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The only way you can dream: interfaces and intolerable spaces in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of 'real space' in science fiction narratives and its implications for the relationship between humans and technology through an analysis of Christopher Nolan's feature film *Inception*. Drawing upon Scott Bukatman's notion of 'intolerable spaces', a term he uses to describe the imperceptible data-spaces inaugurated by the computer terminal which are made visible and accessible through science fiction and cyberpunk texts such as William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, this paper argues that *Inception* participates in a cultural discourse which conceptualizes the human mind through technological metaphors, conserving an idealized model of the human subject as one who can (and should) remain above, separate from, and in control of technology.

> One initially strange thing about *Inception* is how *undreamlike* the dreams in the film are. (Fisher 2011, 40)

In her essay 'Stories about the Future', Veronica Hollinger characterizes contemporary Western society as 'the science-fictionalized present' (2006, 453). She describes 'the sheer extravagance of contemporary technoscience', citing examples of scientific breakthroughs such as cloning, xenotransplantation and space exploration, which has led to 'the implosion of science fiction and science fact' (453). This 'sheer extravagance', however, is not confined to distant state-of-the-art laboratories and space stations: as Hollinger has noted elsewhere, science fiction intrudes into everyday lived experience, and our present age is increasingly 'configured by late capitalism, the circulation of simulacra, and the cyborging of the human body' (2000, 219). Hollinger suggests, therefore, that science fiction is not only a genre, but also 'a discourse of choice through which to describe a present which perceives itself as both technological and apocalyptic' (2000, 217), until 'the future becomes nothing more than a kind of displaced version of the present' (2000, 218). The designation of a text as belonging to the genre of science fiction is conventionally determined by the presence of a 'novum', which William Stephenson defines as 'a thing not found in the world of the reader' which 'is never just an incidental object but lays down the unfamiliar norms on which the narrative world is based and establishes the SF text's distance from the reader's reality' (2011, 225). If, as Hollinger suggests, the conditions of postmodernity in the West lend our present the characteristics of science fiction, such that 'the SF text's distance from the reader's reality' is increasingly minimal, it would seem that the nova of science fiction, too, might be becoming less and less new, and more and more familiar. In this paper, I will explore this shrinkage between contemporary reality and fiction and its implications for the representation of the relationship between humans and technology through an analysis of Nolan's (2010) feature film, *Inception*.

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The novum in *Inception* is technology that enables people to share dreams. The dream-sharing technology was first developed as part of a military training programme, but its applications have now expanded to the corporate realm: CEOs can hire 'extractors' to plunder secrets from their rivals' minds, or they can have their own minds secured against such an attack. One extractor is the fugitive Dom Cobb, who is hired by Saito, the head of a powerful corporation, to convince his competitor, Robert Fischer, to dismantle his father's business empire. The process of planting an idea rather than stealing it, known as inception, is notoriously difficult to perform successfully, because the idea needs to seem self-generated, necessitating that Cobb and his team go deep within the subject's mind, creating a dream within a dream within a dream, in order to plant the most basic version of the idea into Robert Fischer's subconscious. 'You need the simplest version of the idea in order for it to grow naturally in your subject's mind,' as Eames, a member of Cobb's team, explains.

Inception participates in a cultural discourse which represents the human mind as a physical space which is conceptualized through technological metaphors. In this regard, the film draws on the conventions of cyberpunk, which Rob Kitchin and James Kneale define as 'a subgenre of SF which takes information technology as its novum, using it to explore the ways in which manifestations of these new technologies might transform (and are transforming) our societies' (2001, 22). Cyberpunk, as Alex Wetmore writes, 'departs from traditional science fiction, which tends to sustain and even reinforce the distinction between human and machine, by espousing a posthumanist perspective that focuses on the means by which information technologies transgress the physical and conceptual boundaries of the human' (2007, 71). Thus cyberpunk explores the impact of technology on the human subject in ways that are at turns celebratory (exploring the possibilities of increased autonomy and agency by merging with technology), cautionary (there are often consequences for merging too closely) and downright anxious (technology decentres the human and creates an intolerable loss of privilege). Bukatman (1989), drawing on the work of Jameson (1982), describes the spaces inaugurated by information technology as 'intolerable spaces'. Bukatman is referring primarily to the inaccessible spaces created by the computer terminal, which are made up of data and operate at a scale that is cognitively incompatible with human perception. In such spaces, the human is obsolete; the space is not designed for humans to inhabit or perceive. The 'intolerableness' of intolerable spaces refers not just to this lack of perception but to a loss of dominance and control. Yet, according to Bukatman, science fiction can bring these spaces into visibility, restoring the human to a position of mastery.

