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"Downwards is the Only Way Forwards": Layered Dreamscapes and Metafictional Allegories in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

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1. Introduction

Inception, a film written and directed by Christopher Nolan and released in 2010, has been situated within the genre of puzzle films, a genre characterised by its use of complex storytelling techniques (Buckland 1). This genre flourished during the 1990s as a consequence of different crises, technological advances and psychoanalytic concerns. In this context, Christopher Nolan began his filmmaking career: his film *Memento* (2000) quickly became one of the most important models of the puzzle film genre and displayed the themes and narrative techniques that would characterise his later work.

Since its release, *Inception* has been considered a prototype of this genre, and has been, despite its complexity, well received by audiences and critics alike. The film follows the life of Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), a professional spy. After accepting a job involving the "inception" of business tycoon Robert Fischer Jr. (Cillian Murphy), Cobb and his right-hand man Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) assemble a team of people with different skills that will allow them to enter Fischer's subconscious and convince him to dissolve his father's empire. The team dives three levels deep into Fischer's subconscious, which leads to the severe distortion of space and time and the endangerment of their mission. *Inception* revolves around the construction of layered dreamscapes and the distortion of space and time this entails, which establishes the film as a modular narrative.

In this dissertation, I am going to explore the main themes and storytelling techniques used by Christopher Nolan in this film, which can be extrapolated both to Nolan's career and to the puzzle film genre. By using specific scenes as examples of the concepts under analysis, I also aim to take a closer look at the significance of *Inception*'s allegory of filmmaking, the visual representation of modularity and

spatiotemporal distortion, and the contribution that traumatised protagonists make to the film's complexity.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Fragmentation of Society and the Rise of Puzzle Films

Christopher Nolan's seventh feature film, *Inception*, belongs to a prolific genre that rose during the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. Film scholar Warren Buckland (2009) coined the term "puzzle films" to refer to a group of films characterised by their complexity and innovation in narrative and formal terms. Puzzle films are the product of a period in which society was starting to be perceived as being increasingly fragmented and in which, as a result, concerns were shifting towards issues of identity, subjectivity and psychology.

The growing uncertainty caused by the political, economic and social crises at the beginning of the twenty-first century led to the questioning of the dominant values that had governed society so far. In her analysis and contextualisation of Nolan's cinema, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (2015) describes this period as one characterised by a "cultural spin," that is, a change of worldview, and claims that this phenomenon is noticeable in different cultural products (147). The overall uneasiness of this period started to be incorporated in film narratives, with examples like *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *Memento*.

Puzzle films present the aforementioned complexity in different, original ways, but their common denominator is the intricate plots and a break from the storytelling developed in classical cinema. As Buckland (2009) explains, "[a] puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*" (emphasis in original, 3). This is achieved by means of various techniques, such as the rupture of the chronological order, the blurring of the limits between reality and imagination or the use

of protagonists who are psychologically disturbed, thus challenging the audiences' expectations "because certain crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented" (Elsaesser 14). Consequently, the role of spectators is a more active one, since they are forced to make sense of all the pieces that constitute these puzzle narratives.

This trend that flourished during the late 1990s continued its prolific journey during the 2000s. The 9/11 attacks brought about another wave of films that displayed the anxieties regarding terrorism, surveillance and patriotism (Joy 4), such as Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The puzzle film genre incorporated these themes and further explored the fragmentation, vulnerability and ethical ambivalence of society, which were reflected in the narrative techniques of fragmentation and temporal dislocation (Ní Fhlainn 147). We can situate Christopher Nolan in this context, as he began his filmmaking career at the end of the 1990s and has been experimenting with film form since then in order to explore his own concerns and those of his time.

2.2. Christopher Nolan: The Master of Puzzling Audiences

Christopher Nolan has undeniably been one of the biggest contributors to the tradition of puzzle films for the past two decades. The British-American director, born in Westminster (London) in 1970, studied English literature while his devotion for the art of filmmaking grew incessantly. From the very beginning of his career, he has proven a deep awareness of the creative possibilities that narrative structure provides without the need to undermine the audiences' immersion (Olson 44). His second feature film, *Memento*, has become the archetypal puzzle film, since it impeccably portrays the fragmented mind of its protagonist, a man who suffers from anterograde amnesia. The

film presents a deeply convoluted narrative by beginning at the very end of the story and working its way back.

