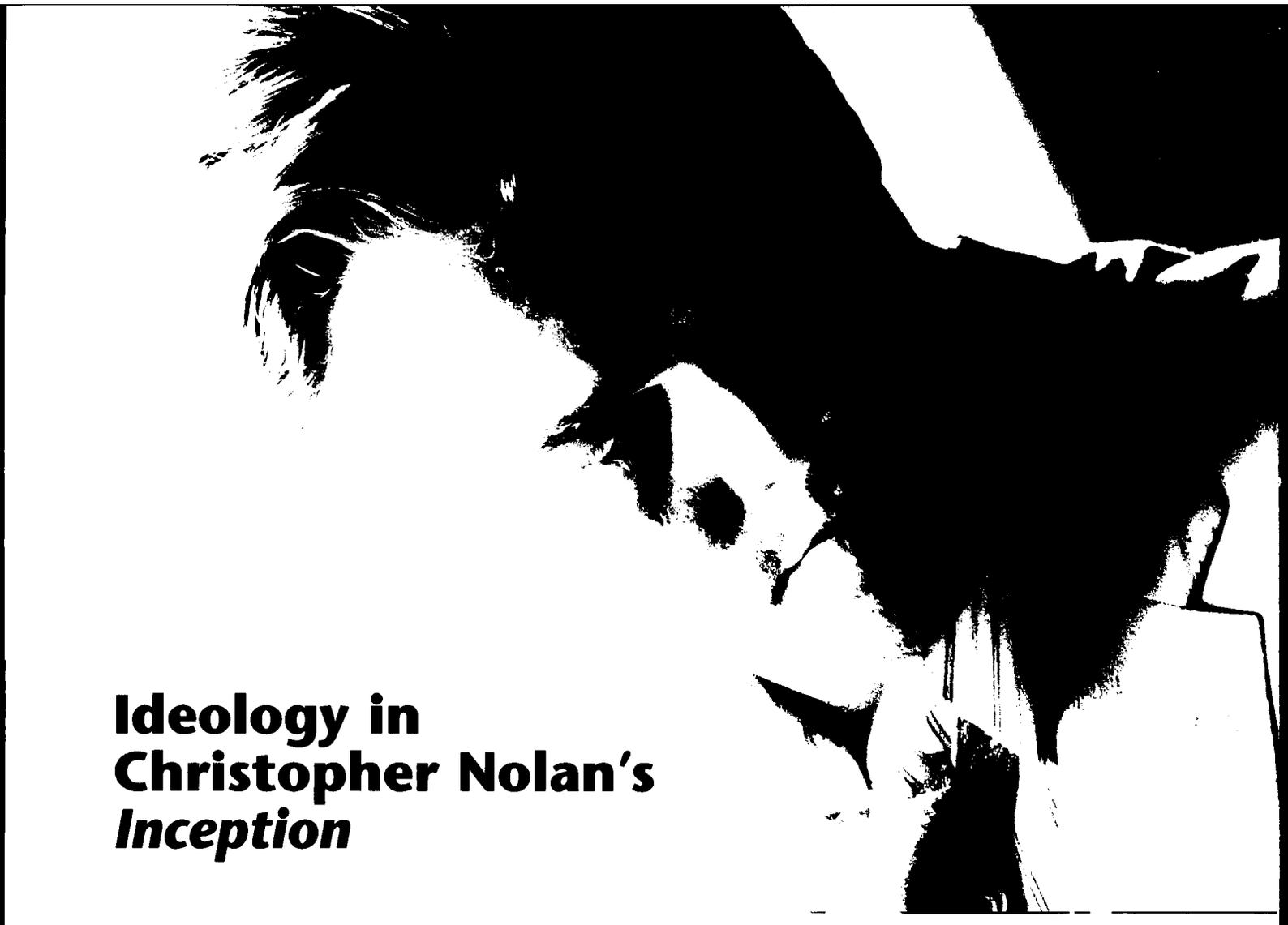

Ideology in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

By DREW WINCHUR

In the West, propaganda films are nowadays an exceedingly rare art form. Few filmmakers are interested in making didactic arguments for or against "the capitalist order" or "Western empire"; investors willing to fund such work are undoubtedly even rarer. As a case in point, Christopher Nolan's *Inception*[1] is a conventional Hollywood suspense movie that completely omits any explicit reference to politics. Its narrative focuses on a corporate thief named Dom Cobb/Leonardo DiCaprio, as he frantically grapples with the aftermath of his wife's suicide, while also trying to return home to his young children. The trauma of excessive guilt and the necessity of grieving are the film's most obvious and important themes. Yet despite *Inception's* supposed focus on individual psychology, this foregrounding of Cobb's emotional turmoil in fact sublimates and rationalizes some disturbingly violent behaviour. Hired by a corporation to "neutralize" an important competitor, Cobb and his associates use futuristic, *Matrix*-like technology to invade the consciousness of a man named Robert Fischer, Jr./Cillian Murphy. They then succeed in implanting a suggestion in Fischer's mind that causes him to sabotage his own financial interests (the titular "inception"). By bracketing these acts as the uncontroversial circumstance of Cobb's emotional struggle, *Inception* covertly legitimizes the routine and far-reaching violence used to sustain corporate empires. In practice, if not by design, the film proves to be a highly sophisticated vehicle for capitalist propaganda.

In the production notes to the film, Nolan indicates that

> **[i]t was very important to [Leonardo DiCaprio] that [the emotional life of his character] be the guiding thread of the story, and with it he is able to draw the audience through the [film's] complex story in a very clear fashion.**[2]

DiCaprio's priorities are indeed evident from the very first scenes of the film. Cobb's unresolved grief for his wife Mal/Marion Cotillard is singularly responsible for the failure of his preliminary mission into the dreams of Saito/Ken Watanabe (his eventual employer). As he gathers a team of criminals and prepares to invade Fischer's mind, Cobb is repeatedly confronted with the danger that Mal poses, both in regards to his own psyche and his corporate mission. Finally, and most importantly, Cobb's mission is accomplished only after he definitively rejects Mal's claims about the nature of their relationship, and accepts his share of guilt for her death. It is this symbolic resolution—as much as the success of the team's real mission—that allows Cobb to return home to America and his children. The lack of emotional tension and conspicuous absence of Fischer during the film's denouement is a final signal that Cobb's psychic pain is the driving force of the film.

This emotional journey, however, does not merely function