Inception's novum is naturalized within a present-day setting which is not so unfamiliar: this is a world in which freelancing professionals with unique skillsets are co-opted by capitalist forces, ceaselessly shuttling between transitory places – the airline cabin, the hotel – while shadowy corporations of ambiguous but sprawling influence attempt to undermine each other. The novum itself, too, has precedents both in our reality and in previous science fiction texts: many commentators have argued that the dream-sharing technology is analogous variously to the Internet (Fisher 2011) or to the cinema (Anselmi and Wilson 2011; Faraci quoted in Fisher 2011; Pop 2011), both of which could be said to draw participants into a 'consensual hallucination' akin to the cyberspace of Gibson's (1984) novel *Neuromancer* (Fisher 2011; Pop 2011). Fisher (2011), in passing, also draws a third analogy for the dream technology: video games. Fisher is referring to the nested dream levels of *Inception*, which resemble the levels of video games, but the way in which the film offers technology as a means of mastery and control points to a deeper commonality between video games and the dream-sharing technology than one which is merely aesthetic. In this regard, the most emblematic moment of *Inception* is a series of scenes in which Arthur, Cobb's co-conspirator, stylishly dispatches some pursuing assailants inside a dream, which calls for sequences of spectacular fight choreography in a rotating hallway, and later on in zero gravity. As Cobb explains earlier in the film, the people who populate dreams are just projections of the subject's unconscious – so when Arthur shoots or strangles his opponents, not only are his actions without repercussions, but his opponents do not correlate to anybody in reality – the projections are just dream filler, making this and many of the film's fight scenes a guilt-free engagement with violence. Nobody actually dies; the projections are just like the endlessly respawning monsters encountered in fantasy video games that are killed for experience or money. The dreams in *Inception*

appear 'undreamlike' because they are generated by an ultimately familiar novum, which replicates familiar narrative forms such as the video game, whilst also confirming the inescapability of real space in representing the intolerable.

While cyberpunk is often hailed for destabilizing 'the privileged central position occupied by humans' and more broadly 'the modernist foundational assumptions which lie at the core of nineteenth- and twentieth-century SF: self–other; self–society; nature–technology; nature–civilisation; rational–irrational; order–chaos' (Kitchin and Kneale 2001, 22), such scholars as Sponsler (1992) and McCallum (2000), through their examination of seminal cyberpunk works like Gibson's *Neuromancer*, have persuasively argued that cyberpunk narratives are not immune to reinscribing familiar geographies of power and reinforcing human-centric notions of subjectivity, spatiality and temporality. In these texts, the lauded ability of information technology to transcend distance, geography and nationality does not diminish the importance of real space, and the technologized protagonists still maintain a familiar, comforting level of humanness. As McCallum writes:

> If some recognisable representation of real space persists in a genre whose emphasis on postmodern aesthetics and cyberspace networks makes it most likely to be able to dispense with the dimension of real space altogether, this persistence should give us pause to consider why this other world's landscape and its subjects look so much like ours. (2000, 351)

Inception, like the texts in McCallum's analysis, also falls prey to the demands of real space, replicating cyberpunk's dependence on real space and embodied perception in making sense of the intolerable spaces produced by technology. However, I would additionally suggest that *Inception* is a film precisely about these limits of the imagination. Cobb says that the dream technology 'is the chance to build cathedrals, entire cities, things that never existed, things that *couldn't* exist in the real world', but this is a hypothesis the film repeatedly finds problematic, as the dream world and *the real world*[1] overlap and resemble each other very closely. What Sponsler, McCallum, Hollinger, Bukatman and Fisher ultimately convey is that it is the impulse of narrative to turn what is intolerable into something tolerable, and that, even within genres ostensibly engaged with extrapolation and boundary transgression, it is difficult to imagine a narrative 'that does not simply play out forces now dominant in our society' (Sponsler 1992, 642). These 'forces' are not just those in our culture – the postmodern suspicion and ambivalence towards late capitalism and technological progress which has produced (and is critiqued in) texts such as *Neuromancer*, and our more contemporary stage of neoliberal capitalism which manifests in texts such as *Inception*, and the tendency of these narratives to privilege Western (and often male) perspectives – but also the demands of real space itself. Hollinger's description of the present as 'science-*fictionalized*', after all, suggests that reality in postmodernity is underpinned chiefly by a contentious relationship with the real, and that reality is as much ruled by narratives as the dream world in *Inception*. Through its reflection on the reassuring, seductive pull of narrative, *Inception* ultimately concedes that one can only 'dream' about what already exists.