Memento is the film that turned Nolan into a promising figure in the film industry and it is an early exploration of the themes that he would take up in his following works. His interest in identity issues is present in *The Prestige* (2006), where it is linked to deception and the figure of the magician (Olson 48): its final plot twist reveals that Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) had a twin brother, which allowed them to manipulate their rival Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman). The Batman trilogy could also be included in this category of films that deal with identity because, apart from dealing with post-9/11 trauma, the films narrate the double life of Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) both as a well-known millionaire and as Batman, the anonymous protector of Gotham City. The commercial and critical success of this trilogy, particularly of *The Dark Knight*, has granted Nolan the privilege of working for major studios without having to give up his vision (Joy 2). This popularity has enabled him to further exploit his long-time concerns, especially the manipulation of space and time, which is a central motif not only in *Inception* but also in later works like *Interstellar* (2014) and the soon-to-be-released *Tenet* (2020). As a consequence, he has been labelled as a Hollywood *auteur*, which means that his renown in mainstream Hollywood goes hand in hand with his personal way of storytelling.

3. *Inception*: Layers upon Layers

One of the central themes in Nolan's works is that of dreams and their relation to reality. The connection between films and dreams has been recurrent in the fields of psychology, film and even sociology for decades (Rascaroli 2), and this connection had been intriguing Nolan since he was a student. As mentioned above, the cultural spin of the time led people to question the nature of reality (Ní Fhlainn 147), and Nolan added yet another layer of complexity to his films with his exploration of the subconscious. It is in *Inception* where this interest becomes particularly evident.

The film revolves around a group of thieves led by Dominick "Dom" Cobb, an expert at extracting information by entering a target's subconscious. However, in this particular mission, he and his team are not extracting or stealing ideas but trying to insert them into the target. This process is known as "inception," and it consists in planting an idea while the subjects are dreaming so that said idea remains in their subconscious once they wake up. The film, as Nolan explains in an interview for Tribute Movies (2010), had been taking shape in his mind for around a decade, fostered by his aim to portray "a dream that you could believe in its reality." Jonathan R. Olson argues that the suspension of disbelief is at the heart of *Inception*, thus drawing a clear comparison between dreams and films (52). *Inception*, both a puzzle film and his personal take on the heist film genre, is a balanced unification of Nolan's interest in the subconscious and his unique approach to narrative form: the subconscious is divided into several levels and Nolan is able to visually portray their connection by playing with the distortion of the spatiotemporal relationship as the protagonists go deeper into the target's mind. Thus, space, time, dreams and layers are all interwoven and form what is known as a modular narrative.

Modular narratives can be considered a type of puzzle films which are focused on the manipulation of time, a concept that has been thoroughly developed by Allan Cameron in his book *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (2008). Cameron describes these types of films as able to "articulate a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation" (1), and draws attention to the fact that audiences can enjoy both the story itself and "the technical craft through which the story is conveyed" (22). As I will attempt to prove in the analysis below, *Inception* presents all these features in a metafictional manner, since it conceptualises time and relates its manipulation and/or distortion to the subconscious and the space within each dream level.

3.1. An Allegory of Filmmaking

Jonathan R. Olson (2015) claims that *Inception* is, along with *The Prestige*, Nolan's clearest example of an allegory of filmmaking (44), since the idea of planting ideas in someone's subconscious resembles the way in which films try to make us believe in their realities. *Inception* undoubtedly is a challenging film, and its metafictional nature is part of the extended allegory of filmmaking. The protagonist tries to plant ideas in his targets' subconscious just as Christopher Nolan fills our minds with extraordinary images and stories. In fact, many have noticed a striking physical resemblance between

Figure 1. The physical resemblance between DiCaprio's character and Nolan reinforces the similarity between the role that both of them perform. (Photographer: Melissa Moseley/Warner Bros.)

DiCaprio's character and Nolan himself (Figure 1), which reinforces the role of Cobb as "director" in this metafictional allegory. DiCaprio even admits he tried to bring Nolan's personal vision into Cobb by collaborating with him throughout the whole process. DiCaprio also confirms that Nolan wanted "to make sure that the audience believed that they were in that world too" (Film4). This idea of "selling" the reality of the world of *Inception* is what turns Dom Cobb into Nolan's alter ego in the film (Olson 47).

For the inception to be successful, the team's work must be invisible, which means that Fischer must not realise that his subconscious is being manipulated. He must believe that the idea of dismantling his father's business empire is his own decision, not one that stems from the scheme of spies. This demands the design and construction of several layers, because the deeper they dive into his mind, the more believable it will be. This process brings to mind the craft of filmmaking. The audience is personified in Robert Fischer, who embodies the viewers' suspension of disbelief, crucial both for Cobb's inception and for Nolan's film to succeed. Like Fischer, we are manipulated from the very beginning of the film, at first without our knowledge (Panek 79). The film opens precisely inside Saito's (Ken Watanabe) dream, inside a Japanese castle, with Cobb and Arthur trying to earn his trust in order to get information from him. However, through crosscutting we get shots of Cobb, Saito and Arthur sedated in a different apartment, which disorients the viewers because we do not know when and where these scenes are taking place. When Saito declares that he knows he is dreaming, the dream collapses and they all wake up in the apartment. The audience realises at this point that the previous scene was just a dream.

