

Comparative Analysis of
Dreams Versus Reality in
Inception and *Eternal
Sunshine of the Spotless
Mind*

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Synopsis

This essay investigates the depiction of dreams on film in both Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. Looking at how impossible visuals and surreal environments create dreamlike worlds; I discuss the battle for control between the lucid dreamer and the subconscious mind in both films. I go on to explore how music and sound contribute to the portrayal of dreams and the return to waking life, with reference to scientific studies on the dreaming brain. I then discuss the importance of narrative structure to the audience's experience and understanding of the films, investigating how disorientation is used to further conjure the feeling of being in a dream. Finally, I look at common character journeys and the concept of the collective unconscious, gaining an understanding of how both films represent memory and the subconscious mind in dreams.

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Introduction

Since the early days of cinema, filmmakers have sought to capture the subconscious on film, through visualising dream worlds and scenarios. The first film which features a dream scene is thought to be *Life of an American Fireman* in 1903, depicting a firefighter who has a dream-vision of a woman and child in danger. From *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) to *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *Total Recall* (1990), dream sequences and films about dreams have continued to populate filmmaking to the present day. Many of the first cinemas were referred to as 'Dream Palaces'¹, due to their luxurious interiors and impressive size. It could be argued that what connects dreams and filmmaking so closely is that films are essentially dreams come to life through visuals and sound. Perhaps it is natural to depict dreams through film, as the storytelling of the subconscious mind when dreaming is much like the storytelling found in film. The act of dreaming itself is the simplest and most natural form of storytelling, requiring no conscious effort on behalf of the dreamer. Film is able to recreate both the content of our subconscious, and the feelings associated with it. For this essay, I will be comparing the approaches of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), directed by Michel Gondry, and *Inception* (2010), directed by Christopher Nolan. I will analyse how both films create visual worlds, sound, narrative structures, and character journeys which contribute to the construction of dream worlds through the combination of memory and

¹ *Dreams: Cinema of the Subconscious*, dir. by Roko Belic, 2010.

imagination. Connecting this to the science of dreaming, I will compare the two films and their approach to creating dreams on film.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (which I will also refer to as *Eternal Sunshine*) was written by Charlie Kaufman and follows two central characters, Joel and Clementine through their relationship. After Clementine makes the decision to erase Joel from her memory, Joel visits the memory-erasing company, Lacuna Inc., to have the same procedure. Joel is put to sleep, and in his dream, we see him revisiting memories of Clementine and their relationship. Throughout this process Joel changes his mind and attempts to stop the procedure. Michel Gondry, who directed the film, has long been influenced by dreams in his work, most notably with his film *The Science of Sleep* (2006), which involves a character whose dreams begin to infringe on his waking life. Gondry has also stated in an interview that "Remembering my dreams is a big part of my life".²

Inception was written and directed by Christopher Nolan and is his only work with a central focus on dreams. This follows the character of Cobb and his team, as they perform an 'inception' to plant a memory in the subconscious mind of another character. The team enters a dream within a dream within a dream to perform the stunt. A major theme of the film is that it is not always clear to the characters or the audience whether they are in a dream or reality,

² 'Learn from Michel Gondry's Masterclass: Dream-Fueled Filmmaking, Directing Commercials & Being an Outcast', *No Film School*, 2016 <<https://nofilmschool.com/2016/07/michel-gondry-masterclass>> [accessed 2 December 2022].

culminating in the film's notoriously ambiguous ending. Nolan stated in an interview about the film:

I've been fascinated by dreams my whole life, since I was a kid, and I think the relationship between movies and dreams is something that's always interested me.³

Both of these films have a significant connection to memory. *Eternal Sunshine* focuses on the loss of memory and the importance of remembering, as the audience gains an understanding of the characters, plot and world through a series of Joel's memories as he revisits them in a dream. *Inception's* central storyline focuses on planting a memory in a dreamer's subconscious, with characters appearing as reflections of the dreamer's memory. It is important to understand that both dreams and memory are closely connected. It has been scientifically evidenced that one of the key functions of sleep, especially so-called 'dream sleep', is the consolidation of memory, through the strengthening and association of different memories.⁴ This essay will therefore have its central focus on dreams, with strong links to memory and the subconscious mind.

