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# Cinema And The Unconscious: Filmic Representations of Dreams

Branson Stowell

Branson.Stowell@Colorado.EDU

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# Cinema and the Unconscious: Filmic Representations of Dreams

Branson Stowell

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*Thesis Advisor*

Melinda Barlow | Film Studies

*Committee Members*

Melinda Barlow | Film Studies

Giulia Bernardini | Humanities

Jennifer Peterson | Film Studies

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## I. Abstract

*“Dreams are the touchstones of our characters.” - Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

The ubiquitous nature of dreams works to connect all humankind through its powerful presence in both our waking and sleeping life. I became curious about the unconscious after I recorded a series of dreams that I experienced last summer. After looking at this phenomena from the outside, I became invested in the narrative aspect of dreams and the personal nature the dreamer has with each dream. It then occurred to me how significant dreams are in our daily life. We experience thousands of dreams throughout our lifetime - varying constructions of our unconscious reassembled night after night. One of the remarkable things about dreams is that only the individual gets to experience them directly. There have been many cultural attempts to capture the dream experience. From the paintings of Salvador Dali to the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, dreams have been a popular catalyst for artistic creation. When film came into existence, it too tried to capture that special, esoteric quality which was seemingly exclusive to the world of the dream. I noticed the special relationship between film and the unconscious and wanted to probe further into these cinematic interpretations of dreams. With the recommendation of a book, *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming* by Michel Jouvet, I began to study the mechanics behind dreams. This led me to consider the way that dreams have been adapted into cinema and also led me to notice the similarities between the cinematic representations of dreams and the scientific mechanics laid out in Jouvet's book. I then began crafting my thesis based around two distinct dream films: *Inception* and *Mulholland Dr.* Using the book as a basis to study the films, I crafted my thesis poised to “...examine the intertwining nature of dream analysis and cinematic

*representations of dreams.*” This paper provided illuminating evidence to the ways that films about dreams have crafted dreams and used the concept of dreaming to further add to the context of the film.

## II. Introduction

Dreams are the fragmented fabric of the human experience, realizations of the mind projected into the unconscious. They have mystified people for millennia with their ability to draw on the experiences in the real world and repurpose them in unique and curious ways. Their cryptic, muted nature makes them a popular subject for cultural reinterpretation. From their inception, the earliest cinematic incarnations have been influenced by dreams. Dreams unique relationship with the unconscious - their ability to project ideas and thoughts on a subtextual level - have inspired cinematic creations that transcend genre. In this paper, intend to investigate the interweaving mechanics between the cinema and the human phenomenon known as dreams. Dreams, the unconscious projections of the mind, tend to incorporate experiences and elements which we encounter in our daily lives. Similarly, cinema also incorporates bits and pieces of the real world for its intrinsic, narrative and non-narrative purposes. However, as real as they sometimes seem, film and our own unconscious both have aspects which indicate that they are other than the reality in which we live.

This paper provide a brief background on the human unconscious, surveying the proposed purposes and explanations for dreams. This will help contextualize the contemporary approaches toward creating the “dream” in cinema. Looking at different dream theories provided by Jouvett and others allows perspective into the different cinematic approaches to the visual realization of dreams. In this paper, I will argue that dream films heavily incorporate elements of dream theory in order to best replicate the phenomenon known as dreaming.

This paper will continue with a close analysis of two contemporary films, *Mulholland Dr* (Lynch, 2001) and *Inception* (Nolan, 2010) which use “dreams” as a mechanism for narrative exploration. Both films use dreams as a narrative backdrop and interweave elements of dream theory through both narrative and visual elements. *Mulholland Dr* captures the idea of a dream environment through the use of its loose narrative structure and its visual abnormalities. I will explore the ways *Mulholland Dr* touches on dream subjects such as dream consciousness, memory repression and ambiguity. *Inception* heavily incorporates dream theory in order to create a visual representation of the dream environment. I will explore the ways *Inception* treats the dream environment, the way the real world interacts with the dream world and the concept of a ‘dream within a dream’. The close analysis will illuminate the ways that both films represent different dream mechanisms, incorporate dream theory and contribute to the visualization of a dream environment. Through the use of both films, I will illustrate the way that dream films incorporate dream theories to manifest a cinematic interpretation of dreams.

### **Michel Juvet**

Before delving into the analysis of oneiric space and architecture in films structured around dreaming, it is germane to inquire about the physiological and metaphorical nature of dreams. In this paper, I will utilize sections from *The Paradox of Sleep, The Story of Dreaming* by Michel Juvet to illuminate parallels between the anatomy of dreams and the different cinematic interpretations of popular dream theory. Juvet, a prominent figure in dream research, spent decades researching neurobiology and oneiric science. He pioneered the idea of ‘paradoxical sleep’, a function during REM sleep, as well as helped define its counterpart, slow-

wave sleep. Through his research, he has worked to connect dreams to personality, history and genetics. Jouvett's dream research utilized experiments on a variety of mammals, from cats to human beings and the biological results of which are consulted in this book.

Jouvett unifies the pragmatic with the abstract as he combines research about the consistency and prevalence of certain dreams with broader theories about dream purpose. This includes dreams as a manifestation of repressed memory, dreams as a separate entity from the "sleeping state" and "awake state", and paradoxical sleep as a period of active dreaming. Jouvett touches on 'repressed memories' presence in dreams as memories which our conscious has tried to conceal resurfacing in a direct or indirect form in our sleep. These memories, some speculate, may contribute to our overall dream environment. His research on paradoxical sleep gave insight into when dreams become most vivid for humans: a specific period during REM sleep. It is during this time, Jouvett shows, that there is a liminal state of being - between sleeping and waking, which encompasses the "dream state". Dreaming is at its most active form when the body is engaged in paradoxical sleep. When humans wake up immediately following this period, the most vibrant depictions of dreams are obtained. The book uses popular dream theories in conjunction with years of research to create a multi-dimensional look at the reason behind dreaming and dream content.

Jouvett's research also explores the teleology of dreams, highlighting popular ideas which trace the cultural and scientific purposes of dreams. He argues potential evolutionary origins of dreams lie in their ability to promote individuality. Dreams are the fabric of the individual's thoughts; their makeup is motivated by the ego<sup>1</sup>. Humans often have familiar experiences in

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. pg 147.



dreams, which are collected from their lives. In this way, dreams tend to promote a sense of identity. Jouvét also proposes several theories on the origin of dream *content*. He analyzes several dreams for the prevalence of certain thematic elements and uses that data to illustrate the way events in the real world permeate the dream. He notes that certain details from the last several days have greater prevalence in the dream environment<sup>2</sup>. The book illustrates the different “makeup” of the dream environment by examining the relationship between the dreamer’s life and the content in their dreams.

Jouvét argues that one of the issues with dreams is that they are a “phenomenon without function”<sup>3</sup>. Searching for the biological function of dreams is difficult because of the limited ability to study the unconscious. But, it has become a popular practice to examine dreams from a psychological perspective due to the widespread presence of narrative ‘symbology’. Dreams are omnipresent in humanity and have been a source of inspiration for many individuals due to the perceived messages they contain. Much like the cinema, dreams contain a ‘narrative’, which presents a message from the unconscious. But, dreams are spontaneously experienced, whereas films are meticulously composed with themes, ideas and characters deliberately used to provoke associations and conjure specific feelings. Jouvét discusses dreams as a message-carrying mechanism in his chapter, “Dream Memories.” Certain symbols, people and themes often appear in dreams to relay an unconscious message to the viewer<sup>4</sup>. The idea for the novel *Frankenstein*, the sewing machine, and the discovery of the structure of DNA are all ideas purportedly

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<sup>2</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 67

<sup>3</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 9

<sup>4</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 74

prompted through dreams had by the creator<sup>5</sup>. In each instance, the dream yielded some greater ‘meaning’. Freud refers to the ‘meaning’ in dreams as *latent content*, which is masked by the *manifest content*, the actual imagery and events in the dream<sup>6</sup>. The symbology of the latent content in dreams is akin to the use of symbols and visual motifs in film. By understanding how dreams are influenced by our daily lives from a scientific perspective, we can get a better grasp as to how these dreams are then translated onto the screen. The screen contextualizes the dream within the greater structure of the plot in the same way that real dreams are contextualized within the structure of the dreamer’s life. Films about dreams take into account the way that dreams affect our lives and the way that dreams can blend reality and the unconscious to create this “other place” in between, what Jouvét would refer to as the “third state of being”<sup>7</sup>. The desire to understand the function of dreams leads to an array of interpretations of dream content, which cultural outlets, such as film utilize for their narrative ability.

