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Mind-Games, Meta Cinema and Self-Allegory: The Case of Inception

Argo, I am arguing, is not a mind-game film, but plays mind-games with history, as an ideological maneuver that allows Hollywood to celebrate itself, while contributing yet another narrative emplotment to the standard trope of American war films, which is: "let no man be left behind", i.e. rescue the boys and bring them home. From *Rambo* to *Black Hawk Down*, from *Apocalypse Now* to *Saving Private Ryan,* the rescue scenario is America's self-serving representation of what are otherwise (ruinous or failed) invasive military missions (for 're-storing democracy'). If *Saving Private Ryan* is a different case – as I try to show in the chapter devoted to the film – it is also because WWII is still considered one of the United States' honorable and just wars, and because Spielberg's film questions the very logic of "save and rescue" one (man/cause/community) and not another.

A film that also reworks the 'heroic' rescue mission trope in the reflexive mode is Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*, paying homage to *Saving Private Ryan* in its opening segment, before opting for a different kind of complex narrative with interlocking actions and the same characters turning up in different segments. Mostly, *Dunkirk*'s disorienting elements are the compressed and dilated time-scales across its three hours duration[2].

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[1] An excerpt from the manuscript *Mind-game Films as Tipping Points*. Courtesy of Thomas Elsaesser.
[2] For a reading of *Dunkirk* in the spirit of time-bending, see Matt Zoller Seitz (2017), and Tracey J. Kinney (2018).

But it is Nolan's *Inception* (whose plot, incidentally, also pivots on the home-coming trope) that is perhaps the most paradigmatic mind-game film, **serving as a kind of summary for the different steps of my argument.** We saw how it obeys the rules of classical Hollywood narrative construction while also embodying to perfection the video-game logic as identified by Buckland. Its narrational strategies have been identified not so much as unreliable or deceptive, but as so complex as to defy analysis. Part of the difficulty stems from the way the power-relations among the protagonists are 'nested' in dreams-within-dreams: a mise-en-abyme that is further complicated not only by so-called 'lucid' (i.e. shared) dreams, but by characters finding themselves inside someone else's dream. Thus, given the non-chronological narration, with unmarked flashbacks that could be flash-forwards (and vice-versa), doubled by asymmetrical power-relations of who is in whose dream (and by extension, who is manipulating whom), *Inception* represents a special case of the uneven distribution of knowledge to be found in most films working with suspense, anticipation and retrospective revision, as well as with identification and participation. Nolan visualizes (or better: diagrams) the nested narrative through an image of the Penrose stairs, with their four 90-degree turns, infinitely ascending and descending in a continuous loop, and indicates an (equally ascending and descending) verticality by way of an old-fashioned, scissor-gate elevator. For Eliot Panek *Inception* is extreme, in that a similarly Penrose-like architecture applies to the distribution of knowledge as it does to the reality/dream status of the images and the nested narrative levels, while also implicating the audience:

> "The audience finds out, later, that Cobb and Arthur know that they are in a dream within a dream. However, the audience possesses a bit of knowledge that Cobb and Arthur do not: when Arthur asks, "What's going on up there?" the audience knows something he and Cobb do not know – that the rumblings are being caused by rioters running through the streets, blowing up cars. This knowledge might keep the audience from totally giving up on interpreting the scene: being kept disoriented for too long while characters, apparently, know more than you do is likely to feel alienating. […Yet] the protagonists also know something that the first-time viewer cannot know: that they are in a dream within a dream. It is thus not easy to say who is at an advantage here in terms of knowledge (the audience or the protagonists), but if one had to decide, one would likely say that the audience is still at a disadvantage, not even knowing the extent to which any of what they see is 'real' within the diegetic universe" (Panek, 2014, p. 81).

Detailing what he calls the "back-and-forth" between "revealing that the protagonist and antagonist had knowledge that the other (and the audience) did not", Panek uses sophisticated narratological tools to establish how carefully *Inception* is plotted as a *film*, and how it both seeks to engage an audience through the management of knowledge distribution, while simultaneously maintaining a high degree of confusion and deliberate disorientation, verging (for some viewers) on incoherence.