The allegory of filmmaking becomes even stronger when, in the apartment, Saito states that he let Cobb and Arthur enter his dream because he wants to hire them and refers to it as an "audition." We now think this is the real world, but we soon find

out that they are yet within another dream. The film warns us, in this way, that we cannot trust the limits of reality and illusion, and that we must remain alert, for the film is willing to deceive us. Saito's "audition" grows into the master plan to destroy Fischer Morrow, Saito's biggest business competitor, and he becomes the one who provides the team with anything they need. He is also the only person who can arrange Cobb's return to his children in the United States. All this leads us to interpret his role as that of the studio head or the executive producer: he funds the heist and is characterised by his determination to destroy his competition.

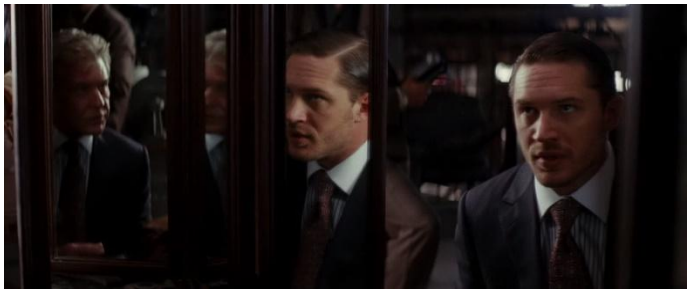
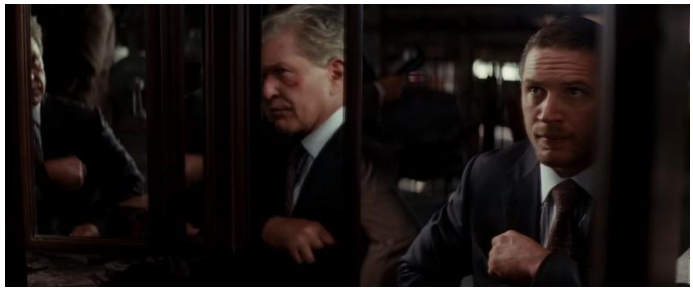
Every person involved in Fischer's inception fulfils an essential film-related role: Arthur embodies the figure of the film producer, as he coordinates most of the plan and makes sure everyone is familiarised with all the structures and concepts involved in it. However, I would argue that the most crucial members, and the ones whose counterparts in the film industry are more evident, are Eames (Tom Hardy) and Ariadne (Ellen Page): the former represents the actor and the latter stands for the production designer (Olson 51). Fischer's deception depends mainly on them because Eames impersonates other people within the dreams and Ariadne is in charge of designing and building the dream worlds—which Cobb describes as "mazes"—and of making them as realistic as possible.

Eames is a skilled, charming impersonator, and his character's analysis is essential in order to fully understand *Inception*'s allegory. Also referred to as "the Forger," Eames is able to adopt the identity and even the physical appearance of whomever he desires. A reason why his role is so important is that, during his first meeting with Cobb, he is the one who suggests using Fischer's turbulent relationship with his father Maurice (Pete Postlethwaite) as the main force driving Fischer's inception (Nolan 75). At this point, the emotional element of the multi-layered narrative

begins to work together with the more technical aspects of the heist (Russo 95). However, Eames quickly realises that Fischer's godfather, Peter Browning (Tom Berenger), also holds great power within the company and has a very close connection with Fischer. Eames decides to exploit their relationship as well by studying, like an actor, Browning's mannerisms. His ultimate goal is to "become" Browning and to undermine Fischer's trust, eventually leading him to think that his father wanted him to dissolve their empire. Thus, Eames resorts to the actors' technique of using emotions and memories in order to tap into Fischer's—and the audience's—subconscious and, therefore, to emotionally engage him (and us).

