

Inception

(2010, Nolan, US/UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)

Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area Spectatorship Ideology

Rationale for study

Nolan's film offers a great deal in terms of looking at key core aspects and spectatorship and ideology. It is the perfect example of an intelligent high concept film which constantly challenges the spectator's perceptions of narrative positioning and fully utilises digital technology in an incredibly engaging fashion. It is a perfect film to start the course with as it feeds into the students existing knowledge of American cinema but also takes them a great deal further.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

The recruitment of Ariadne (23.58 – 27.10)

We see Cobb and Ariadne in a café as Cobb explains the way that dreams work and how they are created. As she slowly realises that she is in a dream, chaos ensues with objects exploding in slow motion. As she seemingly dies, she wakes in the warehouse we have seen slightly earlier. The 'active' response pulls together this information, positioning the spectator with this new character Ariadne.

End Sequence (129min - 133min)

After arriving back in the US after the 'inception' Cobb is finally allowed back into the country. Through a series of point of view and establishing shots, the team (and Fischer) silently acknowledge each other at the airport arrivals, linking into conventions of the heist film. As spectators we

have also been a part of 'the team'. Equally the uncertain ending of the film does raise important points about interpretation and positioning.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

Wally Pfister's distinctive use of different colour palettes to distinguish the different dreamlayers – from layer 1 use of gun metal grey with a metallic blue tint through to the naturalistic browns of limbo.

The use of the fixed camera in the hotel hallway sequence which by rotating gives the illusion of zero gravity. This was shot in 65mm emphasising a greater level of detail.

In Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, low-key lighting is utilized to achieve a dramatic effect on the film. It is marked by extreme use of deep shadows, with very high contrast between the brightest parts of the scene and the darkest parts, which are obscured in shadows.

Mise-en-Scène

There are clear links to the noir and the heist film exemplified in the mise-en-scène. This is clearly expressed in key aspects of costume. The main male protagonists are nearly always formally dressed in suits. Mal is clearly defined in sequences as the femme fatale by the very nature of her appearance. Ariadne's transformation from naïve student to fully-fledged member of the team is also developed by the change in her costume.

The film skips across a huge variety of locations, largely utilising urban settings from Tokyo to Paris to LA. The dream layers are also clearly marked by location (exterior/interior), weather (rain/snow) and also costume once again in order to help the spectator to make sense of the narrative.

We rarely see the protagonists in a domestic setting apart from Cobb's dream sequences when

he reflects on his past life with Mal and also the end of the film when he is reunited with his children. The bulk of the developmental sequences occur in a largely warehouse setting where we learn about the techniques of entering dreams and expose the tensions between characters. The warehouse is also returned to in dream layer 1.

Editing

The non-linear nature of much of the narrative is a fundamental part of how editing determines meaning in *Inception*. The flash-forward at the start of the film with Cobb meeting Satio in limbo, only fully makes sense after the film's climax is a good example of this. The use of flashback is also essential in constructing Cobb's version of the past and outlining his previous inception of Mal and the disastrous effects of this.

The use of parallel editing in the major dream sequence is dependent on understanding the way that time and space have been set up in the narrative. The different uses of implied time frames in each layer, supplemented by the use of slow-motion add a particular sense of tension to the sequence as a whole.

Fast-cutting is an integral part of a number of the action sequences – the opening Japanese battle, the chase in Mombasa and the climax of the film in limbo.

Sound

The film's composer Hans Zimmer used leitmotif from Edith Piaf's 'Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien' throughout the movie. The music slows down based on the dream level we are currently in. The deeper we are, the slower the music plays back (and vice versa). Again, this directly correlates with the time-flow in various levels of the dream. The deeper the level of a dream the slower the tempo of music.

In the main score Zimmer wanted to emphasise the emotional states of the characters, particularly that of Cobb. The second plot line of Cobb's relationship with his dead wife Mal is expressed through a mixture of nostalgia and sadness in Zimmer's music and this is apparent in a number of scenes – Mal's suicide, the flashback in limbo and the film's resolution.

