

Dreams, Mourning, and Desire

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The absence of time – this is something we dream – what we call eternity. This dream consists of imagining that we wake up. We spend our time dreaming, we do not only dream when we are asleep. The unconscious is precisely the hypothesis that we do not only dream when we are asleep.

Jacques Lacan, *Le moment de conclure*. Lecture held on November 15, 1977.

According to Jacques Lacan, the definition of the neurotic subject is that it does not desire what it wants and that it does not want what it actually desires. My hypothesis is that *Inception* presents us with a unique dream, that of a neurotic subject. The film is about the dream of one man, Dom Cobb, who has a dream of a wanted, but undesired grief. The dreamer's desire is not only to mourn the suicide of the beloved woman he lost, but it is also the will to power, it is the hallucination enabling the dream to continue as the dreamer lives intensely and eternally in the presence of his wife. Christopher Nolan's film presents the aspect of the Freudian unconscious with all its twists and turns. The film portrays the unimaginable grief and melancholy associated with the inability to desire the desire itself. This is well illustrated by the Russian doll structure of the film: a dream within a dream within a dream ... until it reaches the state of limbo. Can the limbo, that is, the unconscious and the navel of dream so dear to Freud, be staged in a film?

From my point of view, everything is dreamt from the very first images of the film. Everything starts with a disconcerting oneiric shot which gives this movie its particular aesthetic quality. Cobb is washed on a beach. He can see his son and his daughter from a certain distance. His eyes are half-closed and he seems somnolent. From the start, we are plunged in an atmosphere of strangeness. Oracular sentences are pronounced, whose sense we can't grasp, exactly like in a real dream. The film thus shows in an explicit fashion the absurd side of certain dreams.

Freud has said that it is necessary, when interpreting dreams, "to neglect the dream's apparent coherence because it is suspect and to give instead to clear and to obscure elements the same amount of attention." We will thus start with a simple assumption. Throughout the

film Cobb has only one single dream. He falls asleep in the aircraft. All characters occurring in his dream are fellow passengers or people he met at the airport.

The dream is a dream through which Cobb is supposed to solve his neurosis and his melancholy. With this dream, he will end the mourning of his loved and lost wife. Let us say that Cobb, when he falls asleep, is battling against the counter-will of the desire defining the neurotic subject. He wants what he does not wish and at the same time he wishes what he does not want. I make this clearer: He wants to go on living as if Mal is still alive and at the same time he wants to be able to continue his life without her.

Like any dream, Cobb's dream is the place where a desire is fulfilled, but in this case the desire is nothing more than a sorting out of his own conflict. Eventually Cobb will solve it. His problem is solved at the moment he is able to produce a steady desire. A *steady* desire means that he eventually wants what he wishes and that he really wishes what he wants.

Desire and Counter-desire

Cobb has the *desire* to carry out the mourning of his wife. However, his *counter*-desire tells him that he wants to go on living with her, standing by her, as if she were still alive. Cobb is in a conflict with himself. When his wife emerges in the dream, that is, in his "subconscious," Cobb becomes unable to control anything; he is in the grip of the counter-will of his desire and everything wavers. Saito asks him if he wants to go home to his children. "You can't fix that. Nobody could," answers Cobb.

Here is the conflict: Cobb wishes to go home but this home is the home which existed before the death of his wife who is no longer alive.

"During sleep the brain can do everything", says Cobb to Ariadne when they are sitting at the terrace of the café and Cobb explains to her what her "mission" is going to be. Obviously, when we are dreaming we can carry out all our desires. But at the same time – and this is what the whole first part of the film is dealing with – Cobb wants to return to reality, to wake up, to live his real life. He can do this only once he has carried out the mourning of his wife. All this is symbolized by the joint dream, dreamt together with other characters inside the dream itself. Cobb would like to be reconnected to others, he would like to quit the community of his alter egos and his melancholic isolation, which is like the universe of an extremely egocentric person locked into her own self.

Still, in the end, the counter-desire of the dream will override Cobb's desire. I believe that this is the message of the film. Moreover, it would be interesting to know whether or not Christopher Nolan made this film as a "sublimation exercise" enabling him to overcome some kind of grief.

