

Reality is Just a Dream:

The Significance of the Uncanny in Christopher Nolan's Inception

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Christopher Nolan's 2010 film, *Inception*, tells the story of Dominic Cobb, a thief skilled in the art of extracting secrets from people while they dream. If only indirectly, Cobb's ability has made him an international fugitive and alienated him from his children. Cobb is offered a chance by a client (named Saito) to return home and be reunited with his children if he can complete one last job: plant an idea (a process called "inception") in the mind of Saito's competitor, Robert Fischer, CEO and heir of Fischer Marrow. Cobb organizes a team, which includes his partner, Arthur, and a graduate student, Ariadne, to complete the job. Throughout the inception, Cobb and the team experience the recurring appearance of Mal, Cobb's wife, who Cobb and his team believe is dead. As the team travels deeper into Fischer's dream, Mal tries to sabotage the job by persuading Cobb to return to the real world so that she and Cobb may be reunited. Throughout the film, Cobb's waking reality is confused with his various dream experiences when he encounters the recurrence of familiar yet uncanny elements (e.g. a train, an open window and Mal) that disrupt Cobb's dreaming. Using citations from the theories of Plato's "Republic" and Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny," I argue that Cobb's reality is entirely perceived and exists only as an ideological construct within the film. Furthermore, I argue that the uncanny events Cobb experiences disrupt his dreams and hamper his ability to resolve the trauma he experienced over Mal's death which he desires to forget so the he may continue to exist in some state of coherence.

Inception presents the idea that it is not possible for Cobb to know the real world as it is and that Cobb's experience of the real world a mere representation. Socrates suggests in his allegory of the cave that experiencing the real world is possible when a person is released from the cave in which he was imprisoned to emerge on to the surface of the earth, the "intelligible real" where the sun is "the source and provider of truth and knowledge" (Plato 63). Based on Socrates's theory, the film could then be interpreted as a variation of the allegory of the cave, favoring, as Jason Southworth calls it, a "Most Real" interpretation of the film, which suggests that scenes of the real world are actually set in the real world (33). In his criticism of the film, however, Southworth suggests that the principle of charity favors a "Full Dream" interpretation of *Inception* (40), an interpretation which suggests that the entire film, including scenes of what is perceived as the real world, is all a dream. I agree with Southworth: it is only possible for Cobb to know representations of the real world because the entire film is like a dream within a dream, a nested cave in which Cobb continues to only see the shadows before him. In his allegory of the

cave, Socrates goes on to implicitly suggest that he has been to the surface of the earth and has seen “the realm of knowledge” (Plato 63). It is plausible, however, that he has simply emerged from one cave into a larger and brighter cave, and is thus only slightly more intelligent than those who remain in “relative ignorance” (64). Applying this way of thinking to the film, I argue that Cobb only moves up one level up in his dreaming instead of waking up from Limbo. Limbo is where nothing except the “raw, infinite subconscious” exists and presents the possibility of the “unconstructed dream space” becoming one’s reality, which is what happens when Cobb tries to wake up from Limbo. In other words, when Cobb attempts to exit the cave, he does not emerge on to the surface of the earth but, rather, into another cave.

Along with the idea that the real world is only experienced as a representation, *Inception* also suggests the idea that dreams allow for uncanny experiences. Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as a “frightening element,” “something repressed which recurs,” “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind ... [but] has become alienated from it only through the process of repression,” and something both simultaneously “familiar” yet unfamiliar (833). Based on this definition, I argue that the train, the open window and Mal are uncanny things experienced by Cobb as he dreams. Early in the film, Cobb warns Ariadne during the workshop not to build dreams from memory because “building a dream from your memory is the easiest way to lose what’s real and what is a dream.” Yet this is precisely what Cobb has done: he has built his dream from memories he shared with Mal, which is evident by the recurring elements of these memories, specifically the train, the open window and Mal herself.

The first element in the film that is uncanny is the train: it is initially used as the “kick” that wakes Cobb and Mal from Limbo. The scene is frightening, and shows Cobb and Mal with their heads resting on train tracks, waiting for a train to kill them and thus wake them up. Before the scene ends abruptly, Cobb recites to Mal a riddle:

Cobb: You’re waiting for a train, a train that will take you far away. You know where you hope this train will take you, but you can’t know for sure. But it doesn’t matter. You know why?

