

PART ONE

**WAS MAL RIGHT? WAS
IT ALL JUST A DREAM?:
MAKING SENSE OF
*INCEPTION***



WAS IT ALL A DREAM?: WHY NOLAN'S ANSWER DOESN'T MATTER

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Your world is not real. Simple little thought that changes everything. So certain of your world, of what's real. Do you think [Cobb] is? Or do you think he is as lost as I was?

—Mal

Inception is anything but straightforward. If nothing else, the fact that the final scene cuts to black before we see whether the top falls leaves the movie open to many interpretations. Of course, figuring out whether Cobb is still in a dream is not the same as figuring out the “meaning” of the film. But the two questions are closely related, as are the questions one must ask in order to answer them. It seems that the movie doesn't give us enough information to settle these questions, so how will we find answers? Where do we look? Is there a single answer?

If Christopher Nolan, the director of *Inception*, told us what he thought, would that settle it?

These questions are not new, nor are they unique to this particular film. Good works of art are usually not straightforward. They challenge us, confuse us, and leave us wondering what we “should have” or “were supposed to” get from them. We worry that we might have missed the point, or misunderstood, or made a mistake in our understanding of the artwork. And when we have these concerns, when we disagree with one another about the “right” understanding of an artwork, quite often the go-to solution is to find out what the artist intended the work to mean. So, many people think, if Christopher Nolan thought the top fell, then we have our answer—the top fell. The idea here is that the artist, as the creator who gave life to the work, is privileged to determine the meaning and proper understanding of the artwork; if anyone has the authority to say, “Sorry, you just got it wrong,” it’s the artist. This position, known as intentionalism, will be discussed below.

But is this right? Does the creator of an artwork have such power over his creation? Let’s look at this question. After considering some views and arguments, I think you will agree that the answer is no. In fact, I think you’ll see that Christopher Nolan would agree as well.

The Major Interpretations

Determining whether or not the top fell at the end of the movie should, it is believed, indicate whether Cobb and Saito made it out of Limbo. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Remember when they went to that basement full of men who shared forty hours of dream-time every day? Cobb tried Yusuf’s heavy sedative, and the dream was so deep that Cobb spun his top in the bathroom to make sure he had come out of the dream. But if you recall, he knocked the top over before it fell on its own. The whole rest of the movie could be a dream!

In fact, the entire movie could be a dream. After all, Mal and Cobb entered Limbo while “exploring the concept of a dream within a dream.” What assurance do we have that when they exited Limbo, they didn’t simply rise into a second or third layer of dreaming—like Ariadne and Fischer did when they exited Limbo at the end of the film? Consider that after Cobb assures his Limbo projection of Mal of his knowledge of reality, she retorts, “No creeping doubts? Not feeling persecuted, Dom? Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces? The way the projections persecute the dreamer?” Even part of Cobb, it seems, is not really sure *the real world* is real. Maybe Mal was right. Maybe she didn’t commit suicide. Maybe she woke up.

All in all, it seems that there are four major interpretations of *Inception*.

The “Most Real” Interpretation: Cobb and his crew exist in waking time except for when we are clearly told they are entering dream states. Cobb’s wife, Mal, is dead, having killed herself as she tried to “wake up” from her real life, which she believed was a dream. The movie ends with Cobb and Saito exiting Limbo and Cobb finally able to return home to his children in reality.

The “Mostly Real” Interpretation: Just like the most real interpretation, except that Cobb and Saito do not fully awake into reality, but into some other part of Limbo or some other dream. Thus, Cobb does not make it back to his children in reality.

The “Mostly Dream” Interpretation: What Cobb thinks is reality is reality, including Mal’s death. However, when he tries out Yusuf’s heavy sedative in his basement, he gets trapped in a dream that is the rest of the movie.

The “Full Dream” Interpretation: The entire movie is a dream, which takes place on several different dream levels, all in Cobb’s head. When Cobb and Mal woke up from

Limbo, they only woke up into a layer of dreaming they had created to enter Limbo in the first place.¹ They spent so long in Limbo that they forgot, and only because Cobb had incepted Mal in Limbo did Mal think it was a dream, attempt suicide, and wake up. (Perhaps she woke up in reality, perhaps in another layer of dreaming.) None of the other characters are anything but projections of Cobb's subconscious. Even if Cobb did return to what he thought were his real children, in *the real world*, he is still only dreaming.²

So which interpretation is correct?

