

Film form in inception



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sigmund Freud, a founder of psychoanalysis, once said that dreams are “ the royal road to the unconscious” and I think Christopher Nolan shows that in this film, Inception. Each time Cobb enters a dream, whether it is his or someone else’s, everything that happens in the dream is as a result of what they are fighting within their mind. For example, when Mal, Cobb’s deceased wife, shows up in Cobb’s dreams it is sole because of the fact that he feels guilty that he is the reason she killed herself and now her children are left without a mother (and a father since he had to flee). The essay that follows will explain as well as give examples of specific elements in the film and what their functions are including what roles they play in the plot. I will also give examples of where similarity and repetition occur in the film and why it occurs. I will show my understanding of difference and variation; development; and unity/disunity by giving examples and quoting important theory information from Film Art: An Introduction.

In Inception, there are many different elements with different functions. The main characters in the film have their own function and “ job” to do. While the characters are somewhat important, the protagonist, Dom Cobb, plays the biggest role of them all. It has been argued that Christopher Nolan, the director, and writer, did not create all rounded characters. The only character who is truly explored throughout the film is Dom Cobb. Kristin Thompson states on her co-owned blog, “ I agree that the characters in Inception, apart from Cobb, the protagonist, are barely assigned traits.” And “ We grasp most of the characters by the types of premises they provide.” (Bordwell and Thompson, 2010). Thompson continues to explain how the characters (with exception of the protagonist) only have about one trait or function to make

them significant in the film. Yusuf, who knows how to manipulate the use of sedatives; Fischer, the young man who has a “ complicated” relationship with his father; Saito, the Japanese man who Cobb has to do an extracting job for; Ariadne, the architect who constructs the dream world; Arthur, Cobb’s dream companion; and Eames the “ forger” who can change into other people in dreams as well as Cobb’s wife, Mal. In the film, a spinning top plays quite an important part. Dom Cobb uses a spinning top as a “ totem”. This totem is used to help him differentiate between reality and a dream. In reality, the spinning top will stop spinning whereas in a dream it will continue to spin. Each person is advised to have a totem on them and only you are to know the weight, feel, and dimensions etc. of it otherwise, it will not work. The spinning top also has an important role at the end of the film. Music also has a function in the film. Edith Piaf’s “ Je ne regrette rien” is played whenever someone needs to come back to reality. It notifies the dreamers that they need to wrap up their “ mission”.

The totem is shown a number of times to show its importance in the film’s overall plot (as explained under Function). The totem is seen as a motif in this film. Film Art: An Introduction explains, “ A motif is any significant repeated element that contributes to the overall form. It may be an object, a colo[u]r, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait.” (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 63) Another element that is repeated is the music that is played to notify the dreamers. The music is played near the beginning of the film as well as during the climax. Yusuf puts headphones on Arthur’s head to help them synchronise each dream levels’s “ kick”. “ Kicks” are used to make the person wake up from a dreaming state. Waking up is brought

about by creating a falling motion for the dreamer to make them wake up. Yusuf explains that he designed the sedative so that it does not interfere with the function of the inner ear. This allows the 'drop' to penetrate through a layer of the dream. In each dream, there is a similarity and (repetition) for Cobb. When he goes into a dream state, Mal manages to show up. When this happens, the audience knows that Cobb does not have the dream under control. Later in the film, the audience finds out that she keeps appearing because he is living with the guilt that he is part of the reason why his wife killed herself. It is vital to know that when participants in a dream die, they wake up. Cobb planted the idea of dreams being reality in her mind. Thus, when she woke up, she thought she was still in a dream.

There are differences and variations in every dream. No dream is the same. This is because each dream may have a different host, different architect, and different mind obstacles. This is Nolan's way of contrasting the characters and their environments with one another. This becomes evident especially in Cobb's dream mission into Fischer's mind. In Cobb's mission, there are 4 levels. The first level takes place in a modern city. It is pouring with rain as Yusuf, the dream "owner" forgot to empty his bladder. The second level takes place in a very posh, expensive hotel. It makes sense that it is Arthur's dream as he is always well-dressed. The third level takes place in a very snowy area. Mal shows up and kills Fischer which leads to Cobb and Ariadne into the fourth level - Limbo. Limbo is suspected to be an unconstructed place but to Ariadne's surprise, it is just the opposite. This is still from the time Mal and Cobb were stuck there.

Development takes place throughout the whole of Inception. The movie begins with what seems like a flash forward scene featuring Cobb and Saito. This is revealed when nearing the end of the film when Cobb goes into Limbo to find Saito after he had died in level 3. Throughout the film, you wonder what that scene's importance is in the film as well as what significance Saito and Cobb's relationship has in the plot of the film. The film develops in showing the audience what Saito needs Cobb to do and why it benefits him to complete the job. The development of the film helps us to gather that Cobb needs Saito in order to be allowed back into America. He had fled the country as people believe that he is the reason that Mal killed herself. The film also develops in revealing to the audience why Cobb's wife died and why it affects his dreams so severely. Film Art: An Introduction states: "Filmmakers often treat formal development as a progression moving from beginning through middle to end." (Bordwell and Thomson 2013: 67) which is exactly what takes place in the film. This type of development is the most effective for viewers as it is easier to understand.

Bordwell and Thompson explain unity in a film, "[W]hen all the relationships we perceive within a film are clear and economically interwoven, we say that the film has unity. We often call a unified film 'tight,' because there seem to be no gaps in its overall form." (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 69). They later say that perfect unity is scarce in a film and some films will still have unanswered questions (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 70). Inception does tie up the most of the loose ends it leaves in the film, however, there are questions that are left unanswered. For example, we never find out how Eames transforms into other people (or, 'forges his identity') and why he is

the only person that can do so. Is it just because he forges documents in real life or is there another reason? The obvious and purposeful disunity of the film is the ending. When Cobb gets home to his children after completing Saito's job request he can hardly believe that he is at finally back where he has been longing to be throughout the entire film. Possibly out of habit when coming out of a dream, he spins his totem to see if he is back in reality. However, he does not wait to see the outcome, instead, he goes to hug his children. The film ends on a shot of the totem still spinning and just when you wait and expect to see it fall... black. The film ends. This disunity is effective because it leaves the audience wondering if the whole film was just a dream or if the ending was just Cobb dreaming and finally allowing him to see his children's faces. It is also effective because the filmmaker knows that this ending will stick with the audience for quite some time as you ponder and think whether or it was just a dream. Bordwell and Thompson explain: "In such ways, momentary disunities can fulfill particular purposes or suggest thematic meanings." (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 70).

Director Christopher Nolan managed to include an important set of essential film forms in Inception. The function film form was showed by giving a specific element in the film, a function. For example, Christopher Nolan gave the spinning top a specific and important function in the film. Regarding the similarity and repetition form, I gave the example of the specific song that plays every time the 'dreamers' have to finish their job or to synchronise certain actions, like setting off a 'kick'. The difference and variation form are displayed in the film by showing how dreams can differ from one another, which is seen in the four dream levels. Development is shown through the

entire plot of the film as the audience discovers things that were previously unknown. The audience also goes on an “adventure” with the protagonist. Finally, unity and disunity are shown by tying up loose ends that the film may have created concerning unity and also choosing to end the film in a disunifying way in order to almost startle the viewer and leave them wondering about the ending.

Bibliography

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