Inception, however, is above all the mind-game film as meta-cinema, and not merely by the way it so self-referentially flaunts its Escher-like labyrinths and Gestalt-switch tromp l'oeuils, taking us back to the duck-rabbit version of mind-game undecidability. Nor is *Inception* meta-cinema merely because it is so self-evidently readable (and frequently read) as an allegory of filmmaking, with its star Leonardo DiCaprio, the alter ego of the director, in much the way that Marcello Mastroianni was Federico Fellini's alter ego in *8 $^1/_2$*:

> The heist team quite neatly maps to major players in a film production. Cobb is the director while Arthur, the guy who does the research and who sets up the places to sleep, is the producer. Ariadne, the dream architect, is the screenwriter – she creates the world that will be entered. Eames is the actor (this is so obvious that the character sits at an old fashioned mirrored vanity, the type which stage actors would use). Yusuf is the technical guy […] That leaves two key figures. Saito is the money guy, the big corporate suit who fancies himself a part of the game. And Fischer, the mark, is the audience. Cobb, as a director, takes Fischer through an engaging, stimulating and exciting journey, one that leads him to an understanding about himself. Cobb is the big time movie director […] who brings the action, who brings the spectacle, but who also brings the meaning and the humanity and the emotion (ONTD, 2010)[3].

As the reference to Fellini indicates, *Inception* is furthermore meta-cinematic in that it alludes to more movies than one would care to enumerate: from James Bond, *Bourne*, *Mission Impossible* blockbusters to *Dirty Dozen*, *Oceans 11* heist

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[3] In fact, Nolan himself has detailed these analogies: "Nolan says that the metaphor for cinema developed organically as he wrote the script over a 10-year period. Cobb's crew of mind-hackers don't infiltrate people's "real" dreams - they actually build ersatz dreams and place them inside people's heads, in the same way moviemakers craft worlds that are transmitted into our brains via a movie projector. Nolan explained that each member of the team serves a role that has a movie analog. The Architect (Ellen Page) would be the production designer. The Forger (Tom Hardy) would be the actor. The Point Man (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) would be The Producer. The Extractor (DiCaprio) would be the director. And [Fisher] The Mark (Cillian Murphy) would be us - the audience. "In trying to write a team-based creative process, I wrote the one I know," says Nolan […] "It's rare that you can identify yourself so clearly in a film. This film is very clear for me." (Jensen, 2010).

films, from Buñuel (*Un Chien Andalou*) to Cocteau (*Orphee*), and from Antonioni (*Zabriskie Point*) to the Wachowski Brothers (*The Matrix*), the allusions and homages are so pervasive that they sometimes take the form of an entire film-within-the-film pastiche.

However, we must add another layer: *Inception* allegorizes quite specifically *digital* filmmaking, insofar as in contemporary cinema, more and more devolves on post-production, with the film taking shape through outsourced special effects labs and sub-contracted work stations. "Dreaming" here stands for "digitizing": every reality, every solid object, every setting or city can become liquid, malleable, expand or contract, explode or vanish, neutralizing the laws of nature and suspending the force of gravity. However, the meta-cinematic dimension of *Inception* goes further even than authorial self-portrait, digital dematerialization, or as an allegory of the teamwork and post-production division of labor required for the making of a contemporary blockbuster film. The very action the plot revolves around, namely inception is what not only this, but all movies strive to do: extract profit from 'dreams' and plant ideas in minds. The 'real' title of the film, in other words, is 'cinema', which means that *Inception* is a mind-game film not least because it is an allegory of a mind-game: an elaborate manipulation of the viewers' sense of reality, their orientation in space and time, across the act of testing their capacity for comprehending a narrative by trying to follow a story. And while the references to dream levels, 'kicks', 'limbo' may mimetically enact the moves of a video game and mirror the actions of the players, the narration gives the audience just enough of an 'Ariadne' thread to follow the leads – movie suspense fashion – through the labyrinth, in the expectation of coming out at the other end, and together with our hero, returning 'home'.

If *Inception* is the *mise-en-abyme* of inception as the meta-cinematic truth of contemporary cinema, then the question arises: does it formulate an ideological critique or present a postmodern celebration? After all, it is a heist-movie: these avatars of a film crew are thieves and criminals, and the stand-in for the audience is called "the Mark"– the target or victim. Quite openly we are told that we are 'robbed in broad daylight', as it were, except that the robbery takes place in the darkness of a movie-theater. The film candidly concedes that extraction and inception is what cinema shares with advertising, propaganda, brainwashing, hypnosis and other forms of influence peddling and mind-control. Yet this in turn suggests that the sort of symptomatic reading or ideological critique as conducted by Garrett Stewart no longer has traction, given how openly the film hides this analogy between cinema and inception in plain sight. Such ideological readings risk doing much the same as Bordwell does: translate mind-game

complexity and narrative ambiguity 'back' into what we already know, whether it is classical story construction or capitalist corporate ideology. It assumes that it can reveal what the mind-game tries to hide, and ends up disambiguating the undecidability on the side of its ideological message.