as an engine for the film's plot. The role given to Ellen Page's character, Ariadne, suggests that there is a more duplicitous agenda behind this emphasis on Cobb's psyche. As the young university student recruited by Cobb to design the mission's dream-world, Ariadne functions as a proxy for the audience and as Cobb's personal psychotherapist. Nolan has admitted that

> **[i]n writing the script for 'Inception,' it was very important to me that there be a conduit for the audience—a character who is being shown this world for the first time and is eager to explore it. That's how the character of Ariadne was born. It was also very important for the audience to see Cobb through Ariadne's eyes and get to the core of that character.**[3]

The very origin of Ariadne's name affirms this connection: i.e., a mythical Greek princess who helps the minotaur-slayer Theseus to navigate a labyrinth. Coaxing and guiding Cobb through his darkest memories, Ariadne both demands and provides "more objective" interpretations of what she sees and what she is told. At the same time, this character forcefully narrows the viewer's scope of potential interests, to the point that a fixation on Cobb's mental state is almost inevitable. As Fischer's subconscious becomes more dangerous and difficult for the team to navigate, it is Ariadne who demands that Cobb reappraise their collective predicament and his own psychological health. Cobb then confesses to her (and the viewer) the details of his wife's suicide and his subsequent exile from the United States. After Cobb confesses this secret, Ariadne asks no further questions, and wholeheartedly accepts his rather feeble reassurances as to their collective safety. She also fails to voice any qualms about his selfish recklessness in trying to withhold this information. Once Mal succeeds in sabotaging the mission at the third and deepest level of Fischer's subconscious, Ariadne insists on following Cobb into his own chaotic mind; it is there that she provides him with strong emotional support during his climactic confrontation with and triumph over Mal (whose name, not coincidentally, means "sickness" in French). Here again, she blithely accepts Cobb's story of apparent emotional catharsis at face value. Pertinent questions remain unasked, relating to the impact of this breakthrough on Cobb's future life, not to mention the mission still underway.

For all of her adeptness at critically interpreting Cobb's psychological struggles, Ariadne is tellingly silent in the face of his real behaviour. After a feeble protest against Cobb's offer of employment, she joins the team and fails to raise a single concern about the immorality of their mission. In her enthusiasm for playing therapist to Cobb (and despite the empathy she demonstrates in this capacity), Ariadne seems untroubled by the team's inherently violent trespass into Fischer's mind. Since "the audience [sees] Cobb through Ariadne's eyes", this tacit acceptance of a controversial norm illuminates the film's true ideological leanings.

