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Michael W. McGowan

Claremont Graduate University, cgu.mcgowan@gmail.com

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Strategies of the Advocate: Inception and the Dynamics of Conversion

Abstract

This is a review of *Inception* (2010).

Ten years ago, when I first saw *Memento*, I highly doubted that Christopher Nolan could write and direct a film of equal power and intrigue ever again. All too often a young filmmaker has a good idea and a stroke of luck only to fall short of expectations in her/his subsequent attempts (recall the 2002 Newsweek cover on which M. Night Shyamalan was declared “The Next Spielberg”). After seeing *Insomnia*, however, I rethought this position. And after *Batman Begins*, I was converted. I myself became a “missionary advocate” for Nolan’s filmmaking abilities after seeing *The Dark Knight*, and since then I’ve attempted to convert others to accept one simple idea: Christopher Nolan is the finest writer/director of thriller movies in Hollywood today.

In Nolan’s latest adventure, *Inception*, dreams are venues within which ideas can be stolen or, in the case in this film, implanted. Now ideas can be powerful things: they cause us to either question the reality with which we are presented or accept it at face value. When the ideas we hold most dear are influenced or coerced by others, the results can be dangerous or liberating, depending on how they’re manipulated and who is affected. And in an information age such as ours, ideas are the hottest of commodities. Hence, there are outfits specializing in the security of the dream domain, training would-be victims to withstand the thievery of dream hackers.

Against this backdrop, the central plot of *Inception* is deceptively simple. Mr. Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), who was accused of his wife's murder and cannot return to the United States, must use his talents for stealing ideas to embed an idea into the mind of Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). "Inception" refers to the implantation of an idea, but the process must occur in such a way that the individual who has had the idea implanted thinks s/he came up with it on his own. Only if Cobb is successful will he earn his re-entry to America and be reunited with his children. What is the idea to be implanted? This question is best answered in reverse, starting with the desired outcome: Fischer must decide to dismantle his father's empire by selling it off in pieces. But the idea that has the power to motivate this business decision is actually much simpler: Fischer must accept the idea that his father loved him.

For the inception to have even the slightest chance at success, Cobb needs to assemble a stellar team: Ariadne, the "architect" responsible for designing the dream world (Ellen Page); Eames, the "forger" capable of impersonating someone familiar to the subject (Tom Hardy); Yusef, the "chemist" who concocts the precise blend of sleep-inducing compounds (Dileep Rao); Arthur, Cobb's sidekick with whom he's worked before (Joseph Gordon-Levitt); and, Saito, the financial backer who solicited Cobb's services and will benefit if the inception is successful (Ken Watanabe).

While the central plot is not overly complicated, the inception faces a host of roadblocks. First, when a person's subconscious senses an outside presence, it constructs figures to prevent access to sensitive information. These figures are like white blood cells that sense an intruder and attack. Second, Fischer had been trained to withstand those who would steal his ideas, so his subconscious attempts to thwart the process all the more. Interestingly, Nolan crafts a clever gambit designed to turn Fischer against his own mind's security. Third, and most important in the subplot of Inception, are the unintended appearances of Cobb's deceased wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard).

SPOILER ALERT: In Mal we see the potential negative consequences of inception: a simple idea can grow like a virus, affecting not only one's choices in a dream, but also the choices one makes when awake. When Mal was alive, she and Cobb had experimented with dreams together, going deeper and deeper to dreams within dreams. However, the deeper they went, the more Mal lost touch with reality. She began taking the dream world as the real world. Eventually Cobb longed to return to reality, so he implanted into Mal the idea that the world she was experiencing was not the real world. However, when Mal agreed to wake up, the idea unexpectedly lingered. Thinking that she would wake up to a higher level, Mal eventually committed suicide. Her death left Cobb alone with his two children, yet he was unable to see them because Mal had convinced authorities that Cobb was to

blame for her death. All Mal wanted was for Cobb to join her as she attempted to ascend to the higher level, but Cobb knew the real world for what it was. To commit suicide in the real world does not lead to a higher level. It's the end.

Inception is by all accounts a psychological thriller bar none with a script that entertains complex philosophical questions with learned sophistication. But Nolan's genius in this film, much like J. K. Rowling's in the *Harry Potter* series, is not as much coming up with an entirely new world, but rather reorganizing and repackaging worlds we've seen before in entirely new ways. Whereas Rowling had delved into magical and religious mythology for her characters and beasts, Nolan delves into the history of motion pictures for his. For example, Nolan builds upon *The Matrix* insofar as he constructs worlds that cause one to ask the metaphysical question, "What is real?" Some viewers wondered at the close of *Matrix Reloaded* if the final installment would reveal a matrix within the Matrix, and regrettably the Wachowski brothers did not follow this interesting line of thinking. Nolan didn't make that mistake, as *Inception* narrates level upon level upon level upon level (four levels of dreams within dreams, though one could speculate with good reason that there may be a fifth). Nolan also borrows and repackages ideas from other genres as well, as is the case with the use of "tokens," objects to remind the dreamer whether s/he is in the real world or the dream world (similar to the ill-timed revelation of the penny in *Somewhere in Time*). Many more examples could be

mentioned, as there are connections with such movies as *The Cell* and *Blade Runner*. The point is this: just as Nolan's characters construct worlds based on their past experiences, Nolan wrote a stellar script based on his.

