Inception

Screenplay by Christopher & Jonathan Nolan

Presentation by Daniel Cho, Noah Hong, Jay Jun, Isaac Han and Amir Greenidge
Story/Plot

Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a thief with the rare ability to enter people's dreams and steal their secrets from their subconscious. His skill has made him a hot commodity in the world of corporate espionage but has also cost him everything he loves. Cobb gets a chance at redemption when he is offered a seemingly impossible task: Plant an idea in someone's mind. If he succeeds, it will be the perfect crime, but a dangerous enemy anticipates Cobb's every move.
Motivation/Cause and Effect

Nolan uses slow motion throughout the film, especially when Yusuf drives the car off the bridge; this is because time runs much slower in reality compared to when in the latter levels of the dream.

We can see a cause and effect notion throughout the film, Cobb uses inception on Mal > Mal kills herself and frames Cobb > Cobb on the run > Will he ever go back home?

Another way the film shows cause and effect is when the team goes deeper into the dreams, what happens in the layer above affects the layers below it.
Plot Chart

Reality - .5 secs
Level 3 - 1 h
Level 1 - 10 secs
Level 2 - 3 minutes
Limbo - 20 hours
Time Explanation Clip

0.51.58 - 0.52.33
“The kick” Explanation
Clip
0.52.34 - 0.53.22
Synchronized Kick Clip

2.11.10 - 2.12.47
Diegetic Elements

A very important diegetic element in the movie is the song that the team uses to synchronize the kicks; the time dilation of each subsequent level of dreams stretches the song's tempo, which is how the team is able to synchronize the kicks. Édith Piaf’s “Non, Je ne regrette rien” was the chosen by Nolan because its lyrics explores one’s psychological effect of memory, how destructive it can be to one's subconscious when he/she does is not able to let something of value go
Song Explanation

The song goes, “Ni le bien qu'on m'a fait Ni le mal” [I regret neither the good things done to me nor the bad things], and the last word on the excerpt, “mal”, means evil/bad in several different languages. Mal just so happens to be the name of Cobb’s wife, a painful memory that aims to destroy his subconscious. Nolan also timed the whole featured film to be 2h 28m, which is a dilated synchronization of the song, which is 2m 28s.
Édith Piaf’s “Non, Je ne regrette rien”
Non-diegetic Elements

The non-diegetic elements of the film are mainly the score by Hans Zimmer. One of Zimmer’s score is a slower version of the aforementioned “Non, Je ne regrette rien”
Hans Zimmer’s score comparison to “Non, Je ne regrette rien”

This is the musical cue that pretty much everyone recognizes
Opening Clip

0.00.00 - 0.00.42
The film starts with dramatic, strong based music which builds tension and confusion for the viewers. The use of non-diegetic sounds is used in the background to help set the scene.
Central character

Dom Cobb is the main character/protagonist of Inception. However, Fischer is the main character of Inception’s subplot.
Developing Characters

Cobb is a developing character, because film builds up to when Cobb has to choose to let go of Mal, which he is able to. Ariadne was propelled by hero intellectual curiosity which made her unable to pull herself away from such a unique opportunity. Fischer is also a developing character because he leads himself to an emotional catharsis, changing how he views his relationship with his father.
Dominick Cobb

Dominick "Dom" Cobb is the main protagonist of the film, *Inception*. Cobb is well known in the black market because of his level of expertise in the field of extraction, which consists of stealing his mark's ideas by infiltrating their dreams and stealing valuable information from them. Wanted as a fugitive for being falsely implicated for the death of his wife, Mal, Cobb is unable to return to his home. As a totem, he uses a spinning top that was once owned by Mal.
Dominick Cobb [continued]

Nolan named him after the thief in his first feature film, Following [1998], and an American architect Henry N. Cobb; which makes sense since Cobb was a thief who used architecture in order to steal information in dreams.
Saito

Mr. Saito is an immensely powerful and wealthy business magnate, and is the head of Proclus Global. He offers Cobb a job for a valuable reward; to clear Cobb of his charges and to allow him to return home to America and his children. In the film, Eames given him the nickname of "The Tourist" because he has no specific expertise but yet is still able to use his financial influence to join Cobb's extraction team.
Arthur

Arthur is Dominick Cobb's right-hand man. Although Cobb is the master planner, Arthur takes care of the details, does the research, and makes sure everything is right. Sharing dreams is not just a job for him; he finds his work fascinating and his Totem is a red loaded die.
Ariadne

Ariadne is a graduate student at the École d'Architecture in Paris. She was contacted by Dom Cobb for a specific job: to design three complete dream layer mazes on the Fischer inception job. Although the job was dangerous, Ariadne was propelled by her intellectual curiosity which made her unable to pull herself away from such a unique opportunity. Her Totem is a slightly hollowed out bishop chess piece. Her name alludes to Greek mythology the princess daughter of King Minos, who aided Theseus by helping him navigate the labyrinth and avoid the Minotaur, just like Ariadne in Inception created and helped Cobb navigate through them to escape Mal.
Eames