Clues from the Work

One method used to determine which interpretation of an artwork is "correct" involves an internal analysis of the work—what clues does the work itself offer? Sometimes the work gives us a pretty clear-cut answer, but a blessing and a curse of *Inception* is its ambiguity. Proponents of the Most Real view will point out that Cobb's children, Phillipa and James, are played by actors who are two years older in the final scene, and that their clothing is also different in the last shot, lending credence to the view that the children have aged and Cobb really has made it home.³

Defenders of the "Mostly Real" hypothesis will argue that the children may only dress differently and look older because Cobb expects them to, and that his expectations determine the content of his dream. In addition, we never see Cobb or Saito commit suicide in Limbo, and the final sequences of the movie seem dreamlike (the film is very slow and jumps from scene to scene with no explanation). Last, the top seems to spin for much longer than is natural.

Proponents of the "Full Dream" hypothesis will point to the many dreamlike elements that *the real world* possesses. Cobb himself informed us, through a conversation with the dream architect, Ariadne, that a way to know that you're dreaming is that you can't explain how you got to your present location.

We see such jumps quite often in *the real world*, including when Cobb mysteriously enters his father-in-law's classroom in Paris without opening the door. In this same scene, Cobb's father-in-law, Miles, implores him to "come back to reality." Of course, we might be meant to take that as a metaphorical reality check. And maybe Cobb opened the door so quietly that Miles didn't hear it. But wait a minute—how did Mal get to the ledge *across* from the hotel room she and Cobb frequented? Are the two ledges connected? Who's to say? That's actually the problem, right?⁴ When two careful viewers struggle with the same data and cannot agree on an answer, chances are that one of them is simply getting something wrong. But that's not what we're dealing with here. We're dealing with thousands of viewers, many of them very careful, repeatedly studying the work and struggling to find "the answer." Yet disagreement persists. It seems that Nolan simply has not given us enough information to determine "*the* correct understanding" of the film. Nolan himself addressed this issue in an interview. After acknowledging how many viewers have asked him for "answers" regarding the correct understanding of the film, he says:

There can't be anything in the film that tells you one way or another because then the ambiguity at the end of the film would just be a mistake. It would represent a failure of the film to communicate something. But it's not a mistake. I put that cut there at the end, imposing an ambiguity from outside the film.⁵

What Nolan Says

So an internal analysis tells us that the film is ambiguous, and Nolan says he made it that way on purpose. Yet Nolan claims to have an "answer" to the meaning of the film. He says:

I've always believed that if you make a film with ambiguity, it needs to be based on a sincere interpretation.

If it's not, then it will contradict itself, or it will be somehow insubstantial and end up making the audience feel cheated. I think the only way to make ambiguity satisfying is to base it on a very solid point of view of what you think is going on, and then allow the ambiguity to come from the inability of the character to know, and the alignment of the audience with that character.⁶

Clearly, Nolan thinks part of the magic of an ambiguous artwork is that the audience, like the characters, and like real-life human beings, must decide what to believe in the face of incomplete evidence. A work of art from a God's-eye view, in which there is no question about how events are to be understood, rings far less true than a work that forces us to make decisions without full knowledge. And this is part of the beauty of *Inception*. Yet many viewers are still wedded to the idea that there is an answer, a secret to be unlocked, and that the answer lies in Nolan's intention when he created the work. Even if he refuses to tell us what it was, these viewers feel, since Nolan intended a particular interpretation when he created the film, that's the right answer and any view that runs contrary to that is incorrect.

Why We Shouldn't Care What Nolan Says

Again, figuring out the "meaning" of *Inception* is not the same thing as figuring out how much of the movie is a dream. The meaning question, and how it relates to the dream question, is an entirely different issue. But what philosophers have said about meaning, and how to grasp the meaning of art, can help us determine how to interpret the plot of *Inception*.

Many philosophers accept *intentionalism*, the view that the artist's intention determines the meaning of the artwork.⁷ But I think that such an approach fails, for three reasons. First, the intentionalist view leaves us with an epistemic

(knowledge-related) problem regarding many artworks; many end up either having an unknowable meaning or no meaning at all, both of which are quite counterintuitive conclusions. Second, intentionalism forces us to understand artworks as interpretively static, when they don't seem to be. Third, intentionalism is inconsistent with the view that the concept of art is a social convention that, properly understood, means that artworks are the collective property of the art world.