Jouvét’s writing on the cultural history of dreaming allows insight into the way dreams have been used and interpreted by discrete communities. In a chapter titled, “The Natural History of Dreaming”, Jouvét examines theories about dreams through a number of cultural lenses. The earliest dream theory links dreams to some part of oneself fundamentally different from the body, an “*untiring and invisible spirit which stays awake during sleep*”<sup>8</sup>. Contemporary societies such as the Masai of Kenya, who do not wake a sleeper for fear the spirit will not be able to reenter

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<sup>5</sup> Logie, Robert. "9 Famous Inventions Inspired by Dreams - Infographic - The Blog." Dormeo UK 05 Jan. 2015. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. pg 149.

<sup>7</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 37

<sup>8</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 28

the body<sup>9</sup>, believe in a strong connection between dreaming and the metaphysical. Some believe dreams are a way to connect to God and others believe they can show the future. By studying the cultural significance of dreams around the world, we reveal varying approaches to its current significance. Films, being an outlet of cultural exploration, often harnesses the perceived connection between dreams and the metaphysical in order to create a deeper sense of meaning.

Jouvet notes the powerful sensory combination of sight and sound within dreams. One study he mentions regarding “Dream Recall”<sup>10</sup>, notes how certain messages within dreams carry over better than others. However, recalling these messages in detail is difficult unless done immediately following paradoxical sleep. Certain details get skewed and sometimes the subject is not completely confident that they remember what they dreamed. Nonetheless, when the messages do come through, people often have a desire to share and have them interpreted, regardless of the amount of the details within the dream they remember. When recalling dreams, the visual details are often the most vibrant. During a dream, other senses, such as sound may be engaged through instances such as dialogue, though images tend to be the most prevalent descriptors in dreams.

Dreams have had a significant cultural impact due to their shared experience across the species. The tradition of communal dream-sharing has gone back millennia and was experienced in cultures across the world. Dream analysis has had a similar longevity. Dreams create a unique, familiar narrative structure which gives people a chance to exchange their dream stories with one another. Humankind, with its history of storytelling has found dreams as a way to allow people to

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<sup>9</sup> Jouvet, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 28-29

<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> Jouvet, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 65

share esoteric unconscious experiences that are simultaneously apart of their individual experience and not. This is tantamount to the way that film is appreciated. One of the most common phenomenon for audiences viewing a film is association. As in dreams, the viewer of a film can form an emotional and psychological connection with a character they find similarities with. In dreams, they perceive the subject to be themselves in the actual dream, but upon waking, there is a dissociation from the dream and the dream subject. When recalling the dream, they believe that the experiences were simultaneously theirs as and the subject's - an "other". Because of a shared connection to the personal nature of our dreams, they have become a popular storytelling outlet which influences all forms of media.

### **Cinema and the Unconscious**

Dreams and the cinema connect intimately through their similar narrative layout, their relationship with culture and the way they interpret the individual's experience. Both dreams and films represent a union of technical complexity and abstract, metaphysical bliss. The abstract nature of the unconscious has given liberty to artists across all mediums for their individual and cultural interpretations of dreams. The popularity of both films and dreams invite a myriad possibilities for the dissection and analysis of the relationship dreamers have with their dreams. In the book, *The Power of Movies: How the Mind and Screen Interact*, Colin McGinn writes about the unique connection dreams and films share,

*"In the cinema we relive the life of the dreaming self. Movies thus tap into the dreaming aspect of human nature. Moreover, they improve upon our dream life. They give us the dreams we yearn for. It is a rare individual who is not fascinated by his own dreams, with their raw*

*ability to reveal, their magical expressiveness, movies partake in this fascination. The impact of movies stems, then, at least in part, from the primal power of the dream.”<sup>11</sup>*

Films also capitalize on the possibility dreams have to transcend the body and reach the metaphysical. The intangible nature of dreams not only lends itself to to an intrinsic connection to the metaphysical, but also provides new horizons for narrative exploration. Though ambiguous, dreams contain a number of concealed elements with which the viewers can associate. Viewers *and* dreamers have strong associations with characters or symbols in their respective narrative experiences. The presence of ‘symbology’ provides a point of reference for the viewer/dreamer to connect with their respective personal experience. This paper will use dream theories and research laid out by Michel Juvet in comparison with films by David Lynch and Christopher Nolan in order to examine the intertwining nature of dream analysis and cinematic representations of dreams.

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<sup>11</sup> McGinn, Colin. *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon, 2005. 192-193. 202-203.

### III. Mulholland Dr.

Films and dreams have an intrinsic connection through their use of a similar narrative platform and their mutual engagement of the viewer's mind. Thus, films use dreams as a narrative device and incorporate their symbolic and liminal nature to affect the course of the plot and the meaning behind the film. Within a given film, the viewer is often able to discern the conscious realm from the unconscious realm. Films are able to accomplish this stark contrast between the waking world and the dream world by distorting the sound, changing the color or several other common methods which identify an 'unconscious' reality. However, within dreams, the dreamer is often *not* aware that they are in the unconscious. Pieces of reality and details help create links to the conscious world, aiding the façade dreams build upon. These details are often symbolic manifestations of recent memory. Films use this dream trait to derive meaning and explore the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious.

In this chapter, I will examine David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr* (2001) and its numerous incorporations of dream motifs including dream consciousness, the 'ambiguous' nature of dreams and memory repression. In the film, Lynch uses the ambiguous aspect of dreams to create a hazy, mysterious and dreamy Los Angeles. The Film Critic Roger Ebert referred to the setting as "*part Tinseltown, part film noir and all dream.*"<sup>12</sup> Visual techniques in conjunction with a loose narrative structure help turn Los Angeles into a environment inspired by the unconscious. Narratively, the film utilizes the random events which pervade dreams, connected only tangentially to the initial thought. The film also plays on the idea of memory repression within

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<sup>12</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Mulholland Drive Movie Review (2001) | Roger Ebert." Ebert/Chicago Sun-Times, 12 Oct. 2001.

dreams through its protagonist, Diane (Naomi Watts). In Jouvét's chapter, "The Labyrinth of Sleep", he argues that one of the purposes of dreams might be to act as memory cleansers, providing space for new thought by expelling old ones<sup>13</sup>. Throughout the film, issues that affect Diane in the real world manifest themselves in symbolic ways throughout the dream, which helps the viewer differentiate between the events in the real world and the events in the dream world. The film does an excellent job of playing with the viewer's notion of real world conscious and dream conscious. Using two scenes for close analysis, I will lay out the ways in which dream theory intersects with elements of the film.

*Mulholland Dr.* tells the story of a young woman named Diane trying to make it in Hollywood who gets whisked into a search for a mysterious woman's identity. When we first meet the protagonist, she is called Betty (Naomi Watts), the name which she uses in the dream world. Betty is struggling to solidify her career as an actress and make all of her big Hollywood "dreams" come true (in this context, "dreams" refers to her career aspirations). Betty encounters a mysterious woman called Rita (Laura Harding), who does not remember any personal details about her life. Betty and her mysterious, beautiful new companion travel across Los Angeles in search of clues to discover Rita's identity all while Betty attempts to secure her dream role in a big-budget Hollywood production.

### **Ambiguity**

From the beginning of the film, the sense of ambiguity and lostness envelopes the onscreen environment. The opening sequence of the film includes a group of people dancing to

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<sup>13</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 11

swing music set against a purple background with dancing silhouettes sprinkled throughout the frame. Immediately, the film takes you out of reality with an unclear setting and characters unfamiliar to the viewer. Lynch then transitions to his rendition of the southern California landscape which contains faded colors, desolate outdoor settings and is saturated with the dark side of 'show-business'. The exteriors are filled with hazy blue skies and dimmed green grass, giving an almost artificial flavor to the environment. He does not present us with the smog-ridden, crime-infested Los Angeles, but rather the brighter, superficial side of the city that embodies the archetypal 'Hollywood' lifestyle. But, the sense of mystery is omnipresent throughout the film, regardless of setting. The interiors favor low-key lighting which creates a sense of intimacy between the characters as well as between the viewer and the characters. Strange, unexplained appearances by characters such as Rita only aid in creating a mysterious atmosphere.

The film is set in a real location, which is familiar to the dreamer, Diane. Because locations visited throughout the film are real places, it adds credibility to the idea that everything shown takes place in reality. Certain narrative elements, however, distort the sense of direction the narrative takes. Characters who have no previous presence in the film appear out of context and make certain scenes feel 'out of place'. However, dreams act a lot this way, jumping from one subject to the next, clinging onto certain details and mixing them with other ones. This forces the audience to question the validity of the reality which is presented to them, leaving the film setting 'ambiguous' - never quite grounded in reality or the dream world. I will now give an example of a scene in which dream-like elements create a lapse in the realistic depiction of the film and promote dream-like structure within the film.



