

Inception: A Never Ending Staircase Of Ideology



Ayaz Ahmad Khan

M.Phil Scholar at the Department of English & Applied Linguistics,
University of Peshawar ayaznumal@gmail.com

Luqman Hakeem

Student at the Department of English, Edwardes College Peshawar.
hakeemluqmani468@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research attempts to explore ideological control within the cinematic masterpiece Inception directed by Christopher Nolan. Through an analysis of the film's narrative and thematic elements it is examined that how does Inception challenge perceptions of reality and agency through its exploration of ideology, consciousness, and fantasy? According to Slavoj Žižek, ideology is understood not as a collection of beliefs, but as a fundamental aspect of social reality that shapes our identities and positions us within the social order. Therefore, this study uses Žižek's perspective on ideology as a theoretical framework which further enriches the analysis, highlighting its intricate workings and pervasive influence on our perceptions, desires, and actions. The concept of shared dreaming in the film reflects the malleability of reality and the influence of external forces, echoing the power dynamics present in our waking lives. Additionally, the process of 'Inception' depicted in the film mirrors the manipulation of subjective experience by external authorities, tying into Lacan's concept of the "Symbolic Order." This study has employed a multi-faceted approach, including textual analysis, semiotics, and qualitative content analysis.*

Keywords: Ideology, Inception, Manipulation, Subjectivity

1.1 Introduction

What is the most resilient parasite? A bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? An idea. Resilient, highly contagious. Once an idea is taken hold in the brain it is almost impossible to eradicate. A person can cover it up, ignore it but it stays there. (*Inception* 2010).

In the realm of cinema, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* stands as a masterpiece of both storytelling and visual artistry. Yet, beneath its gripping narrative and mind-bending visuals lies a profound exploration of a theme that extends far beyond the boundaries of the silver screen—ideological control. Therefore, this study delves deeper into the cinematic world of *Inception*, drawing parallels between the dream manipulation practiced by Dom Cobb, the

protagonist in the movie who is a professional thief, and his team and the subtler forms of ideological manipulation prevalent in our own reality. The film's protagonist navigates the treacherous landscapes of the subconscious, striving to plant ideas deep within the dreamer's mind, much like how dominant social structures implant and propagate ideologies in our waking lives. Since ideology is not a mere collection of beliefs and ideas, but as an intricate system that subtly governs our unconscious thoughts and behaviors. Slavoj Žižek flips classical Marxist notion, "they do not know it, but they are doing it", to extrapolate what ideology means in 21st century: "it is they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it" (*Mapping Ideology* 08). Therefore, Žižek suggests that to grasp contemporary politics, we must adopt a different

understanding of ideology. He notes that since Marx, the term 'ideology' has carried negative connotations, and individuals under the influence of such ideologies never perceive themselves as deceived. If 'ideology' is to have any meaningful significance, ideological positions are always attributed to others. For instance, for today's Left, the political Right are seen as adherents of various noble lies about natural community or the ideal functioning of markets; conversely, for the Right, the Left are perceived as followers of well-intentioned but unrealistic egalitarianism destined to result in societal problems.

Žižek's compelling notion of ideology as an omnipresent and often invisible force molds our desires, beliefs, and perceptions informs the foundation of our inquiry. He contends that ideology operates through "ideological fantasies," constructs that serve to perpetuate existing power structures and obscure contradictions in our understanding of reality. These fantasies, in essence, provide a semblance of coherence and meaning to our lives, yet their true purpose is often to maintain the status quo. Žižek characterises ideology as the generating matrix that regulates the relation between the visible and the invisible, the imaginable and the non-imaginable, as well as the changes/shifts in these relations.

One of the key aspects of *Inception* is the concept of shared dreaming, where multiple individuals can enter a dream world and interact with one another. This shared dreaming represents a collective subjective experience, highlighting the malleability of reality and the influence external forces can exert on it. In the dream world, external authorities, such as the dream architect or the dreamer's subconscious projections, shape the environment and control the narrative, imposing their will on the dreamers. This manipulation of subjective experience by external authorities reflects the power dynamics present in our own lives, where institutions and social constructs shape our understanding of reality. Furthermore, in the film, the characters engage in a process called *Inception*, which involves planting an idea in someone's subconscious mind without their

awareness. This process reflects the manipulation of subjective experience by external authorities, as the characters become agents of influence, attempting to change someone's beliefs or behavior through the alteration of their subconscious thoughts. This manipulation and imposition of ideas on the subjective experience of others tie into Lacan's idea of the "Symbolic Order" (Homer 43) where language and social structures shape our understanding of the world and construct our identities.

1.2 Problem of the statement

Christopher Nolan's cinematic masterpiece *Inception* serves as a multifaceted exploration of ideological control, operating within the narrative realm of dream manipulation while resonating with broader socio-political dynamics. This study endeavors to delve into the intricate interplay between subjective experience, power dynamics, and ideological manipulation as depicted in the film. Drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's conceptualization of ideology as a pervasive force shaping social reality, this research aims to unravel the complexities of ideological control within "*Inception*." Through a critical analysis of the film's narrative elements, thematic motifs, and character interactions, this study seeks to elucidate how the manipulation of dreams within the cinematic narrative serves as a metaphor for the subtler forms of ideological hegemony present in contemporary society.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. How does *Inception* portray the manipulation of subjective experience and ideological control within the context of shared dreaming?
- ii. How does *Inception* challenge perceptions of reality and agency through its exploration of ideology, consciousness, and fantasy?