The dreamer has to use a powerful sedative developed by an expert chemist, Yusuf, in order to let the counter-desire grow so it will eventually become a *steady desire*. This process is not without risks: potential failures will cost dearly. What could be more difficult than to accept the reality of the death of the beloved and lost wife? On the one hand, he will leave the cherished object behind, but on the other hand he will find a steady desire. In the first part of the film, Cobb lives this situation as a betrayal, and he will get rid of this feeling of guilt with the help of a powerful sedative which represents the *steady desire* that he needs. It will take Cobb the entire film to reach that point, which probably corresponds more or less to a dream lasting only a few minutes for a dreamer. And the dreamer is Cobb sitting in the seat of the aircraft that brings him back home.

In principle, the dream (which is the entire film) represents a conflict between a counter-desire and a desire; and eventually this counter-desire will dominate. Cobb's primary desire is stated on several occasions: "In my dreams we are still together," he says when he talks to Ariadne in the elevator. This is the reason why it is so important for him to dream. "You're keeping her alive, you can't let her go," retorts Ariadne. Ariadne might be no more than a double of Cobb. She very well understands that he doesn't really want to achieve the mourning, at least not for now, while he is dreaming. This means that within Cobb's dream there is a dialog, a dialog of Cobb with himself. In the same sequence, when he is walking around with Ariadne in Mal's house, he says that he is dreaming in order to be able "to grow old together" with Mal and "to see again the faces of my children."

To stand by his wife would be for Cobb the same as spending the rest of his life asleep, entangled in dreams, and to remain forever locked up in the existential condition of living while being dead. Very slowly Cobb begins to refuse this. Cobb has been in limbos, in phases of deep melancholy. In my opinion, this is the meaning of limbos: it is a state of melancholic dullness where one is completely detached from the world. Cobb built his own oneiric world although he was awake. Melancholy is a life without desire, a life under the seal of death, a life spent scrutinizing memories of the past without perceiving any possible future.

The chemist's task is to clarify all this when he shows Cobb the twelve people who take a sedative in order to be able to remain in their dreams forever. An old man tells him that "they come to be woken. The dream has become their reality." Cobb prefers an oneiric and imaginary world from hard reality and he *wants* to continue doing this though he *wishes* at the same time that he could stop.

But fortunately for Cobb, the counter-desire emerges: "We yearn for people to be reconciled, for catharsis," explains Cobb to his team when they are planning to implant an idea into Robert Fischer's mind.

A Way Toward Redemption

Fundamentally, the much discussed question of the "levels" – the dream in the dream in the dream, up to the limbos – is not really a problem. Level 1 is where Cobb is in the hands of his desire, where he wants to continue living as if nothing has happened, with his wife still standing by him, just like before. Level 2 is the level where the counter-desire starts to intervene. Cobb no longer wants what he desires, but he needs "time to understand." Then appears Ariadne, and scenes evolve towards violence and death. This is the level where Cobb is battling against himself, or at least against his primary desire. At this moment he can hardly control things, and his wife reappears together with her phobia of trains. The following level is the one where Cobb will slowly accept his counter-desire as his only desire. This desire will help to resolve the neurotic conflict of the dream: it represents the choice of life and finally an achieved mourning. This evolution happens while Cobb is in diverse limbos, which represent the last level. Of course all these levels are not really distinguished, they are superimposed and proceed simultaneously. Finally we can assume that there is, during the whole film, only one reality and one dream.

Somehow the film reaches a critical point when Saito is wounded, and the mission is about to fail. This is how a new "level" is attained. Cobb is plunged in the middle of snow-covered mountains. A true war will occur, of which we do not know many details. The first task to be solved is to plant a desire in Fischer's mind in order to make him dismantle the financial empire he has inherited from his father. But in principle, the war is only a metaphor induced by Cobb's dream-work. This dream-work is a battle that Cobb is leading against himself. However, this desire is – at this moment of the movie or dream, since the whole film

is only one dream – again in the firm grip of the counter-desire of the will. And it is here that the intensity of the battle reaches its climax. We are shown a real war with tanks, large guns, an excessive number of soldiers, etc. Here the internal conflict lived by the dreamer Cobb reaches its climax. And this is precisely the moment of the dream where Cobb shoots Mal. This is clearly a sign of the overcoming of mourning. But Mal seems only to be wounded and not yet dead. Slowly she will become able to occupy the place of a lost object. Therefore, we can presume that Cobb is on his way to admit the reality of her death.

The Choice of Mourning

Everything will be cleared up in the limbos, and Cobb – not without the assistance of the young and brilliant architecture student Ariadne – will make his final decision: he will accomplish the mourning of his wife. This decision takes place unconsciously.