In the scene, a man named Dan and his friend are at a diner called Winkie's, a restaurant symbolic of typical americana. This is the first and only audience interaction with these characters. In the scene, Dan and his unnamed friend sit down in a booth and enjoy a light breakfast while analyzing a dream Dan had. Dan is a visually nervous character, with dark features and a quick, shaky delivery. His friend appears apathetic throughout most of the scene and is the more domineering of the duo.

In the scene Dan begins recounting his dream by discussing how the elements of his dream were set in reality, which made it difficult to determine whether or not he was dreaming. The audience also struggles to determine whether or not the film is a dream because of the realistic nature of the setting mixed with the unusual narrative structure. Dan says that the dream takes place in the restaurant they are in and the setting for the dream was altogether similar to the current circumstances. He talks about a number of mundane events which occur in the restaurant regarding the food they ate and what various background characters did. The tempo of the scene begins to slow down at this point and he goes on to describe how at the end of the dream, they walk around the outside of the building, only to discover there was a man with a terrifying face who confronts him. Dan really emphasizes the physical horror of this face waiting to confront him around the corner. The friend remains skeptical and continues to reassure him that it was "just a dream" and proceeds to try and convince him that he is living in reality. But, as the pair leave the restaurant, the friend begins to re-enact a number of elements of Dan's dream, causing Dan to become visually anxious as if his dream is coming true. The dream begins to mesh with reality and Dan's dream events play out in the 'real world'. At this point, every event in Dan's dream had comprised of ordinary elements which could otherwise take place in the real world. It

is at this moment that the dream world directly invades the world of the film. The scene ends with the camera making its way slowly around the corner to see if Dan's suspicion (and the audience's suspicion as well) actually comes true. The terrifying-faced figure does appear, complicating the audience's perception of reality. This "living nightmare" sequence is both shocking and confusing as it further contorts the audience's sense of reality by realizing the dream of this character, which challenges the reality of the setting. In our dreams, the locations and the characters often seem completely normal to us because often we are unaware of the fact that we are dreaming. In this film, we are set up to believe the same thing. But, this scene contains an element of the supernatural - something unrealistic and we cannot logically fit it into the structure of the film. Therefore it contributes to the random, dream-like narrative structure that the film uses, creating a sense of ambiguity only present in dreams.

The mere presence of characters like these contribute to the disorienting, nonsensical nature of the film. Some characters in the film seem to have an ephemeral presence - lacking any true solid character development, becoming these mysterious shadow-like figures which appear from scene to scene. This is akin to what can happen in dreams, where characters and locations can change from one instance to another without any discrete logic behind it.

Another scene which embodies these dream-like traits deals with a mysterious "Cowboy figure" and a Hollywood director. One of the film's subplots deals with a Hollywood director rebelling against the studio to make his own casting decision. In one scene, the studio sends the Director to engage with a strange Cowboy in the middle of nowhere. They meet in some unnamed area with a lack of features, other than a corral in the background. The Cowboy has an uneasy appearance with a deadpan stare, slow delivery and lack of eyebrows. At this point in the

film, there is no further background on the character and the scene does not provide any detail either. When the Director first arrives, the Cowboy asks whether or not a man's "attitude shapes his way"<sup>14</sup>. The director looks confused and really emphasizes the Cowboy's odd line of questioning with his skepticism. The nature of these questions are scattered and random, which further elevates the ambiguous nature of the scene. They continue with this odd exchange until the Cowboy establishes himself as an affiliate of the studio by discussing who should be cast as the female lead. He remarks "*If you see me one more time, you've done good. If you see me two more times, you've done bad.*" From these remarks, it could be assumed that some form of punishment will await the Director should he not follow these demands and it creates the expectation that the audience will see this Cowboy again. However, this particular situation is never revisited. The Director is seldom seen in the remainder of the film and never do the viewers get to experience a direct confrontation between the Cowboy and him again. By using these transient characters and non-sequitur dialogue, Lynch plays on the unique narrative structure of dreams and creates an ambiguous feeling for the audience - an uncertainty regarding whether or not what they are seeing is the real world or a dream.

### **Dream Consciousness**

*"Dreams are only true while that last, can we at best say more of life?"*(Ellis, H. The World of Dreams)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mulholland Dr.. Dir. David Lynch. Universal Pictures. 2001. DVD.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, Havelock. 'The World of Dreams.' 1912

*Mulholland Dr.* also plays with the idea of dream consciousness. Diane wakes up at the end of the film and immediately creates a conscious barrier between those events and the events prior. The film never outright establishes that any part of the story could be apart of a dream, instead it uses the dual persona of the protagonist as a way to differentiate two distinct realities. Events and locations from the dream world appear later on in the real world, but in a different context. This creates two starkly different stories with different characters, one which lives in the waking of Diane and the other belonging to her dream conscious.

Within the dream consciousness, the elements of the film seem positive. Betty attends auditions and gets great feedback from casting directors who say she is ‘perfect’ for the role. Her life is constantly filled with excitement after encountering this stranger who takes her on this journey. The dream consciousness creates an entire environment based around the mind of the dreamer. In Betty’s case, her dream was strongly influenced by the Freudian prospect of *wish fulfillment*. Regarding wish fulfillment, Freud writes, “*Dreams show us the wish as already fulfilled; they represent its fulfillment as real and present; and the material employed in dream representation consists principally of sensory images*”<sup>16 17</sup>. Everything that she ever wanted in the real world was realized only through the workings of her unconscious. Betty felt that her desires were viscerally fulfilled in the dream consciousness. She could see, feel and experience her success as if it were happening to her in the real world. This is in contrast to the ‘waking conscious’, which limited these possibilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. 151.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition. Trans. by A. A. Brill. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913. pg 173-174

At the end of the film, a 'waking conscious' is revealed. In the final moments, Betty wakes up as 'Diane' into the dark reality of the world in which she is actually living. This awakening is an awakening for the audience as well. The initial "fake" look that Lynch's Los Angeles once had now dons a much darker appearance. The colors become darker, the scenery does not look as contrived and the overall mood becomes much more serious. Diane looks completely disheveled and her accomplice, Rita, is no longer by her side - instead she has returned to being Diane's rival. She looks as if she has just woken up from a daze, her hair messy, her face plastered with a lasting look of distress. She examines her environment and seems to have realized the switch from the dream consciousness to the waking consciousness. Now that everything is visually different, both Betty and the audience question the validity of everything that has happened in the film. Did the entire film take place during her dream? Just as things seem concrete, the film takes another surreal turn. This creates a distinct barrier between the waking consciousness and dream consciousness. All of the previous optimism and splendor present in her character have vanished and she now looks broken. She has left the realm of the dream conscious and entered the harsh reality of the waking conscious. Lynch uses natural, outdoor lighting and a bright color palette to give identity to the dream consciousness. On the other hand, the waking consciousness is riddled with dark lighting, foggy sets and relatively stormy weather.

By revealing the waking conscious at the end, Lynch evaluates the escapist effect dreams have on humans. In Diane's case, her dream was filled with her hopes and metaphorical *dreams* (as in aspirations), waking up brought to her attention the fact that everything was a product of her unconscious. In a worse scenario, her dream conscious projections could have been merely

what she wished she was dreaming. In Jouvét's section on 'Dream Consciousness', he writes, "*memories of mental activity on waking up during any stage of sleep could represent memories created during the waking process itself*"<sup>18</sup>. In that respect, the film could have merely revealed Diane's hopes. Diane created her own visually appealing world inside her dream consciousness: ornate Hollywood sets, perfect Los Angeles weather and fairly classic dress with white - a symbol for her initial purity - being a prevalent color. In one scene, Diane auditions for a role in a big-budget Hollywood production. She enters the room, which features low-key lighting and casting agents surround her as she approaches her scene partner, an older greying man. Their age and beauty are meant to contrast one another and create the expectation that their relationship will be cordial. After the director signals them to begin, the two actors perform their scene which is explicitly erotic in nature. They begin kissing one another passionately. The film cuts back and forth between the passionate french kissing and the nonchalant onlooking casting agents. The kissing is distressing, it feels artificial given the circumstances and the casual responses from the casting agents. This is a part of the logic of the dream consciousness; nothing that Betty is doing is out of place at all. When the scene ends, the agents congratulate both parties on their impressive acting abilities, leading Betty to believe she has acquired the job. Within the dream consciousness, socially inappropriate behavior, which is initially repressed, may manifest itself in an erotic fashion. Sexual desires are acted upon and validated, such as they were for Betty. In her case, both parties are even rewarded for the quality of their performance. In the waking consciousness, Betty has none of the glamour. Based on her meager living circumstances and

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<sup>18</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 106

perpetual look of distress, her waking consciousness experiences endless disappointment in casting and little praise for her acting.