1.4 Research Objectives

- i. To critically analyze the portrayal of shared dreaming in *Inception* and its implications for understanding the malleability of reality and the influence

of external forces on subjective experience.

- ii. To explore how the *Inception* challenges perceptions of reality and agency by exploring the interplay between ideology, consciousness, and fantasy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews research articles and book chapters to examine the surrounding literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of the thematic elements and ideological implications explored in *Inception*. Exploring the subjective experiences and ideological control within the dream space of the film, comparisons are drawn to real-world mechanisms of ideological propagation. The concept of shared dreaming in *Inception* underscores the malleability of reality and the influence of external authorities on subjective experiences. Through the manipulation of the dream environment by external forces, such as dream architects and subconscious projections, the film mirrors power dynamics present in society. This examination sheds light on the intricate interplay between subjective perception and external influence within both fictional dream worlds and the broader societal context.

James T. M. Miller's chapter, "The Unavoidable Dream Problem," in the book *Inception and Philosophy* (Johnson 2012), struggles with fundamental question of the distinction between dreams and reality, echoing the sentiments of Dom Cobb's iconic quote: "Dreams feel real while we're in them. It's only when we wake up that we realize something was actually strange" (qtd. In Miller 72). Miller provocatively challenges the notion of absolute certainty, drawing parallels between the characters' uncertainties in the film and the age-old philosophical problem of radical skepticism. "The skeptic's position is not that we are in a dream; that is not the conclusion of the dream argument. The point was that we cannot tell whether we are awake or we are dreaming" (79). Miller's argument is about how we can't be sure if we're really awake or just dreaming. It's like when you have a dream that feels totally real

until you wake up and realize it wasn't. He's saying that this uncertainty is a big philosophical problem that the characters in the movie also face.

In the chapter titled "Let Me Put My Thoughts in You: It Was All Just a Dream," the author explicates Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* as a product of ideological manipulation, citing instances from the text to substantiate the argument. By highlighting Nolan's strategic utilization of cinematic techniques, such as slow motion and jump cuts, the author asserts, "When things happen in slower motion in the upper levels of nested dreams, it is to remind the viewer that things are happening more quickly on the lower levels" (Southworth 53). This deliberate manipulation of visual cues serves to blur the distinction between reality and dream, thus guiding the audience towards the interpretation that the entire narrative unfolds within Dom Cobb's subconscious. Moreover, the author underscores the significance of music as a tool for ideological manipulation, stating, "*Inception* uses music not just to convey feelings but also to convey story information" (53). By employing the Edith Piaf song "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" as a recurring motif, Nolan effectively shapes the emotional and narrative trajectory of the film, subtly influencing viewer perception. Through a meticulous analysis of Nolan's directorial choices, the chapter unveils *Inception* as a sophisticated work of cinematic manipulation, inviting audiences to question the nature of reality and engage with the film's ideological underpinnings on a deeper level.

Amresh Sinha's "The ideology of *Inception*" (2017), deals with the profound ideological implications of the relationship between architecture and dreams in *Inception*. The movie projects a process where the dream's subject is not its architect, emphasizing the external manipulation of dreams for ideological ends. This manipulation extends to the inception of ideas within the dreamer's subconscious, orchestrated by external forces. Sinha highlights the role of Mal as Cobb's antagonistic unconscious, relentlessly pursuing him towards reunion in her constructed reality. The article delves into the economic parallels, noting how

“the means of production and production of the means of consumption” is akin to capitalist relations (Sinha 101). Furthermore, it explores the notion of propaganda as a tool for subjecting individuals to ideological frameworks, drawing parallels between “The actual inception of the idea . . . [and] “culture industry,” which “robs the individual of his function” (104). Sinha underscores the power of implanted ideas to shape belief structures unconsciously, echoing the concept of “ideological language as empty speech” (108). Hence, according to this research, *Inception* serves as a cinematic exploration of the manipulation of dreams and ideas, reflecting broader ideological mechanisms at play in society.

In “The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*,” Mark Fisher explores Christopher Nolan's film, dissecting its complex narrative and philosophical underpinnings (2011). Fisher begins by exploring Nolan's partiality for constructing enigmatic puzzles, noting how “Nolan himself has specialized in setting puzzles that can’t be solved” (Fisher 37). Drawing parallels with film noir and neo-noir tropes, Fisher highlights the shift from epistemological to ontological uncertainties within Nolan's works, particularly exemplified in *Memento* (2000). The narrative intricacies of *Inception* are further examined, with Fisher elucidating how Cobb's journey through dreams reflects a broader societal obsession with the manufactured realities of the corporate world. Fisher critiques the film's portrayal of dreams, noting how they lack the uncanny distortions typical of Freudian interpretations, instead resembling “a mass-marketed ‘subconscious’ recirculating deeply familiar images mined from an ersatz psychoanalysis” (45). Through Fisher's analysis, *Inception* emerges not just as a cinematic thriller but as a reflection of contemporary anxieties surrounding the erosion of personal identity and the dominance of corporate interests in shaping our collective dreamscape. As Fisher summarizes, “*Inception* is ultimately about... the nonspecific but pervasive pathos that hangs over *Inception*” (45).

