goes to shit” (Inception Flaws, 2010). Thus, the viewer can blame the difficulty of creating a coherent text-world on the other discourse world participants’ (i.e. the writers’) perceived failures. One reviewer cited above described the film as ‘emotionally cold’ and held this effect in contrast with the cognitive demands; this suggests that Nolan’s concentration on complex narrative has not only resulted in the viewer’s frustration at the complexity of the film’s narrative structure, but also entailed a neglect of character development. A lack of belief or empathy from the viewers can result in the viewer’s unwillingness to make the leaps from their own reality to that of the text, which, in Text World Theory terms, is described as ‘resistance’ (Gavins, 2007) on the part of the discourse participants to partake in building a text-world. The complexity of *Inception*’s layered architecture of worlds and asymmetrical accessibility relations certainly make it difficult for discourse participants to make a coherent text-world of the film, and that difficulty has been shown to produce varying viewer responses, from enjoyment and engagement to frustration and resistance.

## **6.0 Conclusions**

Text World Theory reflects the layered nature of discourse and this article has demonstrated the further embeddedness of represented discourse, by using the *Inception* screenplay. The characters’ dialogue was shown to exist on a separate layer, forming a *character text-world*, a modification that is consistent with other Text World Theory principles: the collaborative nature of discourse and the applicability of the same rules to each layer of the text-world. My analysis of *Inception* widened to consider the narrative as a whole, outlining the complex system of worlds that make up the film narrative. I argued

that the PUSHes and POPs of Deictic Shift Theory are better served to describe vertical movements between ontological layers, rather than deictic shifts, which are considered as switches on a horizontal plane in Text World Theory. As well as a profoundly layered ontological architecture, *Inception* was shown to have a myriad of different accessibility relations between its fictional layers, using Ryan's model of fictional worlds. It was demonstrated that the accessibility relations are not always compatible between our reality and *Inception's*, and between the world at the centre of *Inception* and the dream levels. This goes some way to explaining the ambiguity of the film's plot and the demand on the viewer's cognitive process, which, it was argued, result in the strong audience response to the text, whether it be intrigue in or resistance toward the text-world of *Inception*. Indeed, although Ryan's model of fictional worlds is helpful in assessing compatibility between the layers of fiction, Werth's model, with its wider applicability, linguistic rigor and appreciation of context in the production and reception of discourse, continues to be an indispensable apparatus in the stylistician's toolkit. Now that it can cope with all represented discourse in a way that is both consistent and compatible with its basic principles, it is all the more robust.

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## Appendix i

INCEPTION By Christopher Nolan SHOOTING SCRIPT

FADE IN:

DAWN. CRASHING SURF.

The waves TOSS a BEARDED MAN onto wet sand. He lies there.

A CHILD'S SHOUT makes him LIFT his head to see: a LITTLE BLONDE BOY crouching, back towards us, watching the tide eat a SANDCASTLE. A LITTLE BLONDE GIRL joins the boy. The Bearded Man tries to call them, but they RUN OFF, FACES UNSEEN. He COLLAPSES.

The barrel of a rifle ROLLS the Bearded Man onto his back. A JAPANESE SECURITY GUARD looks down at him, then calls up the beach to a colleague leaning against a JEEP. Behind them is a cliff, and on top of that, a JAPANESE CASTLE.

INT. ELEGANT DINING ROOM, JAPANESE CASTLE - LATER

The Security Guard waits as an ATTENDANT speaks to an ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN sitting at the dining table, back to us.

ATTENDANT

(in Japanese)

He was delirious. But he asked for

you by name. And...

(to the Security Guard)

Show him.



SECURITY GUARD

(in Japanese)

He was carrying nothing but this...

He puts a HANDGUN on the table. The Elderly Man keeps eating.

SECURITY GUARD

...and this.

The Security Guard places a SMALL PEWTER CONE alongside the gun. The Elderly Man STOPS eating. Picks up the cone.

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

(in Japanese)

Bring him here. And some food.

INT. SAME - MOMENTS LATER

The Elderly Man watches the Bearded Man WOLF down his food. He SLIDES the handgun down the table towards him.

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

(in English)

Are you here to kill me?

The Bearded Man glances up at him, then back to his food.

The Elderly Japanese Man picks up the cone between thumb and forefinger.

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

I know what *this* is.

He SPINS it onto a table- it CIRCLES gracefully across the polished ebony... a SPINNING TOP.

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

I've seen one before. Many, many  
years ago...

The Elderly Japanese Man STARES at the top mesmerized.

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

It belonged to a man I met in a  
half-remembered dream...

MOVE IN on the GRACEFULLY SPINNING TOP...

ELDERLY JAPANESE MAN

A man possessed of some radical  
notions...

The Elderly Japanese Man STARES, remembering...

COBB (V.O.)

*What's the most resilient parasite?*

CUT TO:

INT. SAME ELEGANT DINING ROOM - NIGHT (YEARS EARLIER)

The speaker, COBB, is 35, handsome, tailored. A young Japanese man, SAITO, eats as he listens.