

*Just some fun personal theorizing with Inception (2010). The intended audience should have a basic understanding of the movie and may have already read several articles titled "Inception: EXPLAINED".*

Many viewers agree that *Inception's* ending is less about determining whether Cobb is living in "reality" or a "dream", and that it's really about Cobb's resolution with his own guilt. And I agree! But I'd argue that the logic of the movie has nothing to do with the totem. In fact, writer-director Christopher Nolan deliberately sets up the concept of the totem as faulty, playing into the absentee narrative logic of Dream Logic.

Let's consider: a totem is a deeply personal object that the dreamer uses to determine whether they are dreaming or living in reality. It's necessary because dreams, when we're in them, are our reality. Without a totem, the dreamer would become lost in the dream world, a world that would become their new reality.

An ideal totem is an everyday object with a quirk. This quirk should be unable to be immediately discerned and replicated by someone else. For example, the totem of Arthur, Cobb's point man, is a loaded die. Only Arthur knows which number the die will consistently land on. If he was in someone else's dream, the logic of their dream world would simply cause his die to land on numbers randomly, given that they have no idea 1) Arthur's die is loaded and 2) what number Arthur's die is loaded to. And consider Eames, the forger of the group. His totem is a poker chip with a very specific manufacturer's spelling defect. If he was in someone else's dream, the poker chip would read correctly.

Accordingly, Arthur specifically instructs Ariadne that Rule #1 in dreaming is that *no one can touch your totem*. To let someone touch your totem and discover its quirk is to render it useless, because then they are able to naturally acknowledge and assimilate the unique rules of your totem into their personal dream world. Cobb not only states that he shares the same totem as his wife, but then he immediately tells Ariadne exactly how it works (and the rest of the team has a good idea of how it works as well), defeating the logical purpose of his totem.

But wait! Even if Cobb didn't do any of that, his top still isn't of much logical consequence because, well, it never had a quirk to begin with.

*Wait a second, Angela, you might be asking, doesn't the top have rules? If it falls down, it's reality. If it spins continuously, it's a dream.* Well, yes, the top does have rules! But those rules are incredibly arbitrary because wouldn't any dreamer naturally rule that tops fall in their own dream? Nevermind whether you went to MIT for undergrad or not: don't we all agree that tops eventually fall due to friction and gravity? So what's the use of Cobb's top (Mal's top) as a totem then? Nolan explains the rules of totems and determining "dream" from "reality" with the deeply expository character that is Arthur, but then Nolan has Cobb explicitly violate all those rules. And if that wasn't enough, Cobb's totem is also fundamentally useless.

As the audience, we're so invested in looking for a telltale wobble in the top or extrapolating other possible totems (the wedding ring-as-totem theory... sigh) when Cobb so easily disregards totems as markers of reality altogether. And how is a potential dream for Cobb any less valid than a textual acknowledgment of his "reality"? After all, isn't the movie ultimately a dream for the audience? *Inception* begins with Cobb awakening on the beaches of Limbo under Saito's lofty mansion and it ends with James, one of Cobb's children, exclaiming that he is "building a house on a cliff": a direct recall of the very first scene with Saito's mansion. It's a structural choice that continues the looping nature of the dream. As viewers, we gloss over the faulty logic of the totem because we cling to direction in this heady heist-thriller, which is both about dreams and itself a dream. By drawing our attention to the formal elements, Nolan also makes this a movie about movie-making: why do we care so much whether Cobb is dreaming or not? His dreaming shouldn't somehow invalidate his joyous reunion with his family. Because honestly, films — or their constructed narratives, at least — aren't "real" beyond their physical stock or digital harddrive: meaning is manufactured at the site of the viewer.

And let's disregard all of the above for a moment: who's to say that Cobb isn't dreaming his own dream? A totem will always feel right in your own dream, escapist fantasy or not.