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Inception

By [Douglas Keesey](#)

Douglas Keesey, author of the Neo-Noir Kamera Book, writes about Christopher Nolan's Inception (Beware spoilers)

With Inception, writer/director Christopher Nolan strives to combine the intellectual ingenuity of Memento with the big-budget action heroics of The Dark Knight. The film crosses genres, being designed to puzzle the mind (corporate espionage), to deliver some visceral excitement (it's a heist movie) and to engage the emotions. It was always important to Nolan that this film be something more than a mind-bender or a seat-shaker, that it have 'massive emotional stakes' and concern itself with 'fears' that an audience would find 'relatable': "That's what film noir is, and I do view Inception as film noir", says Nolan. "You take the things you are actually worried about in real life, or things you care about in real life, and you extrapolate that into a universal." (1)

The first 'relatable fear' is of the father's monopoly on power. Global magnate Maurice Fischer (Pete Postlethwaite) is close to achieving total energy dominance and, when he dies, his son Robert (Cillian Murphy) is on course to consolidate the father's corporate empire. It is as if one man were able to extend the reach of his power over the entire globe, dominating others with his own dream-vision of the world, displacing any competitors with men made in his own image like the son whom he reduces to a mere extension of himself.

And so, to counter this fear, the idea must be planted in Robert's mind that what his father really wants is for him to be his own man and break up the paternal empire, thus allowing room for other competing dream-visions of the world. In the process, Robert will be able to reconcile filial rebellion with fatherly approval. Inside his father's safe, Robert can now imagine not the hoarding of money and power, but a pinwheel which Robert made as a boy: his father's blowing on it shows the loving wish to help his son grow up and learn self-empowerment. With the 'inception' of this idea into his dream, Robert is able to imagine a world where his father makes a place for him as a son to create something himself.

Robert's father thus becomes like Professor Miles (Michael Caine), the kindly father-in-law who first taught Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) how to navigate other people's dreams but who doesn't insist on controlling what Cobb does with this power. Instead, Miles does everything he can to help Cobb reunite with his family.

If the fear Robert must face is that his father's corporate dream will dominate, Cobb's fear is that his wife's romantic dream will enrapture and imprison him. Together Cobb and his wife Mal (Marion Cotillard) built a perfect world for themselves as a couple, but now this lovers' idyll, like a romantic Parisian street folding in on itself, threatens to become narcissistic and self-enclosed, excluding all elements of the real world such as their young son and daughter. Like a malware virus, Mal invades Cobb's mental operating system, trying to infect his reality with her deadly dream, reuniting him with her in a 'folie a deux' which would cut him off from the rest of his family forever. However, with the aid of Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Ariadne (Ellen Page) - a young man and woman who are like the persons Cobb's children will grow up to be if he can reconnect with them - Cobb is able to find his way out of Mal's 'Liebestod' fantasy and rejoin his children back in reality.

To do so, Cobb must overcome the guilt caused by his 'inception' of an idea into Mal's mind: to shock her out of her romantic delusion, he had planted the seed that the perfect world they shared was only an illusion. Yet this seed grew into cynicism and despair, into a sense of the real world as so fatally flawed that she would rather die and leave it for the ideal world of her dreams, which came to seem more 'real' to her. Cobb has been haunted by guilt over her suicide, a spectre that has taken the form of Mal as a femme fatale trying to force him to consummate their ideal love through death. It is only by confronting the Mal in his mind and forgiving himself for the harm he unintentionally caused - he had meant to restore her to reality, not reduce her to despair - that Cobb is able to resist his wife's pull toward romantic delusion and death. And so, rather than being Mal's siren song, Edith Piaf's 'Non, je ne regrette rien' becomes the music that leads Cobb out through the maze of dreams and back to the imperfect - but real - world(2).

- 1: Christopher Nolan, Preface, Inception: The Shooting Script, San Rafael, CA: Insight Editions, 2010, pp. 10, 11.
- 2: Marion Cotillard, who plays Mal, also played Edith Piaf singing 'Non, je ne regrette rien' in La Vie en rose (2007).

Douglas Keesey's Neo-Noir: From Chinatown to The Dark Knight has recently been published by Kamera Books.

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