

Term paper on dreaming and time through the music of inception

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



In Christopher Nolan's 2010 sci-fi thriller *Inception*, dream-stealer and extractor Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) assembles a team of thieves and architects to infiltrate the dream world of the heir to a client's rival corporation (Cillian Murphy), in order to implant an idea that will accomplish the client's goals. In the meantime, he has to deal with his own demons, including the dream-ghost of his wife and his guilt over his complicity in her death. Along the way, the viewer is treated to stunning visuals, complex characterizations and gravity-defying action sequences that immerse them in a supremely well-made techno thriller. However, one of the most impressive and important components to the film is Hans Zimmer's unique and aggressive score, which fuses together several elements in unique ways to unsettle and excite the audience, both within and tangential to the plot. Zimmer's use of harsh tones, slowed down orchestration of diegetic music, and electronic elements address the themes of time, dreaming and consciousness in the film *Inception*. This is done by creating sounds and moods that allude to a world beyond reality, all while emphasizing the exponentially slower timeframe of each dream level.

The very beginning of the film provides the musical thesis by which the audience will interpret themes and mood within *Inception*: as the production company logos scroll by, a low, rhythmic tonal boom begins, increasing in volume. Performed by brass instruments and percussion, this low boom is ominous, inexorable, and getting closer to you each second. Its rhythm is almost a gallop, groupings of two, then a pause, then beginning again. Zimmer uses electronic distortion to warp the sound to make it sound even lower than it was likely played, making it sound off. This musical cue

crescendos as the final production logo fades out, slowing down in a ritardando until the first frame of actual narrative props up; the sound of crashing waves. This relaxing sound, coming immediately after such harsh, oppressive tones, is Zimmer's way of preparing us for the intensity of the film to follow, then jarring us with the unfamiliarity of the first scene (taking place in limbo, arguably the most unstable and alien of the dream worlds). This sound will recur many times throughout the film, both diegetically and non-diegetically.

This single cue is not just Zimmer's way of gearing the audience for an action-packed, scary thriller - it foreshadows an important element of the plot. In the dream world, time slows down; with each level you drop, time slows even further. This enables the entire dream heist, which comprises hours in movie time, to happen over the course of a single plane trip. In order to get out of the dream, "kicks" have to be cued up, the feeling of falling that jars you out of dreamland; this is done to music. Cobb's and Arthur's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) preferred song to use that with is Edith Piaf's ballad "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien (I Will Have No Regrets)," which features a quick, clipped, horn-based gallop as its underscore. This song is used diegetically within the film, the characters being aware of the song itself and using it as a tool in their heist.

When this song is cued up on their headphones, both in the beginning "audition" with Saito (Ken Watanabe) and in the major heist itself, those in the dream hear the song slowed down, emulating the booming cue at the beginning of the film. This serves to underscore the idea that what is

happening in the dream is slower than in real life, a piece of the film's language that the audience has already been exposed to. Even further than that, this low booming gallop serves another narrative purpose within the film. Cobb himself has an irrational fear of trains, stemming from his use of a train to get himself and Mal out of limbo (which then caused her to commit suicide). The rhythm of this cue sounds very similar to the clacking of an old steam train's wheels, a familiar sound that instills dread in both Cobb and the audience.

There are many electronic elements in Zimmer's score for Inception, along with modern rock elements, that separate it from a traditional score that uses a full orchestra for all of its cues. Like many of Zimmer's scores, there is a substantial use of percussion, particularly electronic percussion. In the scene taking place in Saito's mind, in the beginning of the film, Zimmer's score is very percussive, with booming percussion and lumbering meter. Zimmer's use of percussion is always very straightforward, never embellishing or filling out the soundscape; it is almost exclusively used to set the time and the rhythm of the action. In this way, Zimmer uses his music as a metric by which to measure time, just as the characters do in the plot of the film. Since the film is, at its heart, a heist film, time and coordination is a vital element to the characters' success; just as the audience is counting down with them, the score is helping them do that through its methodical, metronome-like pacing and presentation.

Other elements of Zimmer's score help to immerse the audience in the atmosphere of a modern, futuristic and tightly-wound film. His score is very

simple, with much of the melodies being conveyed through guitar, strings and loud, booming percussion. Often, these 'booms' or 'bwaam's will be played in reverse on the soundtrack, particularly during Cobb's training of young protege Ariadne (Ellen Page); this helps to emphasize the oddness and topsy-turvy nature of the dream world. During action cues in particular, slow, methodical brass hits will provide a percussive effect to the score, while the guitar and/or violin plays very fast, tense chords and arpeggios above that backdrop, illustrating a tension that is shared by the audience as they watch the characters attempt to survive firefights or race against time to get to where they need to be. When moments are slowed down in action scenes, or emphasized in the film, the action cue slows appropriately, acting as the same melody but exponentially reduced in tempo.

One may argue that Zimmer's use of electronic and guitar elements is not meant to demonstrate the use of time and the alienness of dreaming - it may simply be a stylistic choice meant to provide appropriate energy and intensity to the action-themed film. Zimmer is a huge proponent of using synthesized elements in his scoring, as evidenced by many of his previous works, including *Black Hawk Down*, *Gladiator* and others - this may simply be more evidence of his attempting to force a style onto the aesthetic of this film (Ndebele, 2011). However, due to the unique nature of the film, and the connection between the diegetic Piaf song and the rhythm of many of the cues, it is clear that Zimmer seeks to use the score to demonstrate the strange rules of the dream world (including slowed time and skewed reality).

In conclusion, Hans Zimmer's score for Inception is a very unconventional score that is often used as a storytelling tool to convey the sense of time and reality experienced by the characters in their dream world. By connecting a diegetic song, Piaf's cheery, galloping ballad, to the slow, ominous and tense tones of the dream world, we understand the rules of time in this alternate land, and also understand the implication that the dream world is far more dangerous than reality. The use of electronic elements connects the film with its futuristic, sci-fi trappings, keeping the score alien and playing against expectations of normal film scoring. The constant use of steady percussion, uninterested in embellishment, helps to keep the constant count that is running in the heads of Cobb and his crew as they seek to coordinate their actions to achieve their objectives. These elements combine to create a compelling, intense and booming score that impressed while also conveying important plot and subtextual information onto the audience.

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