Eames is an essential part of the secrecy and deceit within the dream world. Eames can project the image of anyone, essentially forging an identity as a literal physical manifestation. Combined with his ability to mirror other people's mannerisms and behaviors, he is a very capable doppelganger. This skill comes in handy, and can help convince another person that whomever team needs him to be in order to aid their deception. Eames' totem is a poker chip.
Yusuf

Yusuf is the team member who formulates the drugs, including his own brand of Somnacin, needed to enter the dream world. To allow the dreamers to enter the multi-level dream of the Fischer inception job he combines his drugs with a powerful sedative that keeps them "under", while still keeping the dream worlds somewhat stable. Only a falling sensation is able to wake the dreamers from the dream state while under the influence of these drugs. Yusef is the Arabic form of the name Joseph, who was a dream interpreter from the book of Genesis.
Robert Fischer

Robert Michael Fischer is the target of the job offered to Cobb and his team by Saito. His father, Maurice Fischer, is on his deathbed, leaving Robert as the heir to his multi-billion dollar empire. Despite his vast wealth, Robert is riddled with all sorts of insecurities, as one might expect of someone who has lived his entire life in the shadow of a hugely powerful individual. Key among those insecurities is the fear of not living up to his father's standards, an insecurity which allows Dom the opportunity for Inception.
Mallorie Cobb

Mallorie "Mal" Cobb (née Miles) was Dominick Cobb's wife, and his mental projection of her is the main antagonist of *Inception*. She is the daughter of Stephen Miles. Like mentioned before, her nickname “Mal” means bad in many different languages, which reflects the fact that she is a painful memory that aims to destroy Cobb’s subconscious. Nolan deliberately designed Mal to be the essence of the femme fatale, a character trope from film noir.
Name Reference

If you take the first letter of each character of the film, it spells out “Dreams” [if Ariadne, Yusef, and Peter excluded], “Dreams Pay” [including all of them].
Totems

A Totem is an object that is used to test if oneself is in one's own reality (dream or non-dream) and not in another person's dream. A totem has a specially modified quality (such as a distinct weight, balance, or feel) in the real world, but in a dream of someone who does not know it well, the characteristics of the totem will very likely be off. Any ordinary object which has been in some way modified to affect its balance, weight, or feel will work as a totem. In order to protect its integrity, only the totem's owner should ever handle it. In that way, the owner is able to tell whether or not they are in someone else's dream. In the owner's own dream world, the totem will feel correct.
Totems [continued]

A totem is often a symbol of the character that holds it. When Arthur’s totem, a loaded die which always lands on 5, is a symbol of Arthur himself; this is because Arthur is the 5th member of the team in terms of how deep they go, and when the hotel rolls Arthur tumbles like a loaded die would, but he always keeps his center of gravity. Similarly, Eames’ totem is a poker chip with “Mombasa” spelt incorrectly, characterizing him as a risk taker and mimic. He also bets on unlucky #13 because he thrives under chaos.
Depth vs. Range

The movie informs the viewers of its world through not so subtle exposition in dialogues. Up until the audience is introduced to Ariadne, what the audience knows is restrictive to dialogue between characters. After the audience is introduced to Ariadne, new information gained is always through/has the involvement of Ariadne, and the audience can see themselves in Ariadne since she is also new to this world.
Depth vs. Range [continued]

For instance, in Ariadne’s training with Cobb we don’t realize that they were dreaming until Ariadne realizes that she is dreaming.
Ariadne Training Clip
0.25.46 - 0.28.21
Subplot

The subplot of the film is Fischer’s journey to his own emotional catharsis. It all starts when Fischer is threatened by Cobb and spurs out the combination, which will be reinforced throughout the layers. On the 2nd dream layer the number is reinforced by being the phone number that Eames disguised as a woman leaves, the hotel room numbers, and on the 3rd dream layer the number is the actual code to the vault. This gives him a sense of self-accomplishment when in reality it was all planned by Cobb and his team to drive him to his emotional catharsis.
The MacGuffin in this movie is not a character, but the combination of numbers that Fischer spurs out when threatened by Cobb. This plays part in the sub narrative, it drives Fisher to his deeper realization.
The theme of the movie is that our reality is built by our own choices, as seen with Cobb as he believes that his reality influenced by external factors. On the final moments of the film, Mal states “You don’t believe in one reality anymore, so choose”, which suggests that the theme is that the human cannot rely on external objectivity to determine reality, but we are able to choose the world we want to live in; truth does not come from the walls around you, it comes from the loved ones around you.
Inception itself is an illusory magic trick, the audience thinks it is about Fisher’s catharsis when in reality it was all planned. Cobb confronting his darkness, Mal, is the true catharsis of Inception.
Symbolisms