³ Steve Weintraub, 'INCEPTION Interview Leonardo DiCaprio, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Ellen Page, Marion Cotillard, Tom Hardy, Ken Watanabe, Christopher Nolan, Hans Zimmer', *Collider*, 2010 <<https://collider.com/inception-interview-leonardo-dicaprio-joseph-gordon-levitt-ellen-page-marion-cotillard-tom-hardy-cillian-murphy-ken-watanabe-director-christopher-nolan-composer-hans-zimmer-and-producer/>> [accessed 2 December 2022].

⁴ *Is Inception Possible in Real Life? | Rich Roll Podcast Clips*, dir. by Rich Roll Podcast Clips, 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbpLAYyuYUI>> [accessed 16 January 2023].

Chaos Versus Control

Throughout both films, surreal and impossible visuals create impressive scenes and remind the audience of the endless possibility of the dream. In *Inception*, Nolan's interest in the idea of the limitless creation of dreams is evident, with scenes of the city bending in half, paradoxical architecture, and sudden extreme weather. Gondry's work also uses impossible visuals alongside unusual editing techniques to create surreal, dreamlike atmospheres which express the often-chaotic nature of dreaming.

In both films, a balance of chaos and control permeates the dream world. In *Eternal Sunshine*, we see the protagonist Joel walking along a street, before the camera pans around and we see him lying on the ground. Suddenly, footage is reversed, and Joel sits on a sofa with Clementine, in another of his memories. The transitions between scenes, often between memories, evoke the chaos and disorder of dreams, and the confusion upon waking. Later on, Joel exits through the doors of a Chinese restaurant directly into the library where Clementine works, still holding his chopsticks. Joel sees her talking to another character Patrick, and as he attempts to turn Patrick around, his face seems to swivel to the back, voices getting increasingly distorted and electronic. The disorienting confusion of sounds and the surrealism of the visual creates a further sense of chaos as Joel delves deeper into his past. Further on in the film, Joel revisits a childhood memory of hiding under the kitchen table and then bathing in the kitchen sink. Joel is scaled down to the size he was in the

original memory, creating an unusual and surreal visual, reminiscent of dream-like memories of being a small child. Joel begins to talk and act like a child, as if forgetting that he is only visiting a memory. The distortion of scale and confusion around reality creates a further sense of chaos, also seen in *Inception* when Cobb is being pursued in Mombasa. Though presented in the film narrative as reality, maze-like streets and an alleyway narrowing as Cobb runs down it create a sense of dreamlike chaos. Some viewers interpret this as a sign that Cobb is still dreaming, however Nolan instead acknowledges his intention to create a blur between reality and dreams.

One of the key lines in the film is "dreams feel real while we're in them", and so I wanted to make a film where the experience of dreaming was addressed in that real way. So even when something extraordinary is happening, you're invested in the reality of that world.⁵

The difficulty to distinguish between reality and dreams combined with scenes of Mal, Cobb's murderous dead wife, creates a chaotic sense of threat and confusion throughout.

Fighting against the chaos of the dream, lucidity allows the dreamer to gain control over their subconscious. In her first experience of shared dreaming, Cobb introduces Ariadne to the limitless potential for creation through dreams. Sitting in a cafe, Cobb explains that dreams often start in the middle of events, stating "you never remember the beginning of your dreams".⁶ As Ariadne realises that they are dreaming, their surroundings begin to change, as the café

⁵ Christopher Nolan, Christopher Nolan: Director - Inception Interview, 2010
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7ff4c-ZqpY>>.

⁶ *Inception*, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros., 2010).

and stalls begin to explode, as if in slow motion, around them. This ‘awakening’ is parallel to lucid dreaming, where the dreamer becomes aware that they are in a dream and can often begin to control the environment and events of their dream. In both films, the dreamers are essentially lucid dreaming. Characters are (most often) aware that they are in a dream and can control their actions. As Cobb and Ariadne re-enter the dream, Ariadne learns that she can influence the surroundings of their dream world, bending and walking along walls of city as gravity shifts. The obvious impossibility of these scenes makes it clear to both characters and audience that we are involved in a dream. As Ariadne learns how to control and design dream architecture, she is shown Penrose steps. A prominent example of paradoxical architecture, this ring of steps would be impossible in reality, but can be created in the dream world. Ariadne is recruited as the dream architect, creating maze-like dream levels for the planned inception. Nolan stated in an interview that he is

fascinated by the nature of dreaming, the idea that when we dream, we can create a world but perceive it at the same time, without realising that we're performing both functions.⁷

This ability to knowingly create and perceive the dream all at once is the ability to regain control of the dream from the subconscious, and essentially resist the chaos. In *Eternal Sunshine*, Joel is aware throughout his dream that he is undergoing memory erasure, however it is not until the midpoint of the film that he begins to exert control over the dream, running from memory to memory to escape the procedure.