Once the team has already entered the first dream layer, they set out to kidnap Fischer. After several setbacks caused by Fischer's militarised subconscious, they take him to an abandoned building and Eames begins his "performance." In what Olson describes as "the most theatrical allusion in the film" (50), we see Eames getting ready in front of several mirrors, the symbol for alter egos and fragmented identities par excellence (Figures 2 and 3). His reflection shows us actor Tom Hardy playing Eames himself, but every time we get back to him after the cuts to Cobb's face, we notice that the mirrors show the image of Browning, played by actor Tom Berenger, thus representing how Eames is quickly forging his performative identity. In the last cut to Eames, he has already adopted Browning's voice and body and starts screaming so as to make Fischer believe he has been kidnapped as well. This scene is a very meaningful one, as it encapsulates many of the recurrent elements in Nolan's films, synthesizing the fragmentation of identity. It could even be argued that Eames is another modular figure in himself because there are many layers that define this character. Tom Hardy, the real actor, must adopt Eames' identity, and this identity is that of someone who forges different identities: another actor. Thus, we encounter a performance within a

performance that simultaneously combines the performances of Hardy and Berenger, culminating when we see Hardy's character being performed by Berenger.

Figures 2 and 3. Eames through the looking glass: With each new shot, another mirror showcases Browning instead of Eames.

The second layer takes place in a hotel inside Arthur's dream. Just as in the layer above, Eames embodies Browning, and the team leads Fischer to think that they are going to enter his godfather's subconscious. At the very end of the film, when the kicks have already taken place and Browning-played-by-Eames and Fischer are sitting on the river bank, Fischer announces that he is going to dissolve Fischer Morrow, and the camera is placed in a way that makes Fischer cover Browning's body (Figure 4). Then, the camera circles around him and we can see Eames resurface not as Browning but as himself (Figure 5), which symbolises that he no longer needs to impersonate Browning because his job is done. Thus, the viewers see from the outside how Fischer is deceived and psychologically manipulated by Eames' skilful performance. In the end, *Inception* blurs the limits between actor and character and plays with the actors' role as professional impersonators with modular identities.


Figures 4 and 5. Eames puts an end to his performance by disposing of Browning's appearance.

As stated above, the other member I believe to be essential in the heist is Ariadne, also known as "the Architect." There have been many interpretations regarding her role in the allegory. Olson claims that she represents the production designer and that it would be inaccurate to consider her as the screenwriter, since the final script is the result of the collaboration between the director and the actors, both in the allegory and in the actual film (51). However, it could be argued that when Ariadne is introduced, she somehow represents the audience as well (Panek 85), because Cobb explains the mechanism of dream construction to her at the same time we find out about it. There is a point in Cobb's explanation where the deception of the film's beginning is repeated: we see Ariadne and Cobb sitting on a café terrace in Paris (Figure 6). Cobb is talking about dreams and about how we never remember the moment a dream starts. When he asks Ariadne how they got to the café, she tries to give him an answer, but she realises that they are in a dream and the Parisian street starts to explode and collapse. This proves that modularity is presented without warning once again (Panek 79), and we, like Ariadne, have been manipulated.

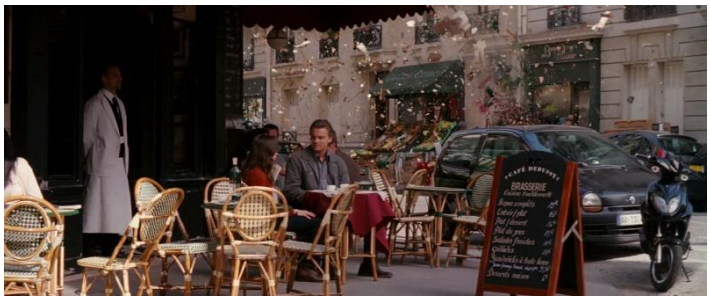


Figure 6. We see the streets collapsing in slow motion while Cobb and Ariadne stay still.

Once Ariadne becomes acquainted with the functioning of dreams, and learns to manipulate and play with spaces, Cobb entrusts her with the construction of the dream layers for Fischer's inception. Her skills as an Architecture student, combined with her broad-mindedness, make her perfect for the job, and she is able to help Cobb deal with his traumatic memories in a way no other team member can. When Fischer's inception begins and we are presented with the different layers, we witness the unfolding of

locations meticulously built down to every detail. Despite the distortion that the manipulation of the subconscious entails, *Inception*'s spaces seem and feel real, which represents how the work of a production designer, along with teamwork, is essential for the credibility of a film.

3.2. Dynamism and Modularity: The Art of Layers

Inception is Christopher Nolan's way of pushing the limits of traditional representations of space and time in film narratives, and this is connected to the concept of modularity. Allan Cameron explains that there are different ways in which a modular narrative can be constructed, such as fragmentation or distortion of traditional storytelling techniques (4). One of the elements driving *Inception*'s story forward is precisely the organization of the plot into different dream layers. In each layer, Cobb and his team become subject to a different spatial and temporal distortion.