Emily Zakin in “Rethinking marxism” (2012)

tends to explore the complex dynamics of subject formation and agency within the frameworks of Althusserian and Lacanian theory, scholars have delved into the intricate interplay between interpellation, retroactivity, and the emergence of the subject. Althusser's conceptualization of interpellation, as articulated in his seminal work “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” offers a lens through which to understand the subject's formation as a retroactive effect rather than a linear progression. Althusser contends that the subject's sense of self is constructed through ideological mechanisms, such as the state apparatuses, which interpellate individuals into predefined subject positions. This process, marked by a circularity of identity, obscures the initial compulsion behind subject formation, leading individuals to retroactively recognize and internalize their roles. However, Althusser's framework is critiqued for its deterministic view of agency, wherein subjects appear to have a formality of choice in accepting their subjection. In contrast, Lacan's notion of the symbolic subject introduces a materiality to subjectivity, emphasizing the rupture between the imaginary ego and the unconscious subject. This split highlights the inherently fragmented nature of the subject, whose emergence is contingent upon symbolic processes and the negotiation of linguistic and social structures. By elucidating the interplay between interpellation, retroactivity, and subjectivity, scholars navigate the tension between agency and determinism in understanding the complex dynamics of identity formation.

Martin Danyluk sheds light on mainstream cultural products in “Dreaming Other Worlds: Commodity Culture, Mass Desire, and the Ideology of *Inception*” (2015). He showcases the interplay between utopian moments and the perpetuation of dominant ideologies. While such products often incorporate utopian elements, they typically fall short in challenging existing social relations, thereby reinforcing prevailing power structures. Scholars argue that cultural production involves a process of refraction or displacement, wherein meanings are destabilized and new ones emerge. This

dissonance between cultural artifacts and the ideological context from which they arise holds liberatory potential, offering glimpses of alternative possibilities. However, these potentials are often constrained by the commodification of cultural artifacts, which promise transformation but ultimately serve to perpetuate the status quo through repeated consumption. For instance, the ban on certain types of TV dramas in China, such as those featuring time travel and supernatural elements, can be interpreted as an effort to suppress dreaming about alternative realities, mirroring historical contexts where oppressive regimes have stifled the capacity to envision alternative futures. (Danyluk 2015)

While the existing literature on dream manipulation within the context of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* offers insightful analyses from various theoretical perspectives, there remains a notable gap in exploring the Žizekian perspective, particularly in connecting Marxism with Lacanian psychoanalysis. This perspective delves into nuanced aspects such as surplus enjoyment, fantasy formation, and subjectivity formation, which have not been extensively explored in the reviewed research. By adopting a Žizekian lens, scholars can investigate how ideological manipulation in dreams reflects broader societal structures of power and control, drawing parallels between the capitalist mode of production and the formation of subjectivity. Žizek's framework offers a unique opportunity to examine the interplay between ideology, fantasy, and subjective experience, shedding light on the mechanisms through which individuals navigate the complexities of their social reality. Through this lens, future research can provide a deeper understanding of the ideological underpinnings of dream manipulation in *Inception* and its implications for both cinematic analysis and broader sociopolitical discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the qualitative approach adopted to investigate the thematic depth and socio-political resonance of the film *Inception*. Grounded in qualitative inquiry, this study employs a multifaceted

approach that encompasses analysis, examination, and exploration of the cinematic narrative. This section outlines the methodological strategies employed and delineates the theoretical framework guiding the study, drawing upon insights from psychoanalysis and Marxism, with Slavoj Žižek's notion of ideology as the central theoretical anchor, to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the film's complexities and its socio-political resonance in our own surrounding.

3.2 Methodology

This study is qualitative in-nature which includes analyzing, examining and exploring. This study has employed a multi-faceted approach, including textual analysis, semiotics, and qualitative content analysis. Through close examination of key scenes, characters, and dialogues in *Inception*, as well as an analysis of visual and narrative elements, the study has carried out exploring how dream manipulation is used as a metaphor for ideological control. Through in-depth examination and interpretation, the research endeavors to uncover the underlying meanings and implications embedded within the cinematic narrative.

3.3 Theoretical framework

This thesis will have a mix theoretical framework, employing a few different theories for creating arguments, lying in the domain of Psychoanalysis and Marxism. The main theorist used to support the contention is Slavoj Žižek and his notion of ideology. According to the traditional Marxist interpretation, ideologies are narratives that propagate false beliefs ('false consciousness') among individuals regarding their political systems; therefore, "the relation between false consciousness and ideology is conceived in terms of the relation between social existence and social consciousness, a relation between who one is (objectively) and what one thinks (subjectively)" (Eyerman 44). Since these beliefs are perceived as true by individuals, they contribute to the preservation of the existing status quo. According to this perspective, undermining an ideology involves revealing the truths it conceals from individuals. Once these

truths are uncovered, people become aware of the political deficiencies of their current systems and are motivated to improve them.