By creating two distinct settings using two distinct identities of the same person, *Mulholland Dr* explores the separation between the waking conscious and the dream conscious, which reveals potential unfortunate consequences.

### **Memory Repression**

*Mulholland Dr.* also incorporates the relationship between dream and memory through the protagonist, Diane, who has several events from her real life manifested in her dreams both literally and symbolically. As we dream, we incorporate elements from our daily lives into the world of the dream<sup>19</sup>. As *Mulholland Dr* is partly Diane's dream, details from her life have become symbolically incorporated into that dream. It is the details within the dream, Freud argues, which reveal the greatest amount<sup>20</sup> about the purpose of the dream. In Diane's case, her failed attempt at acting and her subsequent reaction has infiltrated her unconscious. By repeating elements and displacing characters from Diane's memory, Lynch taps into the latent content behind these seemingly random events and creates a greater overall purpose for the dream.

One of the ways Diane's past resurfaces in her dream is the transference of her own identity onto Rita. During the dream, Diane is called 'Betty' and they determine that Rita (the mysterious woman) may be the true 'Diane'. In the real world, Rita is Diane's rival, someone who is more successful and well-liked by the Hollywood community. So, by assigning Rita the

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<sup>19</sup> Jouvett, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 70

<sup>20</sup> <sup>20</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. pg 157-159.

‘Diane’ identity in the dream, she is also possibly hoping the memory of Rita’s success will fuse with the ‘Diane’ name. Rita acts as a foil to ‘Betty’ in both looks and actions: Rita is quiet and cautious, Betty is peppy and optimistic. Rita is the brunette with a dark color palette and Diane is the blonde who is associated with lighter colors. Diane’s memories of Rita’s recent successes exhibit in her transference of identity by making Rita into ‘Diane’, symbolizing her jealousy over her rival. This is similar to the idea of displacement in Freudian terminology, where something affecting the dreamer can manifest itself in a completely different and subtle form<sup>21</sup>. By stripping Rita of any identity, she loses her power. When she is later thought to be ‘Diane’, the name Diane is then infused with all the success and wealth Rita experiences. Diane’s memories from the recent events in the real world infiltrate her dreams creating symbolic purpose for the decisions within her unconscious.

One of the more abstract examples of this follows the scene where Betty awakens and her entire environment is super odd. After she returns to the conscious world, Betty is chased by an elderly couple who have eerie, menacing smiles as they chase her down a dark hallway. Then there is a flashback to a dark club, Silencio, where her and Rita visited once in the middle of the night. Ambient echoing sounding like static from the radio covers up faint ghostly voices rattling in the distance as a key is seen on the table in the foreground. This sequence is raw and contains a lot of (in the vein of David Lynch) visual abnormalities, such as beaming red lights, miniature humans, and a light fog that is scattered throughout the house. Even though, as the audience, we are aware that Betty has awoken from her sleep and presumably left her dreams, she is still experiencing entities which lie outside reality. These can all be read as resurfacing memories

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<sup>21</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. pg 149.



from the past. The elderly couple might be representative of her parents and her fear of returning home after failing an actress. The dark atmosphere could be representative of the cold reality she lives in and the failures she has experienced. The club acts as a reminder of her competition with Rita as well as a symbol for her 'silenced' career. All these thoughts from Diane's unconscious make their way into the film, which further molds an environment inspired by the unconscious mind. Certain things that people often try to avoid in their conscious mind may resurface in dreams. This goes along with the idea of memory repression, which Freud sees as an answer to the dreamer's cathexis. Freud notes that individuals have a cathexis, or an investment of energy in people, objects or ideas, which tend to manifest themselves in our dreams<sup>22</sup>. These repressed memories may not necessarily come back in a literal form. Jouvét writes, "the repressed *psyche* of the waking state appears in dreams"<sup>23</sup>. In Diane's case, the majority of *Mulholland Dr* is made up of her psyche manifested in a dream-like state.

Dreams, though seldom referenced in the film, are ever present in its atmosphere. The ambiguous nature of characters and the environment, blended together in an indiscernible fashion suspend the audience's certainty that the film takes place in reality. The film also creates evident contrast between the conscious of waking life and the conscious of a dream. Separating the protagonist by identity creates two different versions of her: one which is dark and scorned which inhabits the real world and another which is amiable and warm, which inhabits the dream. Both experience their respective realms in completely different ways, highlighting the difference between the dream conscious and reality. *Mulholland Dr* also utilizes the unique relationship

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<sup>22</sup> Denis, Paul. "Cathexis." International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis. 2005. [encyclopedia.com](http://encyclopedia.com).

<sup>23</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 29

between memory and dreams to reveal the way elements of our past can express themselves in different and unique ways within our dreams.

#### **IV. Inception.**

*“In the cinema we relive the life of the dreaming self. Movies thus tap into the dreaming aspect of human nature. Moreover, they improve upon our dream life. They give us the dreams we yearn for.”- Michel Jouvét<sup>24</sup>*

Like films, dreams are composed of their own unique environment, complex and comprised of pieces of human identity. Dreams draw on the experience and history of the dreamer, creating a world that is familiar visually by drawing on similar surroundings, but foreign due to the void of rational logic. Films utilize the experience of the filmmaker in a similar fashion and are also subject to their own filmic logic and exist in their own reality, much like the nature of dreams. The world of the dream creates a façade of reality, allowing us to be unaware of our presence in it, because we merely accept our familiar surroundings. Occasionally, we are able to transcend this barrier of unawareness in the unconscious into a ‘lucid state’, allowing us to explore and manipulate the laws of the dream realm. Being conscious of our unconscious realm opens possibilities to reshape our dream landscape. Lucidity is difficult to achieve and manage, but when done correctly can provide an opportunity to explore the inner-workings of the mind<sup>25</sup>. Our awareness of our dream environment and our ability to mold it in different ways allows us to explore our dreams and manipulate them as well. A number of dream

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<sup>24</sup> McGinn, Colin. *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Print. pg 192-193

<sup>25</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 74

films capitalize on the narrative value possessed by lucid dreams. Allowing a character to consciously explore the dream realm allows for a more structured, digestible plot. Some films use this to explore the nature of dreams and even dreams within dreams. The concept of a 'dream within a dream' peers deep within our unconscious, layering thoughts and realities created by our mind. Awakening seems to be a cue for our re-entry into reality, but when the awakening turns out to be false, it complicates our perception of what is real and what is not. Films consciously provide outlets for humans to explore the conceptual side of dreaming. Dream films explicate the possible manifestations and layers our unconscious may create. Though they are realizations of a filmmaker and their team, films delve into the worlds crafted by our minds and allow us to experience dreams from an external perspective.

In this chapter, I will examine Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) and its incorporation of dream mechanics, including the creation and design of the dream environment, the concept of layered dreams (dreams within dreams), and the ways in which the dream world and the real world are positioned against one another. In the film, Nolan uses the dream environment as a primary setting which the characters are able to affect and manipulate in various ways. Visually, Christopher Nolan makes *Inception*'s dream environment alive and visceral, sustaining its own projections of everyday life to keep the illusion of reality. Narratively, the film tackles the concept of dreams within dreams and dream layering to emphasize the complexity of dreaming and realities contained within the human mind. The layers create multiple narratives the audience simultaneously experiences, allowing them to suture each one together to better comprehend the film. The film experiments with the idea of awareness and creates, using visual clues and narrative symbols, two distinct 'worlds' - one real

and one in the dreams. One of the primary threats to the characters in the film is the potential loss of their grip on reality. Being aware while in both worlds becomes problematic for the characters as they may lose the ability to recognize what makes a dream distinct from reality. Using two scenes and one sequence for close analysis, I will examine how these dream mechanics are manifested within the world of the film.

*Inception* (Nolan, 2010) is a film about ‘dream exploration’. The film follows a man named Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his team of ‘extractors’ who are privately contracted to infiltrate the dreams of corporate rivals in order to discover their secrets. However, a new challenge arises once Cobb is tasked to plant an original thought in the son of a dying business mogul through a concept known as ‘inception’. Cobb and his team construct a scheme which will allow them to pierce the deepest layers of the unconscious. In order to do so, Cobb hires a new dream ‘architect’ under his wings named Ariadne (Ellen Page), who will serve as the primary designer for the dream environment. She and the rest of his team each have a specific role within the dream to help keep the illusion of the dream as believable as possible. They decide that in order to create an original idea, they have to go deeper inside the mind of a person than they have ever gone before: three layers of dreaming, a dream within a dream within a dream. Cobb and his team defy logic and physics all while battling the inner-defenses of the subconscious in order to plant an original thought.