⁷ *Why Christopher Nolan Is Obsessed with DREAMS #shorts* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDqm36j1S8w>> [accessed 25 November 2022].

As dreamers become more lucid, however, there is the danger of mistaking the dream for reality. Taking control over dreams can confuse the senses and lead the dreamer to ask whether they are still dreaming or are actually awake. Due to this confusion, lucid dreaming can in some cases cause disassociation,⁸ reflected in several scenes of *Eternal Sunshine*, where Joel observes himself as if outside of his body. Similar to the phenomenon of false awakening,⁹ where the dreamer wakes up only to realise that they are still dreaming, *Inception* intentionally blurs the divide between dreams and reality, with central characters often waking from one dream to another. "Dreams feel real while we're in them"¹⁰, it is stated in the film, as Cobb's wife Mal commits suicide in an attempt to get back to the real world, and Cobb struggles to make sense of reality and dreams. It has been found that during REM sleep (Rapid Eye Movement, the sleep stage where dreams are most often experienced) there is an increase in activity in areas of the brain controlling visual, motor, emotional and autobiographical memory of up to more than 30% than in waking life.¹¹ This increase is accompanied by a decrease in activity in parts of the brain associated with controlling rational and logical thought. This accounts for why even the most surreal of dreams feel real while we are experiencing them, just as in *Inception*.

⁸ Ursula Voss and others, 'Insight and Dissociation in Lucid Dreaming and Psychosis', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 2164 <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02164>>.

⁹ 'Are You Awake or Asleep? The Funny Paradox of False Awakenings', *Verywell Health*, n.d. <<https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-a-false-awakening-3014835>> [accessed 29 November 2022].

¹⁰ *Inception*.

¹¹ Matthew Walker, *Why We Sleep* (Penguin Books, 2018). P.195.

Though dreams appear to be lucid in this film, the subconscious mind seems to re-exert control. In one dream, a freight train associated with a memory from Cobb's past crashes through a New York street and Mal repeatedly appears, often intending to kill other dreamers. Other than those sharing the dream, the people surrounding the dreamers are projections of the subconscious, automatically searching for the dreamer. Manifestations of the dreamer's subconscious in *Inception* often seem disconnected to the events of the dream. When we dream in nREM sleep (the stage before REM sleep), our brain logically connects pieces of knowledge with clear associations.¹² However, in REM sleep, our brain shortcuts these connections, linking distantly associated topics. Therefore, a truthful representation of the subconscious manifestations of the dream world would often appear illogical and unconnected from the events of the dream. In *Inception*, the company pursuing Cobb is called Cobol Engineering – the similarity in names leading some viewers to believe that Cobb is dreaming throughout the entire film, running from his own subconscious.¹³ Mal (as an extension of Cobb's subconscious) reinforces this point, saying:

No creeping doubts? Not feeling persecuted, Dom? Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces? The way the projections persecute the dreamer?¹⁴

¹² Walker. P.225.

¹³ *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*, ed. by David Kyle Johnson (John Wiley & Sons, 2012). P.7.

¹⁴ *Inception*.

Whether or not the similarity in names is intended, it does correspond with the ways in which our brains link information as we sleep. Due to the connections our brains subconsciously make, it is impossible for dreamers to exert full control over their subconscious, expanding the possibility of confusing dreams and reality. In *Eternal Sunshine*, as Joel runs between memories he often becomes caught up in the past, confusing it with the present reality. One of the most notable examples is when Joel visits his childhood memories, appearing child-sized and subconsciously reverting to his childhood self as he states "I want my Mommy".¹⁵ As we continue, he stands outside his childhood home and says "That's where I live... lived".¹⁶ Like the experience of being caught up in a dream, he believes that his dream memory is his reality. He appears to be in a state between lucidity and obliviousness, partially aware of and taking control over the dream, and partially allowing his memories to wash over him in the attempt to relive them once more. Throughout the film, there exists a constant battle for control between the dreamer and the subconscious mind. The same battle is seen in *Inception*, particularly during scenes where characters enter 'Limbo'. This is the deepest dream level, filled with the subconscious from all dreamers who existed in the space, where it becomes almost impossible for characters to tell that they are not living in reality. In this case, the subconscious mind has won the battle for control.