Ideology has been a central concept in the realm of social theory, often sparking intense debates and discussions. Slavoj Žižek, a prominent Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, offers a distinctive perspective on ideology, challenging conventional interpretations and providing a nuanced understanding of its workings. Žižek contends that ideology is not merely a set of beliefs or ideas propagated by dominant institutions but operates at a deeper level, shaping our perceptions, desires, and actions in ways that are often concealed from our conscious awareness. Unlike traditional views that portray ideology as a false consciousness masking objective reality, Žižek argues, ideology constitutes the very fabric of our social reality, constituting the symbolic framework through which we make sense of the world; therefore, “the mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence” (*Sublime Object of Ideology* 25).

Central to Žižek's understanding of ideology is the notion of "interpellation," borrowed from French Marxist Louis Althusser. Interpellation refers to the process by which individuals are hailed or called into subjectivity through ideological mechanisms (Althusser 131-132). Within the theoretical framework utilized in this thesis, Jacques Lacan's insights offer a profound understanding of the workings of ideological interpellation, particularly through his concept of the "Symbolic Order." Lacan posits that language and social structures shape our understanding of the world and construct our identities, thereby exerting a significant influence on our subjective experience (Homer 43). In the context of Slavoj Žižek's perspective on ideology, Lacan's notion of the Symbolic Order elucidates how ideological mechanisms interpellate individuals into subjectivity, shaping their identities and positioning them within the social order (Althusser 131-132). By drawing upon Lacanian theory, this thesis seeks to uncover the intricate ways in which ideology operates within both the cinematic narrative of

Inception and broader socio-political contexts, highlighting the role of language and symbolic systems in shaping our perceptions, desires, and actions. In the film *Inception* Cobb and Ariadne sit at an outdoor table, Cobb explains to Ariadne the concept of dream architecture and how they can manipulate dreams to feel like reality. He illustrates that the mind creates and perceives the dream world simultaneously, allowing them to manipulate it by taking control of the creating part. Ariadne is initially skeptical about how they could convince someone they're dreaming, but Cobb explains that dreams feel real while experiencing them, and asks that how did we end up here and Ariadne does know nothing exemplify 'the ideological subject' or interpellated subject because her conscious is under the control of the other.

Moreover, ideology operates through what Žižek terms fantasy formations- “obfuscate[ing] the true horror of a situation” (Nobus 190). These fantasies are not mere illusions but constitute the fundamental fantasies that structure our reality and provide coherence to our experience. They serve as the unconscious scaffolding upon which social norms, values, and power relations are constructed. Therefore, the fantasy of meritocracy in capitalist societies obscures the structural inequalities and injustices inherent in the system, legitimizing existing power dynamics. For example, such kind of fantasy formation “deters . . . [people from Third world] from probing into the causes of their predicament. i.e. from politicizing their situation”, perpetuating a cycle where systemic issues are obscured by individual acts of charity (202). It underscores the need to critically examine and address the root causes of global inequality and injustice, rather than relying solely on charitable gestures to assuage guilt or maintain the status quo.

In addition, ideology operates through what Žižek refers to as ‘ideological enjoyment.’ Or ‘surplus enjoyment’ “what we get in exchange for our obedience and renunciation is perverted pleasure in renunciation itself, a gain in loss itself (*Surplus Enjoyment* 6). Surplus enjoyment stems from the very mechanisms of ideology that provide satisfaction and fulfillment to

individuals, even as they perpetuate systems of oppression and domination. For instance, consumer capitalism offers the promise of endless consumption and pleasure, enticing individuals to participate in the system while obscuring its exploitative nature. In *Inception* this can be seen in a conversation between Ariadne and Cobb:

Ariadne: "why do you do this to yourself?"

Cobb: "This is the only way I can still dream".

Ariadne: "Is it so important to dream?"

Cobb: (staring at his family) "In my dreams... we are still together" (00:56:05-00:56:15).

This shows that Cobb's service of Mr. Saito is motivated by his own surplus enjoyment. That is, through the dream world he can see the projection of his wife and enjoy her company, of which he is incapable in real life.

In conclusion, this thesis employs a multidimensional theoretical framework encompassing psychoanalytic and Marxist perspectives, with Slavoj Žižek's notion of ideology serving as the linchpin for analysis. Building upon the foundational ideas of Marx, Lacan, and Althusser, Žižek offers a unique reinterpretation of ideology that challenges conventional understandings and underscores its pervasive influence on individual subjectivity and social reality. By unveiling the mechanisms through which ideology operates, particularly through concepts such as interpellation, fantasy formations, and surplus enjoyment, Žižek invites critical engagement with the symbolic order and power dynamics that shape our lives. Through this reevaluation of ideology, Žižek prompts us to recognize the inherent contradictions and conflicts within ideological formations, opening up spaces for resistance and transformation. In doing so, this theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between ideology, power, and social change, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of the forces at play in contemporary society.

