

## Inception (2010) - Movie Review by Roger Ebert

It's said that Christopher Nolan spent ten years writing his screenplay for "Inception." That must have involved prodigious concentration, like playing blindfold chess while walking a tight-wire. The film's hero tests a young architect by challenging her to create a maze, and Nolan tests us with his own dazzling maze. We have to trust him that he can lead us through, because much of the time we're lost and disoriented.

The movies often seem to come from the recycling bin these days: Sequels, remakes, franchises. "Inception" does a difficult thing. It is wholly original, cut from new cloth, and yet structured with action movie basics so it feels like it makes more sense than (quite possibly) it does. Christopher Nolan reinvented "Batman." This time he isn't reinventing anything. Yet few directors will attempt to recycle "Inception." I think when Nolan left the labyrinth, he threw away the map.

Like the hero of that film, the viewer of "Inception" is adrift in time and experience. We can never even be quite sure what the relationship between dream time and real time is. The hero explains that you can never remember the beginning of a dream, and that dreams that seem to cover hours may only last a short time. Yes, but you don't know that when you're dreaming. And what if you're inside another man's dream? How does your dream time synch with his?

This is a movie immune to spoilers: If you knew how it ended, that would tell you nothing unless you knew how it got there. And telling you how it got there would produce bafflement. The movie is all about process, about fighting our way through enveloping sheets of reality and dream, reality within dreams, dreams without reality.

The film is a perplexing labyrinth without a simple through-line, and is sure to inspire truly endless analysis on the web. Nolan must have rewritten this story time and

again, finding that every change had a ripple effect down through the whole fabric. Dreams have a shifting architecture, as we all know; where we seem to be has a way of shifting.

Leonardo DiCaprio plays Dom Cobb, a corporate raider of the highest order. He infiltrates the minds of other men to steal their ideas. Now he is hired by a powerful billionaire to do the opposite: To introduce an idea into a rival's mind, and do it so well he believes it is his own. This has never been done before; our minds are as alert to foreign ideas as our immune system is to pathogens.

The film is breathtaking in its visual imagination. The city of Paris literally rolls back on itself like a roll of linoleum tile while Cobb teaches Ariadne about dream world-building. So skilled is Nolan that he actually got me involved in one of his chases, when I thought I was relatively immune to scenes that have become so standard. That's because I cared about who was chasing and being chased, and understood why, and it helped that the movie's very fabric depends on this chase sequence.

The Matrix, Dark City, and other films have explored similar territory, but Inception stands apart. It lacks the nimbleness of Spielberg's *Minority Report* perhaps, and the tone is solemn - I felt out of line even cracking a smile. But that's intentional. Nolan is too literal-minded, too caught up in ticktock logistics, to make a great, untethered dream movie - and that's his choice, his aesthetic.

The performances are uniformly strong. DiCaprio brings emotional weight to Cobb's tortured psyche. Tom Hardy is a standout as Eames, bringing charm and wit. Marion Cotillard is haunting as Mal, the manifestation of Cobb's guilt and grief. Ellen Page (now Elliot Page) provides the audience surrogate as Ariadne, learning the rules as we do.

The film's effects are brontosaucean, like the city that folds over on top of itself. Yet they never overwhelm the story. Nolan uses them to serve his narrative purposes, not as ends in themselves. The zero-gravity hotel fight sequence is both technically impressive and emotionally grounded in the story's logic.

What makes Inception fascinating is its multi-layered approach. On one level, it's a heist thriller. On another, it's a meditation on grief and guilt. On yet another, it's a reflexive commentary on filmmaking itself - with Cobb as director, Eames as actor, Ariadne as production designer.

The film challenges viewers to sift through multiple layers of unreality. It's a fiendishly intricate yarn set in the labyrinth of the subconscious. Some will find it too cold, too cerebral. Others will marvel at its ambition and execution. I fall into the latter camp.

"Inception" is not without its problems. The rules seem arbitrary at times. Why this, why not that? But I was willing to accept Nolan's internal logic because the journey was so compelling. And that ending - that marvelous, ambiguous ending - ensures the film will be debated for years to come.

This is filmmaking of the highest order. Ambitious, complex, entertaining. Nolan has created a maze worth getting lost in.

Rating: ★★★★★ (4 out of 4 stars)