Ariadne's support of Cobb is perhaps justifiable during the innocent beginnings of their relationship, but proves less and less credible as the film wears on. By the time Fischer has been kidnapped within his own subconscious, Cobb resembles less a grieving widower than a murderous thug. Shoved into locked rooms and unmarked vans, handcuffed, repeatedly threatened and drugged, and beaten with an insouciance bordering on contempt, Fischer's body is gradually stripped of its humanity

and debased to the level of anonymous hostage. When Cobb needs Fischer to fabricate a non-existent security code, a member of the team impersonates Fischer's godfather and most trusted confidant. Fischer is then convinced that this imposter will be murdered if he refuses to cooperate. Later, upon revealing to Fischer that his dreams have in fact been invaded, Cobb pitilessly capitalizes on the fear and vulnerability that this disclosure understandably provokes. Throughout all of this, Ariadne seems oblivious to the protagonist's descent into near-sociopathic criminality.

Perhaps most disturbing is the corruption of Fischer's already troubled relationship with his recently deceased father. The entire dynamic and meaning of this private bond is falsified by Fischer Sr.'s dramatic, deathbed confession—a confession that has, in fact, been scripted and stage-managed by Cobb. Given repeated chances to reflect on this profound transgression, Cobb's response is always the same selfish shrug: "I'll do whatever it takes to get back to my family." Ariadne's staunch refusal (or inability) to address this violence is a crippling blow to her credibility — both as pseudo-therapist and proxy to the viewer.

By now, it should be obvious that the director has structured *Inception* in such a way as to equate reality with a concern for Cobb's well-being. Without this disproportionate investment in the protagonist's internal world, audiences might have drawn very different conclusions as to this character's final significance.

II

In his review of Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker*, Slavoj Žižek comments on the way in which that film's exclusive focus on American troops "enables us to obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the [American- Iraqi] conflict:"

> **Depictions of the daily horror and traumatic impact of serving in a war zone seem to put [the film] miles apart from such sentimental celebrations of the US army's humanitarian role as John Wayne's infamous *Green Berets*. However, we should bear in mind that the terse-realistic presentation of the absurdities of war in *The Hurt Locker* obfuscates and thus makes acceptable the fact that its heroes are doing exactly the same job as the heroes of *The Green Berets*. In its very invisibility, ideology is here, more than ever: we are there, with our boys, identifying with their fear and anguish instead of questioning what they are doing there.**[4]

Similar tactics are at work throughout *Inception*: the disturbing immorality of Cobb's mission is rendered invisible by the film's insistent focus on Cobb's struggle between guilt and redemption. An innocent man is drugged and mentally violated by corporate raiders; the most private realms of his personality are

corrupted; a son is coerced into swallowing a bald deceit about his recently deceased father. Yet the viewer is meant to sleepwalk past it all, convinced that the real story lies with Cobb and his own claim to emotional distress.

From this perspective, the narrative of *Inception* can be seen to have two closely related functions. At one level, the film works as corporate propaganda. As a means by which corporations habitually expand their overwhelming powers over the rest of society, white-collar violence poses a direct threat to the democratic body politic. By disguising such aggression as the benign setting of private turmoil, *Inception* coerces the viewer into legitimizing behaviour that she might otherwise find morally and politically revolting.

It might be argued that the abuse inflicted on Fischer is not real, and that he will awaken without any memory of the trauma he has suffered. The film's focus on Cobb's emotional struggle would therefore be justifiable, since only this struggle carries over into "true" reality. Yet such a thesis would contradict much of what we learn from observing Cobb and Mal's relationship. Mal's dreamed life proves to be so vivid that she commits suicide in a bid to recapture it. While on the lookout for a new "architect" to add to his team, Cobb pays a visit to Mal's father, Miles/Michael Caine, who advises him to "come back to reality" and forget the mission. Cobb, however, clings to his dream-world intrigues, explaining that the deal with Saito represents the only way back to his children. Examples such as these hardly suggest that one's dreams can be taken lightly; rather, they tend to leave deep scars and serious responsibilities in their wake.

