GCE A LEVEL

WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in
FILM STUDIES

Section B:
American Film Since 2005 - Focus Film Study Guide:
Spectatorship and Ideology in Inception (Nolan, 2010)

Inception is an interesting film to analyse in terms of spectatorship because it uses cinema itself as a metaphor for dreaming.

Like Cobb and his team, all filmmakers (and particularly of this film):
- Engage our subconscious desires
- Plant ideas using characters, locations and situations
- Use symbolism to generate meaning
- Drive a narrative that makes sense whilst we are immersed in it (but may not stand up to scrutiny later!)

The film depends on the audience fully grasping and believing in a set complex concepts, but it manages to employ a range of cinematic techniques to do so:

Narrative

The plot is structured in such a way that it balances:
- **Flashbacks:** the first scene is of Cobb washing up on the beach in search of Saito, and from there we flash back to the Cobol job and the rest of the plot. There are other 'flashbacks' inside characters' subconscious minds that can be visited e.g. the elevator into Cobb's memories of Mal.
- **Enigmas:** from the opening 10 minutes and the simple 'Who are these men?', 'Where are they?' to 'Is this a heist movie?', 'Are they in a dream? Whose? How?' The spectator is constantly asking questions that the characters quick-fire dialogue answers).
- **Explication:** Nolan often shows answers to enigmas before he tells us; that way the audience witness something within the film's universe happening, then he tells us verbally what is was. He starts the film with Cobb and Arthur - and their dialogue with Saito when he 'wakes' in one level of the dream - revealing that they are asleep, and the main premise of the film: that it is possible to 'break in' the dreams of others. This explains the locations and scenarios we've just watched, why water burst through the walls, where the characters are now, how they got there - whilst instantly generating more enigmas: how does the technology work (we glimpse it on the bullet train but it looks rudimentary)? Who builds the dreams? Is it the dreamer? Why is Cobb doing this? Why is Saito?
- **Pace and plot holes -** The plot 'drip feeds' information that answer enigmas and make us feel confident that we are understanding the main concepts, whilst also filling in the backstory on Cobb and Mal. It does this with an efficient combination of pace and editing - and music - that links short scenes together and makes each 5-6 mins feel

like a series of 'training montages'. In some ways they are: they are 'training' the spectators mind to 'accept' the film's premise and concepts as 'real'.

- **Action scenes -** breaking up the plot and conceptual explication, there are face-offs, escapes from collapsing houses, chases, gunfights, all within the first ten minutes. This adds a sense of danger that both raises the stakes in the 'real' world, and shows how Cobb's reality looks similar to the espionage-action scenarios he inhabits in dreams. This enables Nolan to provide the expected excitement of the action genre, and use the dream location as a device to 'sample' sequences from other films e.g. the 'Mombassa' chase scene is reminiscent of a scene in Cairo in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981) and the Tangiers rooftop race in *The Bourne Supremacy* (Greengrass, 2007).
- **Visual spectacle -** Nolan also uses CGI (the 'bending city' stroll with Cobb and Ariadne) and in-camera effects (the rotating hotel corridor Arthur fights in) to visually demonstrate some of the ideas. These sequences are spectacular (they feature heavily in the trailers and marketing!), but also seem intellectually gratifying; it feels almost like a magician is revealing how their tricks work, like we are being inculcated into what's 'behind' the illusion. (Nolan's previous film *The Prestige*, 2006, did exactly this: present a series of remarkable magic tricks and then revealed their secrets)

Task: *Where can you see the above techniques being used in other scenes?*

Genres

One way Nolan balances the uniqueness of the film's concept and plot is to use different genre motifs and conventions. These serve the double function of both fulfilling the audience's expectations, and 'orientating' the spectator: educating them in the 'world of the film', the rules of this reality, and filling in the backstory.

- The film begins like a lavish **thriller**: a man awakens on a beach, clutching a gun and confronts another man in a vast Japanese mansion. Enigmas are established, a flashback structure is used to answer them.
- The film then seems to change to a mixture of **spy** thriller, and **film noir**. The tuxedos, complex double bluffing and buddy mission planning *Mission Impossible*; whilst the character of Mal is a typical *femme fatale:* alluring, cunning, beautiful, exotic, dangerous.
- The concepts being explained are **sci-fi** but the production design is almost corporate **thriller**: sharp suits, glossy cars, jet planes, cocktail bars. There are no futuristic elements apart from the dream sharing technology itself.
- During the planning stages, the film becomes a **heist** movie: sarcastic quick-witted criminals sat around a board in a rundown warehouse.
- But then as the mission begins, we begin to realise the plot has more in common with **'grift'** movies that centre on an elaborate con or scam (e.g. *The Spanish Prisoner*, 1998), with a 'mark' (here Fischer) being lured into a series of bluffs that win his confidence and reveal what the 'grifters' (Cobb's team) want.