According to Cameron and Misek, these layers present two different movements: horizontality and verticality (114). The horizontal movement limits itself to the timeline within each level. In each of them, time passes at different speeds and the protagonists have to slowly insert the idea of giving up his father's fortune into Fischer's mind. However, it would be too risky to perform the inception in the first dream level, since it is too close to reality and the targets could find out they are dreaming, which is why Cobb and his team must dive deeper into the subconscious in order to make their work completely seamless (Russo 94). This idea of "diving deeper" is what links horizontality with verticality: the images of descent are recurrent in the film and the distortion of time and space becomes more powerful as the team gets further away from reality. Cameron and Misek also state that each of *Inception*'s levels, including the reality level, is a module which has an autonomous timeline (109), but this

autonomy is not complete because they are all connected to each other through the distortion of time—a few minutes in the surface level amount to years in the deepest levels—and space—whatever happens in a level is manifested in those below it—.Thus, modularity in *Inception* entails said distortion as well as changes between layers, both of which are presented to the audience through cinematography and editing.

As Panek states, modularity is introduced to us in an unexpected way, since the film begins two layers deep into Saito's mind. This can disorient the audience to some extent, but he also argues that, by doing so, Nolan is able to keep the audience engaged despite the demanding plot structure (79-80). Nolan reiterates that he was particularly interested in how we create the spaces in our dreams as we perceive them (Tribute Movies), and *Inception* explores this when Cobb tells Ariadne that "we create and perceive our world simultaneously." This is connected to Cameron and Misek's essay, in which they argue that in *Inception*, spaces are constantly transforming themselves and, as a consequence, the film achieves dynamism (113).

For this reason, cinematography plays a crucial role both within Ariadne's diegetic design and as part of *Inception*'s own nested narrative. Wally Pfister, *Inception*'s cinematographer and long-time collaborator of Nolan, states that he felt he had to make sure the cinematography guided the audience (Pavlus 2010). This shows Pfister's awareness of how modularity, if combined with distinguishable colour palettes and a distinct mise-en-scène, can be more accessible. The second hour of the film begins with the team boarding the same flight as Fischer. After Cobb gives Fischer the

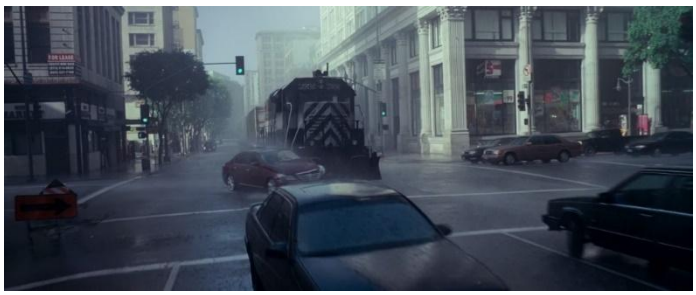


Figure 7. The colour palette in the first dream layer displays a muted, neutral space.

sedative and he falls asleep in the plane, the team members are connected to a machine and sedated by a flight attendant, thus starting the first dream layer: a rainy day in L.A. For this layer, Pfister chose a colour palette with metallic greys and blues that blends with the rainy setting (Figure 7).

Once Cobb and his team have kidnapped Fischer, Yusuf (Dileep Rao) drives the van while the rest enter the second dream layer. This layer takes place in a hotel for which Pfister used warm browns and oranges, a palette opposite to that of the layer above. At this point we must revisit Cameron and Misek's concept of verticality because it is what links all the layers: this means that the space-time distortion in a layer will always depend on the stability of those above (115). Instead of distorting the second layer and letting viewers assume something is happening above, Nolan decides to use crosscutting so as to tie the layers together and show the source of the disruption. We get several cuts to the van, which is now veering around the rainy streets of L.A while being chased by Fischer's security. The van's abrupt movements act directly upon the hotel layer, where lamps lean and rain starts to fall inside the building. However, the scene that best displays the spatial distortion of the film, and which has become one of the most acclaimed scenes of the last decade, is Arthur's fight with Fischer's security in a gravity-less hotel hallway.