There have been many interpretations of *Inception* since its release. Explained in *Inception and Philosophy*,¹⁷ some viewers speculate that the entire film is set

¹⁵ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, dir. by Michel Gondry (Focus Features, 2004).

¹⁶ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

¹⁷ Kyle Johnson. P.19.

in a dream, from beginning to end. Described as the ““Full Dream” Interpretation”, the book references several aspects of the film to contend that the entire film is happening within Cobb’s mind. It discusses the dreamlike elements of the real world, including jump cuts to the middle of scenes, the unlikelihood of events and the logic of existing in Limbo long enough to forget which reality is true reality. Surrounding these theories, Nolan has stated that he intends to withhold his own understanding of whether we are seeing dreams or reality throughout the film in order to retain the ambiguous ending:

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.¹⁸

The view that the entire film is a dream can be likened to the philosophical idea of Solipsism. This is a metaphysical and epistemological position that “the mind is the only thing which can be known to exist, and that anything outside of the mind is unjustified.”¹⁹ This is effectively Cobb’s position in the world, as he is unable to know for sure the objective reality of the people and environment surrounding him. In *Eternal Sunshine*, however, Joel has an undoubted understanding of his existence in reality, only occasionally distracted by events of the dream.

¹⁸ Christopher Nolan, Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity, 2010 <<https://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl-inception-nolan/>> [accessed 21 January 2023].

¹⁹ <https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_solipsism.html> [accessed 21 January 2023]

The Crossover Between Dreaming and Waking Life

Throughout both films, we see the impact of real life on the dream, something which researchers have studied with interesting results. Summarised by E. Solomonova and M. Carr,²⁰ visual, auditory, olfactory, and somatosensory stimuli can affect the content of dreams. Looking at several experiments on lucid dreamers, their research discusses the varied and unpredictable impact of stimuli on the dream content. Offering one explanation, the authors state that our brain awakes us to a limbo between waking and dreaming, labelling this “micro-arousal”, where we can perceive the outside world while sleeping, leading to both direct and distantly associated interpretations of the stimuli. The impact of external stimuli in dreams is explored widely in *Inception*, with numerous examples. In one of the best-known scenes in the film, we see the dreamers asleep in a swerving van in the first dream level, causing a shift in gravity in the second dream level, leading to an avalanche in the third dream level. The shift in gravity is the most notable signifier that we are seeing a dream, reminiscent of the impossibility of the dreaming world.

Similar to the physical experience of the dreamer in the real world affecting visual dream environments, sound also creates a bridge between dreaming and waking life. Throughout *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel hears voiceovers of the real-world characters while he is still dreaming. In one scene where Joel is in his apartment, he indistinctly hears the Lacuna employees' conversation in muffled sound, as if they are in the dream-apartment with Joel.

²⁰ Elizaveta Solomonova & Michelle Carr in Robert J. Hoss, Katja Valli, and Robert P. Gongloff, *Dreams: Understanding Biology, Psychology, and Culture* (ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019).

He experiences a similar “micro-arousal” to those in the above study, and at this point exists between dreaming and waking life. The voiceover is comparable to the recurring use of Edith Piaf's song *Non, je ne regrette rien* in *Inception*. This song permeates the soundtrack, played as a ‘kick’ to signal to dreamers that they are about to exit the dream. In line with the time dilation between dream levels, the song plays at normal speed in the real world, slowing down the deeper the characters are in dream levels. Supporting the narrative of the central characters, the song also leaves room for ambiguity and interpretation as to whether we are seeing the dreamers awake into real life or another dream. *Inception*'s soundtrack, scored by Hans Zimmer, also hints at the events and ideas of the film. Zimmer created *Half Remembered Dream*, a slowed-down, orchestral version of Piaf's song, heard at the very beginning of the film with a reprise during the end credits as we hear Piaf's song morphing into Zimmer's. This creates a loop from the end back to the beginning of the film and could be interpreted as another signal that the entire film is a dream. Additionally, a connection can be drawn between the length of Piaf's original song, which lasts 2 minutes and 28 seconds, and the film's running time of 2 hours and 28 minutes – argued by some critics as non-coincidental.²¹

Regardless of whether or not these choices were intended to hint that the whole film is a dream, they bring audiences to question their own reality - not just whether the film itself was a dream, but whether we, outside of the film, are living in reality. To paraphrase, the film asks us this: how do we know that we are not dreaming, or is it possible to know at all?

