



Films

INCEPTION

Heather Rivera dreams up a film review. Or does she?

René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* was published in 1685. The film *Inception* came out rather more recently (2010), yet in it the viewer explores the very topics that Descartes was philosophizing about over three hundred years ago.

Have you ever been sure that you've awoken from a dream, only to find out you are actually still sleeping? Dreams within dreams happen sometimes, in the phase of sleep where REM (Rapid Eye Movement) is full-blown. Descartes, who wanted to establish what it is possible to know beyond doubt, thought about whether we can ever tell for certain if we are dreaming or not. In fact, our minds could be confused by various deceptions. In his search for truth, Descartes considers the possibilities that he is mad; is being totally deceived; is dreaming; or even is possessed by a demon. This is where his radical skepticism comes into play, for if we cannot even tell for sure whether we are dreaming, then how can we know for certain any truth about the world in which we seem to live? He even wonders whether he is real or not. Then Descartes realizes that even if he were mistaken about everything, then he must be thinking, for

one can't even be deceived unless one is thinking. And knowing for sure that he thinks, then it must follow that he exists; there must be a 'thinking thing' (*Meditations*, p.19). This is where his famous statement "I think, therefore I am" comes from, because whatever else can or can't be known, this at least is beyond doubt.

Descartes' solution to the problem of dreaming versus reality was to argue that "our memory can never connect our dreams with each other and with the course of life, in the way it is in the habit of doing with events that occur when we are awake." So to examine the possibility that you might be dreaming, you need to be awake. This is a way to distinguish dreams from reality, and so can provide a basis for holding that you aren't currently dreaming.

On the contrary, the premise behind some of the action in *Inception* is ultimately a rejection of Descartes' solution to the Dream Argument. Even when Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Dom Cobb, is dreaming in the film, he's fully aware of the possibility that he might be dreaming. So in the film it is impossible to tell whether you're dreaming or not, albeit that in many dreams within the film we see things

like the impossible staircase. In this staircase the stairs make four 90-degree turns as they ascend or descend, yet form a continuous loop, so that a person could climb them forever and never get anywhere.

Descartes tell us that we cannot dream what we have not experienced. This is why in the film the dreamers who create the worlds or 'levels' of the dreams always use pieces of places that are familiar to them. David Hume also said in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that we cannot create anything absolutely new in our thoughts, only combine experiences and ideas which are already known to us. He gives the example of a golden mountain.

We know what a mountain looks like, and what color gold is, thus we can imagine what a golden mountain looks like by combining the idea of a mountain and the color of gold. There is nothing new there. The dreamers do the same thing, creating a world filled with buildings from cities they have visited, street lamps from their old neighborhood, or the bridge from a favorite vacation spot. As one character states, "We have to draw on what we already know."

Descartes himself states that the only thing we know for sure in the state of doubt is our own thoughts, with one exception, the knowledge of God, which knowledge he uses to escape skepticism. Now, Descartes knows he is aware of God, yet is not sure how that idea got into his mind. This is where *Inception* further ties into Descartes' text.

In the context of the film, "inception" means an idea being planted in someone's mind without their knowledge of this happening. Cobb explains that this is only possible if the subject is in a deep enough sleep. Then the person can truly believe it was their own thought, created by themselves while they were dreaming. Thus while in a dream-state things can be suggested to us by people who

have invaded our dreams, which is the premise of the movie. If the dream-world in which the idea was suggested seems plausible to us, we may even remember the dream incident at a later point, believing it was our own thought.

We hear this explained in *Inception* when Cobb tells us that he used inception on his wife. In *Inception*, in a dream, time is slower: days can pass there in what amounts to only a few minutes or an hour in the conscious world. Mr and Mrs Cobb were trapped in a dream for what amounted to a weekend in reality, but was something like fifty years in the dream. In an effort to make her want to leave the dream world, he planted in her mind the seed of the forgotten idea that that world was not reality. Unfortunately, when she returned from the dream-state to reality, she still firmly believed that the world around her was not real. She felt that the only way to break the dream and return to reality was to kill herself, and tragically, she does just that.

A Dream Within A Dream?

Can the central idea of *Inception* really happen? Can an idea be planted into the minds of others while they are sleeping?

While we are awake we can have ideas implanted – we can be influenced to make

certain decisions, and we can be persuaded to think or act a certain way. Marketing companies for example are paid to persuade you to buy products. If this can be done when we're wide awake, why not while sleeping, too? You can speak to someone when they are asleep and they will answer, so why not plant an idea in that way? The words you say will become part of that person's dream world. Upon waking they will think a great idea has sparked up from their night's rest. This concept is entirely possible – maybe not the way the film shows it, but possible nonetheless.

The question remains, what distinguishes dream from reality? This question is precisely why the film *Inception* ends in doubt over whether Cobb is still dreaming or awake. By supposing we can think we're dreaming whether or not we are, *Inception* makes dreams nearly indistinguishable from reality. However, the film's protagonists have real-world objects called 'totems', which have weights or other properties known only to their owners. They use them so that they cannot be deceived about being in a dream by someone else. Only in the real world will a totem fall the way it is supposed to fall, for example. Therefore when the totem is thrown, spun, or held, its



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owner can tell if they are in a dream-state or in reality.

