Appropriating Viewer Subjectivity in Nolan’s Inception—
Subverting a Genre Reading through Psychoanalytic Tropes

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In his film *Inception*, Christopher Nolan's creates a protagonist whose unintentional participation in the murder of his wife perpetuates his inclination to repeat the trauma of losing her. Cobb's (Leonardo Dicaprio) repetition compulsion allows him to not only maintain a fixed identity but also helps him avoid accepting "the loss of the loss" or "the Romantic loss of what one never had" (Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 194). Cobb has to reconcile with the fact that though marriage symbolically formalizes his union with Mal into a complementary relationship, towards the end of the film, Cobb reconciles with the fact that he could never possess the true Mal as he so fantasized about. However, losing the object he thought he possessed is the narrative that allows him to relocate himself into reality. Cobb's inability to face the reality of his solitude implants a powerful point of identification for the spectator, which eventually carries them into a deeper psychical understanding of their own selves. Beyond animating a social communities' anxieties, or teaching the subject how to desire, film's projection of images onto a screen grants the medium the ability "replay to its viewers their own processes of perception" (Elsaesser and Hagener 152). Thus, the film behaves as a mirror of self-reflection for the spectator because Cobb's preference for the virtual reality of his lucid dream resembles the post-modern subject's preference for the virtual dimension of instant gratification. The film consistently disorients the viewer and the discontinuous editing engages the spectator in yet another simulation that demands his full attention in order to piece together the narrative structure. The film depicts a subject who perceives reality as a simulation- Cobb carefully constructs his persona by assuming a socially acceptable motivation that masks the truth of his past and his desire.

Nevertheless, Cobb's distant response to reality resembles the modern-day spectator's attempt to preserve their subjectivity through their withdrawal from reality. Typically, Hitchcock's *Rear Window*
models the archetypical film-spectator relationship which grants the subject with voyeuristic and scopophilic privileges (Elsaesser & Hagener 13). As Jeff spies on his neighbor, he uncovers a murder mystery from the comfort of his living room but as soon as he trespasses into the reality of the window, he violates his privileges as a peeping Tom and puts his own life at risk as the violence of the window permeates into his world. Hence, *Rear Window* offers a didactic storyline that warns the spectator of the consequences of not maintaining a clear demarcation between reality and fiction. But today’s viewer, as Baudrillard argues, is saturated in technology and media to the extent that he can no longer tell the difference between fiction and reality (Smith 5). Such is the case in *Inception*. Dom’s vocation as an “extractor” relies on technology that enables him to enter into a victim’s mind and steal important information for his clients. But Cobb’s experience with the hyperreal attenuates his ability to differentiate between fact and imagination. In “Film Theory’s” treatment of “Cinema as Mind” the author explains how “certain films function like a virus or parasite that depends on a human host but also start to lead a life independent from him” (Elsaesser and Hagener 149). This description tracks how cinematic culture forms a part of society’s cultural code. The scene that captures Cobb breaking into Mal’s mind and implanting the idea that haunts her even after she re-emerges back into reality depicts the intrusive nature of cinema. When Mal re-emerges into reality, Cobb’s wife cannot detach from this idea, for her subconscious has absorbed it, just as a spectator unconsciously absorbs the diegetic fantasy of a film. Hence, her retreating from the lucid dream resembles a spectator’s retreating from the theatre. Removing oneself from the theatre, and returning to reality, at best can leave a spectator impressed, and at worst, depressed, as occurred with some *Avatar* fans (cite). Therefore, the seamless suturing of person within a film, can distort a viewer’s expectations of reality. While *Rear Window’s* Jeff learns to
maintain his distance from fantasy, today's audience, as Cobb demonstrates, crave to exist inside of it.

Inception portrays the permeability between fantasy and reality, creating an allegory that depicts the modern-day viewer's relationship to film.

Hence, as the distance between subject and film diminishes, the evolving relationship threatens to efface the subject. A film's ability to satisfy a viewer's corporeal, visceral or intellectual demands depends on its ability engage the spectator's suspension of disbelief, that is, its ability to suspend him from his conscious awareness of his own reality. Film theorist Pauline Kael argues that movies are "not good at [generating] reflective thought or conceptual thinking" (Corrigan and White 346). Kael's conclusion evinces an uneasiness over a spectator's inability to enter into the discourse of "high theory" and illuminates a tension between a film's conscious consumption of the viewer and a viewer's unconscious consumption of the film. As a film absorbs a subject into its diegetic world, it threatens to temporarily efface the subject and reduce him to a body of somatic responses. Baudrillard notes that with the influx of simulation, "a new form of subjectivity emerges in which individuals become saturated with the ecstatic form of the real: information, images, and simulations. Without distance, they become pure screens, or switching centers for the influent networks... and all surfaces of inscription" (Smith 70).

