



Inception

Dreams, Reality, and Leaps of Faith

What's the best film of 2010 so far? Pastor James Harleman of Mars Hill Church in Seattle is torn between *The Book of Eli* and *Inception*. While both are excellent films, my mind is clear: *Inception*. And you can't just watch *Inception* once. It is too deep and complex and exciting for that. You simply have to see it again. It really helps. Be assured, this is a multi-faceted and epic film that deserves revisiting and pays back the opportunity in dividends. Inspired and iconic, it works on multiple levels to deliver superb entertainment with ideas that will tick in our heads – causing us to think.

Working from his own script, Christopher Nolan has come of age as one of today's premier directors. His earlier films were good. *Memento* played with the concept of memory in an innovative reverse plotline. *Batman Begins* rebooted this comic book hero franchise. He followed this with *The Dark Knight*, one of my favorite films, filled with morality questions. But Nolan has raised the bar here and exceeded his earlier achievements. *Inception* is on a par with *The Matrix*, a film it seems to draw from.

Nolan has described this movie as a contemporary sci-fi action thriller “set within the architecture of the mind,” and it forces us to question reality, not once or twice but four times over.

Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a specialist, an extractor. Explaining to Japanese businessman

Saito (Ken Watanabe), he asks: “What's the most resilient parasite? An idea. A single idea from the human mind can build cities. An idea can transform the world and rewrite all the rules. Which is why I have to steal it.” He extracts ideas by getting inside the dreams of his victims: “We bring the subject into that dream and fill it with their subconscious.” When his dream-architect creates a safe or lock-box, the subject will put their deep secrets “safely” inside; but Cobb

will find them and steal them.

In essence, *Inception* is a caper film with the mind as the location and dreams as the medium. Although the concept of dream-stealing is briefly explained as coming out of military R&D, the mechanism is left dark and we have to suspend our disbelief and simply go along with the story.

When Cobb's initial mission of “corporate espionage” fails, he is ready to go on the run again.

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We learn something of his background over the course of the film, but it is enough to say he is a wanted man in America, where he has left his children. His wife is dead, but she keeps showing up in his dreams to haunt him and hinder his “work.” Ready to evade his current employer, Saito makes him an offer he cannot refuse: he will, with one phone call, clear the slate and allow Cobb to go home. But in return Cobb must do the impossible: **inception**. He must plant an idea into the mind of Robert Fisher Jr. (Cillian Murphy, Scarecrow in *Batman Begins*). Fisher’s father lies dying and Saito wants his multinational empire broken up. This straw Cobb cannot refuse.

“Inception” is clearly an immoral and unethical practice. It is a little like brain-washing, but more subtle and less obvious. Cobb has to dive deep into the subject’s own mind, battling his own defense agents, to do something more profound: make him think it is his own idea and let this idea germinate and blossom on its own until it changes him from within completely.

Cobb brings together a talented team. Ariadne (*Juno*’s Ellen Page) becomes his new architect, suggested to him by his father-in-law Miles (Michael Caine). A student, yet she harbors talents in dream-making and world-creation Cobb has rarely

seen before. He flies to Africa to find Eames (Tom Hardy, in a wonderfully droll and scene-stealing role), a forger and dream world shape-shifter. Arthur (Josep Gordon-Leavitt) functions as Cobb’s right-hand man, while Yusuf (Dileep Rao) makes the potions that keep the subject, and the team, asleep.

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Indeed, in Africa, Cobb sees a room full of men literally dreaming their life away. They have swapped the actuality of life for the perceived reality of dreams, where time is elongated: one hour asleep corresponds to many hours in the dream. They return day after day to find their reality. This is akin to *The Matrix*, where humanity lies in pods, “living” in the matrix of dream-state while they are being harvested for their energy, batteries for the machines.

This forces us to consider reality and dreams. Sometimes we desire escape from real life and all its problems. Some make this happen with drugs, creating their own surreal reality with illegal chemicals. Dreams, on the other hand, are natural and unforced. As Cobb says, “they feel real when we’re in them. It’s only when we wake up then we realize that something was actually strange!” When we rely on drugs or other reality-substitutes for too long we become confused and unable to separate the real from the illusory. God has created this world and all that it contains. This is reality. Like it or not, it is what we have. There is a spiritual reality that surrounds us, but our eyes are blind to this. Only in exceptions has God opened human eyes to witness what surrounds us, as he did for Elisha and his servant, who saw the chariots of fire and the angels who were prepared to fight for him (2 Kings 6:17).

