

Inception: Dreams and a lingering itch

When I was 10 years old, I saw the film *Dreamscape*, in which a young man (played by a very young Dennis Quaid) was convinced to use his ability to psychically enter people's dreams in order to help them. The movie terrified me, but in a way that left me wanting a little more. I watched the film another dozen or so times over the next few years. I became fascinated with dreams and their images, an interest that flowered into investigations of dream journaling and dictionaries. I even wrote part of my master's thesis about the archetypal symbols that so often make their appearances in dreams.



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When I went to see *Inception* a few weeks ago, I expected the film to tap into and arouse my fascination with dreams. It certainly delivered.

Director Christopher Nolan's latest blockbuster stars Leonardo DiCaprio and indie-film favorites Ellen Page and Joseph Gordon-Levitt as members of a six-person crew that not only enters other people's dreams, but manufactures them. Each of them plays a specific role within the dream scenarios: Page is an "architect," who creates the dream world,

Gordon-Levitt is something of a pugilistic point man who removes obstacles (including dream-people) to the team's goal, and DiCaprio plays the "extractor," a kind of psychic thief who mines information from the targeted and unwitting dreamer.

The premise is brilliant: people trained in manipulating others during the dream state can pull information from them that otherwise might be impossible to obtain. A more difficult task—and the one around which the entire film is built—is to actually plant an idea in the dreamer's mind within the dream state. Called "inception," this undertaking requires the dreamer to believe that he or she came up with the idea in the first place, a feat that is revealed to the movie viewer early on as being nearly impossible.

Inception has been a box office success, bringing in \$500 million. And that makes sense. It's a great film. It's fun to watch and to share, it moves quickly (especially for a two-plus-hour flick), promotes interesting conversations, and leaves you feeling like you really saw something worth today's high cost of admission.

But still...it's telling, in my opinion, that what really made an impact on me, what I find myself thinking about when I recall the film, is what I was most unprepared for: the

motivation behind the dream team's work. More specifically, crooked business. DiCaprio and his team are hired by a businessman who wants them to push a business-weakening idea into the mind of a more successful corporate rival. Money—and in DiCaprio's case, freedom and a cleared criminal record—are offered as payment.

And so the film unfolds, with the truly clever sophistication of a Rube Goldberg device, featuring specially concocted sedatives, dreams within dreams (four levels and a "limbo"), a timed cascade of dramatic awakenings, and well-executed special effects that, surprisingly, mostly occur when something goes wrong. Subplots abound, naturally, and an unresolved ending (sorry, no spoiler here) leaves the audience waiting to exhale.

Like other movies that are built around less-than-honorable characters (e.g., *The Italian Job*, *Entrapment*, *Ocean's 11*, *12*, and *13*), where you find yourself rooting for the "bad guy," for me, *Inception* delivered the same subtle aftertaste. It didn't exactly leave me questioning my morals, but it did provoke the examination of how we end up celebrating what we'd otherwise disdain as foul play.

Granted, it all takes place in dreams. But the ramifications are expressed in the "real world." And, okay, DiCaprio's character essentially uses two wrongs to somehow make a right (the first wrong is a side story involving his deceased wife), and it works out for him... sort of.

Perhaps one of the ways that *Inception* makes its mark is by delicately reminding us of this streak of gray that runs through the human spirit, the part of us that cheers when a well-executed robbery succeeds or when vigilantism just "feels good." We know that something isn't quite right about the situation, but we can't help but feel jubilant at the triumphant conclusion.

Some will argue—and aptly so—that *Inception* isn't about this at all. Instead, it concerns the untapped abilities of the mind, the vast interior space where if you can imagine something, it can happen, and about how the dreaming mind is perhaps the last explored frontier.

Watch the movie. Take a loved one or friend (or both) and enjoy the inevitable post-film discussion. But be prepared for that little itch that lingers in the back of your mind. **M**

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ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *Inception*. **Rating:** PG13. **Director:** Christopher Nolan. **Running time:** 148 minutes. **Theater release:** July 16, 2010. **Notes:** In a world where technology exists to enter the human mind through dream invasion, a highly skilled thief is given a final chance at redemption. **What others are saying:** "The idea of moviegoing as communal dreaming is a century old. With *Inception*, viewers have a chance to see that notion get a state-of-the-art update. Take that chance: dream along with Christopher Nolan." —Richard Corliss, *Time Magazine*