In his essay 'The Cybernetic (City) State', Bukatman argues that the computer terminal has created a kind of parallel space, separate from our experiential reality, which operates, according to Jeremy Rifkin, 'below the threshold of human consciousness […] in a time realm that we will never be able to experience' (quoted in Bukatman 1989; 45–46). That is, the electronic realm has supplanted the human by taking responsibility for certain decisions and tasks, but these are executed at a scale that the human mind cannot perceive or comprehend. Bukatman suggests that science fiction is 'grounded in the new "intolerable spaces" of technological culture: the narrative exists to permit that space to exist, but in a manner now susceptible to human perception, comprehension, and intervention' (52). Often, as Bukatman argues, these intolerable spaces are rendered visible and manageable by inserting a human figure into the field to experience and intervene on our behalf. Bukatman offers Gibson's *Neuromancer* as such a narrative: the hacker Case enters and navigates through the global computer network that is cyberspace, allowing the reader to have a sense of perceiving a hitherto imperceptible space – one that is made up of data. Gibson often employs language which connotes physical movement: Case 'ascended lattices of light' (1984, 115), 'jumped forward by a single grid point' (1984, 116). Thus, rather than depicting terminal spaces as new and incomprehensible, science fiction can instead function as a

way to return the electronic realm to human control, recentring the human as the locus of action and drama, making those spaces 'tolerable'.

While *Inception*'s engagement with cyberculture is not as obvious as *Neuromancer*'s, the film resembles a number of other contemporary texts in its construction of the human mind as an intolerable space similar to that created by a computer terminal. In her analysis of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a film which imagines the possibility of the excision of memories about a broken relationship, José van Dijck observes that earlier conceptions of the human mind as a library or archive – from which one can retrieve stored, static memories – have given way, in the current conjuncture, to 'connectionist metaphors' such as 'the networked computer' (2004, 353). Here, the information stored in the human mind is not seen as stable and unchanging as in a library; rather, this metaphor represents memory as continually changing data – 'Memories are effectively rewritten each time they are activated: instead of recalling a memory that has been "stored" some time ago, the brain is forging it all over again in a new associative context' (van Dijck 2004, 354). Just as the act of remembering in *Eternal Sunshine* has Joel reperforming each soon-to-be erased memory of his former girlfriend Clementine, so too does Cobb reperform his memories in *Inception*, most notably in the scene in which Cobb and Ariadne use an elevator to revisit, participate in and witness different memories that Cobb regrets. Although these depictions are closer to what van Dijck believes is a more accurate conception of memory as like a symphony orchestra, in which the act of remembering is performance, and no two performances are alike, *Inception* ultimately demonstrates that the space created by the computer terminal still remains a persistent paradigm in representing the human mind in fiction. The title of Koch's (2010, 32) review of *Inception*, 'A Smart Vision of Brain Hacking', consolidates this connection: it is not a coincidence that Cobb twice compares an idea to a virus, and that, effectively, the central mission of the film is to install an idea into the mind of Robert Fischer. The recurrent image of the dreamers 'hooked up' or 'jacked in' to the dream machine recalls both *Neuromancer* and, as Anselmi and Wilson (2011) point out, the Wachowskis' (1999) cyberpunk film *The Matrix*. Information in the dream space, as in a computer, is processed more quickly – as Arthur explains to Ariadne, an hour in the dream space is equivalent to only five minutes in *the real world*. Furthermore, when Cobb breaks into Saito's mind to steal his corporation's expansion plans, the information is depicted as A4 sheets of typewritten pages – the brain's information is data that can literally be 'read' in the dream space.

Thus, science fiction's ability to imagine a distinct future is often limited by the persistence of a cultural sense that perception is impossible to separate from our embodied selves. Even as Case from *Neuromancer* loathes physical reality – the body is often contemptuously referred to as 'meat' – and yearns for the disembodied freedom of cyberspace, Gibson must still describe cyberspace according to human limitations of perception and can only make it visible at all using spatial metaphors. Cyberspace is revealed to the reader as 'the unfolding of [Case's] distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity' (1984, 52). McCallum says that 'one might expect that the physical world would carry little importance' in cybernarratives, but instead, '[r]eal space is a surprisingly important axis for the unfolding of cyberpunk narratives, and spatial metaphors are inescapably part of the virtual worlds they depict' (2000, 350). Although *Inception*'s dream space is purportedly a space in which anything is possible, it is still governed by the logic of physical reality. For example, Cobb explains to Ariadne that people's private information often manifests in the dream space as being hidden inside a secure place, like a bank vault, so, in order to steal people's secrets, one can simply break into the vault. The dream thus functions as a kind of user interface for human memory; the mind can be navigated like real space, and furthermore, problems can be *solved* as if they exist in real space. McCallum observes, 'Travel through reality is crucial to plots that time and again require the characters to go somewhere physically to achieve a narrative aim' (351), and, specifically of *Neuromancer*, 'each assignment requires the accomplishment of a task in real space, […] be it stealing hardware or inserting a key and saying the secret password to a particular terminal' (360, 361). The mastery of real space is similarly vital in *Inception*: the dreamers must all be *physically* linked to the same machine in order to share the same dream, which is why the two jobs performed in the film take place on a train and a plane: so the unsuspecting marks – Saito and Fischer, respectively – can be surreptitiously attached to the dream machine

