

## The Tenacity of an Idea

A review of the film



### **Inception**

(2010)

Christopher Nolan (Director)



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Reviewed by

[Keith Oatley](#)

*Inception* means origination, or taking in. It's the title of a new movie written and directed by Christopher Nolan about how dreaming might be used to insert a life-changing idea into a person's mind.

Most of *Inception* occurs in dreams, and keeping track of them is quite a task for the viewer. So let me orient you a bit. Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a psychological expert who enters people's subconscious minds during dreams to extract industrial secrets. In the opening sequences of the film, mostly dream sequences, Cobb is working to extract a secret from the very rich, very powerful Saito (Ken Watanabe). Really, however, although Cobb doesn't know it, he's in an audition arranged by Saito to test his abilities.

Saito is satisfied, and he employs Cobb to perform a task that is the reverse of extraction: to implant an idea into the mind of Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy), whose severely ailing father is head of a vast industrial company that is Saito's competitor, and is on the verge of becoming a monopoly. Robert Fischer is heir to his father's company, all set

to follow his father's ideas. Saito wants Fischer to split up the company. That's the idea that Cobb is to implant. We viewers know a monopoly is a Bad Thing, and that seems to be enough for us to go along with Saito's scheme.

There is discussion about whether inception is possible. Cobb says he knows it is because he has done it. Cobb's most important concern is to be reunited with his two young children in the United States. He is separated from them because he's fled from America to avoid life imprisonment because he is suspected of the murder of his wife. Part of Cobb's payment is that Saito will arrange for him to be able return to America to be with his children. He's that powerful.

How will Cobb do the inception? He will induce a dream state in Fischer, who in the dream will dream another dream and in that dream will dream yet another dream. Only by descending through these layers can the inception be done. In the first layer (we're told), the dreaming brain is vastly more efficient than the waking brain. A dream that takes minutes of sleep time is experienced as taking hours; you get so much more done with the more efficient brain. In the second layer, dreaming that you're dreaming, the experience can last for days. At the third level, the experience can last for years.

Cobb assembles a team of specialists: One is Cobb's point man, one knows about chemicals to induce dreaming sleep; another is an architect who will design dreamscapes; and there is a forger who can make falsehood look like reality. The sleeping time for Fischer will be 10 hours. So Saito buys an airline and arranges for Fischer and the dream team, and for Saito himself, to occupy the whole forward first-class cabin of a Boeing 747 from Sydney to Los Angeles. A chemical soporific is slipped into the welcome drinks, and off they go. The dreams that Fischer will experience are shared dreams, inhabited and furnished by Cobb, Saito, and their team.

Shared dreams? Hmmm, isn't that what movies are? If you have ever wondered what the subconscious contains, this film is for you. It turns out to contain a fair bit of yearning, and an awful lot of shooting, explosions, and motor vehicles ramming into each other. Or perhaps that's just the male subconscious. The main yearned-for figure, who turns up repeatedly in various layers of dreaming, is Mal (Marion Cotillard), Cobb's wife, whom he loved very much.

Two fairly engaging storylines drive the film. One is Cobb's yearning for Mal and his children. The other is whether inception of the idea into Fischer's mind will work. In the plotline about his yearning for Mal, Cobb knows that inception is possible because he had induced into her the belief that reality is no more than a dream. This aspect of the film takes up the meditation begun 2,300 years ago by the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (Palmer, Breuille, Chang, & Ramsay, 1996). He dreamed he was a butterfly, flitting around and feeling happy, but suddenly he woke up: Was he Chuang Tzu who had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or was he a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu?

Having been incepted (is that the term?) with the idea that reality is itself only a dream, Mal decided that the dream state was to be preferred because, in it, she and Cobb

could be together indefinitely without the irritations of so-called reality. The film invites us to ask to what extent being in love is a dreamlike projection. Of course we know that in part it is (Djikic & Oatley, 2004). But do our projections have much to do with the actual person whom we love or with being able to love that person?

The second plotline is about what it takes to implant a consequential belief. The dream team decides that the idea to be implanted into Fischer has to be consonant with everything he knows and that he has to believe that he thought of it himself. The team members agree, too, that they have to start with the relationship between Fischer and his father. In the plan, Fischer will descend through the three levels of dreaming, be induced to enter unawares into situations he normally would not enter, and think for himself the thought about splitting up his father's industrial empire.

This aspect of the plot has the structure of a confidence trick, a well-known filmic example of which was *The Sting* (1973), directed by George Roy Hill. In it characters played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford created an elaborate scenario, based in a betting shop, that accomplished the inception into their mark, a mob boss, of a belief that induced him to part with a large sum of money.

Any clinical psychologist who acts like Cobb should, of course, be thrown into jail. At the same time, the question of how clients in therapy might take up new beliefs is pressing. As Cobb asks near the beginning of the film: What's the most tenacious parasite? Is it a bacterium or a virus? No, it's an idea. Once an idea has taken root, it's almost impossible to dislodge it. In the film, this is why the procedures are so elaborate.

Is this the reason, too, why the procedures of psychotherapy are also so elaborate? Some of them extend over weeks and years. Some (like psychoanalysis) involve dreams one has had while asleep. Some (like hypnosis) involve going to sleep without dreaming. Some (like relaxation therapy) involve staying awake but daydreaming. Some (like graded exposure to progressively more feared situations) involve people being induced to act in ways that they generally avoid.

The critical differences are that in therapy it's the client who employs the psychological expert and that it must be the client who wants to change a life-defining idea. Even when these conditions are met, elaborate procedures still seem to be necessary. The mind is tenacious, and therapy can be seen as getting around its tenacity.



A therapist known for being brilliant at such getting-around was Milton Erickson, as described by Haley (1986). A patient of his who suffered from a disabling stomach ulcer could not stand unannounced visits from her in-laws three or four times a week, during which they stayed a very long time. She had the idea that she couldn't say anything to them. Erickson said: "They certainly can't expect *you* to mop up the floor if you vomit when they come" (p. 153).

She adopted the procedure of rushing to the refrigerator to drink a glass of milk the moment she heard her in-laws' car arrive. Then she would vomit and apologize piteously as they cleaned up the mess. The in-laws started phoning ahead to see if she could receive a

visit. “Not today,” she would say. One day she made a mistake and vomited, and they cleaned up again. The in-laws stopped coming for a couple of months, until she invited them. This time they did not stay long. This therapy didn’t involve anything like buying an airline or inducing three layers of dreaming, but therapist and client still seemed to need an elaborate procedure to get round the tenacity of an idea.

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## References

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