Hence Cobb, as well as the spectator, utilize distance as a way to preserve their subjectivity so as to not become "a pure screen [of]... absorption and resorption" (Smith 70).

It becomes difficult to locate a spectator's subjectivity while they unconsciously consume an entertaining film. Nevertheless, in light of auteur theory, Andrew Sarris dictates that "a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (Sarris 562). As a director that harnesses tight control over his films' meaning and philosophy, Nolan standardizes a subject's
viewing experiencing, thus making it feasible to locate his subjectivity. Todd McGowan’s “The Fictional Christopher Nolan” tracks Nolan’s propensity to deceive the spectator with a character’s misguided interpretation of a conflict and this signature becomes the emblem of his philosophy (Mcgowan 12).

Nolan’s films follow a formulaic-like philosophy that has been mediated through yet another formula: that of genre. In his book Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and The Studio System, Thomas Schatz argues that genre films recycle the same conflicts and teach the spectator a set of pre-disposed expectations until the social community experiences a saturation of a message at which point the genre becomes self-reflexive -as occurs in musicals (Corrigan & White 21). But this process suggests that it is not until a community has reached the saturation of a message that it can recognize its subjective participation in the commercializing of such films for the studio system requires a two-way conversation between consumer and producer, even if this conversation remains invisible.

The act of subverting the conflicts that a genre animates allows for the spectator to displace himself from a mainstream interpretation and bring to the foreground the seemingly inferior conflicts that genre represses. Thomas Schatz posits that in genre films “the resolution does not function to solve the basic cultural conflict” but rather that the “conflict is simply recast into an emotional context where it can be expeditiously, if not always logically, resolved” (462). In *Inception*, Nolan instead exploits the complex narrative structure and creates a love story thereby diverting attention away from the cultural conflict at hand. *Inception* relies on the spectator’s familiarization with the science fiction genre to disguise the gravity of his criminality.

Even though genre presents Cobb’s motivation to return to the reality of his children as an ideal desire, this initial reading is one that psychoanalytic theory can strip down to its more selfish veracity. I
propose that using a psychoanalytic framework to analyze Cobb’s presentation of his self, as well as his relationship with Mal’s projection, to show how he experiences his return to reality as a form of self-punishment and subverts the genre reading that presents it as his ultimate reward for successfully completing the heist. Subvert a genre reading can help the spectator appropriate his subjectivity. The manner in which Cobb copes with reality reflects upon the spectator’s construction of reality and characterizing him as a byproduct of myths and fabled tales that he uses to sublimate instinctual wishes into socially permissible roles.

Inception follows the life of Dominic Cobb, an “extractor” whose dream machine gives him the ability to break into the mind of the targeted victim's mind so as to steal crucial information for his clientele- this process is called “inception”. Upon failing to extract important information from Saito, a business mogul, he agrees to perform inception in the mind of Saito’s new business rival, Robert Fisher, in exchange for his freedom. Saito guarantees him that with one phone call he can arrange for his return to the U.S. and circumvent the felony charges that accuse him of murdering his wife. Cobb agrees to the ambitious task of implanting an idea that will lead Fisher to destroy his father’s multi-million company which he has only recently inherited. After assembling his team to perform the heist, he enters into Fisher’s dream and realizes that his volatile relationship with a repressed memory threatens to sabotage the very mission that can potentially reunite him with his children. In this way, Cobb's compromising situation follows a Hollywood formula that captures the trauma of losing a loved one which consequently pressures the spectator to identify with the protagonist. Nolan structures the narrative so that the spectator experiences an incremental revelation of the truth in regard to Cobb’s involvement with the death of his wife. This structure, along with the spectator’s habituation to the genre of a heist,
undermines Cobb's criminality.