²¹ Kyle Johnson. P.8.

Rather than create ambiguity around whether we are seeing dreams or reality, *Eternal Sunshine* uses distorted sound to distinguish between the two. Several techniques are used to distort sound in Joel's memories - dialogue is sped up, reversed, out of sync, echoed and muted as the memories are being erased. Often music is not diegetic, instead being heard within Joel's mind. In both films, distorted sound does not just create a rift between real life and dreaming, it also signals the beginning of the collapse of the dream or memory. In *Inception*, the song alerts dreamers of their imminent awakening, and in *Eternal Sunshine*, the sound gets increasingly distorted as the memories are destroyed. Within both films, sound is used alongside deteriorating visual environments to signal memory collapse and a return to the real world.

Sounds and their associations with memory is something touched upon in both films. In *Inception*, Cobb hears a glass breaking during a dream, triggering his subconscious mind. Similar to how the brain connects ideas during sleep, Cobb's dreaming brain connects the sound with his memory and inadvertently brings parts of this memory into the dream world. In *Eternal Sunshine*, Gondry explores sound in association with memory differently. At the beginning of the film when Joel and Clementine meet (this segment is set close to the end of the timeline, after the memory-erasing procedure), Clementine recites the song *O, my darling Clementine*, and mentions *Huckleberry Hound*. Joel has no recognition of the song or the character who often sang it. Though this appears insignificant at the time, later in the film we see two earlier memories, first of Joel's mother singing the song to him, and then of him singing it to Clementine on their first meeting. The film's distorted timeline allows this to slowly become more significant as a symbol of Joel's memory erasure.

Orientation and Disorientation

The narrative structure of both films contributes to the audience's understanding of the film and characters. Throughout most of *Eternal Sunshine*, we are travelling back in time through Joel's memories. Simultaneously, we are going forward in time in the real world, cutting to scenes set during and after the procedure. From the start of the procedure onwards, we are concurrently going back (in dreams) and forward (in reality). This unusual double-narrative structure is broken down by C. Jess-Cooke,²² who labels Joel's real-world experience, travelling forward in time, as the primary narrative. The secondary narrative takes us back in time through Joel's memories, likened by Jess-Cooke to G. Genette's description of this type of narrative as a;

backward continuation (i.e., what came before), meant to work its way upstream, from cause to cause, to a more radical or at least a more satisfactory starting point.²³

The simultaneous forward and backward continuations present the audience with both dream memories and present reality at once, emphasising the sense of chaos and Joel's lack of control over the procedure. Without a signifier to distinguish between past memory and present reality in the film, the audience may become lost, much like the confusion felt when navigating between dreams and reality in *Inception*. However, one element of the film acts as a

²² Carolyn Jess-Cooke, 'Narrative and Mediatized Memory In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*', *SCOPE*, 8 (2007). P.3.

²³ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests : Literature in the Second Degree* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997). P.177.

compass guiding us through the timeline - Clementine's hair. Throughout the film, her hair goes through four colours, helping Joel and the audience to establish where we are in the timeline, and indicating shifts in their relationship. When they first meet, Clementine's hair is green, perhaps symbolising new beginnings, followed by red when they fall in love and start their relationship, and then orange when the relationship begins to unfold. Clementine's hair colour shifts to blue nearer the end of the events after she erases Joel from her memory, begins an unsuccessful relationship with Patrick, and meets Joel once more. Understanding the timeline allows the audience to distinguish between memory and reality, with the reversed timeline (Clementine's orange, red, and green hair) existing in Joel's dream, and the forward continuation (Clementine's blue hair) existing in the real world.

