

Example of essay on inception: philosophy and reality

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Inception, the 2010 movie written, directed, and produced by Christopher Nolan, is a fascinating film from its opening moments to its final frame. Inception can stand alone as a movie that entertains with stunning visuals and entertaining plot, but its visual cues, characterization, and plot devices concerning reality make it a movie rich with discussion points for students of philosophy.

The main plot of the movie is that business partners Dominick Cobb (Leonardo DiCapro) and Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) are hired by another businessperson, Saito (Ken Watanabe), to use the special nature of their skills to get the heir of Saito's rival, Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy), to break up his competing conglomerate. Dominick and his team usually use their espionage skills to infiltrate the dreams of others to get secret information, which is why they are known as "extractors." However, instead of stealing information, what Saito wants them to do is to plant an idea in his rival, Fischer's, mind. This is referred to as "inception" instead of "extraction." Planting ideas through a dream, or "inception," is considered to be much more risky than "extraction," requiring Dominick and his team to create dreams within dreams. An important sub-plot of the movie is that Dominick, a U. S. citizen, cannot return to America and his children because he is suspected in the death of his wife, Mal. Saito offers to use his political power to let Dominick go home if Dominick and his team successfully plant the idea in Fischer's mind which will lead him to break up his business conglomerate. Although most points of the plots are resolved, the movie ends with the question of whether Dominick has succeeded in returning to his children in reality, or whether he is stuck in a dream-limbo where he believes he has

returned to the U. S. and his family home.

Philosophy classes often study the nature of reality from different perspectives. The movie uses a number of different visual cues to help establish different times and places that the characters inhabit. As part of their task, Dominick and his team spend a lot of time creating the world of the dreams they will use to infiltrate Fischer's mind, even employing an architect to construct every physical aspect of the dream worlds. The three dream worlds include a modern city, a hotel that is part of Fischer's business, a snowy mountain fortress, and dream limbo. Each of these three dream worlds have very distinct looks, including colors, tone, and style. The city is rainy and in cool colors, reflecting the discomfort and anxious nature of this dream in which Fischer believes he has been kidnapped. The hotel is in warm colors, designed to suggest familiarity to Fischer so that he will trust Dominick when he reveals that the setting is a dream. The mountain fortress is cold, white, and relatively barren, designed to suggest that there is nothing important in this dream setting than the secret hidden in the heart of the well-defended fortress. Dream limbo has the colors of sunrise, offering the impression of a place that is new and without definite form. The distinct visual cues, such as colors and different settings, are important because the movie cuts between these dream worlds frequently, and without these distinct visual cues the audience could easily become confused about what is going on. Visually, it is important for the audience to be able to believe they are able to discern what is real in the movie and what is not real.

Using visual cues to decide what is real and what is not real is not only something the characters must deal with, but also something that the movie

will also direct the audience to question. "Seeing is believing," is a phrase many people use to comment on the idea of using visual cues to pin down what is real and what is not real, but in a philosophy class and questioned in tandem with a discussion about this movie, the idea of using visual cues to decide what is real is not so reliable. The dreams that Dominick and his team create are visually convincing. A philosophy student may argue that a dream is not reality, or he may argue that a dream is only a part of reality. He may argue that a dream can be an entire reality on its own. Visually, Inception offers validity to any of these philosophical questions. The blatant construction process using an architect supports the idea that dreams are artifice. That people can be awake and conscious or dreaming and conscious supports the idea that a dream is a part of reality. The limbo dream world where everything is malleable to the dreamer who no longer realizes she is dreaming supports the idea that dreams are entire realities on their own. All of these offer interesting points to make when studying questions of what people see, or how their sensual experiences, create reality, an interesting philosophical question.

The characterization in Inception presents the idea that reality is different to different people. For example, Dominick's motivation to engage in the risky "inception" is that he wants to be reunited with his family. Saiko's motivation is that he wants to gain an advantage for his business and cannot do so unless Fischer breaks up his conglomerate; he wants to witness the team's success for himself. Ariadne (Ellen Page), the team's architect, is motivated by the desire to engage in a purely creative and challenging task. Mal (Marion Cotillard), Dominick's late wife, is a "projection," which is an aspect

of Dominick's subconscious that haunts every dream he is involved in; she is there not of her own motivation, but because she represents Dominick's guilt and unresolved feelings concerning her death.

Saiko's characterization represents the "seeing is believing" aspect of reality. Although his task appears to be simple in that all he needs to do is watch his rival to see if the idea is successfully planted, the situation evolves so that his role becomes much more than that. He is shot in the first dream-within-a-dream, which could have dire consequences for the entire mission. Ordinarily, when people "die" within a dream, they wake up. However, because of the nature of the sedative that the team is using for the "inception" operation, in this case, death means the dreamer will be caught in a dream-limbo and unable to return to the waking world. Saiko's situation demonstrates that seeing, or being a mere witness to reality, is not possible; people are an integral part of all aspects of reality, whether it is the waking world or a dream, simply because of their presence.