Mal: Because we’ll be together.

When the team enters the first layers in Fischer’s dream, the train appears again, barreling down the street, knocking everything out of its way, including the car Cobb and Ariadne are driving: another frightening scene. Mal also recites the riddle about the train before letting herself fall from the hotel window. Thus, the

train is an uncanny thing: it is familiar to Cobb because of the memory he has of it; it recurs throughout the dream; and it is frightening.

The second element in the film that is uncanny is the open window: it reminds Cobb of the night of his and Mal's wedding anniversary - the night Mal committed suicide. In this scene, it is unusual that Mal is sitting on the window ledge across from their hotel room. If Cobb and Mal were back in the real world, she would likely be sitting on the window ledge of their own hotel room. But, because it is not possible to wake up from Limbo but to only move up one level in the dream, Cobb and Mal are still dreaming. Cobb does not seem to think that it is unusual Mal is sitting on the window ledge across from their hotel room. The scene is also unusual and familiar because it is similar to when Mal and Cobb rested their heads on the train tracks and used the train as a "kick" to wake them up: Mal lets herself fall from the window so that the feeling of falling in the dream is used as a "kick" to wake her up again. The open window is also uncanny when Cobb sees it in Saito's dream as he's restraining Mal to keep her from sabotaging the extraction; he is unsuccessful as Mal still ends up sabotaging the extraction. The open window is uncanny not only because, like the train, it is also familiar to Cobb because of the memory he has of it and it recurs throughout the dream film; but it is frightening because it "leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 825): Mal, the most uncanny element of all.

Cobb tries to repress the memory of Mal, to keep her in "a prison of memories" in the basement of his mind. No matter how much Cobb believes he has Mal under control, it is evident, as Ariadne says, that "Mal is bursting through." Mal is a recurring element throughout the film, and when she appears, she is frightening: handling a weapon such as a knife or a gun, reaching for an object she can use as a weapon (such as the broken stem of a wine glass) or attacking someone with her bare hands. The memory of Mal has become so alienated from Cobb that she desires nothing else except to be reunited with him and tries to remove anyone who may keep them from being reunited: Mal stabs Ariadne during the workshop and lunges at her in the basement of Cobb's mind; she shoots to kill Fischer when the inception is close to completion; and she even stabs Cobb when he tells her he doesn't want to be reunited with her. Thus, Mal is the most uncanny element in the film: she is repressed, alienated, recurring and frightening.

The film suggests that the uncanny disrupts Cobb's dreaming, or perceived reality, making him unable to resolve the trauma of Mal's death. In his criticism of the film, Doru Pop suggests that it is impossible to know the real world while we are dreaming because while we dream we see ourselves as living, or as it is best expressed in terms of the Lacanian mirror-stage, we see ourselves "as illusions of our own fake reality" (Pop 208). I agree with Pop and expand on his suggestion by arguing that Cobb consistently chooses to forget the uncanniness of the train and the open window, but that their recurrence makes it difficult for

Cobb to allow himself to forget about the real world: the uncanny elements disrupt his dreaming. Cobb's dreaming is most disturbed when he experiences Mal: he is most uncertain over whether or not he is back in the real world with Mal and has difficulty resolving the trauma he has experienced over her death. Only near the end of the film, when Cobb is again in Limbo does he confront Mal, telling her that she's "just a shade" of his real wife. This scene suggests that Cobb, no longer within the familiarity of his dream, finally understands that he has been dreaming ever since he woke up from Limbo, and that regardless of whether or not he remembers his real wife, he at least knows that his perceived reality, including Mal, is all just a dream.

In closing, *Inception* is a nested dream in which the uncanny disrupts Cobb's perceived reality: Cobb's entire reality is a dream, a representation, a shadow, and the uncanny moments he experiences disrupt his dreams and hamper his ability to resolve the trauma he experienced over Mal's death. Moreover, Cobb allows himself to forget that he is dreaming and exists in an imagined construct so that he may continue to function.

References

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