Conversely, *Inception* has no clear signifier of the timeline. However, there is no real need for this as it appears to be presented going forward in time, aside from flashbacks, shown in short bursts as Cobb speaks to other characters, and in dream sequences when visiting Cobb's memories. Instead of focusing on one long dream as in *Eternal Sunshine*, *Inception* creates multiple worlds, with no reliable way of identifying them as dreams or reality. The narrative structure of the film has been designed to create confusion and ambiguity, primarily through the use of Genette's 'narrative metalepsis'²⁴, which can be summarised as a story within a story. The dream within a dream within a dream structure uses narrative metalepsis to disorient and confuse the audience, emphasising Cobb's struggle to determine the reality of his

²⁴ Gérard Genette, *Métalepse: De La Figure à La Fiction* (Seuil, 2004).

existence. Character names in *Inception* also hold significance in relation to the film's narrative - with Ariadne being a key example. In Greek mythology, Ariadne guides Theseus back out of a labyrinth to safety after he slays the Minotaur, much like her guiding role to Cobb and the other dreamers through the maze-like dream worlds which she has designed.²⁵ The myth of Ariadne also influenced the 1912 opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*,²⁶ which uses narrative metalepsis to tell the story of an opera within an opera. As described by D. Lash, "disorientation and confusion are not defects to be remedied; they are crucial to both how and what films mean."²⁷ The use of narrative metalepsis alongside the character's own struggle to determine reality from dreams creates a sense of disorientation which further involves the audience and mirrors the confusion of waking from a particularly vivid dream.

Our viewpoint within this narrative is also essential to understanding characters and distinguishing between dreams and reality. The majority of *Eternal Sunshine* takes place in Joel's subconscious, where we follow his journey back through his dream-memories to the beginning of his relationship with Clementine. Joel's journey in the film is therefore our journey, and his experience is our window into this world. To understand the reality of what is happening in a story, we must determine the reliability of the narrator, in this case Joel. The film presents to us a clear distinction between dreams and reality, without ambiguity. We see Joel and Clementine's relationship naturally

²⁵ 'Ariadne | Myth & Summary | Britannica', n.d. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ariadne-Greek-mythology>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

²⁶ 'Ariadne Auf Naxos', n.d. <<https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/ariadne-auf-naxos/>> [accessed 29 November 2022].

²⁷ Dominic Lash, *The Cinema of Disorientation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). P.158.

evolve and grow (in reverse) and Joel's past experiences feel realistic, despite the more surreal visual atmosphere that surrounds them. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the narrator is reliable. However, with *Inception* this claim could be disputed. Cobb often struggles to tell dreams from reality after spending decades in Limbo with Mal, repeatedly using his 'totem' (a spinning top) to confirm his reality. However, some argue that the top cannot prove whether or not we are seeing reality.

Arthur comes right out and says a totem can only tell you if you are not in someone else's dream, since they don't know how the totem behaves and you do. The top failing to fall would be sufficient evidence that Cobb is in a dream, but the top falling does not give us the same level of confidence that he is not in a dream.²⁸

Though the film presents us with a truthful narrator (we are not being deliberately deceived by Cobb himself), we cannot accept everything Cobb believes to be true. However, Christopher Nolan has stated that the point of the ambiguous ending (never seeing the top fall) is not whether Cobb has returned to true reality, it is that Cobb has stepped away from the spinning top altogether, accepting his unreliable reality.²⁹ The film is not intended to provide a definitive answer, but to raise questions about both the realities that exist in the film, and those that exist in our own lives.

²⁸ Kyle Johnson. P.34.

²⁹ Christopher Nolan, Christopher Nolan on his 'last' Batman movie, an 'Inception' videogame, and that spinning top, 2010 <<https://ew.com/article/2010/11/30/christopher-nolan-batman-inception/>> [accessed 21 January 2023].

Throughout *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, we are journeying through Joel's subconscious, and therefore all other characters in his dream can be viewed as projections of Joel's mind. This is confirmed when the head of Lacuna Inc., Doctor Mierzwiak, states "I'm inside your head too. I'm you."³⁰ In Joel's dream, the people surrounding him often act in uncharacteristic ways. Clementine expresses a lack of surprise to the unusual events of the dream world and does what Joel needs her to do to escape the memory-erasure. As a part of Joel's subconscious, Clementine can be examined as an extension of him, described by Jim Carrey as the "outward manifestation of Joel".³¹ Expanded on by C. Jess-Cooke, "Clementine exists not as a character in her own right, but as Joel's secondary subjectivity".³² At one point, as Joel tries to convince her to escape the memory-erasure, Clementine resists. This could be interpreted as Joel's own reluctance to leave the moment himself, manifested as dream-Clementine by his subconscious.