ANALYSIS

4.1 An Endless Staircase of Ideology: From

Dream to Reality and Vice Versa

Let us explore two scenarios. It is a Sunday afternoon of leisure. An adolescent boy is commanded by his father to go visit his old ailing grandmother. The boy refuses, but the authoritative father disregards his feelings and insists that he comply. "You must go see your aging grandmother", says the father, "and remember to behave yourself". This scenario, I would say, is perfect. For although it appears that the boy's freedom of choice is violated, it is hard not to see that he did not have any to begin with. Consider a second situation now with a "post-modern" permissive father. "Son, I would like you to go see your grandmother only if you wish to, but don't forget how much she loves you! follows the strange request of the father. The boy, not wanting to show inconsideration, agrees reluctantly. Essentially this is to say: "Son! Not only must you visit your grandmother, but you must do it out of your free will too!". This shows how easily one is manipulated into believing that he is free in making his choices which are in fact determined by something outside of himself. Such is the way ideology operates in the world today: the invisible order which dictates one's sense of free will. Now a child is not an idiot and he or she will know perfectly what this order means: beneath the appearance of a free choice it gives you a much closer choice, order. The order is not only that you must go and visit your grandmother but you must do it freely. One of the most important things here in this situation is the apparent freedom of choice masks a much harsher choice and manipulation. It is the invisible order which sustains your apparent freedom. In the similar way when Mr Saito in *Inception* threatens Cobb by kidnapping his friend to work for him which Cobb refuses. Then Saito comes in the disguise of a post-modern permissive father and says: "Mr.Cobb...? There is one other thing I could offer you. How would you like to go home? To America. To your children" (00:20:17-00:20:23). This is where the apparent choice of home masks a much harsher choice, order. Here the order is not only you must go and do what I, i.e Saito, want, but you must do it because it is I, i.e Saito, who can fix

your problem of going home. This is where manipulation of subjective experiences gets started in the movie *Inception*.

Inception dives deep into the concept of manipulating subjective experience and ideological control within a shared dream space: The core function of the protagonists in *Inception* is to perform *Inception*, which involves planting an idea into the target's subconscious mind during a shared dream. This idea, once rooted, can influence the target's waking world beliefs and actions – it is about hacking into someone's deepest thoughts and leaving a seed that grows into their own belief. Upon awakening, he/she would instinctively adopt it as his/her own. In psychoanalytic language, their objective is to transform an individual's fundamental fantasy, the deeply buried primal moment of loss that shapes human subjectivity, acting as the unavoidable blind spot of consciousness, compelling individuals to unconsciously repeat specific behavioral patterns. Within the analytic context, Lacan termed this transformative event as the “traversing of the fundamental fantasy” (Lacan 273), through which the existing coordinates of the subject's libidinal economy are undone, liberating his/her by shattering his/her ego and its passionate attachment to an imagined trauma (*From Passionate Attachment to Disidentification* 7).

The team, in *Inception*, does not just plant ideas in anyone's mind. They meticulously choose targets with unresolved issues. What is an unresolved issue? According to Drs. Ron and Mary Hulnick, founders of spiritual psychology, “anything that disturbs your peace. Generally, includes emotional disturbance, it can be hurt feelings, it can be anger, resentment, or disappointment. It is all of the negative emotional issues that contribute to a feeling of separation and inner unhappiness” (Ronald & Hulnick 112). These unresolved issues can act as fertile ground for the new idea to take root. For instance, in the film when Eames comes out from Fischer's Subconscious, he says: “Relationship with his father is worse than we imagined”, and Arther inquires: “This helps how?”, and Cobb replies: “The stronger the

issues, the more powerful the catharsis” (01:23:09-01:23:15). When Eames emerges from Fischer's subconscious and reveals that the relationship with Fischer's father is worse than they had previously imagined, it underscores the depth of unresolved emotional conflicts within Fischer's psyche. It also suggests that the intensity of unresolved emotional baggage can lead to a more profound and transformative release when confronted. Robert Fischer, the target whose subconscious is haunted by his deceased father's accusations. That unresolved guilt becomes the key to planting the idea of breaking free from his father's control. For instance, the team of dream extractors manipulates Robert Fisher's subconscious to alter his feelings towards his father, aiming to influence his decision about the family business. Through a psychotherapeutic process within the dream, they replace Fisher's resentment towards his distant father with a fantasy of paternal warmth and understanding. Ultimately, upon awakening Fisher is miraculously reconciled with his father, experiencing a newfound sense of relief and emotional freedom. This is what we see at the end: providing Fisher with the chance to resolve inner conflicts and achieve desired outcomes.