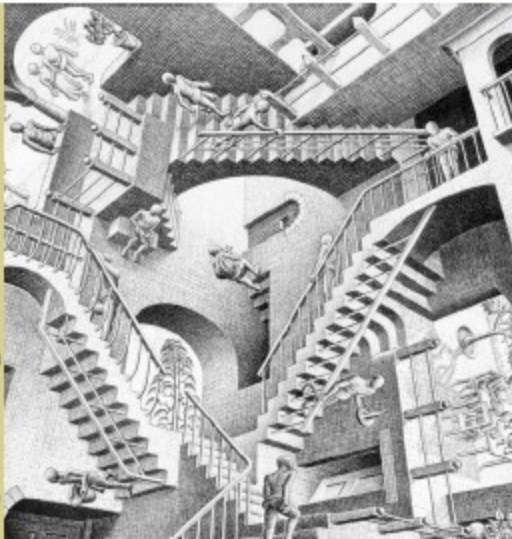
When Cobb walks into his house at the end of the film, he spins his totem, a spinning top, then proceeds to walk outside to greet his children. A sign that he is in a dream would be that the top continued spinning forever. We are left seeing the totem spinning on the table – then the film cuts to the credits. We are not sure if the totem spins forever, or falls. Even if the spinning top had toppled over at the end of the film, it would still be impossible to tell whether Cobb was dreaming, since the original state where he created this totem and defined its behaviour might itself have been a dream... This ending is perfect, as humans are still searching for the answer to this question.

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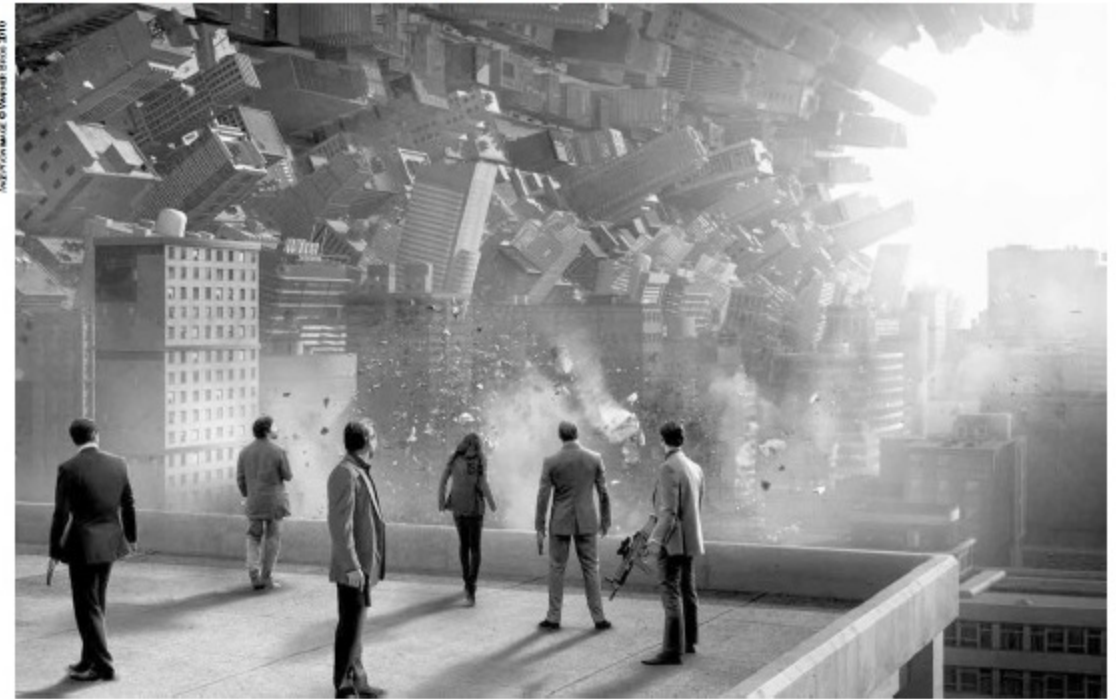
The plot of *Inception* involves Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and friends entering into a corporate executive's dream to implant an idea in his mind. For the idea to work, the dreamer must not realize that the idea has been implanted. So Cobb's team construct a three-layered dream within a dream within a dream, in which they can disguise themselves as projections of the dreamer's psyche.

A sub-plot of the movie is that Mr and Mrs Cobb once got so stuck deep inside layers of the dream-world that they grew old in their dream-life. To escape, Cobb had to convince his wife that they weren't in reality. Unfortunately, when she awoke, with that idea still in her mind she thought she was still dreaming. To escape, she killed herself.

A philosophically-interesting subtext concerns the metaphysical status of Cobb throughout the film: Is the whole film itself an elaborate dream of Cobb's? At the end we are deliberately left unsure what is the case.



If this happens to you, you know you're dreaming.



And this...