- But then a lot of the film consists of chases, gunfights, crashing cars in the rain, elaborate fist fights familiar from the **action-adventure** film or even the 'first person shooter' video game genre.

Task:
- *What other scenes/characters from the film seem familiar from other films? You could build a 'mood board' of images from different films that Nolan is 'sampling.*
- *In what ways does Nolan use the videogame form as well as cinema genres? What games do you think have influenced some sequences in the film?*

Nolan uses conventions and visual cues from a number of genres to both offer familiar mise-en-scène to reassure the spectator, but also to prepare them for the next stage of the plot. When we see Mal arrive at Saito's mansion dressed and behaving in this way, we are expecting the ensuing faceoff and plot twists (even the film has only just begun); when we see the 'players' sat around in a warehouse, we prepare to listen to the mission details.

Self-Reflexive Spectatorship

Inception cleverly not only provides fantastical escapist cinema, it also achieves what critics call *distanciation*, making the spectator aware of the artificiality of the worlds it shows to us. Nolan does this by:
- Switching action between multiple levels of consciousness
- Using familiar movie genre cues to indicate which movie 'world' we are seeing
- Using musical cues (each 'level' and reality itself have differently sped up or slowed down version of 'Je Ne Regrette Rien' integrated into their soundtrack)
- This makes us reflect on the construction of 'reality' and the mechanics of the illusion
- Daniel Chandler notes that there is a type of 'gaze' in cinema that is 'self-reflexive' reminding us we are watching a constructed world. Just like a film crew, Cobb's crew provide locations, characters in costume, a 'plot' with 'realistic' events and situations
- Nolan is reminding us of the act of immersive spectatorship that we are allowing ourselves to indulge in.

Ideology and *Inception*

Political Ideology

It isn't easy to identify whether *Inception* aligns with left or right wing ideologies, or whether it reinforces or challenges dominant values. It is a good example of what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'heteroglossia' - a text that has a multitude of 'voices', some conflicting, some louder (more dominant) than others. This makes it a good film to debate and discuss.

Task: *What are some left and right wing views on the following?*
- *Capitalism*
- *Family*
- *Gender*

How does the film represent these issues? Do the representations conflict at times? In what ways could Inception *be seen as a left wing film? In what ways does it also promote some right wing values?*

Some ideas:

Inception as a left wing film	*Inception* as a right wing film
Representation of Capitalism: Saito's whole motivation for the mission is to prevent the Fischers controlling almost all the energy in the world. This is an anti-capitalist sentiment that implies corporate control can have a bad effect on the world.	Saito wants to break up Fischer's market dominance (using industrial espionage) to encourage free market capitalism (a right wing, pro-capitalist approach).
Cobol Industries, who initially commissioned Cobb's team to break into Saito's mind, are a threatening, faceless presence, with sinister operatives.	The wider economic effects of the team's mission are never really discussed. The only characters are CEOs of massive corporations - or the thieves they employ. The 'little people' are rarely seen.
The bland, faceless and interchangeable architecture of global capitalism is utilised by Cobb and his team to construct environments and costumes that Fischer will find 'real' and believable. The cities and locations in the dream could be anywhere: Dubai, London, Hong Kong, Chicago. This could be seen as an aesthetic representation of the anonymising effect of globalisation.	The mise-en-scène could be said to fetishise the style of corporate America: mirrored skyscrapers, men in sharp business suits, limos, company jets, swish minimalist cocktail bars and hotels. As one critic said "who knew dreams would look this dull!"
Representations of family: Cobb's family structure is unorthodox: Mal, the traditional mother figure has taken her own life to escape her family (which she believes aren't real - or which don't feel real enough to her); the father, Cobb, is on the run; and his father takes care of the children.	Cobb's family structure is portrayed as disruptive - and implied as unhealthy for all concerned. Cobb's father warns him that the children are forgetting him; Cobb himself is tormented by the fact he can't be there due to the actions of his psychotic/neurotic wife. This could be read as a very conservative and patriarchal view of family: that what is needed is the stabilising, loving father figure (which is what Robert Fischer also lacks in his life).
Representations of Gender: Both men and women are portrayed in a way that challenges stereotypes. Cobb is a 'flawed hero', whose guilt is personified by Mal. Despite being a very masculine hero is some ways (reckless, quick-thinking, capable) he is also vulnerable and in need of support (especially from	The male characters all take traditional roles - businessmen, bodyguards, thieves, soldiers; sons and fathers' relationships are also foregrounded (the effect of Mal's suicide on her children isn't really discussed, but the absence of Cobb from their lives is). One could argue that many of these are part of Fischer's subconscious, so reflect his values

Ariadne). Robert Fischer is also portrayed as a male character left with trauma due to the relationship with his father. The other male characters also play with ideas of masculinity depending on which level of dreaming they are on. E.g. Eames, who seems quite camp and affected in 'reality' becomes a ridiculous action hero in the snow fortress sequence. These elements question gender roles, how they are constructed, and to what extent performed.	and lifestyle; but in 'reality' the men mostly behave in stereotypically heroic and masculine ways: driving fast cars, shooting bad guys, fist-fighting in zero gravity. This offers a very patriarchal view of the world.