In the film, Cobb and his team are contracted by Saito (Ken Watanabe), the man in whose mind the film begins. Saito, a big corporate energy mogul, hires the team in order to influence the dissolution of his competitor's company. His competitor, a man named Maurice (Pete Postlethwaite), is riddled with illness and near the brink of death. The future of the company lies

with his son, Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). Fischer expresses feelings of remorse towards his father and intends to cash in on the benefits of inheriting a dynasty. He talks about his father's disdain towards him as a child and how the apathy he received when he was young has been revived in his feelings towards his father even on his deathbed. This dark past haunts Fischer. Like any dark piece of our past, floating around in the unconscious, Fischer's memory of his father haunts him and causes him passively lash out at his father even in his last moments of life. This is problematic for Cobb and Saito, who need Fischer to actually think positively of his father in order for their mission to work. So, they decide that by probing his unconscious later in the film, they will be able to find Fischer's insecurities hidden deep within his mind and use that to convince him to dissolve his father's company based on his old man's ailing wishes. Fischer's unconscious becomes the primary setting for the second part of the film as the team races to deepest layers of his unconscious in order to plant the raw idea.

### **The Dream Environment**

The film begins in the dream environment and manages to keep the audience unaware of the location several minutes into the film. The interior of the first dream environment shown is regal and ornate, it seems more stylistic than any ordinary building, but it is not immediately indicative of a dream environment. As opposed to conventional cinematic representations of dreams, such as color distortion, filters or radical set design, *Inception* does not use obvious indicators to reveal when the characters are in a dream. Instead, the film continues with the façade that actual dreams hold and until demonstrated by the characters in the film, remains as

realistic a location as one would expect from any other film. The world of the dream created by the mind is an immensely complex environment drawing on personal experience and imagination to create the narrative surroundings of the unconscious. *Inception* utilizes the dream environment as a primary setting throughout the film as Cobb and his team do the bulk of their work in the dream realm. Early on, the film attempts to explain its own dream mechanics through a scene where Cobb teaches Ariadne the basics of the shared dreaming experience. I will now analyze this scene in *Inception* which heavily lays out the mechanics that the film prescribes for the dream environment.

In the scene, Cobb explains the ability the dream environment has to deceive the dreamer to Ariadne, the architect-in-training. The name Ariadne draws allusions to the character of Greek myth who was associated with mazes. Her role as architect is to turn the dream into a form of insolvable maze. At the opening of the scene, Cobb and Ariadne sit outside at a Parisian café. It seems like a standard day in Paris, with scattered people and a few parked cars in the background. Except for our two main characters, everything else in the frame is not in focus. The first part of the scene uses tight framing on the two characters to prevent any immediate suspicion of the *mise-en-scène*. Cobb tells Ariadne, *“Imagine you’re designing a building, consciously creating each aspect. But sometimes it feels like it’s almost creating itself.”* As a graduate architecture student, Ariadne understands this concept. Cobb then reaches for a pencil and paper where he draws an endless circle, continuing his explanation by saying, *“In a dream, we create and perceive our world simultaneously.”*<sup>26</sup> He points out that the mind is so powerful, we are able to circumvent our awareness of being in the dream. Dreams are not already loaded into

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<sup>26</sup> *Inception*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2010. DVD

our minds, they only exist as they exist to us. What we see inside the dream is the entirety of the dream environment, though it may seem unbelievable at the time. Since the dream is a facsimile of the real world, it is only natural that we perceive it to be limitless. In the unconscious, dreams have endless possibilities, but are unlimited only so far as we have created them to be.

Cobb then draws a line through the middle of the circle and notes that we have the ability to take over the creation of the dream environment. He explains her duties as dream designer: she creates the world of the dream, they bring the subject into the dream and then the subject fills it with their subconscious. She looks taken aback and voices her skepticism about being able to create a detailed enough environment to deceive the dreamer into believing that it is reality. Cobb then points out that all dreams feel real while they are happening, it is only in reflection after awakening that the dream tended to seem strange.

Dreams force you to accept the illogic of your environment. Jouvét writes, *“Our dream consciousness reacts as if it were awake. We think that we are not dreaming. It is thus conscious awareness because we can ask ourselves if we are dreaming.”*<sup>27</sup>

The dream environment is not trapped by the barriers that the material world is, so the illogical does not seem out of place. Cobb continues by noting that no one remembers the beginning of a dream, instead they always end up in the middle somehow. He moves closer and asks her how they came to the café, to which she can not muster an answer. Eventually she comes to realize that they are experiencing a shared dream and he tells her to stay calm. The coffee begins to ripple and their dream environment begins to violently shake. A newsstand bursts and the passing pedestrians do not notice. Different pieces of the dream environment each

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<sup>27</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 77



begin to individually pop and their remains seem to remain floating in the air as if they were in a zero-gravity environment. Parts of the nearby buildings crumble, fruit stands projectile fruit high into the air and all of the pedestrians continue on slowly as if nothing was out of the ordinary. As elements of the dream environment, they do not have an awareness, they are merely products of the environment Cobb created who operate in this world to continue the illusion of the dream. All of the debris from the stands and the buildings seem to be moving progressively slower and continue to remain suspended mid-air. This represents the power that dreams have to manipulate both time and space, both of which are grounding elements of our reality. Time and space are also aspects of the world which we have little physical control over.

Ariadne and Cobb continue through the streets of Paris as Cobb explains to her the elements of the dream world. This section of the film is shot with the camera tracking the two actors. The slight oscillations in the camera movements give the impression of disorder, adding to the dream-like atmosphere. Cobb explains to her how they are currently in his subconscious and that the people surrounding them are merely projections of his own subconscious with which he can converse and even extract information from. He explains how certain symbols within the world of the dream are linked with unconscious associations our mind has, such as bank vault being the location within a dream where the most important secrets are kept because our mind associates it with security. In our mind, certain narrative symbols can have this effect manifesting themselves in different associative ways<sup>28</sup>.

Ariadne continues to scan this foreign environment embracing her awareness of the situation. She remarks, "*I guess I thought dreams would be all about the visual, but I guess it is*

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<sup>28</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition. 1913.pg 108

*more of a feel.*”<sup>29</sup> In Michel Jouvét’s chapter, “Dream Memories”, he argues that the visual aspects of dreams tend to stand out to us most while we are dreaming, and the other senses, while often present, do not tend to resonate as much with the dreamer<sup>30</sup>. However, the dream experience is an all-encompassing one which can utilize all of the senses in the human body. Dreams are a truly visceral experience that creates an illusion which envelopes you into another reality by mimicking every aspect of the one in which you already exist.

Ariadne continues her exploration of the environment by questioning the physics of the dream. Immediately after, the streets of Paris begin to unhinge. Another section of the city slowly starts to rise and the city begins to fold over on itself, stacking arrondissement onto arrondissement, one mirroring the other. Ariadne plays with the physics of this world by walking straight up a vertical street she creates, in awe at the ability she has to manipulate this new environment.

As she continues to create vertical streets and play with the environment, she notices the pedestrians, the human projections of Cobb’s unconscious, begin to stare at her. Cobb explains they are representative of his mind becoming aware that the unconscious is being manipulated by outside forces and he warns Ariadne that they will attack her if she continues changing his dream environment. She ignores his warnings and pulls off the street where there are two giant mirror doors attached to two big green columns. She pulls both mirror doors so that they are facing one another and creates a series of endless images of her and Cobb and the little section of road that they are on. Cobb and Ariadne stare at endless images of themselves reflected from the mirrors.

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<sup>29</sup> Inception. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2010. DVD

<sup>30</sup> Jouvét, Michel. The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming. pg 67

The layering in this image emphasizes the countless realities which can exist in the dream world. The absence of the camera reflected in the mirrors also draws attention to the construction of the dream, making the viewer aware of the presence of the director via his absence.<sup>31</sup> In this way, Christopher Nolan also gets his own credit for creating this dream world. The mirror's reflection also serves as an inspiration for Ariadne, who now realizes the capabilities one has within the dream world. Ariadne approaches one of the mirrors and it shatters, revealing a bridge that she can now walk across. Cobb follows Ariadne but begins to recognize the bridge. The scene then incorporates flashback images of Cobb with his deceased wife on different sections of the bridge. He explains that locations from the real world should not be used, only details from locations, otherwise they risk losing track of what is real and what is a dream. The associations that Cobb has with the bridge bring back the memory of his wife, which emotionally troubles Cobb and causes him to lose focus on the dream world around him and think about her. Cobb's projections of people begin to turn on Ariadne violently and hold her down while they keep him from interfering. Finally, Cobb's wife comes to life in his dream and stabs Ariadne while she is held back, waking them up and ending the dream.