It is important to notice that the team does not just enter one's dream; they create a layered dream structure. As illustrated in the film by Cobb, the protagonist of the film, that the deeper the team goes in the subconscious of the target, the stronger the implanted idea becomes. Imagine Fischer's mind as a safe – the deeper dream layers act as security measures, making the core belief (the combination) harder to access and change. Planting an idea is not about brute force. The team uses emotional triggers specific to the target. They exploit Fischer's guilt and fear of his father to make the idea of breaking free seem like his own desperate desire. Remember the scene in the snowy mountains? It was not just a chase, it was a way to amplify Fischer's fear and make the idea of incepting his father feel like self-preservation while the goal is to plant an idea: *Inception*. They infiltrate the target's mind, exploits vulnerabilities, and uses emotions and repetition to make the new idea

feel like the target's own, influencing their actions in the real world long after they wake up. It is a fascinating exploration of the potential power (and danger) of manipulating the subconscious. The team often spends more time extracting information or dismantling existing beliefs. Think of Cobb trying to break through Mal's, wife of Cob, projections in Limbo¹. In order to dismantle her false reality (the dream world they are trapped in), the team tends to create space for the *Inception* to take hold – the belief that their world is not real.

The team in the film meticulously constructs the dream landscape to manipulate the target's perception and emotions. This “architecture” controls the flow of the dream and guides the target towards the desired realization of the planted idea. Here, the dream architects create a pleasant or terrifying dream scenario to evoke a desired emotional response, pushing the target towards a pre-determined conclusion. They plant specific ideas or memories within the dream, subtly influencing the dreamer's waking thoughts and behaviors. This could involve creating symbolic imagery or placing the target in situations that resonate with their emotional state. They become more responsive, adapting to the dreamer's reactions and choices within the dream. This creates a more immersive experience, potentially tricking the dreamer into believing they have agency within the dream and its outcome. They, the architects, in trying to manipulate perception, are essentially constructing a symbolic order within the dream. However, the Real – the dreamer's true desires and anxieties – can still leak through, causing distortions or disruptions. The malfunctions, revealing glimpses of the Real that disrupt the dream and force the dreamer to confront their repressed desires, The Limbo—a traumatic space of “raw, infinite subconscious.” (01:08:42-01:08:45) from where a character never gets back until someone reminds him/her that he/she is not in the reality. Limbo, with its

distorted time and manifestation of subconscious desires, can be seen as a representation of the Lacanian Real – the traumatic, representable truth that lurks beneath the Symbolic order (language, culture, social norms). The clash between the symbolic and real cause a traumatic event. A traumatic event represents, for Žižek, “a point of failure of symbolization” the archetypal relationship between the Symbolic and Real Orders; The point where the Real disrupts the smooth running of the Symbolic (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 191). The dream architects, by exploiting vulnerabilities in Limbo, are essentially tearing down the dreamer's symbolic defenses, exposing them to the raw desires and anxieties that ideology usually keeps hidden. Limbo's distorted landscape can be seen as a perversion of the unconscious. Normally, dreams offer cryptic glimpses into our desires, but Limbo forces a grotesque manifestation. This perversion can be a double-edged sword. While it makes the target vulnerable, it might also offer a glimpse of the truth- the ideology they inhabit tries to suppress. Žižek argues that ideology relies on a certain level of enjoyment – the pleasure we derive from participating in the symbolic order, even if it represses our true desires (54). As in the movie when Ariadne asks Cobb, “why do you do this to yourself?”, Cobb responds: “This is the only way I can still dream”, to which Ariadne inquires: “Is it so important to dream?”; Cobb stares at his family and says: “In my dreams... we are still together” (00:56:05-00:56:16). This is enjoyment and the perks ideology offer, a small amount of dream. Limbo, by exposing the Real, can disrupt this enjoyment, creating a sense of unease or dread. By this the dreamer becomes self-aware within Limbo, recognizing the distorted landscape and the architects' manipulation. This can lead to a struggle for control within the dream space. Limbo starts to bleed into the waking world, with elements of the dreamer's subconscious desires manifesting in reality. This creates a

¹ Limbo: In *Inception*, limbo represents a psychological state where individuals can become trapped within the depths of their subconscious. It is depicted as a dream state

that exists deep within the layers of the dream world, accessible only under specific circumstances, such as prolonged sedation or a failure to properly wake up from a dream.

nightmarish scenario where the lines between dream and reality blur. As Mal does not distinguish between her world of reality and dream, once she and Cob come to reality from Limbo. This shows dream architects themselves are not immune to the effects of Limbo. Perhaps prolonged exposure to the Real destabilizes their own ideological framework, leading to internal conflict or a breakdown. Limbo becomes more than just a tool for manipulation; it transforms into a battleground where ideology clashes with the unconscious, and the very nature of reality is thrown into question.

To sum up, the concept of a shared dream space suggests a vulnerability to external influence. The film explores the idea of a collective subconscious, where dream elements can be manipulated to influence a group's ideology. Overall, *Inception* portrays the manipulation of subjective experience and ideological control within shared dreaming as a complex and potentially dangerous act. It raises questions about the nature of reality, free will, and the ethics of altering someone's core beliefs.

4.2 From Estrangement to Reconciliation

Remember the scene from the Documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* in which Slavoj Žižek analyses a scene from the movie *They Live* (1988), in which the character [John Nada] shouting on his friend, "I'm giving you a choice Either put on these glasses, or start eating that trash can". And then Žižek appears on the screen and says:

I already am eating from the trash-can all the time. The name of this trash-can is ideology. The material force of ideology ... makes me not see ... what I am effectively eating. It is not only our reality which enslaves us. The tragedy of our predicament, when we are within ideology, is that when we think that we escape it into our dreams, at that point we are within ideology (00:00:23-00:01:04).