Though Joel at points confuses the dream with reality, as an audience we can still distinguish between the two. However, watching *Inception*, we cannot be sure whether we are seeing dream or reality, and therefore have no way of confirming whether central characters are real people, or projections of Cobb's subconscious. If real, it can be understood that the characters are working for Cobb. Some believe, however, that characters are trying to perform an inception on Cobb, using dialogue including "come back to reality Dom,

³⁰ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

³¹ Jeff Otto, 'An Interview with Jim Carrey', *IGN*, 2004 <<https://www.ign.com/articles/2004/03/12/an-interview-with-jim-carrey>> [accessed 1 December 2022].

³² Jess-Cooke. P.6.

please"³³ to plant the idea in his mind that he is, in fact, dreaming.³⁴ If we assume that characters are products of his subconscious, we can analyse them as insights into Cobb himself. Some argue that characters are written to serve Cobb's plot, and are intentionally underdeveloped, hinting that the entire film is taking place in Cobb's subconscious.³⁵ We know for certain that Mal is Cobb's projection throughout the dream levels, and can undeniably interpret her behaviour as an extension of Cobb. Mal – whose name translated from French means bad, or ill - manifests as a reflection of Cobb's guilt and inability to let go of the past, constantly attempting to convince Cobb to stay with her in the dream. During one dream scene, Mal gazes at a Francis Bacon painting, *Study for Head of George Dyer*³⁶. Just as Bacon's portrait is a distorted depiction of his lover, Mal in Cobb's dreams is a warped reconstruction of his memories of her. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud proposed that dreams are a representation of the subconscious, often a form of 'wish-fulfilment'³⁷ – that a person may dream of something which cannot happen in reality. Though many of Freud's theories have been scientifically disproven, they have heavily influenced the understanding and representations of dreams since. A line can be drawn between Cobb and Mal's relationship in the dream levels of *Inception* to Joel and Clementine's relationship in the dream world of *Eternal Sunshine*. The behaviour and dialogue of both women in dreams give an insight into the mental state of Joel and Cobb, revealing deeper emotions and character

³³ *Inception*.

³⁴ Kyle Johnson. P.356.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Francis Bacon, *Study for Head of George Dyer*, 1967.

³⁷ 'Wish Fulfilment - The Interpretation of Dreams - Freud Museum London'

<<https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/the-interpretation-of-dreams/wish-fulfilment/>> [accessed 16 January 2023].

motivations, and raising the notion that the women represent the subconscious dreamer. The desire which both Joel and Cobb have to stay with Clementine and Mal within the dreams could be understood as a form of wish-fulfilment similar to that discussed in Freud's theory.

The Shared Dream

Both the title *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the name of the memory-erasing company, *Lacuna Incorporated*, hold significance to the recurring theme of memory throughout the film. The word lacuna is defined as "a blank space or a missing part; gap",³⁸ relevant to the central idea of the film - if we were to forget, what would we have left? The title of the film comes from a poem titled *Eloisa to Abelard*,³⁹ by Alexander Pope, quoted in the film by Mary, an employee at Lacuna Inc. The poem reads;

How happy is the blameless vestal's lot! The world forgetting, by the world forgot. Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind! Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd.

The poem concerns Eloisa, envious of the Roman priestesses who have taken a vow of chastity in their loyalty to Vesta. The priestesses are both forgotten and able to forget, making them eternally happy. This can be related to blissful

³⁸ 'Definition of LACUNA', n.d. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lacuna>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

³⁹ Poetry Foundation, 'Eloisa to Abelard by Alexander Pope', *Poetry Foundation* (Poetry Foundation, 2022), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/> <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44892/eloisa-to-abelard>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

ignorance, a key concept which permeates the film. By forgetting, we are no longer obligated to deal with the pain that the memories cause us. The film questions whether by forgetting we are unable to learn - and by extension - unable to grow. In the film's screenplay, upon finding that she has had the same procedure, Mary quotes Patrick Henry, an American Revolutionary leader, saying "For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it."⁴⁰ Though not included in the film, the quote encapsulates not only Mary's journey throughout the film, but also Joel and Clementine's.

