

## Inception Study Notes



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**Directed by:** Christopher Nolan

**Certificate:** 12

**Running time:** 148 mins

**Release date:** 16 July 2010

### Synopsis:

Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is an expert at the dangerous, rarely performed skill of inception – infiltrating people’s dreams to plant an idea that may change their actions or ideologies when they wake. He is also in exile from his home in the US, hunted across the globe for allegedly murdering his wife. When Cobb and his team of ‘extractors’ are offered the deadly task of performing inception upon the heir to a business conglomerate, he sees the last chance to earn the privilege of returning home. Risking everything, Cobb ventures deep into the dream world where anything can happen, minutes last decades, and the line between the subconscious and reality becomes increasingly blurred...

## Before viewing

The trailer for *Inception* garnered huge attention as it highlighted the film's unique look, mind-bending concepts and Hans Zimmer's memorable, grinding score.

- *Inception* quickly became known as a film with a complicated plot, but to what extent does the trailer for *Inception* indicate that the film has an incredibly complex story?
- What elements of the film does the trailer seem to emphasise?
- Does the trailer call to mind the look or influence of any other films?
- To what extent does the trailer suggest *Inception* is a mainstream blockbuster?

## After viewing: action cinema – 'dumb movies' for 'dumb people' \* ?

Academic Yvonne Tasker explored the statement above in her essay on gender in action films. But is *Inception* simply another 'dumb' action movie or is it something else? Explore this debate in reference to the following areas:

### Masculinity

- How are DiCaprio and the character he plays different or similar to...
  - a) The muscle-bound, impervious action heroes of the 1980s (e.g. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone as well as contemporary equivalents such as The Rock and Vin Diesel)?
  - b) The leaner, more vulnerable and/or feminised action heroes of the 1990s (e.g. Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson)?

### Femininity

- What function does the character of Ariadne (Ellen Page) serve? Could this character have served the same purpose if it was a male role? What particular narrative function that you may expect from this sort of character does Ariadne not serve?
- Is the character of Mal (Marion Cotillard) problematic? Think about the way she is presented: does she seem to be stereotyped? If so, in what way?

## 'The Hero's Journey'

- Look at Joseph Campbell's theory of 'The Hero's Journey' using the websites below. How closely does Cobb's journey adhere to this archetypal narrative framework?

<http://www.mccli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/ref/summary.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Heroesjourney.svg>

## Vladimir Propp

- Propp's character archetypes, first applied to Russian folktales in 1928, are listed below. If you are not already familiar with these, look them up. What roles would you assign to the characters from *Inception*? Are any archetypal characters missing from *Inception*'s narrative, or are there any characters with more than one function?

- the hero
- the villain
- the dispatcher
- the helper
- the Princess/prize
- the father of the Princess
- the donor
- the false hero

## Target audience

- How does *Inception* appeal to teenage boys?
- How does it try to appeal to other audiences such as 30+ males, women and older audiences?

## The 'MacGuffin'

*Inception* had been criticised for having a weak and indifferent plot device - a person, object or situation that gives the plot momentum and signals the end of the narrative once it is obtained, solved or dealt with. Some good examples of plot devices include the bomb on the bus in *Speed* (1994), the shark in *Jaws* (1975) or the Ark of the Covenant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1983). Plot devices are otherwise known as 'MacGuffins' - a phrase coined by Alfred Hitchcock.

- Who or what is *Inception*'s MacGuffin?
- What happens once the MacGuffin is dealt with at the end of the film?
- Why do you agree or disagree with the criticism outlined above?

## **An unconventional blockbuster**

*Inception* breaks a number of Hollywood 'rules' that could have alienated mainstream audiences, yet it was one of the most successful films of 2010 taking nearly £36m at the UK box office. Film Critic Mark Kermode voted *Inception* the best film of 2010 because it proved that Hollywood blockbusters didn't need to be 'dumb and stupid' in order to be a critical and commercial success.

- What elements of *Inception* could have alienated audiences?
- Are the various dream levels differentiated in any way so that audiences can keep track? Can you explain how?
- What is unique about the film's opening sequence and the closing shot?
- Is *Inception* the 'brainiest' blockbuster ever? Find and discuss other possible candidates for this title.

\* Tasker, Y., *Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, The Body, and The Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema in Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinity in the Hollywood Cinema* (S. Cohen & I. R. Hark eds) Routledge, 1992 (pp. 230 – 244)

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