Arthur is the person who stays behind in the hotel's layer while the rest of the team, accompanied by Fischer, dive into the snow fortress of the third layer. Arthur must guard the hotel room where everybody is sedated, but Fischer's security finds him. Meanwhile, in the first layer, the van rolls down a hill as Yusuf escapes security. This creates a chain reaction that first leads to the loss of gravity in the hotel (Figures 8 and 9) and, when Yusuf drives the van off a bridge, it prompts an avalanche in the snow fortress. Arthur is suddenly thrown across the hallway, which not only loses gravity but

also spins. The scene acquires even more strength with the cuts to the first layer as we see the van falling in slow motion, since it brings together the spatial distortion and the temporal one. If crosscutting is Nolan's preferred technique for conveying simultaneity and spatial connection between layers, slow motion is the technique Nolan uses in order to visually represent the temporal distortion that makes time stretch in the deeper levels (Cameron and Misek 118).


Figures 8 and 9. The hotel becomes subject to the gravity loss of the first dream layer.

As I have already argued, Nolan is mainly concerned with realistic settings despite the impossible nature of a spinning hallway from the point of view of physics. The hotel scene posed a serious challenge in logistic terms, since using a green screen or CGI was off the table for Nolan. Both Pfister and Nolan are known for their preference towards practicality, and figuring out how to make a rotating hallway—which is a product of subconscious distortion—look as convincing as possible was a process that took months to prepare. Nolan has claimed he drew inspiration from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and, with the help of special effects supervisors, engineers and production designers, they built the infrastructure from scratch. Pfister confesses that camera placement became one of the biggest challenges, and the production designer eventually created a pattern in the carpet that hid the camera track without the need to resort to CGI (Pavlus).

The modularity is extended even further in the third layer: the snow fortress in Robert Fischer's own subconscious. Regarding the colour scheme for this layer, Pfister

built a cold setting with a predominance of white, which creates a great contrast with the metallic blue and warm oranges of the layers above. Again through crosscutting, viewers can still see the van falling in the first layer and Arthur preparing the kick in the hotel's elevator in the second one, thus heightening the tension as we become aware of how little time the team has left in order to complete the inception and synchronise the kicks that will make them wake up in the real world. This editing choice also highlights the relativity of time and brings viewers back to the concept of modularity because it succeeds in making the connection between layers as explicit as possible.

Despite the threat that Fischer's security and Cobb's subconscious poses, Fischer eventually arrives at the vault where the mental projection of his own father is. For this room, Pfister designed a space that completely breaks away from its layer's colour palette: it is a futuristic room with highly saturated black walls and white lights (Figure 10). It is a hidden place where Fischer's relationship with his father is located, as if it were a remote corner of his mind. Next to the hospital bed where Maurice is minutes away from dying, there is a small black safe in which Cobb and his team have planted the final and decisive part of the inception. Even though it is not another dream layer, the safe is also part of the film's modularity because it contains Fischer's projections manipulated by the team: the information that determines whether Fischer fulfils his father's wish or rebels against it is inside it.

Figure 10. Pfister wanted to make viewers feel as if the room did not belong to its natural surroundings.

Fischer uses the combination that Eames has been drawing his attention to in the other layers and finds Maurice's modified will inside the safe, along with a paper pinwheel that seems to be emotionally charged for him. His realisation that his father truly cared for him leads him to decide in favour of the dissolution of their empire, and with one last look at Fischer, Eames blows up the snow fortress at the same time as Arthur blows up the elevator with the sedated team inside it and the van hits the water in the upper layers. At this point, the crosscutting editing becomes more frantic than before: we get more cuts to all the layers as the modules close and Cobb's team "climbs up" the layers until they finally wake up in the plane, the supposedly real world.

Inception's modularity conforms to Allan Cameron's description of these narratives as able to portray time as a tangible part of the story that can be stretched, distorted or fragmented (1). Nolan goes even further by incorporating the complexity of the subconscious and using layers as a visual metaphor for this modularity. Each layer has its own complexities, its own spatial-temporal rules that affect those below it. Thanks to Pfister's creation of distinctive colour palettes, to Nolan's practicality and to an editing that constantly emphasises the layers' interconnection and dynamism, *Inception* becomes easier to follow without losing the intricacy that lies at its core.

3.3. Cobb's Trauma and Inception's Emotional Component

The importance of modularity coexists with a strong emotional, even psychoanalytic component in *Inception*, and they merge into one because psychological depth is visually represented by the progressive descent into people's subconscious. Personal relationships become crucial for an idea to stick after being planted, and in this film we can identify two major characters whose strong emotions permeate every aspect of the heist: Dom Cobb and Robert Fischer. Cobb's relationship with his wife, Mal (Marion

Cotillard), represents an enduring trauma and feeling of guilt with which Cobb has been struggling for many years, whereas Fischer constantly faces rejection and coldness coming from his father, which has turned him into an insecure man who can be easily manipulated.