Cobb misleads the spectator into thinking that he embraces the possibility of returning to his children when in reality, the incremental revelation of his past exposes his attachment to Mal's projection as the true obstacle that prevents his return. A great part of Cobb's motivation to take on Saito's proposition stems from his desire to preserve his reputation, his symbolic vehicle when he re-emerges his children's reality. When Cobb visits Mal's father, Miles, to recruit a new architect to add to his team, Miles beseeches him to "Come back to reality". The reality that Miles proposes to Cobb entails returning to the U.S. and accepting the alleged charges that condemn him of murdering his wife. In short, Miles beseeches him to assume the role of a criminal for the sake of his children. Perhaps Cobb wishes to protect his children from the shame of having a criminal father, but Miles' proposition reveals a limitation on Cobb's determination to return to his children. Miles raises the important possibility that Cobb prefers the reality of the lucid dream, the fantastical world that houses the projection of his wife as opposed to a reality that perceives as a criminal but that sustains his children. Cobb does not address his concern, and instead pressures him to allow one of his students from the university he teaches in to build the layout of Fisher's future dream. Cobb insists that this opportunity will allow him to return to the U.S and reunite with his children. It is not until Ariadne (Ellen Paige) enters into the film, that the spectator can catch a glimpse of Cobb's inaccurate renditions of his past.

Ariadne's intrusion into Cobb's repressed memories establishes him as an unreliable character and his inconsistencies problematizes the spectator's identification with him. When Ariadne searches for Cobb to ask him a question regarding her totem, she spots him sleeping next to the dream machine and she intrudes into his dream sphere. As she descends down an elevator that retains Cobb's memories,
she spots Mal reliving a memory with his wife. When Cobb catches Ariadne spying on him he furiously decides to take her down a deeper level telling her: “These are moments, I regret. Moments I turned into dreams so I could change them... There’s only one thing I need you to understand about me”. The definitive last statement demonstrates Cobb’s obsessive preoccupation with retaining control over his ability to construct his own history. In an attempt to preserve Ariadne’s perception of his sanity, Cobb descends one level deeper with Ariadne and reveals the unfulfilled desire of seeing his children’s faces as he stares at them digging for earthworms in their backyard. This scene reinforces the surface motivation that compels the audience to identify with him, but at the same time, Ariadne’s intrusion shatters Cobb’s version of himself.

Hence, Cobb uses speech as a means to reinforce his role as a dutiful father. In his chapter “Truth Emerges From the Mistake” from *Freud’s Papers on Technique*, Lacan argues that speech creates the dimension of truth even if deception has first been articulated because there exists neither truth nor error prior to speech (Lacan 262). Lacan removes a value judgement on truth and error and instead characterizes them as subjective points. Lacan affirms that “In order to deceive, speech has to affirm itself as truth” or rather, that the subjective points needs to disguise themselves as truth (Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique* 263). It is the discourse of speech that establishes both reference points. Cobb employs speech as a means to represent himself to the other characters and simultaneously to the spectator. As Cobb reminisces over his past in the scene where his children dig for earthworms, Ariadne sneaks into the elevator and descends into the nadir of Cobb’s memories. She encounters a hysterical Mal waiting for Cobb on the couple’s anniversary, in the hotel suite where the real Mal eventually committed suicide. Ariadne uncovers the crux of Cobb’s torment: Cobb claims that
he has been wrongfully charged of murdering his wife. Note that as Cobb withholds information from her, he simultaneously withholds information from the spectator, thus establishing two reference points—one of truth and one of error. But even though Cobb articulates deception, he sustains an interior dialogue with the truth. Lacan perceives deception as a function of truth and claims that the path of error and the path of truth are one and the same (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique* 264). Further along the film, he again uses speech to perpetuate this ideal persona. When his team enters into Fisher's dream, Cobb confesses that they risk losing themselves in limbo after Saito acquires a wound. Cobb claims “I had to do what I had to do to get back with my children” and successfully portrays himself as a father whose determination to return to his children knows no limits. Thus, this knowledge splits the spectator’s identification between Ariadne and Cobb. Ariadne pushes him to attach deeper implications to his superficial articulation of his persona. As the film later reveals, it is his attachment to his latent desire that prevents him from returning to reality. Cobb exploits the performative aspect of speech to hide this attachment along with his fragmented persona and instead chooses to present himself as a dutiful father. In order to detect Cobb’s lie, Lacan prescribes that “In analysis, truth emerges in the most clearcut representative of the mistake- the slip, the action which one improperly, calls manquee [missed, failed, abortive] (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique* 265)