This sequence in the film is used to explain the mechanics of *Inception's* dream environments. The dream environments in the film are inspired by elements that we all experience in our own dreams. The idea of 'ending up in the middle of a dream' is an aspect of dream recall that is fairly common. Also, the visceral nature as opposed to the strictly visual nature of dreams is also common in dream experiences. The idea that our unconscious has a protective nature is in line with Freud's idea of the unconscious as a place where the deepest and

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<sup>31</sup> -Saunders, Leon C. "Inception: Film, Dreams and Freud." – Offscreen. Offscreen, 11 May 2011. Web.

most private thoughts can be exposed<sup>32</sup>. The creation of location from details happens within the dreams and according to Jouvét is quite common<sup>33</sup>. The dream environments within *Inception* emphasize the dreams ability to mimic reality in both a visual and physical fashion. But, the film also explores the potential that dreams have to break away from these ideas and create an entire world all their own.

## **Two Worlds**

The world of the dream, like the world of the film, is meant to create the illusion that the dreamers are in the real world. The film bounces back and forth between the ‘real world’ and the ‘dream world’. The dream world is where the majority of the film’s action takes place and the real world acts as a setting for most of the plot exposition. Both are intimately connected to one another just as they are in our minds. In order for the characters in the film to enter the dream world, they must undergo a special anesthetic which connects their thoughts and keeps them sedated for a specific amount of time. Despite being technically unconscious, Cobb and his team are able to retain their awareness when they enter the mind of the dreamer. They serve as independent actors in the mind of the dreamer, allowed to do as they wish and explore the dream world as they wish. In this way, they are acting amalgamations of the two worlds.

Traveling between both worlds as often as they do, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to decipher whether they are in the real world or not. One of the awareness techniques that the team uses in the film is ‘totems’. The totems are devices which are unique to each individual,

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<sup>32</sup> <sup>32</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition. 1913. pg 52-58

<sup>33</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 70

which they know intimately and help them determine whether or not they are experiencing reality. In our dreams, there are common triggers which help determine that one is dreaming: the inability to read numbers off clock, looking at one's hands and attempting to operate a light switch are all common triggers for determining whether or not one is dreaming. Since the team spends such a significant amount of time in the dream, they have had to use totems to keep them grounded in reality. Cobb's right hand man Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who uses a specifically weighted die, points out that no one else should know the specifics of your totem or risk jeopardizing the ability to retain your reality. Cobb's totem is a top, which he spins frequently, allowing him to determine if he's in a dream. If it falls eventually, then he is safely not in a dream. These two worlds have to remain separate, or risk losing yourself in another reality. In the film, Cobb is emotionally damaged by the amount of time he spent in the dream world. The extractors have designed a waking mechanism which forces them to escape the dream, known as 'the kick'. This brings everyone in the dream back to the conscious realm. Throughout the film, Cobb expresses his desire to escape the profession and return to his children in America. In exchange for completing the final mission, Cobb is to be rewarded by having his desires filled.

The final moments in the film best express the struggle between the dream world and the real world. In the scene, Cobb finds himself in the same environment he was in at the beginning of the film. He notices his top spinning endlessly and realizes he is in a dream. His associate, who looks significantly older than he is in the real world, realizes this too and the next second, they awaken on the plane - where the mission originally began. Cobb's totem was the one thing that allowed him to escape from the dream realm, by being the only piece of the dream

able to trigger his awareness. On the plane, Cobb awakens to a flight attendant offering him an immigration form. He looks around and notices his entire team looking at him, signaling their awareness of their surroundings. Fischer, the man whose mind they infiltrated, sits in front of him, seemingly oblivious to their scheme. All signs point to a successful mission and a successful return to the real world for the team. Cobb goes through immigration at the airport, visually fearful that he may not be allowed to enter. After a moment of hesitation, Cobb is allowed back into America. He makes his way to the baggage carousel, now a free man, and encounters all of his team members along the way. No words are exchanged, only glances and smirks.

Cobb's father-in-law greets him at the gate and brings him home to see his children. It seems as though Cobb's wishes are finally being fulfilled. Cobb cannot believe everything that is happening to him, so he pulls out his totem once again and spins it on the desk. Immediately after, he notices his children playing in the yard, just as they were represented in the flashbacks, and he runs towards them. In doing so, Cobb breaks one of his biggest rules: never take your eye off of your totem. As he embraces his children, it's evident that he has forgotten about his totem entirely. The camera then slowly pans and zooms toward the spinning top, which continues to spin as the camera moves closer. In the final seconds of the film, the top appears to wobble before the screen goes black.

In the end, Cobb's reunion with his children could have been as made up as any other aspect of his dreams. His awakening on the plane, his perceived mission success and all of the glances exchanged with his team members could have been constructions of his dream. The film does not have any dialogue during this part and only a few pieces of sound: the sound of the

children's laughter and the spinning top. The fact that the first image of the children is identical to the images used in the flashbacks could be because Cobb was constructing both scenarios from memory. The film, like other Christopher Nolan films, leaves the audience with a lot of questions. The wobble of the top towards the end was representative of the possibility that Cobb's desires were fulfilled. Either way, the final moments of the film were dream-like for Cobb. He had wanted nothing more than to be able to retire, return to America and see his children. In the end, Cobb walks away from the top, as the audience is brought closer to it. Once Cobb has his wish fulfilled, he no longer cares what realm he is in. After that, it is left up to the audience to determine, leaving them suspended in a place between both the dream world and the real world, trapped in limbo left only to speculate about the detrimental possibilities of being stuck in the dream world.

### **Dreams within Dreams**

*Inception* uses the concept of dreams within dreams to analyze ideas about deeper consciousness. Dreams can sometimes occur in layers, where dreams happen within dreams. As dreaming is something in the real world, it manifests itself amongst the other realistic elements of dreams. Dreaming can happen within the reality of the dream world and another layer of dreams can be explored. *Inception* uses this concept of a dream within a dream to represent deeper levels of the mind. This is similar to the Freudian model of the mind, where there are multiple layers: the superego, the ego and the id<sup>34</sup>. In the film, the mind is more vulnerable to

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<sup>34</sup> <sup>34</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition. 1913.

inception the more layers one adds. The core of the mind is raw, making it sensitive to outside influence. In *Inception*, dreams within dreams are the key to accessing this part of the mind.

The concept of dreaming inside dreams is not exclusive to cinema. Many people experience the layered dream phenomenon. Some, however, are able to break the dream world façade through what is known as a ‘false awakening’, an instance where the dreamer wakes up only to realize they are still trapped within a dream. But, by becoming aware of this instance, the dreamer gains a certain amount of lucidity, and has a greater control of their environments. This lucidity is the primary concept backing *Inception*. In the film, a group of individuals gather together to experience a shared dream. In this shared dream, many are so well-trained in dream exploration that they immediately become aware that they are dreaming, a tool which becomes useful to them as soon as they travel deeper into dreams.

*Inception* layers dreams upon dreams in order to explore the deeper levels of the mind. Cobb and his team infiltrate the mind of Robert Fischer, where they are tasked to plant an original idea. So, they hatch a plan to go three layers into the dream - a dream within a dream within a dream - where the thoughts are the most raw and the ideas will be the most original. However, the deeper that they go and the more layers that they go into, the more unstable the dream gets. Dreams seem to last a long time, though most episodes are not as long as they seem. Dreams have their own clock and their own sense of time, which like other physics in the dream, are not bound by the familiar logic that we use. So, time in the dream goes by much quicker in the real world and days in the dream end up amounting to mere hours. But, with each layer of the dream explored, time moves progressively slower for the team. The idea of going that many layers into the dream realm scares Cobb and his team because of the potential ramifications on



their sense of reality. This can happen when someone is trapped in dreams within dreams. Even if lucid, there is a claustrophobic feeling that one can get being aware that you are inside of your unconscious but unable to escape.

In the first layer of the 'dream layer' sequence in the film, the team is transported to a rainy Los Angeles. There they try and intercept Robert Fischer, only to be chased down by his unconscious. They race through the streets of Los Angeles, trying desperately to catch Fischer and bring him down another layer in the dream. The LA dream location is a familiar one to Fischer and makes sense in context as the entire plane is traveling to Los Angeles at the moment. The city is sprawling and rainy, but all the details are obscured. This is a perfect setting for the first layer of the dream because it is big and familiar and seems to be an appropriate location to be dreaming about. In this scenario, the unconscious recognizes the foreigners like a virus, which leads to an extended car chase throughout the city. After the chase, the team progresses another layer down into Fischer's unconscious.