Feminism and *Inception*

Further to the portrayal of men, the portrayal of women in the film is also complex and good for discussion, challenging Mulvey's ideas about the 'male gaze' in a number of ways.
Some interesting points are:

● Though Mal's costume, hair and make-up is very much styled on the *femme fatales* of the film noir genre, neither she - nor Ariadne - are ever sexualised. They are not presented as available sexually or dressed in revealing or provocative styles. They are also vital characters in the plot: Mal is the main villain, and Ariadne not only is a key team member, it is she that saves Cobb (and Fischer) in the end by journeying to limbo with Cobb. This means they are not 'voyeuristically objectified' in the way Mulvey suggests.

● The two main male characters - Cobb and Fischer - are also not as idealised as other male characters. Cobb especially, is a vulnerable, psychologically damaged individual, and not someone a male spectator (according to Mulvey) would 'narcissistically identify' with.

● In addition, it is interesting that - in line with the self-reflexive nature of the rest of the film - Mal is presented as an individual entirely constructed by a man's (Cobbs') view of her. We never get to see the 'real' Mal: she is either a memory, a reconstruction, or a vengeful projection of Cobb's guilt. This could be seen as a comment about the way images of femininity are constructed in the media, and how 'accurate' these images are.

Task: *Compare Mal and Ariadne to female characters in other films from a similar genre (sci-fi, action, spy, thriller, heist).*
● *How are those characters dressed?*
● *How do they behave?*
● *Do they conform to or challenge female stereotypes?*
● *How active are they (i.e. create the plot through their actions, are capable etc.)?*
● *To what extent are they 'voyeuristically objectified'?*

How are the male characters portrayed?
- *How physically strong, active and brave are they?*
- *To what extent do they display other stereotypical male qualities? How do they challenge the stereotypes?*
- *How idealised are they (i.e. behave in an exaggeratedly positive way)?*
- Would male spectators 'narcissistically objectify' them?

<table>
<tr><td>Focus Scene Analysis -

'Paradoxical Architecture' (00:39:42 - 42.00)</td></tr>
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Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)
Cinematography (including Lighting)
In this sequence, Arthur shows Ariadne how to construct a believable location for the target, and one in which the team can avoid the target's projections. Most of the scene is shot on a steadicam, following the two as they talk, moving backwards and facing them. This both makes us feel like part of the tea, like Ariadne a 'newbie' being shown around by Arthur. It also creates an impetus, like what we are learning is dynamic and kinetic, not merely being lectured at. There are occasional uses of LS to show the environment, and how it appears 'normal'. This is until the camera suddenly pitches angle to show the staircase they are walking on is a 'paradox'; then it plunges down to show the height (this foreshadows Arthur's disposing of an enemy projection later. This again reminds us of the illusory nature of what we are seeing.
Mise-en-scène
The location is anonymously corporate: it could be a staircase in a building in any financial district around the world: large glass walls, stairs, marble floors, workers in suits. But this belies the 'magical' element Arthur reveals in his looped staircase and the huge drop. The location has now become an illusion that we can see 'behind', to its mechanics. This links to the way the film comments on the process of filmmaking and how we experience these worlds. Arthur, though dressed smartly, looks more like an academic than a stockbroker and this suits his role in this scene: the educator, the expert, guiding Ariadne (who is dressed similarly to when we first meet her at the university).
Editing
This scene cuts between panoramic views of the location, so we can take in its verisimilitude (how real it appears); and a series of moving medium shots of Arthur and Ariadne (so we can see him explaining and her 'getting it'). The pace of the editing matches that of the music, and gives the scene the sense of a 'training montage', or an 'induction' into the world of the film. The camera stops moving when Arthur explains about Mal's death, showing how this information has literally 'stopped them in their tracks'.

Sound
Hans Zimmer's score plays steadily throughout this, the rhythm and pace do not increase but the repetition creates a feeling of building momentum that captures Ariadne's excitement at what she is learning. It changes to something more wistful when Arthur explains about Mal: here the music becomes a slowed-down version of the song 'Je Regrette Rien' that is identified with Mal throughout. The change in score shows that the 'conceptual' explication has now ended, and information about emotional backstory is being delivered.
Ariadne's POV and dialogue stands in for the spectator's during this scene: first, she asks questions about constructing 'dream architecture' that answers enigmas that have been generated earlier; then she begins finishing his sentences to show that she - and hopefully we - are understanding. Finally, her comments about Mal spur Arthur to explain this part of the story (and answer more enigmas about Cobb and Mal).

Task: *Can you link the above examples to some of the ideas about spectatorship and ideology? How could theories or perspectives help you understand the scene further?*