But perhaps this is because the question: critical or celebratory, deconstructive or conformist, classical or postmodern is wrongly posed. I have been operating with a different set of terms, arguing that mind-game films mimetically enact and reflexively allegorize the material and technological conditions that make them possible. Mimesis and allegory in this context are not two diametrically opposed modes of representation, or affirmative and critical by another name, but more the two sides of the same coin, which allows the film to address and appeal to several distinct constituencies and as such another version of "access for all" while "keeping control" – control here being the hiding in plain sight or the robbery in broad daylight.

However, in the case of *Inception*, one can argue that the film's narrative architecture resembles not only a kind of tromp l'oeil perspective, in which the two-dimensionality of the screen is used for three-dimensional illusionist tricks (the Penrose stairs as the film's structural metaphor), but that there is also a parallax of another kind at work, which tempts us to look at the wrong thing or follow the wrong person, and thereby miss what is also going on. For instance, the most sustained debates surrounding *Inception* concerned the question whether the spinning top (the telltale 'totem' that was supposed to help separate reality from dream) at the end was wobbling and about to fall, or kept spinning: by cutting to black, Nolan left us 'in the dark', and thus undecided whether Cobb when reunited with his children was still in a dream, or finally back 'in the real world'. All options were debated, and plausible solutions offered for each (the spinning top is a red herring, because it is not his totem at all, but Mal's, his deceased wife, while his totem is the wedding ring, which he sometimes wears and at other times does not; the whole film is a dream, and the dream/reality divide is a red herring; etc.). These different possibilities alert us to the structuring principle of equally plausible alternatives, i.e. undecidability, but why stop there? Why not, as Todd McGowan has done, argue that Cobb is not the central figure but decentered in relation to his own 'desire', which makes Mal the film's gravitational center. Or – given the powerfully Oedipal thematics that run through the film, with Saito and Fisher senior clearly functioning as father figures – why not add the Professor (Michael Caine), Mal's father, Cobb's father-in-law and the one who lets Cobb take ownership of another of his 'daughters', Ariadne. And what if Ariadne, who is the one figuring out the role Mal still plays in Cobb's 'subcon-

scious', has been 'delegated' by the Professor to extract and incept Cobb, which is what her name suggests, as the one who holds all the threads? The Professor, having lost Mal through Cobb's recklessness, certainly has motives for wanting to 'control' Cobb. What is important is not whether this is the correct version, but merely the fact that there are several additional possibilities of how the narrative can be framed and reframed, centered and decentered, thus maintaining the story's parallax displacement and with it the possibility that a shift of angle might reveal a different view of the object.

Almost everyone writing about the film also acknowledges "*Inception* was clearly built with ambiguity in mind and that's going to make finding a final, true answer nigh-impossible."[4] However, this has not stopped critics and commentators staking their reputation on giving a definitive reading, mostly focused on how to interpret the ending, and deciding whether Cobb in the final scene is still dreaming, or awake in some more fictionally 'real' reality, where he is united with his children. By positing so openly the question of what is real and what is dream, of why dreams can feel so real, and how we can tell whether we are dreaming or not, *Inception* has also attracted its fair share of philosophers. The bait here is a problem as old as philosophy itself, going back to Plato and the parable of the Cave, it itself became the myth of origin of this sort of cinema: what if the phenomenal world we see, touch, and grasp is merely a chimera, the reflection of some ideal world of forms we can only attain through abstract concepts (or as we would now say: through mathematics)? While this debate between Socrates and Glaucon in *The Republic* about the nature of perception and knowledge has been kept alive through Descartes, Hume, Bishop Berkeley (to Hilary Putnam's 'brain in a vat' thought experiment), the neurosciences have given a new life to the possibility of either a radical disconnect between our brains and our bodies, or of a mind entirely dependent on electro-chemical impulses, in order to see or sense and thus to know anything at all. Thus, *Inception* can be seen as Platonic in its emphasis on 'ideas' but also anti-Platonic in that it treats these ideas not as guarantors of some higher truth, but as the very stuff that can be instrumentalized, manipulated, monetized. Ideas are actually referred to in the script as 'parasites' that worm themselves into the brain: more like *idées fixes* or obsessions, and thus once more close to paranoia and addiction: the Holy Grail of Hollywood today.

As a multidimensional, non-linear film, a tale told by competing narrational authorities, requiring several viewings, giving rise to mutually compatible but diametrically opposed interpretations, and offering layer upon layer of meta-cinematic reflexivity, *Inception* fulfills all the criteria of the mind-game film as

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4   'Williamb', "Inception 2nd take", https://chud.com/inception-2nd-take/.