As analysed above, Eames is the person who believes that approaching Fischer's inception from an emotional perspective can be the most effective way to destroy his company. He uses Fischer's insecurities and practically absent father figure to make him believe that his father secretly wants him to become his own self, and he even adopts the identity of Fischer's godfather to make the idea more believable. When they are in the third dream layer and Fischer finally opens the safe with his projection of the will, his own subconscious also projects a paper pinwheel which he apparently made for his father when he was a child. This triggers a strong emotional response in Fischer, since he realises (or makes himself think) that his father truly cares about him. At the end, it is not the business-related aspect—represented by the will—that makes the inception succeed; it is Fischer's affective deprivation and his childhood memories—represented by the pinwheel—that lead him to make the decision of dissolving Fischer Morrow. This puts emphasis, once again, on Fischer's role as the audience, because this scene accurately represents the manipulation of viewers by means, as in this case, of emotionally charged props.

It is known that the protagonists of Nolan's films tend to present a certain degree of mental instability or emotional issues in different forms, partly as a result of the post-9/11 renewed interest in fragmented identities (Ní Fhlainn 147). In the case of *Inception*, Cobb suffers from a trauma caused by his wife's suicide, for which he feels guilty. The repression of his guilt has led him to navigate his own subconscious in order to relive memories of Mal and their children, but the mixture of these memories with

the traumatic ones has somehow "corrupted" Mal, turning her into a kind of glitch or a modern version of the *femme fatale*. With her vindictive demeanour, she, or at least Cobb's projection of her, becomes a threat for the heist's success and, therefore, Ariadne must not disclose any details of the layers' design with Cobb so that he cannot "pollute" them with his own subconscious. In other words, Cobb's memories of his wife are so strong and dangerous that they can disrupt any dream landscape and put the team in great danger.

At the beginning of the film, the figure of Mal is presented in a vague way: she appears in Saito's castle and asks Cobb whether the kids miss her, but we are not told the reason behind it. When Cobb and Ariadne are practicing dream construction in Paris, she blends in with the crowd and shoots Ariadne. It is through Ariadne's relationship with Cobb that the viewers get a grasp of the extent to which his troubled past has damaged his present self (Panek 85). He is unable to let go of his wife's memory and, therefore, she repeatedly invades the dreams, but Cobb refuses to let his team know of the potential danger she poses.

As a puzzle film related to dreams, *Inception* also deals with the limits between dreams and reality and the possible consequences for the stability of identity. Fran Pheasant-Kelly argues that Mal triggers Cobb's trauma and leads him to question whether he is dreaming or not, which in turn forces him to carry a totem with him at all times (111): He has a small spinning top that spins incessantly when he is dreaming and topples when he is not. Throughout the film we see him resort to this totem several times, thus reinforcing how paranoid he is. The film depicts him as a deeply conflicted and scarred character, since he is also addicted to seeking Mal, as we can see when he sedates himself and accesses his own memories just to be with her projection.

In this scene, Ariadne finds Cobb and decides to join his dream. Once she is sedated, Ariadne appears inside an elevator, a very important element in the film, as its movement downwards stands for a trip deeper into the subject's subconscious and takes us back to Cameron and Misek's concept of verticality (115). This elevator becomes a visual representation of both *Inception*'s multi-layered narrative and Cobb's mind, where each "floor" corresponds to a specific memory. The root of Cobb's trauma is located in the lowest level, a hotel room, and it is not until they are within Fischer's mind that he confesses to Ariadne the meaning of said room and how Mal died: after spending many years in limbo, described by Arthur as "raw, infinite subconscious" where time and space lose meaning, Cobb was still aware of the unreal quality of the place. Yet, Mal began to see it as a reality and she became somehow trapped by her own creation. This forced Cobb to perform an inception on her by planting the idea that nothing was real. However, Cobb's idea had been so deeply ingrained that after killing themselves in limbo and waking up in the real world, Mal still thought that they were in a dream. Cobb was unable to convince her otherwise and Mal's obsession was eating her alive, so she made everyone believe Cobb was going to kill her in order to blackmail him into committing suicide along with her. When he refused, she jumped off a window, leaving Cobb behind and framing him for her murder, which is why he had to flee the country without saying goodbye to his children. From that moment on, Cobb struggles with a type of trauma which Pheasant-Kelly argues is the perpetrator trauma: his guilt stems from the fact that his inception on Mal is what eventually led her to commit suicide (112).