'*Inception*' in the universe of Nolan reflects '*Inception*' in our walking lives because we are eating every day from the trash-can, called 'ideology' and Nolan's *Inception* is all about ideology. The film's core concept of dream manipulation directly parallels how ideologies

function. Just as the '*Inception*' team meticulously constructs elaborate dreamscapes, dominant ideologies create symbolic systems that shape our perception of the world. The opulent settings and corporate structures within Cobb's dreams, for instance, reflect the pervasive influence of consumerist ideology and capitalist power structures in our waking lives. The architects, like powerful figures within society, manipulate these symbolic structures to serve their agendas. Each dream level in *Inception* can be seen as a layer of ideological conditioning. The characters navigate through these landscapes, encountering projections and challenges that represent their own internalized beliefs and anxieties. Cobb's constant struggle with the manifestation of his deceased wife, Mal, embodies his unresolved guilt and longing, highlighting how unresolved personal experiences can become entangled with existing ideologies. There is this scene in which the character named Arthur, while being chased by his enemy on a spiral staircase, suddenly runs full circle, shows up right behind the enemy, and attacks him. This scene can be seen as a metaphor for the paradoxical, elusive, nature of ideology. Despite the dreamlike setting, Arthur's actions still reflect the influence of ideology. The spiral staircase could symbolize the endless nature of ideology, where in moments of apparent escape, individuals remain entrenched within its framework. So, Arthur's maneuver represents the realization that attempts to break free from ideology often lead back to its grasp, reinforcing Žižek's notion that "when we are within ideology, is that when we think that we escape it into our dreams, at that point we are within ideology" (00:00:55-00:01:04 Sophie Fiennes).

An another scene from the movie *Inception* Cobb and Ariadne sit at an outdoor table, Cobb explains to Ariadne the concept of dream architecture and how they can manipulate dreams to feel like reality. He illustrates that the mind creates and perceives the dream world simultaneously, allowing them to manipulate it by taking control of the creating part. Ariadne is initially skeptical about how they could convince someone they are dreaming, but Cobb

explains that dreams feel real while experiencing them, and asks Ariadne: “Let me ask you a question- you never remember the beginning of your dreams, do you? You just turn up in the middle of what is going on”, and Ariadne answers: “I guess”, but Cobb asks again: “So... how did we end up at this restaurant?”, and Ariadne replies with uncertainty: “We came here from...”; Cobb asks for the third time: “Think about it, Ariadne. How did we get here? Where are you right now?” and Ariadne thinks unable to remember. a faint rumble begins and she utters in sheer bewilderment: “We are dreaming?” (00:27:10-00:27:33). In this scene when Cobb asks that how did we end up here and Ariadne does know nothing exemplify “the ideological subject, traveller[s] lost in a forest” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 92). In this scene ‘interpellation’ can be observed through the process of the characters being drawn into the constructed reality of the dream. Initially, Ariadne is positioned as the skeptical outsider, questioning the feasibility of manipulating dreams to feel like reality. However, as Cobb explains the intricacies of dream architecture and seamless integration of perception and creation within the dream world, Ariadne becomes increasingly immersed in the experience. This immersion mirrors the concept of interpellation, where individuals are hailed or called into subjectivity by dominant ideologies or structures. In this case, the dream world, with its convincing realism, effectively interpellates Ariadne into its narrative, blurring the lines between dream and reality until she is unable to distinguish between the two. This realization ultimately leads to her understanding that they are currently within a dream, highlighting the power of interpellation in shaping perception and consciousness within the film’s narrative framework.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly the concept of the Symbolic Order, sheds further light on the film's exploration of ideology. The Symbolic Order refers to the system of language,

culture, and social structures that shapes our understanding of the world. Lacan argues:

It is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far my father made mistakes which I am condemned to reproduce . . . I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one cannot stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else (qtd. In Homer 44).”

Homer, commenting on Lacan, extrapolates that “we are subjected to the symbolic order: the order of language, of discourse; we cannot escape it” (44). In *Inception*, the dream architects embody the Symbolic Order, constructing the dream space, like our reality, with its own rules and limitations. This reflects how ideologies operate through the unconscious, subtly influencing our desires and anxieties to maintain control.

Therefore, it can be argued that *Inception* masterfully explores the tension between freedom and control. Within the dream world, characters appear to have choices, but these are ultimately limited by the dream architects and the underlying structure of the dream itself. For instance, Cobb seems to have free choice and responsible for all his action but actually this is not the case. He seems free but apparently his freedom is controlled and he has no language to speak his ‘unfreedom²’. This parallels the illusion of choice presented by some ideologies, while subtly restricting the range of acceptable beliefs and actions. As Žižek says: “the ideology of free choices is everywhere, it is the air we breath When we are deprived of universal healthcare, we are told that we are given a new freedom of choice to choose our healthcare provider” (*Surplus-Enjoyment* 44).