I have laid them out in this chapter. Packed into an Oedipal story of father-son rivalry and a family melodrama of guilt, trauma and the return of the repressed, Nolan also delivers a self-presentation as candid self-exposure: 'that's how we do it, in the Hollywood film business of today; we sub-contract the best talents from all over the world, and we treat the most beautiful spots on the planet as our film sets, which when we feel like it, we blow up, foul up or fold over.' Cool confidence, detached equanimity, and irony laced with cynicism keep their balance in this 'realistic' assessment of global Hollywood.

Assertive or anxious allegorizing is nothing new to both classical and post-classical cinema, as J.D. Connor (who prefers the term 'neo-classical') has been demonstrating for the past decade and more. *Inception*, produced in conjunction with Legendary by Warner Bros., with whom Nolan forged a close relationship after the *Batman* franchise, lends itself especially well to a reading that highlights the competing centers of power and authority within global entertainment conglomerates, which in the film are identified as being in the business of dominating the world's 'energy' market, itself an apt metaphor for cinema as an affect and emotion machine. Furthermore, if filmmakers in the US – Hollywood studios and independents, separately and in relation to each other – are indeed at all levels tied into competitive-cooperative relationships, then Hollywood is best characterized by the positive/negative feedback loops that I try to capture in my formula 'access for all' while 'keeping control'. The tension inherent in this formula no doubt needs to be further elaborated in terms of the specific budgetary moves (e.g. tax credits, labor contracts, choice of locations, crews etc.), legal maneuvers and interaction with authorities, which determine the material conditions of a script ending up as the finished movie, but it provides a template for the ways the corporate-entrepreneurial power-constellation enters into the film's narrative and allegorizes the self-representation of the production companies involved, while also keeping the contending forces in balance, which – as *Inception* makes clear – means stealing from people in such a way that they believe they are freely giving.

Yet in this chapter, my main focus has been on mind-game films, and how and why they generate moments of undecidability, whose uses and function are potentially in conflict, so that undecidability itself becomes that which keeps the balance, and cinema at the tipping point. Such work of undecidability – and as I hope has been clear throughout, constructing semantic Penrose steps and structural Escher labyrinths is *work*: demanding significant dramaturgical expertise and considerable writing skills – such may well work in response to the old William Goldman adage about Hollywood: 'nobody knows anything'. What Gold-

man meant was that no-one in the motion picture business, irrespective of their position in the corporate hierarchy, their talent or their experience *knows* for certain what film is going to succeed, or indeed why those that are successful, have become so. What this implies, however, is not that it's just "dumb luck", but that there are probably too many variables for 'linear' prediction, which is indeed one way in which narrative complexity and non-linearity of the kind typical of mind-game films allegorizes the real world conditions under which films get made in the era of creative agency-led one-off package deals:

> "If every screenplay is a business plan, then every production is a dummy corporation, a virtual corporation that gives rise to and reflects the actual corporation that it is. In *Production Culture*, John Thornton Caldwell puts it like this: 'Because film and television are so capital intensive, a script also functions as a financial prospectus, a detailed investment opportunity, and a corporate proposal.' Is a star available? Is a location "fresh"? Should this movie be marketed for Christmas release? Does it have a guaranteed cable slot? How will it play across the windows of distribution? These are a film's virtual times and spaces, and as they become actual, they may also, and by that very same maneuver, be retained in their virtuality, as images and sounds, as self-allegorizations" (Connor, 2014, p. 143).

Assuming that for producers, complex narratives are a way of keeping contending economic interests, strategic objectives and managerial decisions in balance, then on the side of the audience undecidability takes the form of not being able to agree not so much *what* a film means, but on *how* it means. As such, it may be the appropriate conditions for an age of increasing (political) polarization, but also of increasing skepticism. To the *nobody knows anything* would correspond *nobody can agree on anything*, which is what mind-game films self-referentially stage rather then merely provoke.

A similar case has been made for long-running television series, such as *Game of Thrones*, which was specifically contrasted with *Lord of the Rings* on the grounds of the disagreements it was able to sustain: "What made *Game of Thrones* emblematic of its time is how it divided its audience from start to finish, right down to the matter of what a happy ending would even constitute. It gave its intense fandom multiple angles to debate as well as to enjoy. […] The most popular fantasy epics tend to focus on a quest the audience agrees on. The Ring must be destroyed, Voldemort must be defeated, Aslan must prevail. [With *Game of Thrones*] a certain amount of dissonance [was] built in to a saga

that combined the HBO sensibility — dark psychological realism and realpolitik moral ambiguity — with epic high fantasy: a genre in which, once upon a time, the only shades of gray were in the wizards' cloaks." (Poniewozik, 2019). If even fantasy genres are banking on undecidability, then the mind-game 'virus' has begun to go mainstream.

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