Cobb exhibits a series of abortive actions that reveals his willingness to sabotage the mission and counteracts his image of a dutiful father even though the tension between Cobb and Mal’s projection initially expresses itself as a struggle against a projection he cannot control. Before transitioning into the third dream stage with Fischer, Cobb stares at a pair of flowing white curtains and as Arthur inquires whether or not he is ready, the close up shot of Cobb becomes unstable and a white
light shines on his face. These curtains resemble the ones in the hotel suite where Mal committed suicide and suggests that Cobb experiences an emotional disturbance. In the next shot, the camera continues to shake but the suspense of the non-diegetic soundtrack subdues. He gazes into the building through the lens of his sniper and regards the safe that Fisher has to open in order to finalizing inception. This binocular point of view represents a “Subjective Shot... [which]merges the look of the character with that of the camera, and is used rarely in cinema...It is associated with difficulty, detachment, alienation, or with robotic vision in science fiction film” (Corrigan & White 1072). This masked subjective shot temporarily aligns the spectator with Cobb’s interiority and relates his sense of disorientation. When Ariadne’s asks "Cobb? Cobb? What's down there?", even her voice sounds soft-spoken and subdued and to Cobb sounds as if he has just woken from a dream. Cobb responds "The truth we want Fisher to learn" which leads Ariadne to rephrase the question: "What's down there for you" to which Cobb fails to respond. This scene offers a problematic viewing experience for the audience. Instead of reiterating his purpose of returning to his children as he initially led the audience to believe, he circumvents the spectator’s expectation of elation. Cobb’s lapse into uncertainty, even with Ariadne’s aid in helping him align with reality, shows his inability to resist the hauntings of his latent desire.

Freudian theory destabilizes the hierarchy between Cobb’s latent desire to remain with the projection of Mal and his wish to return to his children. In fact, Freudian theory grants greater legitimacy to those latent desires which demonstrates that Cobb's allegiance belongs to the id portion of his mind. In Freud’s chapter on “Neurosis and Psychosis” he explicates that in neurosis, the ego suppresses a piece of the id and simply ignores reality, whereas in "psychosis, this same ego, in the service of the id, withdraws from a piece of reality" (Freud 183). Hence, Cobb's insistence to push against the desire for
Mal's projection—a desire that emanates from the id portion of his mind—classifies him as a neurotic. Since Mal resides in the id portion of Cobb's consciousness, her sabotaging of Cobb's plan remains consistent with Freud's description of latent thoughts: Mal "will not allow [herself] to be dictated by reality" and her "remodeling is carried through against forces which oppose it violently" (Freud 186). Freud describes that in the situation in which a person has to give up a love object, the ego undergoes an alteration, "setting up the object inside the ego" (Freud 29). In the case of melancholia, this would allow a person to overcome the situation and give up that object but Cobb is not willing to give up his desire for the projection. Here, Freud offers another explanation that diagnoses Cobb's unreliable behavior: "The transformation of an erotic object-choice into an alteration of the ego is also a method by which the ego can obtain control over the id and deepen its relations with it" (Freud 30). It is Cobb's intense relationship with the id, with Mal's projection, that allows him to experience her giving up of her as a form of punishment that compensates for the murdering of his wife. This expository theory will later prove how Cobb's sacrifice of Mal's projection reconfigures his relationship with the absence of his wife through the genre of courtly love.

Woman Does Not Exist

Beyond the Freudian qualification of his allegiance towards his id, a psychoanalytic evaluation of Cobb's relationship with Mal's projection yields a much more sadistic interpretation. Cobb's obsession with his reputation resembles the anxiety of a subject's inability to anticipate the position of the Other albeit in the forms of friends, strangers, police officers, etc. correlates with Lacan's trope: "there exists no such thing as a sexual relationship" and the even more controversial conclusion that "women does not exist". Zizek explains this concept in A Pervert's Guide to Cinema through the male point of view.
When engaging in intercourse, Zizek explains how a man is “effectively doing it with [his] own fantasy, [and] woman is reduced to a masturbatory prop. Woman arouses insofar as she enters [the man’s] fantasy frame”. The psychoanalytic tropes do not claim that people do not engage in sex, but rather takes into account how the symbolic order codifies the body and negates the complementary “yin yang” formulation of the male-female sexual relationship (Fink 104). Fink illustrates the normal perception of relationships through the cosine formula: \[ \sin^2(x) + \cos^2(x) = 1 \] (Fink 104). This equation represents the manner in which Cobb perceives his relationship with Mal. Mal’s projection asks Ariadne if she knows “what it’s like to be half of a whole” when Ariadne descends into the elevator of his memories.

As a projection of his own desire, Cobb expresses through Mal his belief of having held a complementary relationship with his wife. Fink clarifies that Lacanian theory upholds that instead of each sex being defined by the other sex, it is actually defined “with respect to a third term”, the primordial father, or the symbolic figure that represents the authority that subjugates a person into his indoctrination into civilization, or the symbolic order (Fink 105). This theme later re-emerges in my explanation of how Cobb’s allegiance to the primordial father leads him to experience his return to reality as a sacrifice rather than as a reward.