If this all sounds cerebral, it is . . . and it isn’t. *Inception* contains depth that belies its Hollywood genesis. But it also contains some marvelous action sequences and fabulous CGI scenes. The chase through the streets of the crowded African city resembles a Jason Bourne chase, complete with hand-held camera-work. A later fight between Eames and a bad guy at a hotel in zero gravity looks like something Neo would have done in *The Matrix*. The car chase and fight in New York is startling and violent, visceral and compelling.

One of the finest scenes is set in Paris, as Ariadne is learning to create worlds. Sitting with

Cobb in an outdoor cafe, she sees the world suddenly explode. This is not a typical Hollywood explosion. This is the world rupturing and coming apart in a carefully choreographed sequence with glass and tables blowing past their heads in slow motion as they sit and watch in wonder. Picking up the concept, Ariadne makes the same location suddenly defy the laws of physics as it wraps over on itself. The buildings of Paris are both beside her normally and above her upside down. Creative is an understatement!

With his team assembled, Cobb relies on Ariadne to create several dream-world mazes to put Fisher in. Going deeper and deeper into his subconscious, they descend into dreams within dreams. As the plot progresses to a score that ratchets up the suspense without relief, we need to keep multiple story lines in mind as Nolan interweaves events in separate worlds. This is *Matrix* to the max!

Steven Greydanus, in his review for *Christianity Today*, pointed out that *Inception* is an extended metaphor on the movie-making process itself, wherein Nolan and fellow directors create illusions that we, the audience, watch as if real for several hours. We immerse ourselves in the dark theater and experience, albeit vicariously, the thrills and wonders of the movie-maker’s imagination and story. We suspend disbelief if the story is good enough. But we expect a strong and meaningful conclusion. As one character in this story says, “Everyone wants catharsis” and that is true for the film’s audience as well. Which makes us expel a nervous laugh as *Inception* itself ends with a hanging question over its cathartic climax. What just happened at the end, we ask ourselves as we exit the cineplex?

Yet with each level they descend into, Mal (Marion Cotillard) appears wreaking havoc with their plans. It becomes obvious to Ariadne alone, that Cobb is harboring his own secret. And he must descend into his own dreams to face this deepest

secret, a secret that involves grief and guilt.

Whether Cobb's guilt is appropriate or not, it highlights the power of guilt. Guilt often drives us to crazy, risk-taking behavior. It did for Cobb. And it was a danger to his team. Guilt has a purpose – to drive us to God in repentance. When we ignore this and try to run from it or even to resolve it in our way, we fall prey to its dominance. Only in confessing and releasing can we find the catharsis we want and need – forgiveness (Acts 2:38). God has promised us this, but we must come to him on his terms (1 Jn. 1:9). Guilt ignored and un-forgiven leads to regret and a life unredeemed.

Interestingly, the Edith Piaf song, “Non, je ne regrette rien,” (I have no regrets) is used thematically throughout the film as a sign to the team in the dreams that they are about to be “kicked out” and kicked back to reality, or at least one level higher. Having no regrets brings Cobb back to his regret-filled life. (And further, Cotillard won an Oscar for her role as Edith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose*.)

Early in the film, an old man tells Cobb, “Dare you take a leap of faith? Or become an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone.” This idea of a leap of faith arises again, later, when Mal asks Cobb to take a leap of faith with her. *Inception* asks its character as well as its viewers to take a leap of faith into a reality that may not be what it appears.

This parallels the theological underpinnings of the Christian faith. We are asked to take a leap of faith to follow Jesus and believe in his God. When we look around us at reality, if we start to question ontological existence or the meaning of life, we begin to consider a first mover, an initial creator. But science will not prove the existence of God. We must at some point take a leap of faith. In taking this leap we do what Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard considered to be a leap to faith. We find ourselves trusting in a God we cannot see, following a man who died and rose to life. This

same man, Jesus, offers real life now, a reality we barely understood before, and a life in the future kingdom that will last for eternity (Lk. 1:33).

At the very heart of *Inception* is the premise that a single idea has the power to define someone. In planting the chosen idea in Fisher's mind, Cobb believes it can come to change him forever, creating a new person, different from who he was before, destined to do something other than he would have done apart from this one idea.

How reminiscent of Christian belief and faith?

The one idea, that Jesus came to give us life if we choose to follow him, can define a person. It can change a person completely. We saw this in the original 12 followers of Christ in the first century. Those uneducated, selfish peasants grasped this one idea and let it run like a virus within their minds and souls. They became selfless and giving, authors whose writings have been read the world over. From self-centered men to sacrificed martyrs, the gospel turned them into missionaries never seen before. It can do the same for you and me. As we allow this idea to take hold, we are changed; we become new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17). We find our whole worldview replaced with a new one. We may find for ourselves a destiny we never dreamed of, a future in a foreign land doing things we never contemplated before. The power of a single idea: *Inception*.

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