Ariadne's characterization also appears simple, because she is motivated by the desire to engage in a purely creative project, but serves an essential purpose for the movie because she becomes Dominick's and the audience's guide. Her name is the same as the daughter of King Minos, a figure in Greek legend, who led Theseus through a maze to defeat a minotaur (Capps). Her inclusion allows not only Dominick to face his issues, Mal's haunting of his subconscious, but allows the audience to learn about the process of infiltrating dreams. Without this guide, Dominick would not have an idea of how to save the mission and himself, but the audience would also be very lost. Ariadne's character does not offer a conclusion about what reality is,

but navigation between different realities.

Dominick's characterization must also include Mal. The motivation to engage in "inception" for Dominick is on the surface, very simple. He wants to return home and be a father for his children. However, the subconscious projection he creates, the character of Mal, haunts every dream he is in. She seems very real not only to him, but also to the others because she has an effect on the dreams they create for the "inception" operation. In a sense, she is not real because she is dead; her motivations, to sabotage missions, are not the motivations of an independent mind. However, she is real because she appears to operate independently of anyone else and the actions she makes affect everyone. It is only once he engages in the "inception" operation that Dominick realizes that in order for him to have success on this mission and to return home to his children, he must confront this subconscious monster that haunts him. She may not be real, but there are very real things that happen because of this projection. Her development as a character because of the immensity of Dominick's guilt is so complete that it is a devastating moment when Dominick says, holding Mal's hands, "I can't stay with her anymore because she doesn't exist," and, "I'm sorry, but you're just not good enough." This admission is a change to his characterization that can alter not only his entire reality, but also affect that of those who are sharing the dream. How character, how people see themselves and how people see others is an important part of how people construct an idea of what is real.

Plot devices signaling changes in reality are also important in Inception. The movie uses dreams, music, and totems as devices to show this. Use of

dreams is a common fictional device to give background into a plot or character, but dreams are not used in a standard sense in this movie. Rather than reflections of the past, the team is making a new dream in order to affect the future. Characters blatantly question whether it is possible to use dreams to do this, some believing it is impossible to do more than simply extract memories. Through the “inception” operation, the team shows that in the life of the mind, it is possible to arrange things so that what happens internally has an effect not only on the external life of the person, but can also affect their inner lives. Although the team’s design is to affect Fischer, the audience learns that Dominick also engages in a critical mental battle to conquer the guilt haunting him surrounding the death of his wife. The dream device allows this to be possible.

The music is also an essential device in navigating the risky terrain of moving between realities. As Édith Piaf’s song, “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien” (No, I Don’t Regret Anything), begins to play, it is the signal on each level of the dream that it is time to exit that constructed reality. On the surface, this is just a clever device the team is using in order not to get lost in each reality, because time flows differently in each level of the dream. Without this signal, there could be no synchronization allowing critical events to happen simultaneously in order for them to complete their tasks at the same time and return to the waking world with the mission complete. However, this device also offers more than just a clever way out of the dream world. The name of the song itself serves as a symbol of what must happen internally for each character in order for the mission to be a success. Dominick must believe that he did his best and leave his guilt behind and

Fischer must believe that his future actions are his own idea that he can engage in with confidence. Positive in nature, the lyrics and music itself create a dissonance as the song plays in the movie; it is eerie and allows the characters to disengage from the current reality in order to hopefully move back to waking life.

The spinning top towards the beginning and also at the end of the film, is there to “ give the character a moment of reality,” says Director Christopher Nolan (Capp, emphasis his). For the audience, this top creates what may be one of the most confusing, frustrating aspects of the film because it leaves open the question of what really happened. However, for philosophy students, the significance of the motion of the top and the open-endedness of what happens in the movie leads to interesting questions about reality. For instance, many people will be frustrated to not know whether Dominick is truly reunited with his family or only dreams that he is, but for the philosophy student, this question is less important. The philosophy student realizes that this question is not as important as looking at the movie’s different aspects to try to understand the nature of reality. Students can examine, using different philosophical ideas, about how reality is constructed, discerned, labeled, communicated, believed, and changed through the different aspects of this movie.

This movie presents many questions about reality, but it does not offer a concrete view. As a discussion device in a philosophy class, a possible detractor is that without guidance of a knowledgeable instructor, the movie may be seen as purely entertaining or too confusing for discussion purposes. It has no terminology that makes it innately educational. However, this is

also one of its strong points in that students could use it in a variety of philosophical discussions or types of philosophy classes, such as how it relates to the ideas of ancient and modern philosophers, how film and art reflect or construct reality, or an examination of personal conceptions of reality. Overall, Inception is an intricate and entertaining film that is engaging and will allow philosophy students a number of interesting ways to discuss class concepts.

Works Cited

Capps, Robert. " Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity." Wired. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.

Inception. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Ellen Page, Ken Watanabe, and Cillian Murphy. Warner Brothers, 2010. Film.