The representation of the true Mal occurs mostly through the filter of Cobb’s memory which is prone to distortion and points to the absence of the female subjectivity of the true Mal which further echoes Lacan’s notion that “woman does not exist”. Nolan’s Inception could be viewed as a modern-day rendition of Hitchcock’s Vertigo. In Vertigo, Scottie’s friend asks him to follow his wife believing his wife has been possessed by the spirit of Carlotta Valdes and fears her suicidal tendencies. When Scottie saves her from her first suicide attempt he falls in love with her after he helps her
recuperate. Upon coaxing her to remember her past by showing her a church steeple, her memory is triggered and Madeline runs towards the building after recognizing it. In an attempt to prevent Madeline from leaping out the steeple and committing suicide, Scottie runs after her but he loses his balance as he ascends the stairs due to his vertigo and witnesses Madeline fall into the trap of death. In the latter half of the film, he befriends Judy, an ordinary-looking woman who resembles Madeline but he pressures her to transform herself back into the Madeleine he fell in love with. Scottie shows a lack of interest towards the real Judy and instead is infatuated with her appearance. Zizek explains in his film that Madeline “is the stuff of his dream, [and to Scott] more real” than Judy. When Judy walks out as Madeline, Scotty reunites with his “fantasy realized” which as Zizek claims, becomes a nightmare for it requires extreme violence to sustain it. It is only until she walks out as Madeline, that Scottie gives her a passionate embrace. Zizek argues that “in order [for Scottie] to have sexual intercourse with her, he has to mortify her, change her into a dead woman”.

In the same manner that Scottie transforms Judy into his fantasy object, Cobb misunderstands the real Mal as the embodiment of a person whose fantasy complements his, but it is not until her death that he can refashion Mal into the epitome of his desire. In Vertigo, there exists a distinct differentiation between the original woman and the fantasy object. However, it’s more difficult in Inception to understand the true persona of Mal when she is presented through a projection that embodies Cobb’s idealization of her. Recall the scene in which Ariadne breaks into Cobb’s dream and rides down the elevator of Cobb’s memories. Before Cobb spots Ariadne, he shares an intimate conversation with Mal. Mal’s projection asks him “Remember when you married me, you said you had a dream” to which Cobb responds “to grow old together”. This unfulfilled dream belongs to Cobb, a detail of which most
likely may not have coincided with Mal’s fantasy for she chose to live in the lucid dream before Cobb tampered with her totem and performed inception on her. Ariadne manages to creep inside the hotel suite moments after in the same scene and meets mal. This scene shows how Cob mis interprets his own desire as Mal’s desire and this erroneous form of remembering her allows him to possess her in his fantasy world, thus perpetuating Lacan’s conclusion that “women does not exist”. Mal exists insofar she complements Cobb’s fantasy, but this eliminates her subjectivity.

In actuality though, Cobb cannot make amends with the fact that his wife preferred to lose herself in the hyperreality of the lucid dream and chose to abandon their family. When Cobb and Ariadne push into the last dream level to save Saito and Fisher, Mal expresses the absurdity of Cobb’s reality: “No creeping doubts?...Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations the way the projections persecute the dreamer?” to which Cobb responds of his duty to return to reality for his children “because you left them, you left us...I want to see them up above”. Cobb can not fathom Mal’s decision to forget about his children and him. That is, he could not co-exist with the idea that she did not share his fantasy, that her sexuation was defined by a third term, the primordial father, and this ignorance prevents the fulfillment of his desire to grow old with his wife. It is not until he recreated her in his own image, that she entered into his fantasy as a projection. This moment correlates with the scene in which Scottie sees Madeline for the first time, the moment Zizek calls “fantasy realized”. Cobb is able to realize his fantasy through the “nightmare that necessitates extreme violence to sustain it“. In order for Cobb to sustain his fantasy, he puts Mal under extreme conditions and like Scottie, successfully molds her into his object of desire by trespassing into her fantasy and consequently murders her. In the same way that Zizek dramatizes Scottie’s possession of Madeline, in order for Cobb’s fantasy to triumph
over Mal's, he went to the extent of "mortifying her, [and] changing her into a dead woman". Cobb effaces the subjectivity of Judy and transforms her into the object of his desire.