Ariadne will try to convince Cobb to remain in his initial position, in which he was living as if she was still alive. She is trying hard to persuade him not to end his mourning. With Ariadne, Cobb visits the city that he and his wife had imagined in former times and which is not more than a fantasized memory distorted by the dream-work of his ancient life. It represents his life at a time when he was living close to Mal. “We had time,” says Cobb. This sentence quite obviously expresses nostalgia.

“Your ideas are confused,” says Mal in order to convince Cobb, telling him that he must stay in limbo if he wants to go on living with his children, James and Philippa. Cobb is confused, but he is about to give up his guilt to stop living with his remorse. Cobb makes up his mind while sleeping: his desire is going to become the primary counter-desire of the dream, but this time it is a steady desire. He chooses to return to reality, to life. His dreamed dialog with Mal occurs as a plea addressed to himself. Cobb believes to have caused the suicide of his wife and we have every right to assume that this is true: Mal obviously did commit suicide. Moreover, in a scene which is about the labyrinths she is building, Cobb tells Ariadne that he can’t go back home because “they” think he killed her. Cobb probably believes himself that he is at the origin of his wife’s suicide. This is well illustrated by the scene inside the helicopter, when Saito asks for an “inception to be carried out.” Though this seems to be impossible, Cobb affirms that he has already done it. This means that he could have pushed his wife to commit suicide while planting an idea in her mind against her own

will. From then on, guilt will prevent him from ending his mourning. The kind of mourning that he undergoes is quite impossible. In the dream he hears, for example, Mal telling him: “you can still save yourself by staying here in the world we built together.” However, this world is no more than Cobb’s melancholic self-enclosure: he lives in this world in the way in which a person who is living, but at the same time dead lives in the past.

“No, I don’t regret anything,” is the title of the famous Edith Piaf song that is repeatedly played in the film. For me this signifies that Cobb is making progress with his mourning and that it will soon be accomplished. The tune is also chosen as a signal for the return to the level of reality. At the same time, it helps Cobb to choose life and to give up regrets and remorse. “I do not stay;” “She does not exist, so how could I stay with her;” “I would like [to stay with you], but I can’t recreate you with your whole complexity, your perfection, all your imperfections;” “You are nothing but a shade, the shade of my true wife;” “You are the best I could recreate but, I regret that it is insufficient...” Once these sentences are said, Cobb, undergoing a real Freudian dream-work, chooses to live without his wife. He decides to leave his imaginary life of melancholy made of the past and memories.

The storyline proceeds from level to level, and each time he reaches a new level, this is a sign that Cobb has woken up. “Waking up” means that he is eventually coming back to real life, to a life in which Mal is dead. This is also true in a more literal sense: he will wake up in the airplane, that is, he will return to a reality that he had actually never left. This means that he has merely been passing from a state of sleep to a state of being awake. This is true even if, as Lacan says in the epitet to the present chapter, we are all constantly dreaming even when we are awake. We can’t know anything about the reality that we are in. We can keep in touch with reality only through the skylight of our phantasms. Even when we are awake and immersed in reality, we see the world only by means of our projecting imagination.

The Question of the Body

What remains relatively real, however, is the presence in the physical world of Cobb’s body. In order to interpret Christopher Nolan’s film philosophically and psychoanalytically, we should assume that Cobb is sitting throughout the whole film in his seat in the airplane that brings him back home. This is certainly a materialist point of view, assuming that the physical world is unique and that there are not various levels of reality in the film. Instead, there is the

insertion of dreams into the dream, a constellation that can produce the false perception of a variety of dreams. At many points of the film, at the beginning for example, it is possible to read the film in this way. This is the case especially after the chat between Cobb, his associate Arthur, and Saito, when everything starts shaking and crumbling after Arthur has been killed; or when the characters are totally weightless and are tossed in the air. This could be air pockets that the plane is going through causing Cobb's body to experience the shaking while he is dreaming.

If there is only one physical world, and if the film presents only one unique dream, there is no passage from one world to another. This is why nothing in Nolan's film comes from the realm of Science Fiction. On the other hand, the Russian doll structure upon which the whole film is built can be interpreted in the following way: when we dream that we are dreaming we very often like the second dream to remain only a dream. That's at least what I think. This could explain the pattern that permits this continuous ascendance "level by level." Because Cobb's ultimate dream, dreamt right before the awakening that saves him, consists in the desire to be together with Mal. Cobb wants the moments associated with being unable to let Mal go belong to the realm of the dream. And the entire film leads him towards this aim. Cobb wants to come back to reality, and this happens when he ascends, level by level, to the state of being awake.