during the long journey. Furthermore, both Saito and Cobb are motivated to perform the inception because they wish to secure their command over real space: Saito wants to prevent Fischer's company from controlling the majority of the world's energy supply, and Cobb wants to return to the USA to live with his children again. Real space matters – not only to make intolerable spaces describable and visible, but also to supply characters with motives and to mobilize the plot.

In his book chapter 'Terminal Penetration', Bukatman says that 'virtual reality speaks to the desire to *see* the space of the computer […] and to further figure it as a space one can *move through* and thereby comprehend' (1993, 200). Employing nearly identical terminology, Gibson has stated that *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace was partly inspired by the sensation felt by gamers of there being a 'space behind the screen' (Greenland 1986, 7). *Inception* speaks to the desire to see the space behind the 'screen' of the human: Nolan brings the intolerable space of the human mind into visibility by constructing it according to technological metaphors and utilizing the protocols of computer programs and video game narratives. It would seem, then, that just as real space can return electronic space to the control of the human, so too can the frame of technology provide a reassuring metaphor for perceiving (and thus mastering) the human. *Inception* infuses dreaming with a kind of technological neutrality, an interface that is consistent for all users. The viewer is offered a comforting subject position, in which technology is obedient and compliant, and enacting mastery of the technology allows one to police the body. The dream-sharing technology consists both of a wired connection between participants and the addition of a powerful sedative formulated by Yusuf, the team's chemist, which, for the Fischer job, is taken orally. The physical body and brain thus becomes part of the novum – the hardware linking Cobb and his team to the dream-interface. Thomas Apperley says that video games are 'understood intertextually' (2006, 20), referring not only to the communities that surround games but also to the way in which different games often have similar properties and controls which make them intuitive to the gamer – Apperley offers the example of car-racing games in which the A-button is most often the accelerator. The dreams in *Inception* seem undreamlike because the film standardizes the sleeping human body, and the heterogeneous private spaces of dreaming, in a similar way to video games. It posits that all dreaming is experienced in the same way by different people, governed by consistent mechanics – for example, dying is a quick escape from a dream, and real time can be unproblematically calculated into dream time. Ariadne, the newcomer to the team, acts as the audience's proxy – she is drilled in all of these mechanics, until the ceaseless instructional dialogue resembles a game tutorial. The film therefore reveals that the electronic realm is no longer the unknowable space that must be made visible through fiction; instead, we have become so familiar with and habituated to technology that electronic discourse is as much an index of reality as real space is an index of the electronic realm. Cobb's declaration that an idea is like a virus is demonstrative of Sponsler's claim that 'the human and the technological overlap nearly endlessly' (1992, 631): the film characterizes the human as a computer, the same way the term 'virus' once characterized the computer as a biological organism. While Anselmi and Wilson (2011) write that '[i]t is now nature that has become the metaphor for technology,' the relationship seems to be more like Sponsler's endless overlapping: metaphor and referent continually swap places and bleed together, neither clearly preceding the other.

For, just as the ascendancy of technology has reconfigured conceptions of the human, the ascendancy of the electronic realm has, according to Bukatman, reconfigured real space. In 'The Cybernetic (City) State', Bukatman observes aesthetic developments in artistic practice that have been replicated by the city, a kind of 'new monumentalism' which 'reject[s] any mimesis of the natural world, and instead enact[s] the demise of past and future in favour of timeless, spaceless, and finally inertial present' (1989, 44). The new monumentalism of the city is 'grand and empty' (Smithson quoted in Bukatman 1989; 45), characterized by 'an absence of movement which implies a denial of space and time' (Bukatman 1989; 44). Bukatman thus declares that we live in 'the age of entropy' (44), with the city standing as a hollow monument to the 'new arena of action which has usurped the urban function' (45) – the electronic realm. Both Bukatman and McCallum point out that Gibson's cyberspace in *Neuromancer* is repeatedly visualized as a city: in the novel's climactic penultimate chapter, the Tessier-Ashpool cores are described as 'an endless neon cityscape', in which Case witnesses the Kuang virus '[dive] past the gleaming spires