Even though Cobb’s true desires contradicts his disclosure of his own subjectivity, speech allows him to construct the mask that he will assume when he returns to his children’s reality. Hence, Cobb uses speech as a form of role-playing that allows him to grow into his ideal persona. Leo Braudy’s interpretation of the film *General della Rovere* notes the importance of “artifice- role-playing, [and] the assumption of disguise- as a way towards moral truth... [This film] introduces the idea that role-playing and disguise can lead to a liberation and realization of the self’ (Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 33). This perception supports McGowan’s interpretation of the function of the lie in Nolan’s films (McGowan 13). In the case of Inception, Cobb’s self-deception over the preference of his own desires resembles a form of role-playing that enables him to speak his self into being even though this creates an artificial character. The film even goes to the extent of qualifying the error as more truthful than truth itself. The lie is the vehicle which will ultimately enable him to re-emerge in his children’s reality as their father. Zizek comments after quoting Braudy that “the dialectic at work here is that of symbolic identification, of assuming a symbolic mandate: insisting on a false mask brings us nearer to a true, authentic subjective position than throwing off the mask and displaying our “true face” (Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 34). The discrepancy between Cobb’s true desires and his duty to return to his children reveals a distance between Cobb’s true self and his mask. However, his “lie” or “error” gives him a place in the “intersubjective symbolic network” of the reality of his children (Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* 34). Even though the spectator can perceive the gap that exists between these two fragmented identities of Cobb’s self, Zizek asserts that in order to align his “true self” with the intentions
of his mask, it requires his “wearing [of] the mask actually makes [him] what [he] feigns to be”

(Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom 34).

The Spectator’s Gaze

Thus, this knowledge portrays Cobb as an unreliable character that splits the spectator’s identification between Ariadne and Cobb. Ariadne pushes him to attach deeper implication to his superficial articulation of his persona. When the spectator meets Cobb for the first time, he meets the dutiful father traumatized by the death of his wife, or the masked character. Hence, Cobb’s speech represses his truth which positions the spectator with the gaze of the societal Other, that is, the symbolic order that sustains society through the authorial codes of culture, language and law (Lacan Freud’s Papers on Technique 30). Though the compelling storyline leads the spectator to identify with him, his speech cannot hide his allegiance to his true desires thereby creating a distinct point of identification through Ariadne. Lacan explains that the gaze does not necessarily concern vision, but rather the window characterized as an x, at which “the object when faced with the subject becomes object” (Lacan, Freud’s Papers on Technique 220). The spectator then, develops two distinct “windows” with which to perceive Cobb. One character cedes to the demands of the societal Other translating his desires into morally acceptable impulses, while the other perspective reveals the true contents of his interiority.

Nevertheless, the gradual revelation of the truth enables Ariadne, as well as the spectator, to perceive their erroneous interpretation of Cobb’s character as a structural coordinate point as opposed to an empirical truth (Mcgowan). Therefore, Cobb’s concern with his reputation anticipates the gaze of the symbolic Other. For Lacan, this anticipation resembles the game strategy that might occur at a war of which he comments: “What matters the most to me is knowing what the other imagines, what the other
detects of these intentions of mine... because I must screen my movements from him" and ironically, "what is not there" structures the choice of those actions (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique* 224). Cobb's concerns himself with what the other imagines of him—which coincidentally includes the gaze of the spectator—and the movements that he screens from that gaze of the societal Other relate to actions that occur in the interior space of his fantasy.

The Ethics of Fantasy

Inception boasts the tagline "Your Mind is The Scene of the Crime" in its promotion and introduces a declaration that questions whether crimes committed in the mind, the site usually associated with fantasy, can figure as true crimes. Towards the end of the film, Cobb descends into limbo and needs to confront and murder Mal's projection in order to resuscitate Fisher and retrieve Saito. Even though Cobb understands Mal as a projection, he cannot bring himself to kill her without first revealing to her that he implanted the thought that led to her suicide. He explains to her that he implanted the memory that her world was not real, and he confesses that he did know not that the thought would permeate into her reality. Mal's projection forgives him and she beseeches him to stay with her so that they could fulfill their dream of growing old together. Cobb then makes peace with his unfulfilled dream by responding to her that they did grow old together after which a flashback shows the couple wandering through the city that they created. This recycled flashback however shows the couple in their senior years. Cobb alters his memory and uses fantasy to satisfy his unfulfilled dream of growing old with his wife. It is at this point in the film that he reconfigures his relationship towards fantasy. Cobb merges the separate dimensions of fantasy and reality into a mobius strip. By accepting that he grew old with his wife in his lucid dream, he unsettles the delicate boundary between fantasy and reality. If he takes into
account a lucid dream as forming a part of his real experience, he brings to the limelight actions committed in the fantasy world and exposes them to the rules and regulations of the societal Other. This entails that a murder committed in his fantasy faces the authorial conviction that sustains the symbolic order of the real world. As Cobb confesses that he implanted the memory that led Mal to question her reality, a nonplussed Ariadne regards him and the spectator perceives him with the gaze of the symbolic Other as well. On one of the subsequent shots, a clip shows Cobb asking Mal to take a leap of faith and the couple lies on the train tracks waiting for a train to run them over. This image justifies Cobb’s criminality. When Cobb re-merges into reality, he accepts the charge he publicly evades.