The ending of the film, featuring a close-up of Cobb's talisman spinning ominously on a table, carries the strong suggestion that his idyllic family reunion might itself be a dream. At first, this ambiguity also seems to undermine a reading of *Inception* as propaganda. If Cobb has in fact only traded one set of illusions for another, what good is his symbolic victory over debilitating grief? He is perhaps lost to new delusions; his future might be less authentic than that of the man whose mind he so successfully corrupted. Wouldn't this make him a deserving candidate for the audience's sympathy? On the contrary, the uncertainty surrounding Cobb's future only bolsters the audience's commitment to describing and treating their protagonist-patient's psychological state. Such a duplicitous and/or deluded character, whose symptoms run an entire gamut of possible pathologies, fits the very ideal of a psychiatric patient. If Cobb's capability for self-delusion is potentially endless, the audience's preoccupation with his inner state—and resulting ignorance of all political consequence—is potentially endless as well.

III

Inception's secondary and more radical function is to suggest that the act of self-delusion is potentially heroic. The film's protagonist, for example, succeeds in consistently denying or sublimating the violence he inflicts. To carry out the immoral behaviour demanded by his role as a corporate raider, Cobb learns to translate his actions into a symbolic language that renders them psychologically and socially acceptable. This character is heroic not for what he does, but for what he succeeds in convincing himself of having done. Each time his transgressions are in danger of losing ethical credibility, Cobb explains them away as the regrettable means to an honourable end, or else situates them in relation to his psychic contest with Mal. In one such episode, Cobb and Ariadne follow Fischer into "limbo"—a deeply chaotic state of consciousness. Cobb hardly even cares to rescue Fischer, and upon entering his old dream-world, the ostensible purpose for his visit is quickly forgotten. Instead, he regales Ariadne with detailed stories of the (virtual) years spent here with his deceased wife. After Fischer is (almost inadvertently) located, Cobb's climactic showdown with Mal immediately retakes centre stage.

After following Ariadne back to the third level of his own subconscious, Fischer experiences a cringe-inducing reconciliation with a man he believes to be his dead father. The scene should serve as a ringing indictment of the inception's moral bankruptcy: the father is in fact only an imposter, and the understanding the two men reach is profoundly false. It is very soon after this event that Cobb resurrects his own surrogate (and highly implausible) father-son relationship with Saito. The heroism and self-sacrifice involved in Saito's rescue, coupled with the fulfillment of Cobb's meaningless promise that the two men "grow old together," symbolically crowds out Fischer's competing and dissonant story of falsified reconciliation. The viewer might register a passing discomfort with Fischer's catharsis, but he is distracted before any of the feeling's causes can be examined.

Once the mission is over, Cobb's team disbands and the protagonist is finally able to reunite with his children. The film ends with the happy family contemplating a profoundly uncertain future. What is certain, however, is that Cobb has successfully escaped all responsibility for the injustice done to Fischer. Whether his idyllic life in America proves to be real or a dream, Cobb's past sins have been resolutely forgotten. Here, the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment becomes nothing more than an exercise in cynical self-delusion. It pays for Cobb to commit violence in the name of corporate profit, since he is adept enough at interpreting his actions according to an acceptably honourable narrative. Through the course of the film, audiences learn that corporate violence is normal, and that preventing it is unnecessary—the task of the individual is to create a delusion compelling and narcissistic enough to render that violence invisible.

IV

Taken together, *Inception*'s ideological manoeuvres are impressive. Its hero models a rewarding and compliant relationship with corporate power, while all evidence of the ugly side-effects is suppressed. His pseudo-therapist and sidekick turns a blind eye to his repeated and serious transgressions, persuading the audience to follow suit. The twists and turns of their labyrinthine mission supposedly represent one man's exorcism of personal demons; in reality, they are just a fanciful dramatization of a corporate takeover. *Inception* renders the violence motivated by corporate profit unremarkable and incidental to a "real" personal story such as Cobb's. True happiness, we learn, requires only the talent to successfully alienate oneself from moral and civic responsibilities.

Notes

1 U.S. release date, July 16, 2010.
2 Christopher Nolan. Quoted in "Inception: Production Notes", http://inceptionmovie.warnerbros.com/pdf/INCEPTION_PK_Notes__Bios_6-18.pdf (accessed August 6, 2010), p. 7.
3 Ibid. 8.
4 Slavoj Zizek. "Green Berets with a Human Face," (London Review of Books Blog, 2010), http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/03/23/slavoj-zizek/green-berets-with-a-human-face (accessed August 6, 2010).

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