The Epistemic Problem

This objection stems from the problem that if the meaning of an artwork is rooted in the intention of the artist, we are left with an interpretive hole regarding many works of art. Nolan tells us that he has an answer regarding *Inception*, but that he plans to keep it a secret. This means that if Nolan gets to set the meaning of the work, the rest of us will simply never know the "right answer" regarding the way we ought to interpret the film. Now, maybe one day Nolan will crack and give us his answer (I doubt it), but what's worse is that many artists report that they simply did not intend any particular meaning when they created their works, arguing that their only intention was for each viewer to find her own meaning in the piece (J. R. R. Tolkien made this claim regarding *The Lord of the Rings* in the introduction to that work).⁸ Regardless of that intention, if artworks really obtain their meaning through artist's endorsement, we're forced to conclude that these works are simply meaningless, because their artists didn't see fit to give them one. And that doesn't seem right.

Another problem is that some artists appear to change their interpretive account of their works over time, perhaps because they themselves are unsure of the meaning or perhaps because they perceive some benefit from rewriting their account (maybe to accord with a particular political agenda or to cash in on a new trend). In fact, they may even change their mind

about how they think the work ought to be understood, or come to view it in a new way. (For instance, Christopher Nolan claimed in an interview that he never detected the connections between filmmaking and the dream-sharing technology in the film—the relationship has to do with simultaneous creation and observation—until it was pointed out to him by his brother.)⁹ Regardless, these types of cases raise further concerns regarding the intentionalist view. Do we really want to say that the meaning of artworks can change at the whim of the artists but that they cannot be changed for any other reason? This gives a strange amount of power to the artist and runs contrary to a social understanding of art.¹⁰ (We'll talk more about that below.)

Not to pile on, but some works of art are of unknown authorship, making their meaning forever unknowable on this account. The gravity of this problem should be clear when you consider that many portions of the Bible—certainly a work of art, whether or not you believe it to be divinely inspired—are of unknown or disputed authorship. And even those works with known authors typically do not come packaged with an authorial account of meaning, which leaves the majority of viewers, who lack knowledge of the author's intent, in the dark about the meaning of the work. The intentionalist view forces us to conclude that all of those viewers simply cannot know the meaning of the work or, if they do, they merely lucked into it and don't know that they know it. The epistemic problem with the intentionalist view, then, is that many artworks—including *Inception*—are either meaningless or are interpretive mysteries.¹¹ And this is quite counterintuitive. Most of us believe that we can derive meaning from a work, even if we do not know what interpretation the artist had in mind, and we don't think the meaning we derive is in some sense wrong, or flawed, if it doesn't accord with the artist's intentions. A position that commits us to believing that most viewers cannot know the meaning of most works of art is therefore one that ought to be rejected.

The Interpretively Static Problem

Setting aside the epistemic problem, even if the artist's intended meaning were knowable in all cases, the intentionalist view would still face the problem of forcing us to the position that artworks are interpretively static. On this view, once the artist has set the meaning of the work, that meaning is fixed for the life of the artwork. This view thus denies one of the features that we tend to value about art. It is generally held that one of the marks of a great work of art is that it continues to be relevant to audiences long after its original context has faded into history, and we tend to fault works that quickly become "dated." Sometimes modern viewers will read an interpretation into a work that the artist could not possibly have intended. There is no way that Sophocles intended for *Oedipus Rex* to be read with a Freudian psychoanalytic spin, but do we want to say that such an interpretation is wrong because the author didn't intend that interpretation? On the contrary, it is typically held that the power and immediacy with which *Oedipus Rex* continues to hit new readers is a mark in its favor, rather than an indication that all of us today are simply involved in a huge misunderstanding of the work.¹²

Despite its success, it is too early to tell whether *Inception* will stand the test of time, and if our great-grandchildren will be arguing about whether or not the top fell. But if viewers are still watching and trying to understand this film in fifty years, it is quite reasonable to suppose that those future audiences will find meaning in the work, connecting it to events or perhaps new ways of thinking or new understandings of dreams and the subconscious that Nolan could not possibly have anticipated. Do we throw out those views as incorrect, and insist that the only way to know the work is to situate it rigidly in the context of its original creation? This runs counter to a fluid understanding of art, one that allows the audiences to impact future understandings of the work, just as the work impacts

the audience's future understanding of their world. If we value the ability of an artwork to continue to exist as a dynamic piece, immediate and powerful to ever-changing audiences, we cannot privilege the author with the ability to set the work's meaning for all time.