Zizek recounts a similar story in which the characters trespass into a loved one’s fantasy space. In Patricia Hughes "The Stuff of Madness", Penelope Waggoner displays her deceased stuffed pets in her backyard and journalists request permission to interview her but her husband Christopher Waggoner begrudgingly accepts the intrusion (Zizek, Looking Awry 154). Before the interviewers come in the next morning, Christopher manages to place a wax statue of his true love in the back yard which causes his wife to suffer a minor heart attack. (Zizek Looking Awry 154). Zizek interprets this scene as the “possible psychoanalytic definition of sin: an intrusion into the fantasy space of the other whereby we ‘ruin his dreams’” (Zizek, Looking Awry 155). Hence, like Christopher, Cobb includes "the very object which must be excluded" and distorts the core that gave meaning to the life of his wife. Zizek warrants that by placing the object in the backyard, he also opens up a niche for himself and that his final act of suicide is an ethical call of justice that allows him to "fill out the vacancy [of the niche] with his own body" (Zizek, Looking Awry 155). Therefore, when Cobb implants a memory which Mal sought to repress, Cobb destroys the coordinate that sustained the reality of his wife. But unlike Hugh’s
Christopher, he resists committing suicide. The path towards suicide disguises itself as Mal's attempt to seduce him into reconciling with her in the lucid dream. This would then force him to give up his position in the symbolic order. Nevertheless, this new relationship towards his fantasy allows Cobb to satisfy an unfulfilled desire but at the cost of accepting the charge he ironically is exonerated from.

Sacrificing the Object Of Desire

Whether occurring in reality or as a continuation of Cobb's dream, the genre reading of the ending of the film dictates that Cobb's successful completion of the heist which allows him to reunite with his children and begin a new chapter in his life. However, the spectator who acts as Cobb's analyst, can interpret the scene as having a more tragic undertone. Taking into account Freud's story of the primal horde- though it now reads as a creation myth- captures the feeling of alienation that a subject might feel in his indoctrination into society. Freud describes the primordial father as an authority figure of a tribe that antagonized his sons because he held free reign over all the women. In an act of revenge, the sons murdered their father but upon doing so felt overcome with guilt (Mcgowan 159). In their search for clemency, they remodeled society by honoring the restriction of the primordial father and translated their guilt into authorial limitations. Lacan however, re-interprets this emotion, not as the aftermath of a parricide, but rather as the regret felt after giving up one's object of desire (Mcgowan 159). Mcgowan likens Miles to the primordial father who commissions Ariadne to assist Cobb to navigate through the labyrinth of his misconceptions and deliver him into reality. The sacrifice of his desire- Mal's projection- ultimately leads him to honor the primordial father. After he undermines Mal's projection and denies her existence, he cannot bring himself to murder her because he experiences the guilt of letting go of her. In the end, "Cobb chooses paternity over the object, and this explains the massive amount of guilt that
haunts him throughout” (Mcgowan 159). Mcgowan asserts that Cobb prefers “…the image and certainty of paternity more than he wants reality” (Mcgowan 170). Cobb’s performance of his social mask has come at such a high price that returning to reality resembles a form of self-punishment which will compensate for the unintentional murder of his wife. Giving up his object of desire delivers him into the external reality where society resides in. This framing addresses genre’s subversion of Cobb’s criminality and distorts the interpretation of his return to reality as a rewarding experience. In returning to the reality of his children, Cobb abandons his enjoyment and self-effaces himself into reality.

Courtly Love

This resignation into reality allows Cobb to reify the memory of his wife through her absence and follows the genre of courtly love. In The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan notes that the tradition of troubadour poeticism often times lauded an inaccessible woman. The female is not touted for her individual attributes but rather “the feminine object is emptied of all real substance” (Lacan 149). Lacan notes that Dante’s love for a nine-year old girl spurred numerous sensual poems precisely because the impossibility of the love affair transforms the “person in question [into] an allegory” (Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 149). Instead of objectifying her, the female figure is instead mythologized. This illuminates the shift in relationship that occurs between Cobb and the projection of his wife when he explains to her that his imagination could not replicate the pure form of Mal and that she represents a mere shade of her. It’s the acknowledgment of Mal’s Otherness that allows him to make peace with her death and externalize her into the symbolic order. “ ‘Why do the dead return?’ Zizek asks, to which he responds “because they were not properly buried” and explains how the funeral procession helps inscribe loved ones into “the text of symbolic tradition [where] they are assured that, in spite of their
death, they will “continue to live” in the memory of the community” (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 23).