In the second layer of the dream, the team is transported to an unnamed hotel. The hotel environment is lit with low-key lighting in the hallways and natural lighting in the open areas. The hotel seems modern, but does not have any distinct features which would indicate that it is a specific hotel in a precise location. This is perfect for the second layer of the dream, because it removes another layer of identity for that location. Whereas in the first layer, the Los Angeles setting becomes obvious, the second layer leaves the dreamers inside any slightly fancy hotel. This is representative of the journey deep into the mind where surface detail begins to fade away. It is in one of the hotel rooms that the team makes the plunge into the final layer of the dream.

Finally, in the third layer of the dream, they are transported into one of the deepest sections of Fischer's unconscious. The scene takes place in what appears to be a snowy mountainous region in the middle of nowhere where grey skies have a large presence in the frame. The white snow and the grey are similar enough in shade that they further obscure any sense of location. The mountains fade into the background, corralling the team into one tight, confined area. The sole building in the scene sits on the edge of a mountain, shrouded partially by the hazy weather. They manage to reach the building with Fischer, where inside they find a vault. This vault is Nolan's overt way of representing the security deep within the unconscious. The vault represented at the end references Cobb's original explanation of dream symbology earlier on in the film where bank vaults held important information. It is the only place where the true 'original idea' can be planted. When they bring Fischer inside the vault, it is decorated in an almost Kubrickian fashion - pitch black glossy walls, assorted bright white lights patterning the room. In the very center lies the one normal-looking object: a bed with Fischer's father lying in it. His father references a safe in the corner, which Fischer opens to find a pinwheel from his childhood. The pinwheel and the picture of him and his father together trigger a deep emotional response from Fischer and the three layers of kicks are initiated.

The final sequence inside of the vault references a number of Freudian themes. The picture with him and his father is an example of memory repression. His father being benevolent on his death bed is representative of Fischer's wish being fulfilled. The pinwheel and the picture of his younger self is associative of childhood, a theme prevalent in a lot of dreams. Ultimately, it takes a journey this many layers deep into the unconscious to get Fischer to reach his own catharsis. The mind can bury thoughts and resentment deep within its many layers, but *Inception*

reveals the potential reconciliation offered at the core of our mind, where our thoughts and our emotions are most raw. The layers of dreams pose as a maze for the characters, a place that they need escape eventually. This is akin to the trapped feeling people can get when they are aware inside of their dreams within dreams and cannot seem to escape.

Dreams pervade every aspect of *Inception*, from its dream-inspired atmosphere, to its dream-oriented plot. The dream environment that the film builds encompasses the complexity of dreams and their unique and often maze-like structure, allowing the audience to get just as lost in the swaying logic of the dream environment as the characters often do. The film's unique take on 'dreams within dreams' transports the viewer into the most internal parts of the mind, the place where thoughts are the most raw and ideas can be planted. Exploring this deep in our unconscious can also have a claustrophobic effect on the human psyche. Phenomena like 'false awakenings' leave one trapped in their own unconscious and completely aware of it. *Inception* keeps the audience and the characters aware throughout their entire experience. This allows for what Dr. Stephen LaBerge calls, '*the inner-eye of reflection*'<sup>35</sup> to open as the gateways to the mechanics of the unconscious are opened. The film poses a potential problem to being in this aware, lucid state: losing track of which world you inhabit. The characters in the film are challenged to retain their sense of reality throughout and Nolan hands over that responsibility to the audience at the end of the film. *Inception* positions the dream as a foil to the real world and in doing so reveals the limits and detriments of having an intimate relationship with both.

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<sup>35</sup> Blakeslee, Sandra. "New Methods Help Researchers Explore the Dark World of Dreams." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 10 Aug. 1988. Web. 2 Feb. 2015.

## V. Thesis Conclusion

*Inception* and *Mulholland Dr* are two films deeply entrenched with oneiric themes, both visually and narratively, and each film takes a different approach when representing dreams on film. Without using a noticeable filter or radical color change, such as in films like *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), both films effectively capture the nature of dreams. As opposed to merely using dreams as a narrative platform, these films use the dream environment to explore the form and function of dreaming. Each film allows us to peer inside the minds of its characters and better understand their psyche through their dreams. Both films also touch on the relationship between the world of our conscious and our unconscious. They look at the ways that certain aspects of daily life tend to revisit us in our dreams - certain moments from the past, certain locations and people. These parts of life embed themselves in the unconscious and create meaning, messages from our sleeping mind. The waking state, the sleeping state, the dream state; these are three separate states in which we can exist. These films illuminate the consequences which can occur when the mind begins to blend the first two states and lose its footing. Though both *Inception* and *Mulholland Dr* are narrative films, they each display the unconventional logic of dreams, which allows us to consciously experience a simulation of an unconscious environment. These films were ideal for the purpose of my argument because of their contrasting approach to the creation of dreams and their respective understanding of dreams and their effect on our psyche, as well as their intimate relationship with our waking life.

*Mulholland Dr* creates a film experience similar to that of a dream. There is no lucidity for the characters or the viewers until the end of the film. The non-sequitur character interactions, the mysterious, hazy mise-en-scène and the two different realms of consciousness present in the film emulate experiences popular to those associated with dreaming. They are meant to evoke a dream-like environment that humans experience based on speculations about dream content. Pieces of Diane's life are present in her dream state and they manifest themselves in a symbolic manner which the audience can then interpret as they would their own dreams. Visually and narratively, the film can be analyzed just as a dream would, assigning meaning to different pieces of the mise-en-scène or plot. David Lynch allows the film to have all the subtleties of dreams, causing the audience to speculate whether or not the film was simply a dream and more importantly, whether or not that mattered. *Mulholland Dr* creates a dream world that is similar enough to the one we are familiar with that, in the end, we are none the wiser. But, this is the nature of dreams. While we are experiencing them, we are unaware of the unconscious state of our mind and that associations it makes to our conscious life. We are merely dreamers, escaping from the reality of the world. Once we wake up, we may realize fittingly: only in our dreams can our "dreams come true". We are presented with the blunt truth that the world in our minds is only a place for us to sojourn every night - not a permanent getaway.

In *Inception*, Christopher Nolan explores the dreamworld from a less avant-garde perspective. The film directly addresses the fact that the characters are dreaming and that the film purposefully dives into layers of dreams. The world created within the dream is full of twists and turns that the audience is privy to, allowing them to be completely conscious of Nolan's

vision for the interior of a dream. Just as comprehensible as the dream surroundings are, so is the dream content. In the film, characters have their dreams explored and thus expose part of their unconscious for the audience to see. Once inside of their minds, we can see the different ways that their unconscious takes shape and attempts to protect us from awareness and lucidity.

*Inception* allows us the lucidity, it allows us to be aware of the illusion of the dream, giving us the ability to better understand the mechanics inside it. The characters are able to explore, create and mold dreams to their fitting, which they use to influence the dreamer - in this case Fischer - in order to plant an idea inside of his mind. Through this, the film comments on the poignancy of dreams and how dreams affect reality. The introspective power that dreams have strongly influence the way that people think. Decisions people make and thoughts they have about life can all be strongly influenced by the ideas projected from the core of their unconscious.

*Inception* takes a frank look at the way dreams are able to acts as protective places for our innermost thoughts. Nolan uses the film to represent the complexities of our unconscious - how layered and secure the inner chambers of our mind can be, especially regarding certain thoughts. The film explores the idea of repression and how past suffering can manifest itself in our dreams and affect our waking life. It also creates the distinction between the waking world and the dream world, one where logic governs and natural order keeps everything in line and another entirely subject to the mind of the dreamer.

The team of extractors in *Inception* play out what it might be like should one ever be able to experience another person's dreams. In this way, the film poses a possible scientific future for dreaming. What if one day we could all be oneironauts - explorers of the worlds within each

others minds? If we had the ability to manipulate dream content and structure, what kind of ways might we affect the real world? *Inception* is incredibly on point in this regard. It is a film which knows that dreams are powerful, influential phenomena, which - due to their mysterious nature - invite a range of interpretations and possibilities as to what their visual and narrative form may look like. Dreams are a ubiquitous, metaphysical sensations which have the ability to impact our lives and should we ever gain the power to control them (through an eternal lucidity), the possibilities for manipulation would be endless.