The Collective Ownership Problem

A third reason why we should believe that artists lack the authority to impose a singular meaning on a work stems from the very definition of art as a social convention. Some philosophers argue that artworks must be understood in relation to other artworks. This view requires a clear rejection of the intentionalist view of artwork meaning because, in this view, the meaning of a work comes partially from *other works*, rather than from the artist. For instance, think of the way music and lighting cue you to anticipate a particular kind of narrative turn as you watch *Inception*. We experience Pavlovian responses to ominous music, such as the “drum drum” in the introductory score of *Inception*—which, interestingly, is really just a slowed-down version of the song (Edith Piaf’s “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien”) that is used to time kicks throughout the film—because years of movie watching have primed us regarding the way we should encounter films. Think about something as basic as understanding *Inception* as a work of fiction in which we are invited to suspend our disbelief and suppose, for the duration of the film, that such a thing as dream-sharing is possible. This would not be the effortless transition out of everyday life that it is for us, smoothly executed as we move through the dimming aisle with our popcorn, were we not schooled in the art of film-watching.

Some philosophers place less emphasis on the role of other artworks in setting the stage for our understanding of a work, arguing instead that the concept of art exists because a subset of society, typically referred to as the “art world,” has agreed

to accept the concept and to set its parameters. To put it a bit more concretely, George Dickie explains that artworks are the kind of things that are deliberately presented to an audience for the purpose of appreciation.¹³ This is what sets objects of art apart from ordinary objects—the art objects are the ones that have been purposely held up with an invitation to attend to them, it is hoped with positive results. On this view, there is no such thing as a private work of art. Why? Because it is the act of presenting the object to the audience that transforms it from a private sketch, musings, or experimentation into an actual work of art.

Arthur Danto takes the audience's role with regard to artworks even further, arguing that artworks, as opposed to non-aesthetic objects, engage the audience by inviting them to “finish” the work by shading in the interpretative gaps that have been left in the artwork by the artist. After all, that is why the artists left them there—to be filled in by the audience as part of the aesthetic experience.¹⁴ When we understand an artwork as something that is by definition public in nature, the artist necessarily relinquishes control of the work when he sets it free in the world. The work then becomes the shared property of its society, and everyone is invited to impose their interpretation on it. For instance, one particularly interesting take on the movie comes from Devin Faraci, who argues that *Inception* is a movie about making movies.¹⁵

In this view, the artist's possession and control of the work end when he presents it to the world as a work of art. Any restrictions regarding acceptable interpretations of the work must be built into the work itself, and to the extent that the artist leaves the work interpretively open, he has surrendered his ability to define the work. This seems to be precisely what Nolan had in mind in telling us that he purposely left the film ambiguous. He appears to be advocating the position that it is each viewer's task to decide what to make of the confusion of information that they receive when they view the film. *The right*

answer does not exist, and were Nolan to reveal “his” answer, it would not make a bit of difference, as the whole point of the film is for each of us to discover an answer for ourselves.

So What’s the Alternative?

My view, multiplism, says that more than one interpretation of an artwork could be valid, or “correct.” Thus, in addition to not giving the intentionalist view priority, *no* one view necessarily gets priority—there could be multiple, equally valid interpretations of an artwork. A common concern regarding this type of view is that it leaves artwork interpretation too open, allowing for an “anything goes” approach to artworks.