of a dozen identical towers of data, each one a blue neon replica of the Manhattan skyscraper' (1984, 256, 257). It is no coincidence that *Inception* employs a similar aesthetic: it simulates the entropic, grand, empty space of the city, most notably on the second dream level, which takes place in an upscale hotel – an uncanny, hollow, non-functioning interior without an exterior, in which projections circulate on their fake day-to-day business. Jameson emblematically described this kind of space in his analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, which he believes 'aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city' (1998, 12), where humans are made passive observers and movers fulfilling the trajectories or 'virtual narratives' (13) determined by the building. The dream spaces in *Inception* interpolate the dreamers into a similar kind of passivity: the architect necessarily designs the dream levels as closed mazes to maximize the amount of time before the subject's projections locate and attack the invading dreamer, and to give the dreamers places to hide from the projections, but also to ensure that the dream thieves and their mark are guaranteed to cross paths. These spaces are reminiscent of the static pre-rendered feel of discrete self-contained 'small worlds' found in video games – especially the enclosed maps of first-person shooter games. The central caper of *Inception* depends exactly on the kind of proximity that these spaces generate – the better for Cobb's team to feed Saito's idea to Robert Fischer's unconscious.

Through the dream-sharing technology, Fischer's unconscious is, to borrow Bukatman's wording, 'transformed into a *narrative* space' (1989, 45). Bukatman argues that science fiction attempts to compensate for the obsolescence of the human in the electronic realm – it attempts to restore humans to a dominant position in the field, to make those spaces 'tolerable'. This could really be said to be the function of all narratives in general – to impose order, to affirm mastery over something. In 'Terminal Penetration', Bukatman distinguishes between two kinds of interfaces, one that 'incorporates some form of *direct sensory engagement* (games and theme parks, for example)' and another which 'operates through an action of *narrativisation* (literature)', and that these 'two distinct modes of subject address […] often occur in tandem' (1993, 195). The dream-interface is both direct sensory engagement and an act of narrativization – in order to implant the three increasingly specific ideas in each level of Robert Fischer's mind ('I will not follow in my father's footsteps' / 'I will create something for myself' / 'My father doesn't want me to be him'), Cobb and his team not only need to create a convincing sensory environment: they also need to create narratives to mobilize these ideas. The 'plot' of the first dream level is the kidnapping of Robert Fischer and his godfather, Peter Browning; in the second, Fischer discovering that Browning was aiding the kidnappers; and in the third, the infiltration of a snow fortress which holds Fischer's dying father. Thus Fischer is inducted into a video game-like virtual reality, one which incorporates both sensory engagement and a narrative through which Fischer guides his dream self, progressing through the 'levels' to reach the final dungeon. It is through the narrative of the first level that Cobb and his team can hint at Browning's duplicity, so that in the second level Fischer internalizes and confirms his suspicions of Browning as if he arrived at the conclusion himself. Fischer becomes accessible and manipulable *through* narrative; to use a technological metaphor, narrative is the user interface which allows Fischer to be read, understood, and altered.

However, Fischer's unconscious is not the only intolerable realm transformed into a narrative space in *Inception*. Significantly, the dream spaces are preceded not only by spaces in the real world like the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, but also by spaces in *the real world* of *Inception*. Commentators frequently refer to two instances in which a dreamlike logic seems to perforate *Inception*'s *real world*: the first occurs when Cobb is being chased through Mombasa by henchmen sent by Cobol Engineering, his employers of the botched extraction job which opens the film (Johnson 2012). As the henchmen seem to proliferate endlessly, popping up in Cobb's path, Cobb eventually arrives in an alleyway between two buildings that seems to become narrower and narrower, until he eventually squeezes through to the street where, in a moment of incredible narrative convenience, Saito's car pulls up to secure Cobb's escape. The second instance occurs when Mal, Cobb's wife, frames Cobb for her death by throwing herself from the ledge *across from* the trashed hotel room where she and Cobb always spent their anniversary (Tallman 2012). In these instances, the landscapes seem staged to work against (or work in favour of) Cobb; his *real world* is as much a video game-like 'small world' as the dream spaces. This is

not only further evidence of Sponsler's 'endless overlapping', but it is through these ontological fissures that *Inception* challenges Cobb's mastery over intolerable space. Cobb is as much at the mercy of a constructed narrative space as Fischer.