Both films may not incorporate dream theory intentionally, but rather are the creations of directors, each of whom have had their own experiences with dreams which they have carefully woven into the fabric of their work. Both directors set out to tell the stories of these characters and their dreams and research can provide some detail on the function and operation of dreams. The rest of the dream experience can come largely from their own dreams. Films about dreams are uniquely approachable in that every person has a point of reference to them: everyone has experienced dreams. Some may be connected to the content of these fictionalized dreams more than others, but everyone is aware of their own relationship to dreams. These films can trigger these associations within the viewer. They allow the viewer to look more critically at their own dreams, exploring the dark symbolism that might lurk around their unconscious or the lighter memories which take them back to childhood. Dreams, by their nature are evocative and so is film. Both take you within yourself through a series of images and associations. Likewise, both these dream films highlight the importance of dreams and their powerful presence within our lives. Normal films tap into our conscious and make us analyze the associations that we have between certain images. But these dream films cause us to look deeper within ourselves. They

ask us to look within our unconscious and to ponder a part of our brain which we may not know intimately. They ask us to look at the part of ourselves which we are seldom allowed to see and often have difficulty understanding. But through this, they are able to make us more aware of the effect that dreams have on us. These films are able to do for its characters what we are only capable of doing ourselves: looking at our dreams and their relationship to and with our daily lives.

The science behind dreams is still heavily shrouded in mystery. On a technical and biological level, we can understand that dreams are the results of electrical signals in the mind, which are closely associated with the REM cycle during sleep and have the ability to regenerate energy within our bodies<sup>36</sup>. Dreams captivate the mind and paralyze the body during sleep and affect the vast majority of animal species on planet earth. However, it is the images within dreams and the narrative substance that has consistently captivated humankind. Several theories range across various civilizations and centuries as to their explicit purpose. But, just as humankind searches for the answers to all of life's puzzling questions, they search for the reasoning behind the substance in our dreams. Why are certain figures more prevalent than others? Why do some locations seem so familiar, yet so foreign? What happens when we become aware of our dreams, especially during sleep? These are the questions that have spawned cultural conquests for answers. People continue to share dreams as a means of cultural exchange in the hopes that someone will be able to derive meaning from them. Sigmund Freud became so fascinated with them that he devoted a large chunk of his research attempting to determine the

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<sup>36</sup> <sup>36</sup> Jouvett, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 9



different meanings within dreams. His methods of psychoanalysis are still often used when breaking down characters and motifs within dreams. Art has also attempted to answer these questions. Novels, painting, music and cinema each take a different look at dreaming, using their respective mediums to create the world of the dream. Film answered the call with a myriad of possibilities. From its origins, film has itself been aware of its inherent ties to dreams both narratively and technically, which has led it to play with dreams and oneiric themes. The earliest films of George Méliés<sup>37</sup> explored the fantastical world we had only previously experienced in our dreams. In the 21st Century, cinema continues to revisit dreams and the different approaches have attempted to explore dreams in depth. Films like *Mulholland Dr* and *Inception* are interested in the purpose of dreams and are aware of their power to affect our lives. There may never be a way to directly explore what other people dream, which is why films that explore dreams provide a unique opportunity to gain insight - especially visually - into the relationship humans have with their dreams.

Michel Juvet's meticulous research has provided greater context to dreams. Juvet specifically categorized the dream state as a section of paradoxical sleep - a state entirely different from waking and sleeping. Dreaming as its own state of being is present in dream films and quite prevalent in both films discussed. Juvet described the vivid nature of dreams and involvement of the brain during sleep. Paradoxical sleep is paradoxical because, by nature, sleep is seen to be a passive act, while dreaming is contrarily quite active<sup>38</sup>. It serves a purpose for our

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<sup>37</sup> Kalat, David. "The Films of George Méliés." TCM Online. Turner Classic Movies. Web.

<sup>38</sup> Juvet, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 5

bodies and may historically have contributed to the makeup of mankind. Jouvett argues that the evolutionary purpose behind dreaming is to preserve our individuality. As a means of cultural expression, films serve a similar purpose. Dreams suture minute details from reality in order to weave together a story and films follow a similar pattern. Weaving pieces from everyday life together which we can relate to, dreams act as some sort of identity preservation mechanism, which is like the way that film works for cultural identity. Films about dreams peer inside of the dreamer and allow us to step outside a layer and observe a process which we all experience from a more objective stance. They incorporate knowledge from oneiric science, psychoanalysis and physiology to make a statement about the way our two worlds interact. They take a look at the way the dreamer thinks while in a dream - how they construct their dreams from different experiences. Above all, they create a reflexive response within the audience, asking the viewer to question the content of their own dreams and what they might say about them and their relationship to the world.

Film creates a barrier between the viewer and the story where dreams may not. Films allow the viewer to experience dreams outside of their own. These dreams are manufactured by filmmakers, but are inspired by the special nature only dreams have. Films, are a collaborative effort on the behalf of several conscious minds. With dreams, we are the source of all the material presented to us. Everything we experience in a dream comes from our unconscious. As Colin McGinn writes in, *The Power of Movies: How the Screen and the Mind Interact*,

*“You can’t dream without feeling, but you can watch a movie without feeling. It is true that movies achieve their emotional effects very easily, perhaps precisely because of their innate ability to imitate the dream state...”*<sup>39</sup>

Because of their narrative nature, dreams are akin to films within our own minds. Night after night we will continue to sit and watch the cinema of the unconscious unfold in new and mysterious ways. The best part about cinema is its ability to occupy its own liminal space between a dream world and reality. They provide the alternative to the conscious world, a place meant to be stuck in between reality and the dream world despite how familiar it seems to us.

Matt Levine writes,

*“Some movies are more dreamlike than others, of course, but it’s more generally cinema itself that offers an oneiric alternative to our waking lives. It all goes back to those first Lumière films, in a way: they proved as soon as the art form was invented that this was an alien vision, not dream or reality but somewhere bewilderingly in between, no matter how convincing the illusion appears on the surface.”*<sup>40</sup>

Each night provides a new journey composed of material gathered from our own unique experience on this planet. Unless lucid, we are merely observers of the dream, unable to manipulate its surroundings and its characters. But, can we say any more of film? There is an inevitability which melds the two together in an entirely unique way.

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<sup>39</sup> McGinn, Colin. *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Print. pg 106

<sup>40</sup> Levine, Matt. "A Ribbon of Dreams: Dreams and Cinema." Walker Art Center. Walker Magazine Online, 3 Aug. 2012. Web. 12 Sept. 2014

“...in this subtle interweaving of passivity and activity, wherein the actively constructed presents the aspect of the passively received, we find the distinct characteristics of two types of experience.”<sup>41</sup>

The world of the film, like the world of the dream is unbound by the logic of the earthy world, instead, it is only bound by the logic of its creators, which is why when the two worlds collide, a kaleidoscopic effect follows, inviting us to look critically at dreams and films in a simultaneous fashion.

Dreams retain their esoteric quality, which is what welcomes analysis so invitingly. I used the film, *Mulholland Dr* by David Lynch and the film *Inception*, by Christopher Nolan in association with the primary dream research performed by Michel Juvet and laid out in his book, “*The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*” as evidence to back up my argument. In this thesis, I examined the nature of dream analysis and the cinematic interpretations of dreams. I sought to use each cinematic example as a way to illuminate the mechanisms present within dreams and the way dreams are analyzed. Being able to view dreams, even constructed ones, removes a level of passivity from the dream experience. The films explored herein provide insight into the parallels between dreams and film as well as the different ways film has chosen to interpret dreams. Because dreams do not obey logic, they constantly beg for analysis, though they may never fully be explained. As Juvet wrote,

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<sup>41</sup> McGinn, Colin. *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Print. pg 157

*“It does not seem that the sleeping or dreaming brain will be explained by putting together our knowledge about all the molecules involved, or of a genetic program. Complexity has its own laws.”*<sup>42</sup>

*Inception* and *Mulholland Dr* apply to Jouvét because they each explore the nature and mechanics of dreams on opposite ends of the cinematic spectrum. In the case of *Mulholland Dr*, dreams remain difficult to discern, mysterious and hidden. David Lynch’s work is not meant to cater to the masses, but still engages the mind through its uniquely artistic craft. In the case of *Inception*, dreams are played out in a much more regimented, easily-understood manner. Christopher Nolan’s work engages a much larger commercial audience and uses its big-budget films to tackle broad topics. By having these two different films, I hoped to be able to show two varying approaches towards the cinematic representation of dreams.

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<sup>42</sup> Jouvét, Michel. *The Paradox of Sleep: The Story of Dreaming*. pg 178

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