Equally fascinating is Nolan's use of dream experiences we all have, in particular (a) parallelism and (b) timing. When Cobb is immersed in water, the Cobb in the dream world sees rafters thunder with water pouring into the room in which he stands. The dreamer experiences a similar, yet amplified version of the events occurring at the higher level. Not only in these parallel experiences does Nolan prove to be an astute observer of dream behavior, but also with issues related to time. For example, we have all had the experience of being asleep for five minutes during, perhaps, a snooze of the morning alarm clock. While we sleep for those five minutes, however, the activity of our dream seems to go for a longer duration. Nolan builds upon these features of dreams, using each "level" of dreaming as an exponential addition of time: what is five minutes in reality is an hour in the dream; what is an hour in the dream is a day in the second level dream (and so on).

These are just a few of Nolan's recent filmmaking strategies, and he is a superb and innovative advocate for raising the craft to new heights. But there is more than just creative filmmaking happening on screen in *Inception*. The film entertains religious questions as well, the most obvious of which is the attempt to

reach a higher, more “real” plane of existence. This is not unlike how many religious people today conceive of an afterlife. Whereas in the ancient world the afterlife was not particularly appealing – e.g., Greeks had Hades, Hebrews had Sheol – conceptions of the afterlife today are more desirable.¹ Not only in monotheistic western traditions, but also in eastern traditions, people want to ascend to a higher or better level in the hope that what is next or “up there” is better than what is now or “down here.” And this raises a question that many philosophers of religion are asking: how does the pre-mortem, embodied self relate to who or what moves on in the afterlife? Most often, people consider that which moves on to be the “soul,” but there are other ways to identify the pre-mortem with the postmortem than sameness-of-soul.

Since the time of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, one of the methods of identification is memory. We can be identified in the afterlife as who we were by the memories we retain from that life, experiences we cataloged and kept over time. To be sure, psychological continuity (i.e., the memory criterion) qua a method of identification is not without criticism, most notably the “duplication problem,” which has, of course, been responded to by other scholars.² Suffice it to say that memories affect the story in major ways in *Inception*, just as they were a major theme in Nolan’s *Memento*. Ultimately, the idea that Mal’s world

was not real lingered deep in her memory, so much so that it contributed to her demise and almost thwarted Cobb's inception attempt on Fischer.

The religious interpretation of *Inception* on which I will concentrate, however, relates to the implantation of ideas. To an equal or greater degree than other ideas (political, philosophical, practical, etc.), religious ideas are firmly planted in a subject's mind and it takes the right combination of events/experiences to replace them. Therefore, *Inception* also raises questions related to the dynamics of religious conversion.

There is still no finer study on the subject than Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion*.³ In this important work, Rambo describes the dynamic between a "missionary advocate" and a potential convert in ways entirely amenable to Nolan's script. That is, there are good reasons to draw a parallel between the religious "advocate" and what Cobb and his team are up to, and there are good reasons to draw a correlation between the potential religious convert and the character of Fischer.

At the most basic level, Rambo argues that religious conversion usually requires a skilled advocate and a subject who is at some level willing to be changed. More specifically, the advocate must adopt a strategic style to find those areas in which the potential convert feels marginalized,⁴ and this is represented on screen in

the exploitation of Fischer's strained relationship with his father. The advocate must also consider the mode of contact with the potential convert and make connections using familiar relationships,⁵ and this is where the aforementioned gambit and the "forger" Eames fits the bill, both of whom pretend to be on Fischer's side as he deals with the infiltration by outside forces. Moreover, the advocate must present strong benefits of conversion for the convert to want it, or at least not resist it. One of these benefits is emotional gratification,⁶ and this is represented as Fischer comes into his own by deciding to dismantle the empire.

Of course, we are not shown the consequences of the inception on Fischer's mind or what effect the inception will have on his future personal or business dealings. Nor are we definitively shown whether the world that appears to be the "real" one is in fact real (or the highest level). As I mentioned above, there is good reason to speculate that there are more levels operating than are made explicit to viewers.

However, one thing is certain: with *Inception*, Christopher Nolan once again confirms for those who have already been converted – and gives good reasons to rethink for those who have not – that he is the finest writer/director of thriller movies in Hollywood today. We can all look forward to the philosophical, religious, and ethical questions that will be raised by his upcoming conclusion to the Batman

franchise. He is an advocate for using movies to ask difficult questions, and his strategies prove effective on millions, myself among them.

¹ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Death and the Afterlife," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (W. Wainwright, ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 366. For an interesting take on the origin of the afterlife being a blessed place one would desire, see the recent film *The Invention of Lying*, in which the story of the afterlife is sufficient to allow someone to die in peace when she was formerly in pain.

² See, e.g., Bernard Williams' essay, "Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 19-25. For a response to the duplication problem informed heavily by theological assumptions and influenced by Gareth B. Matthews, see Rudder Baker, "Death and the Afterlife," 380.

³ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant, eds., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (New York: Cassell, 1999).

⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 79.

⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 79.

⁶ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 81-84.