Nolan constructs Cobb as one who understands the importance and power of narrative. When he warns Saito about the full implications of inception, he says: 'The seed that we plant in this man's mind will grow into an idea; this idea will define him. It may come to change […] everything about him'. Cobb knows he is not just reprogramming Fischer, but reauthoring him. As Marjorie Worthington writes, the 'increasing encroachment of technology on the human subject reifies the conceptualisation of the human subject as a text ripe for editing, altering, even constructing through the narratives of technology' (2009, 110, 111). The dream-sharing technology represents a promise of mastery, authorial control. It promises not just spatial mastery but temporal mastery, for Cobb is able to live out an entire lifetime with his wife in his dreams, while only a few hours pass in *the real world*. The romantic potential of the dream technology is fleeting, however, for what we see primarily in the film is that dreaming has been co-opted by corporations such as Saito's. If Cobb can 'build cathedrals, entire cities', it is not for his own pleasure: it is in the service of some corporate aim. Saito is afraid that Fischer's company will soon 'control the energy supply of half the world. In effect, they become a new superpower. The world needs Robert Fischer to change his mind', which recalls Vivian Sobchack's remark that '[t]he multinationals seem to determine our lives from some sort of ethereal "other" or "outer" space' (1990, 108). Mark Fisher argues that *Inception*'s key premise – that inception is difficult to perform successfully because the mind, according to Arthur, 'can always trace the genesis of an idea' – is 'strangely quaint', asking: 'Isn't "inception" what so much late-capitalist cognitive labour is all about?' (2011, 45). This is corroborated in another Gibson novel, *Pattern Recognition*, when marketing magnate Hubertus Bigend says that his task is 'to make the public aware of something they don't quite yet know that they know – or have them feel that way. Because they'll move on that […]. They'll think they've thought of it first. It's about transferring information, but at the same time about a certain lack of specificity' (2003, 63). It seems that what the multinationals decide is best for the people is determined not from an ethereal 'outer' space but an 'inner' space, disguised as a self-generated idea, or the simplest version of an idea – a narrative that one feeds to oneself.

Thus what we see in *Inception* is an anxiety over who controls the narrative – to control the technology is, in effect, to control the narrative; technology is an instrument of narrative. McCallum's question as to why 'this other world's landscape and its subjects look so much like ours' (2000, 351) is salient here: this 'other world' of *Inception* is hardly based on unfamiliar norms. As McCallum says, '[W]e cannot imagine this scale of technology without corporate power' (357). When Cobb's team encounters a group of dream addicts, who spend hours hooked up to the dream machine, Cobb remarks, 'After a while, it becomes the only way you *can* dream', and, similarly, the film suggests that our 'dreams' – our stories, our narratives – are inevitably scripted by capitalism and the dominant narratives purveyed through cinema and media culture. They set the terms and limits of our extrapolation, and perhaps, even, our identities: the narratives we feed to ourselves. The cyberpunk texts in McCallum's analysis are 'at heart […] organised by humanist, Western assumptions about ordering the world through individualist, rational subjectivity, striving for mastery from a single coherent, even transcendent, vantage point' (367), and perhaps one can make the same criticism of *Inception*, which homogenizes dreaming into a generic enterprise, supposing that everybody's dreams are Hollywood-style action flicks or video games. The conventional narratives sold at each level of Fischer's unconscious are mimicked by the orderly narrative sold to the film's audience members, who are granted a coherent, stable vantage point. Mark Fisher draws particular attention to the scene in which Ariadne causes a dream space, based on a Parisian streetscape, to fold in on itself: he writes that 'she's behaving more like the CGI engineer who's creating the scene than any dreamer. This is a display of technical prowess, devoid of any charge of the uncanny' (2011, 40). Fisher's critique might also apply to Arthur's zero-gravity fight sequence referenced at the beginning of this essay – a sequence which, while spectacular, is too choreographed and technically proficient to appear dreamlike; the walls and the floor may change places, but it is still the same hallway that Ariadne designed. While Cobb marvels that the dream space is 'the chance to

build cathedrals' the true pleasure of the dream space, the one the film ultimately sells, is the ability to be an action hero, to be part of a spectacle of explosions and gunfire and *Matrix*-like acrobatics without any of the consequences or moral guilt of the real world. Fisher writes, 'An unsympathetic viewer might think that the entirety of *Inception*'s complex ontological structure had been built to justify clichés of action cinema' (40). It is indeed striking how closely *Inception*'s dream spaces resemble Hollywood action films: the human mind is just a stylish upgrade of real space, where it is suggested that the only defence against invasion is to 'militarize' your unconscious as Fischer does – to populate your mind with gun-wielding soldiers. But it is only deferring the inevitable, for your imaginary police force is still constrained by reality's paradigms. They are outgunned and outsmarted by Cobb's team; they still succumb to the failings of 'meat'. *Inception* ultimately envisions yet another intolerable space which is domesticated by a Western, human-centric narrative.