Epilog

In the epilog of the film, Cobb wakes up in the plane just after talking to Saito. He has grown much older, and Cobb tries to convince him to come back to reality in order to resume his youth. Perhaps Cobb is speaking only to himself, convincing himself, for a last time, that it is necessary to join "live life" and to give up his melancholic state of dullness. Just like in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, the beginning of the film reappears at the end. Moreover, while Cobb is talking to Saito, his weapon and his spinning top are on the table, which might show that the fact of leaving the dream has been a means to buckle the loop. The mourning is done, and Cobb won't need to repeat the dream.

In the next sequence we see Cobb opening his eyes in the airplane. This gives us the key to the film. At least, it proves to us that there is only one single dream, Cobb's dream, which represents the whole film. Cobb leaves the state of sleep and approaches the only level on

which reality really exists and which, as a matter of fact, he had never left. Freud says in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that one always uses the images of the day before in order to build a dream. Cobb finds indeed all the protagonists of his dream in the airplane. They are the passengers sitting next to him or the people he had noticed in the airport before the plane took off.

His passport is ok and he can come back to America; in the dream this had been impossible. Coming back home had been impossible and the dream has made it possible through a metaphorical actualization. Coming back home means to come back to his real self and it means that the weight of mourning has been removed.

Cobb's father-in-law (and a father figure) Miles is perhaps the only element that symbolizes something like a "life instinct" in the film. Cobb visits his father-in-law because he is looking for a good architect and Miles clearly tells him: "Come back to reality." The image of Miles appears in the first part of the film and is quite benevolent. Miles seems to push Cobb to do his mourning. For Cobb, Miles represents probably that part of his will that drives him forward. Miles is the little voice inhabiting Cobb, pushing him to reach out for real life, to give up the past, to confront himself, to be youthful, and to look towards the future. All elements allow us to consider Cobb's dream as "a dream of redemption."

The spinning top does not tumble when Cobb comes home. But on the basis of our assumption that the whole film is one single dream and one single reality, we can conclude that this is not really important. Its meaning is merely metaphorical and should probably be understood as a link connecting Cobb and Mal. The function of the spinning top is clarified for the first time when Cobb explains to Ariadne why she should create her own totem. This totem has to be absolutely unique and its details should be known only to its owner. Only then will it allow her to know if she is in another person's dream or not. The spinning top is also presented as Mal's former totem. What sense does this spinning totem have? Several interpretations are possible. For me it is merely an element allowing Cobb to build his own dream; it isn't used in order to discriminate between "real reality" and dream.

On another hand, the spinning top was Mal's creation, it was her object, and Cobb appropriated it afterwards. Consequently it remains her object, her totem, her guide. In the last sequence of the film it continues spinning on its own as if it belongs to nobody, as if it is completely detached from Cobb's psyche and from his "subconscious." The top could be a representation of the beloved and lost Mal, which has eventually been expelled, and which

allows Cobb to come back to life. The object of grief is neither erased nor forgotten, but it has been put into its right place, where it is unable to block Cobb's will to life.

Something needs to be said about the children. At the beginning of the dream, the image becomes fuzzy and develops towards an oneiric aesthetics. Are the children real or did they die together with their mother? Did they ever exist? We can assume that the melancholic state of Cobb prevents him from living with his children and that he needs to alter this psychological state. The discussion with his father-in-law in the amphitheater could support this assumption, especially when he says to Cobb: "It'll take more than the occasional stuffed animal to convince those children they still have a father." This implies that Cobb has been away from his children as a result of his melancholic state and that he has not been able to take care of them. But we shall leave this question open. Let us simply say that the children are the umbilical point of the dream mentioned by Freud, that they are an element whose sense cannot be grasped. They are the element that makes it impossible to interpret a dream in its entirety. The reason is that throughout the film there are plenty of seemingly absurd elements, exactly like in a dream. We have to read these elements as the author's intention to recreate, with great subtlety, an oneiric universe of rare precision.

Perhaps the attentive reader has noticed that this text has been constructed in a way where single elements are not necessarily connected in terms of a logic that is visible at first sight. It's just like a dream.

Translated from French by Pascal Coulon