For example, we don’t want a view that says that an acceptable interpretation of *Inception* is that it is about a troubled guy with parental abandonment issues who dresses up in a scary cape and haunts rooftops seeking to bring bad guys to justice. We’d want to say such an interpretation is acceptable for other Nolan films, such as *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, but is unacceptable as an interpretation of *Inception*. Fortunately, the view I am defending does allow us to reject such interpretations, for it allows us to dismiss interpretations that are inconsistent with the facts of the film itself. As a result, the artist does have a way to restrict interpretations of his work. Our understanding of an artwork, if it is to be proper, must be consistent with the information the artist chooses to give us.¹⁶ So we are bound to the view that Cobb is highly motivated by the desire to be reunited with his son and daughter, James and Phillipa. It would be inconsistent with the facts of the film to think that his motivation is instead to take over both Saito’s and Fischer’s energy companies and rule the world. And had Nolan wanted us to be further committed to the views that Phillipa loves ponies and James has a stuffed dog named Sir Barks-a-lot, he would have needed to put that information into the artwork itself, in such a way that any interpretation

to the contrary would be inconsistent with the facts internal to the film.

Even once we leave the domain of information that is set by the work itself, we can still evaluate different interpretations, rule out ones that seem wildly implausible, and argue in favor of those that offer the most coherent reading of the film or that are the most helpful depending on the interpreter's particular point of view. In chapter 2, Jason Southworth does just this. Even though he admits to the ambiguity of the film, he offers up his own preferred interpretation of *Inception* and his reasons why it ought to be accepted over other views.

Of course, whatever Nolan's interpretation is, it should be given equal weight with any other equally plausible account. It's just not the only one—or even the most authoritative one. Now that we realize artists don't determine the meaning of their artworks, each of us will have the freedom to take on the task of figuring out *Inception* and other artworks for ourselves.

NOTES

1. Another possibility is that the entire movie is a failed inception on Cobb, performed perhaps by Miles, to trick him into waking up into reality. Andrew Terjesen, a contributor to this volume, favors this interpretation and articulates it in his chapter.

2. As multiple authors and the editor point out many times in this volume, Cobb's top spinning and falling in *the real world* does not actually tell him, or us, that he is not dreaming. There are multiple reasons, the most obvious of which is the fact that Arthur tells Ariadne (and us) that totems tell you only that you are not in someone else's dream. They cannot tell you that you are not in your own dream.

3. <http://clothesonfilm.com/inception-jeffrey-kurland-costume-qa/14317/>.

4. There are many other dreamlike qualities of *the real world*. For a thorough rundown, see "The Editor's Totem" and Jason Southworth's chapter in this volume. A complete list is also in the appendix of this volume: "A Safe Full of Secrets: Hidden Gems You May Have Missed."

5. Brad Brevet, "Nolan Offers New 'Inception' Insight Prior to Its Debut on Blu-ray and DVD," *Rope of Silicon*, www.ropeofsilicon.com/article/nolan-offers-new-inception-insight-prior-to-its-debut-on-blu-ray-and-dvd, December 2, 2010.

6. Ibid.

7. See Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

8. Some intentionalists would say that this itself is an intention. See E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 202–225; see also Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, p. 117.

9. "Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking: An Interview with Writer/Director Christopher Nolan," interviewed by Jonathan Nolan, in *Inception: The Shooting Script* (San Rafael, CA: Insight Editions, 2010), p. 19.

10. Many intentionalists would say, however, that it is only the original intent that matters.

11. Many intentionalists, however, would say that the text is never meaningless because its meaning is always derived from the artist's original intent. They would admit, though, that sometimes the meaning of a text is forever lost to us, but in this respect works of art are no different than texts of any other kind, including bits of conversation that leave us forever wondering what was truly meant.

12. One way to respond to this worry would be to draw a distinction between meaning and significance, and suggest that meaning is static, but that significance is not. Although the meaning of a work will always remain the same, its significance can alter as culture changes. An example of significance would be the interpretation of *Inception* as a film about filmmaking. See E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 8, and also Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, pp. 46–50.

13. See George Dickie, *Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Louisville, KY: Chicago Spectrum Press, 1997).

14. For a full explanation of his account, see Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

15. Devin Faraci, "Never Wake Up: The Meaning and Secret of Inception," chud.com, July 19, 2010, www.chud.com/24477/NEVER-WAKE-UP-THE-MEANING-AND-SECRET-OF-INCEPTION/. Also, for more on how *Inception* parallels moviemaking, see Daniel Malloy's chapter in this volume.

16. For an opposing intentionalist view see Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in Gray Iseminger ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 97–131. Carroll argues that internally consistent interpretations can be wrong. For example, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* can be consistently interpreted as a parody, though certainly it is not a parody.