This desire for the comforting domestication of an intolerable space is nowhere more apparent than in the film's attitude towards characters who demonstrate a deeper merging with technology. In her analysis of Gibson's cyberpunk oeuvre, Sponsler argues that Gibson's protagonists 'fit the well-known mould of the free-willed, self-aware, humanist subject' (1992, 637). Protagonists such as Case from *Neuromancer*, Sponsler says, 'are the characters who are the least invaded by technology. Without exception, they are all resolutely "human", not least of all in their vulnerability' (637, 638). Cobb might also be a Gibsonian cyberpunk hero in this regard: his continued visions of his children constantly remind the audience of his vulnerability but also anchor him to *the real world*, keeping his mind tethered to his *real* body. Cobb is an autonomous, self-aware subject; he upholds that 'strangely quaint' (perhaps *modernist*) notion that the mind knows itself so well that it can always trace the genesis of an idea. Cobb's use of the dream technology never compromises his integrity as a liberal humanist subject in a way that would make him unrelatable to the assumed viewer, whose subjectivity, like that of Gibson's assumed reader, is 'reassuringly reaffirmed rather than threatened' (Sponsler 1992, 638). The film provides two sets of subjects who merge with the dream technology in what is deemed an 'unacceptable' way: the first is offered in Mombasa, when Yusuf leads Cobb, Eames and Saito to the locked basement below his laboratory, where 12 people are sleeping, all hooked up to dream machines. According to Yusuf, the group comes to the basement for 3 or 4 hours at a time, translating to about 40 hours in the dream space each day, a level of immersion which makes Cobb visibly uncomfortable. When Eames asks, 'They come here every day to sleep?' A man watching over the sleepers replies, 'No. They come to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, sir?' Through Cobb's discomfort and recoiling, and the sleepers' position in the *basement* – the film persistently associates these lowest levels of buildings with repressed darkness, as in the scene of Ariadne and Cobb in the elevator of memories – the sleepers' merging with the dream technology is constructed as disturbing and 'Other'. 'Their' addiction is presented in opposition to Cobb's addiction; 'they' are meant to be where Cobb *could* end up if he is not careful enough. That the scene takes place in Mombasa is also significant: the basement sleepers are marked as Other both through their nationality and their perceived over-engagement with technology. A similar kind of racialized characterization is also at play in *Neuromancer*: in her analysis of the novel, McCallum questions the difference in characterization between the Dixie Flatline, a deceased human mind saved on a ROM who advises and converses with Case, and the Kuang, a Chinese program which Case uses when hacking the Tessier-Ashpool mainframe:

> Given the odd ontological status of the Dixie Flatline, which is a human's mind recorded as a computer program, it is remarkable that the Kuang does not exhibit a subjectivity of its own; we must wonder whether the line between the Kuang and Dixie is not simply a racial distinction rather than an ontological one, given that the Kuang demonstrates a kind of cyberspace agency, a sense of knowing where to go and what to do that could be indicative of some form of consciousness. (2000, 363 n15)

The fear of merging too closely with technology is, in these texts, conflated with marginalised 'Other' identities; for these minor characters, their deep engagement with the novum and their computer-like characterization become the basis of their racialized dehumanization, while technologized protagonists such as Cobb are able to retain their humanness through their emotional vulnerability. Cobb, the

masculine Western console cowboy a la Case from *Neuromancer*, is the familiar human (inter)face for the viewer in *Inception* – Case and Cobb both represent 'acceptable', well-managed technological merging.