Therefore, instead of repeating the trauma of Mal’s death and indulging in her as an object-libido, Cobb transfers her into the symbolic tradition where he can preserve their love in the name of courtly love.

Cobb reconfigures his relationship towards Mal’s memory in order to consecrate his love towards her. Lacan argues that “…to be deprived of something real is essentially linked to the primary symbolization which is wholly contained in the signification of the gift of love” (Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 150).

Honoring her absence signals his love to the gaze of the symbolic Other.

**Deceit as a Simulation**

A dumbfounded Cobb wakes up in the seat of his airplane and glances around the interior of the craft. He stares down a barely woken Saito who immediately makes a phone call as promised. Cobb arrives at the airport and hands his documents to a TSA worker who fumbles with his documents and finally welcomes him home. As he grabs his luggage, he walks past the familiar faces of his team members and Robert Fisher, who briefly regards him with a puzzled look and proceeds to attend to his cell phone. As Cobb spots Miles, his demeanor softens into relief. When he arrives home, he takes out his totem and leaves it spinning on the table, while he runs off-screen to embrace his children. The infamous last shot is clipped right before the top tumbles, indicating an ambiguity over the nature of his reality he exists in. He awakens to return to the dream of his life. The delirium he experiences comes from the fact that he has managed to avoid the gaze of authority. Miles, the primordial father helps him assert himself into society once more. As he walks among strangers, his mask as a member of society protects his subjectivity. Zizek uses *Woman in the Window*, the story of a professor who dozes off and kills the lover of the women he had an affair with, to illustrate how the protagonist’s relief after waking
from his dream does not signify the common interpretation that he is a common man dreaming that he is a murderer but rather emphasizes how “in our unconscious, in the real of our desire, we are all murderers (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 16). He concludes that the protagonist “dreams in his everyday life, that he is just a decent bourgeois professor” (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 16). Therefore, the avatar of Cobb’s fantasy holds the expression of his true desires. Cobb’s fantasy reveals his object of desire in the form of a projection which nearly lures him away from his dutiful position as a father. But in order to accept his social “mask” he performs his role through deceitful speech which re-integrates him into the symbolic Other. If subjectivity emerges in the distance between the mask and the interior space of that desire, truth relies on fiction in order for it to emerge.

Fantasy allows us to stage a desire and protect the artificial avatar that is projected into the symbolic order that sustains society. Zizek ponders whether “psychoanalysis is outdated?” and proposes that “in our ‘society of the spectacle’…Perhaps we should instead insist that the time of psychoanalysis has only just arrived” and takes into account how the hedonistic aspect of video games does not enable “a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho” but rather allows him to adopt a “persona…[that is] ‘more real than reality’?” (Zizek). Zizek takes into consideration the liberating aspect of cyberspace and a person’s ability to enjoy his excess through an avatar that embodies a truer representation of himself. Even in the realm of videogames, the absence of the gaze of the societal Other creates an opportunity for a subject to role-play or “lie” about the mask that he claims in the symbolic order. The privacy of fantasy is necessary in or to generate a fictional character, or arrive at his true mask. This grants the opportunity to assume the reality of a mask that coincides with the societal Other while his desires are held in quarantine in the realm of virtual reality. Nolan places
greater legitimacy on the lie. As the spectator unknowingly treads Cobb’s path of error, he treads the path of truth as well. Cobb’s relationship to reality demonstrates how in everyday life, we resume the dream of the characters that we imagine ourselves to be. Hence the artificial persona is the external projection that exists in the real world because it performs in the anticipation of the gaze of the societal Other.

Nolan encloses the spectator in a maze of misunderstandings constructed through the misinterpretations of Cobb’s character, but the narratorial complexity creates a hyperreal simulation of a puzzle that ultimately leads the spectator to confront the subjectivity behind their own “tr...
tool to subvert genre readings. In order to appropriate a viewing experience, one can approach cinema as a philosophy in contrast to an entertaining simulation. Michelson notes that “Cinema is a medium akin to modern philosophy because it philosophizes about movement and time with its own means...great film-makers are also great thinkers... Their approach to filmmaking is philosophical, in that they are convinced that cinema can generate new knowledge about the world” (Elsaesser & Hagnener 161).
Works Cited