The way that music rising in tempo and pitch shifts in sound is used to transition from dream layer to dream layer. This is further supported by the use of sound bridges throughout the film which, alongside parallel editing, supports and reinforces meaning.

The use of reverb within some of the dream sequences to accentuate the surreal atmosphere.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

The representation of the flawed hero is key here. Cobb is haunted by his past mistakes, the death of his wife and his estrangement from his children. His leadership of the team and the risks that he takes at a number of points in the film put his colleagues in danger. He is a psychologically damaged individual, whose point of view is highly questionable in the narrative as evidenced by his version of past events and the ending shot.

There are few female characters in the film – but the two that are most prominent, Mal and Ariadne, are crucial to the overall development of the narrative. Mal is a tragic but also a dangerous figure cut adrift from reality and who acts as the main driver for Cobb's actions. She also acts as the main barrier to the main inception of Fischer. She represents a number of standard female representations – the mother, the lost love, the irrational woman. Ariadne on the other hand the architect of the dreamscape and also acts as a helper and sounding board for Cobb.

The main plot point of the film, the planting of an idea in Robert Fischer's brain is very important in looking at how capitalism is represented here. Satio who commissions the job, does so to stop Fischer's corporation from gaining too much control of the world's energy supply, which he says will mean that they will be able to blackmail governments and become a major superpower. His motives seem altruistic, but there is an interesting sense of who will really gain from Cobb and his team's job – Satio perhaps?

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

The film, from the outset, is driven by a number of huge VFX driven set-piece sequences, which denote the action segments of the film. These are broken up by periods of reflection and character development. In this sense this is a typical high concept film. What makes it different is the psychological framing of Cobb's character and the movement between what might be considered the dream-world and what might be reality.

Certainly the influence of noir impacts greatly on

Inception in terms of the way that characters are delineated, the use of lighting and the overall sense of fatalism which prevails in the whole narrative.

Visual and aural motifs also play a large role in constructing aspects of the mise-en-scène (totems, water, trains, lifts, war) and aiding meaning throughout the narrative.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

Certainly the film taps into the way that video games construct narratives and with the use of different layers echoing levels, different things happening at the same time at different speeds, playing with the idea of linearity and the links to interactivity. Of course one of the main audiences for this film would be those who are most likely to play these games.

Historical

Nolan's films, certainly post 9-11, do tap into ideas around trauma (nearly always male), grief and the dislocation of memory. Equally important in this film is the crisis around masculinity afflicting Cobb's character.

Political

The power of the multi-national conglomerate is at the heart of the film's narrative. The emphasis on changing the young Fischer's mind can be seen as a necessary consequence of the industrial espionage enacted on Satio's orders.

Technological

The use of digital technology in terms of creating

these separate dream-worlds is an important part of the film's appeal. That said Nolan's insistence on this film being shot on 35/65mm film, his dismissal of 3D and his support for the IMAX counters the prevailing use of technology in Hollywood.

Institutional

Warner Brothers who produced the film put a great deal of money into its production and marketing and it made \$825 million at the box office. Nolan had signed on to make the Dark Knight trilogy and this film was made between the second and third film. In many respects it felt like a return to Nolan's more typical auteuristic concerns.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - SPECTATORSHIP AND IDEOLOGY- STARTING POINTS

Right from the beginning of the film we are positioned as active spectators attempting to make meaning from the cues offered to us by the narrative.

With the use of non-linear techniques, meaning slowly dawns on the spectator as to what the main conflict of the film is – Cobb's guilt over Mal's inception. This is supported by a number of visual and aural cues throughout the narrative.

Possibly the most affecting element around spectatorship is the way that the audience are positioned at the end of the film with the spinning top. The lack of clear resolution offered here and the potential for different conclusions and readings is probably what the film is best remembered for.