Inception provides another warning lesson on merging too closely with technology in Mal, Cobb's deceased wife. Like the Dixie Flatline construct in *Neuromancer*, Mal persists after death: she lives on as a projection in Cobb's dreams. Mal is deemed a faulty technologized subject because, like the basement sleepers, she came to prioritize dreaming over reality. As Cobb tells Ariadne, he and Mal were exploring the concept of a dream within a dream, and eventually ended up building a life for themselves in Limbo, the lowest level of dreaming. Mal had 'locked something away, something deep inside her; a truth that she had once known, but chose to forget,' leading Cobb to implant a death wish in Mal's mind so that they could return to *the real world*. This idea, persisting in Mal's mind, leads her to commit suicide and frame Cobb for her death. Mal is 'the antagonist double and the grief object' combined in one character (Fisher 2011, 42), a 'demonic presence' and a '*femme fatale*' (Vukovic and Petkovic 2013). After death, she autonomously appears during Cobb's extraction jobs, sabotaging his missions and even attacking Ariadne and Robert Fischer. With her continued exhortations to Cobb to listen to what he 'feels' rather than what he 'knows' and her hostility towards Ariadne, who always reminds Cobb of what is *real*, Mal's characterization is conspicuously feminine. Cobb comes to realize towards the end of the narrative that his projection of Mal is 'just a shade' of his real wife. As Vukovic and Petkovic (2013) note, Mal's name is derived from the Latin word *malum*, 'the origin of words that denote "evil" in Romance languages'. Coincidentally, malicious software is collapsed into the term 'malware' in computer discourse, and Mal, likewise, is a corrupted memory that infects Cobb, preventing him from designing dream worlds, undermining his dominance and control. The film further constructs Mal's failure to distinguish between dream and reality as horrifying because she is unable to recognize her *real* children, insisting that they are only projections: her technological merging leads to her failure as a mother. Mal resists Cobb's attempts to domesticate intolerable space; she is an obstacle that Cobb, the male protagonist, must overcome, a final boss to 'defeat' (Fisher 2011, 38) in his quest to return to his children. All of the experienced dream thieves fear Limbo – their fear is that they could be lost in Limbo until their 'brains turn to scrambled egg' – but, as Cobb manages to keep his grip on what is *real* while in Limbo, returning both him and the lost Saito to *the real world* unscathed, Mal is the only character we see in the film who emerges from Limbo irreparably harmed. Mal, like the basement sleepers, is a cautionary tale to the other dream thieves; she is an emblem of what could go wrong. Her construction as a 'bad mother' further marks her technological merging as transgressive: she not only abandons her children, but her framing of Cobb for her murder ensures that he, too, is separated from them. Wetmore writes of *Neuromancer*'s Case: 'Case pursues the liberal humanist ideals of material transcendence and total autonomy through new technologies, and as many feminist theorists have convincingly argued, these ideals that claim universality are actually primarily those of Western, White, middle-class men' (2007, 79 n1). In *Inception*, once again, transcendence and autonomy through technology belong firmly to the familiar figure of a Western male protagonist; Cobb, not Mal, is deemed fit to engage with the novum and care for their children. Rather than exploring the 'potential for cybernetic technologies to deconstruct the liberal humanist subject and to produce empowered, posthuman identities that overcome the limitations of "biology as destiny"' (Wetmore 2007, 72), *Inception* reinforces those limitations, conserving the modernist ideal of the human as a rational subject that remains separate from, above, and in command of technology.

In Limbo, *Inception*'s final dungeon, Mal taunts Cobb: 'So certain of your world. Of what's real. […] No creeping doubts? Not feeling persecuted, Dom? Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces, the way the projections persecute the dreamer? Admit it. You don't believe in one reality anymore.' Mal draws Cobb into imagining himself at the centre of a conspiracy – like a dreamer, like a video-game protagonist – where nothing exists beyond the pre-rendered scenery, and which ceases to exist without his presence. Conspiracy theories are seductive, Peter Knight says, because they

> restore a sense of agency, causality and responsibility to what would otherwise seem the inexplicable play of forces over which we have no control. […] [T]hey offer a compensatory fantasy that at least things are still controllable by an all-powerful individual or group. (quoted in Kneale 2011, 174)

Thus Mal also draws Cobb's attention to the unreality of his *real world*, which is as much an intolerable and untrustworthy space as the dream world. All the dream thieves carry 'totems', a small item which only they know the feel and weight of. Only the owner can accurately recreate the totem in a dream, and so the dream thieves consult their totems to reassure themselves of what is *real*. While Ariadne marvels that this is 'an elegant solution for keeping track of reality', the totems can only tell the owner if he or she is in *someone else's dream*. It seems that the premise of a false reality is now obsolete, made pedestrian by films such as *The Matrix*. The central anxiety in *Inception* is *whose* reality is it – rather than verifying reality, the totems establish if one is in control or not, whether one has agency. The inception of Robert Fischer offers a vision of technology that is at once reassuring as it is terrifying: technology is capable of producing both intolerable anxiety and a comforting, domesticating effect. What is being mourned in *Inception*, then, seems to be an old dream of technology, and an even older dream of a rational, autonomous self.

Note

1. Following the convention established in *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*, a volume of essays about *Inception* edited by David Kyle Johnson, I use the italicized *real world* to refer to the film's outermost level of reality in which Cobb plans the inception of Robert Fischer. 'By the use of the italicised phrase, the authors will not assume that *the real world* actually is the real world' (Johnson 2012, 2).

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