The concept of limbo and its visual representation are closely linked to Cobb himself: It is an unconstructed plane he and Mal reached while exploring the limits of the subconscious. Nolan and his advocacy for practicality came into play when putting

such an abstract concept into real images, and even Pfister took inspiration from a real half-built building area while shooting in Morocco. The buildings crumbling down in limbo visually represent Cobb's traumatised mind, and the mixture of metallic and earthy colours brings together the palettes of the layers above. Cobb and Ariadne enter limbo because Mal has infiltrated the third dream layer and killed Fischer with the intention of attracting her husband and making him stay there forever. Following Ariadne's advice, Cobb decides to confront his trauma, that is, (the projection of) his wife. Despite Mal's appeal to his emotions, he acknowledges his responsibility as perpetrator and claims that she is nothing but a "shadow" of what the real Mal used to be. By doing this, he tries to free himself from her destructive projection and from what Lisa K. Perdigao describes as a "never-ending loop of grief" (121).

As in Robert Fischer's case, emotion becomes what motivates Cobb to embark on such a dangerous mission (Russo 95). In fact, the climax of the film relies on the ambiguity of its ending, which must be inevitably analysed in relation to Cobb's traumatised identity and *Inception*'s modularity. After finding Saito, who had died from a gunshot in the third layer, in limbo, Cobb wakes up in the plane. The modules, therefore, have been allegedly closed, and we see Cobb arriving at his house. Mal's projection is gone and his healing has begun. Yet, Cobb still does not fully trust his surroundings and spins his totem on a table to verify it is all real. However, he hears his children and looks at them. Suddenly, knowing whether he is still dreaming or not becomes irrelevant. With Cobb hugging Philippa (Claire Geare, Taylor Geare) and James (Johnathan Geare, Magnus Nolan) in the background, the camera focuses on the totem. The top wobbles for an instant but, before letting viewers know the outcome, the screen cuts to black and leaves us with the vital uncertainty of the ending's reality. The

ultimate goal of the troubled protagonist was to finally return to his children: whether this has taken place in reality or in a dream level is left open for the audiences to decide.

I would argue that *Inception*'s ambiguous ending unifies the different themes at the core of the film. On the one hand, it concludes Nolan's extended allegory of filmmaking, drawing the viewers' attention to the fact that boundaries between fiction and reality are not clearly defined, since, like dreams, cinema is an illusion we are made to believe. On the other hand, modularity is presented in the form of dream levels: Nolan visually represents puzzle narrative devices and the world of the subconscious that he is so passionate about. Lastly, Cobb's cathartic journey, which ends with him reuniting with his children, fits in Nolan's set of traumatised protagonists who add yet another layer of complexity to the story itself. Emotion seems to win over the technicality of the modular narrative, and the deeper we dive into the subconscious, the more involved we are in the magnitude of Cobb's trauma, ultimately becoming, like Fischer, emotionally invested in, and manipulated by, the reality of these manufactured worlds.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of *Inception*'s play with traditional narrative techniques enables us to understand why it is such an intricate yet popular film. Cameron and Misek's essay on *Inception*'s use of vertical and horizontal layers provides a solid basis for the analysis of the film in relation to the world of the subconscious, which is characterised by being dynamic and interconnected. Christopher Nolan achieves a final product where the most technically challenging aspects, such as the visual representation of the manipulation of space and time, coexist with a strong emotional component that stems from the characters' psychological conflicts, fostering in this way the audiences' engagement.

Additionally, the allegory of filmmaking brings together Nolan's passion for filmmaking and his concern for the viewers' immersion. The unclear separation between films and the real world is represented, for instance, by Cobb's struggle to discern whether he is dreaming or not as a consequence of past traumas. Cobb and his team manipulate Fischer as Nolan manipulates audiences, and the success of the film relies partly on an ambiguous ending that leaves the limits between what is real and what is not still undefined.

A film that demands several viewings and a thorough analysis, *Inception* is one of Nolan's most ambitious projects. However, Nolan, in conjunction with his trusted cinematographer, does not allow *Inception*'s high level of complexity override the comprehension and enjoyment of viewers, which is noticeable in the use of an instantly recognisable mise-en-scène and colour palette for each level. The modular narrative creates an intricate world where minds can be entered and information within them can be manipulated seamlessly. At one point in the film, Cobb says that "downwards is the only way forwards" (Nolan 126), a maxim which perfectly encapsulates the combination of horizontality and verticality discussed in this dissertation. In a time of

uncertainties and concerns about the reality that surrounds us, *Inception* is an archetypal contemporary puzzle film, Nolan's original, complex and massive allegory of what watching a film is, and a remarkable example of how a Hollywood blockbuster can also be the highest expression of a director's personal vision.

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