In the same way that *Inception's* characters are connected in a dream with the same objective, all characters in *Eternal Sunshine* are going through the same journey - connected through their realisation that knowing the "whole truth" - remembering our past - is essential to our growth as people. This can be likened to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, which proposed that in addition to our "immediate consciousness" (our individual collection of observations and experiences), there exists "a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals".⁴¹ *Inception* appears to mirror this theory, with the existence of Limbo, a dream-space described in the film as "Raw, infinite subconscious".⁴² Limbo is filled with the subconscious of all the dreamers who have existed there, therefore is a shared collective unconscious. Deteriorating buildings crumble into the sea, where characters wash up upon entering Limbo. The

⁴⁰ 'A Quote by Patrick Henry', n.d. <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/190352-for-my-part-whatever-anguish-of-spirit-it-may-cost>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

⁴¹ C. J. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Routledge, 2014). P.43.

⁴² *Inception*.

recurring theme of water again links to Jung, who believed it to be “the commonest symbol for the unconscious”.⁴³

The collective subconscious alongside the events of the film can be related to a phenomenon known as shared dreaming. This is the idea that, like in *Inception*, two or more dreamers can share a dream environment and experience the same dream at the same time. Though there have been several reported experiences of shared dreaming, scientific evidence is yet to be found and few studies address the concept. However, a 2021 study found that two-way communication is possible between a lucid dreamer and a non-dreamer.⁴⁴ Asking dreaming participants maths problems and yes/no questions, they were able to respond correctly using facial movements. Though there is evidence to support communication between a dreamer and a non-dreamer, the science of dreaming is still far from being able to provide evidence of mutual dreaming, or communication between two dreamers.

Conclusion

Originally, I chose to focus on *Inception* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as I wondered what it was that intrigued me enough to keep revisiting both films. Each rewatch provided me with something new and I was curious to explore why. I began to believe that the reason I and so many others are drawn

⁴³ Jung. P.18.

⁴⁴ Karen R. Konkoly and others, ‘Real-Time Dialogue between Experimenters and Dreamers during REM Sleep’, *Current Biology*, 31.7 (2021), 1417-1427.e6 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.01.026>>.

to both the subject of dreams and films about dreaming is the inability to fully understand the topic – that there is always an unknown, allowing for endless speculation on the subject. The further I investigated the topic, the more I became aware that the intrinsic link between dreams and filmmaking in general is storytelling. It is thought that everyone dreams, regardless of whether they remember them.⁴⁵ Dreams allow for the unfiltered creativity of the subconscious and the exploration of the impossible. In both films, impressive visual worlds draw heavily from the science and psychology of dreams, using them as a base for fictional ideas. *Eternal Sunshine* uses editing techniques to create impossible environments and visually surreal dreamscapes, where *Inception* blurs the line between dreams and reality to evoke the chaos of dreaming. Both films explore the battle for control between the lucid dreamer and their subconscious mind, and the struggle to distinguish between dreams and reality. *Inception*'s narrative structure amplifies this struggle, using progressively layered narrative metalepsis to disorient the audience. Conversely, *Eternal Sunshine* uses a double-narrative structure to drive the story, whilst distorting the timeline and evoking the feeling of remembering a dream. Music and sound are an integral part of the narrative, and contribute to the experience of dreamlike reality, signalling the collapse of the dream and a return to the real world. *Inception* explores the impact of the dreamer's physical and auditory surroundings on dream content, whereas *Eternal Sunshine* uses sound to locate characters in a space between dreams and reality.

⁴⁵ Bastien Herlin and others, 'Evidence That Non-Dreamers Do Dream: A REM Sleep Behaviour Disorder Model', *Journal of Sleep Research*, 24.6 (2015), 602–9 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/jsr.12323>>.

Although the technology depicted in both films is highly speculative, *Inception* appears to draw more on the science of dreaming to create a believable story, leaving the audience with questions on whether we can ever be certain of the realities both within the story and in our own lives. *Eternal Sunshine* has a more abstract approach to portraying dreams, instead presenting a sequence of memories in a visual world which conjures the feeling of being in a dream.

Overall, this essay has allowed me to gain a better understanding of the many ways in which filmmakers are able to explore dreams on film. Given the variety and complexity of dreams, it is unlikely that there will ever be a definitive portrayal of the subject, and for this reason it is probable that dreams will remain a significant theme in film and popular media. For filmmakers and artists alike, the endless possibility of the dream provides an infinite source of creativity.

Taking a step back to embrace the somewhat meta-commentary of *Inception*, it could be argued that the experience of watching any film is comparable to a shared dream. Viewing a film brings an audience into a new world, creating a shared memory and bringing people together to form a better understanding of themselves and others. Both *Inception* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* offer the audience a better understanding of the importance of memory and the endless possibility of the dream.

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