According to Carl Young, water is a symbol of the subconscious, as water by nature deconstruct things but it also connects to a vast shared network of other waters, like how our subconscious is a collective ocean of ideas. The first scene of the movie is Cobb washed up on a shore, and Cobb is constantly hit with water throughout the movie to represent his mental state.
Symbolisms [continued]

Mazes play a big role in Inception, in various Greek myths a maze represents a journey of one’s own enlightenment, and to navigate the maze is to confront your darkness; and according to Marie-Louise von Franz, mazes are symbols of the subconscious mind with the winding paths and dead ends reflect our wandering thoughts. This maze concept was also utilized by Kubrick in one of his feature films, “The Shining.”
Repetition

Repetition is key in Inception, as 20 53 is a recurring number throughout the movie, 20 was the last number of Saito’s safe combination in the first scene, it was the number of the taxi that Cobb bumped into, 20 is also the first number of Mal’s safe combination. The reverse of 20 53 is also present in the film, it was the room number of the hotel that Mal committed suicide in, and it is on the train that passes through the 1st layer of the dream. This is because Cobb reversed Mal’s perception of reality, she gets back at him by reversing this meaningful number.
Metaphor

The movie itself is designed to feel like a dream, as Nolan casted dreams and the dreambuilding process as a metaphor for films and the filmmaking process; DiCaprio as a younger Cobb looks very similar to Nolan himself. If in Inception Cobb is a dreambuilder trying to go back to his children, in the real world Nolan would be a home-sick director losing himself in and out of dream world that he creates, movies after movies of extracting riches from the audiences until he finds one last job to “incept” meaning into his audience’s minds that would allow him to see his kids again.
If Cobb is the director/writer of the movie, then Arthur would be the producer of Cobb's art; the one figuring out the nuts and bolts of the idea to execute the vision. Saito would represent the executive producer/head financier, Cobb and Arthur’s pitch to Saito about protecting him could be compared to a director and producer pitch to a executive producer/head financier. Ariadne would be the production designer, the artist who conceives the visual aesthetic and language of the movie.
When Cobb is explaining how dream sharing works, he draws a diagram of the cycle of creation vs. perception in our mind and how they get in between that process, which is visualized by a line. This line represents the movie screen, a projection of a simulated reality for the mind to perceive. Similar to what Cobb points out about dreams, movies often begin in a middle of the action. Eames would be the actor, he is ego-centric but also the one in the group with the most understanding of human psychology, similar to how an actor would be able to invigorate and find the truth of a hollow scene, Eames is able to discover Fisher’s complex family issues.
Metaphor [continued]

Yusef would be the technician, like the director photography, lighting director, VFX artist, the one applying science to produce the most vivid imagery and the widest bandwidth which the rest of the team operates in. Robert Fischer would represent the audience. When the team is brainstorming on how to trigger carthosis in Fischer, it mirrors a Hollywood writers room trying to break a story. Each layer of a dream is a different cinematic theme, based on 3 of Nolan’s biggest influences. Eames’ dream is an homage to “007: On Her Majesty’s Secret Service”, Arthur’s dream is a hotel maze like the Overlook Hotel in “The Shining”, and Yusef’s dream is a reference to “Heat.”
Voyeuristic

The world that the film presents is believable because there are no supernatural factors, only technological, which is believable because our society is technologically advancing at a fast rate. Christopher Nolan also keeps the movie believable by insisting in real world practicality.
Visceral

The film grabs the audience’s attention by building suspense, the film makes the audience question if Cobb and his team will be able to complete their mission and if Cobb will truly be able to see his children again. The audience also experiences shock as the Cobb reveals that he incepted Mal. In the end the audience feels confused on whether what they saw was a dream or reality.
The audience is mainly emotionally involved with Cobb due to his situation, the film develops the character Cobb in way that the audience is able to sympathize with him. The viewers are cheering for him to see his kids throughout the movie.
Verisimilitude

The quality of the film and the scenes make the film seem like it can happen in the real world, as there are no supernatural factors only technological ones. The unrealistic shots of the film are justified by the fact that they are in a dream, since anything can happen in dreams it makes it believable for the audience.
Ending Clip
2.19.35 - 2.20.54
Ending

So was it a dream or was it reality? Most would say that it was not a dream, this is because we see throughout the movie that he only has his wedding ring when he goes under or on flashbacks of when Mal was still alive, and in the ending scene Cobb was not wearing his wedding ring. This implies that Cobb’s original totem was his wedding ring. However, it is good to note that it was a clear intention by the director to leave the ending open to interpretation, so there are no right answers.
Is it a good movie?

Yes, Inception is a good movie. This is due to the combination of different elements such as the ending, story building, and suspense all come together to create an intriguing story that is worth rewatching several times to fully understand the work by Nolan.
Thank you for listening