The team of dream extractors manipulates Robert Fisher's subconscious to alter his feelings

² Unfreedom is a term coined by Slavoj Žižek, referring to a state in which individuals are not truly free despite appearances to the contrary.

towards his father, aiming to influence his decision about the family business. Through a psychotherapeutic process within the dream, they replace Fisher's resentment towards his distant father with a fantasy of paternal warmth and understanding. Ultimately, upon awakening, Fisher is miraculously reconciled with his father, providing Fisher with the chance to resolve inner conflicts and achieve desired outcomes. This is not the reconciliation between father and son rather the reconciliation between ideology and ideological subject, Fisher. Here Fisher actually conforming the symbolic order. and now the estrangement between father and son is called reconciliation.

To sum up, *Inception* serves as a multifaceted exploration of the interplay between ideology, consciousness, and agency. Drawing on the insights of Slavoj Žižek's theories, combining Marxist notion of Ideology with Lacanian psychoanalysis, viewers are prompted to consider the pervasive influence of ideology on individual perception and behavior. The parallels drawn between dream manipulation and ideological control underscore the film's central thesis: that we are all subject to the subtle machinations of ideology, even as we perceive ourselves to be exercising free will. The notion of interpellation, as depicted through characters like Ariadne and Cobb, further underscores the power of ideology to shape consciousness and blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. Ultimately, *Inception* invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of freedom and control within the framework of societal structures and symbolic systems, challenging us to question the nature of our own agency in the face of ideological hegemony.

4.3 And who are you to Think Otherwise?

The scene from *Inception* in which Yusuf, a chemist, discusses with Cobb and others the use of powerful sedatives and compounds for dream manipulation, including the possibility of multiple dream levels. He reveals a back room where people sleep for extended periods, hooked up to tubes, to experience shared dreams daily. He explains that for some, it is the only way they can dream. In a pivotal moment within the room, Eames queries the purpose of its occupants' daily

presence: "They come here every day to sleep?" The Elderly Bald Man, his gaze filled with a mixture of wisdom and fondness, offers a profound response: "No. They come to be woken up... the dream has become their reality..." With a pointed gesture towards Cobb, the Elderly Bald Man challenges his certainty: "who are you to say otherwise, sir?" (00:43:20-00:43:34). This exchange encapsulates the existential depth of *'Inception'*, probing the nature of reality and consciousness, and challenging characters and viewers alike to question their perceptions of truth and illusion. This scene raises question about the very ideological control and manipulation like who controls whom? As mentioned earlier, dream extractors alter Fisher's view of his father to influence his business choice. Using dream psychotherapy, they replace Fisher's resentment with acceptance. Upon awakening, Fisher reconciles with his father, finding relief and resolving inner conflicts., ultimately offering him the opportunity to have his cake and eat it too. But what if we think otherwise. Like in the case Cobb, the protagonist of *Inception*, grapples with the guilt and grief surrounding his deceased wife, Mal. Their relationship is marked by complexity, as Cobb struggles to distinguish between reality and the lingering remnants of shared dreams with Mal. Throughout the film, Cobb is haunted by memories of Mal, who manifests as both a source of love and torment within his subconscious. His inability to let go of her leads to psychological turmoil, impacting his ability to perform his work effectively and complicating his relationships with other. At the end of *Inception*, Cobb completes his mission, overcomes the projection of Mal and perform *inception* on Robert Fischer. He successfully plants the idea in Fischer's subconscious mind, allowing him to make a decision that will ultimately lead to his own liberation and finally returns to his home and reunites with his children. But the spinning top, a symbol of Cobb's grip on reality throughout the film, is left ambiguous, leaving viewers to speculate whether Cobb is truly awake or still trapped in a dream. This places us in ambiguity, is *inception* really happens to Fisher? Is Cobb returns home or to an another dream? This last scene is very

important because of its ambiguity. The missing information compels the audience and make them to know more which is “Objet Petit a” (Lacan 111), privileged object or object cause of desire, and what constitutes one's subjectivity. And “to avoid the void is subjectivity” (*Real Tears* 148). In this perspective, the viewer finds themselves in a space of emptiness, facing their own sense of lack. Lack is the Real, devoid of language, constantly disrupts the symbolic order. Essentially, it reveals one's acknowledgment of their finite existence. Fantasy emerges as a means to fill this absence, providing a buffer against the awareness of mortality. For example, facing imminent danger from a bear or tiger removes boundaries, prompting the creation of structures to distance oneself from the inevitability of death. These structures, essentially fantasies, serve to regain control over desire by accessing the lost object. Similarly, in cinematic reality, imposing limits through fantasy establishes a framework for meaning. Removing or rupturing these limits leaves the viewer in a state of uncertainty, once again confronted with their own lack and mortality. Thus, the viewer must overlay their own interpretations or fantasies to mask the void and deflect from the reality of mortality, effectively reconstructing the missing elements to evade being-towards-death. As fantasy does not simply teach us what to desire its function is rather that of a Kantian “transcendental schematism.” it literally “teaches us how to desire” (Nobus 191). Here the fantasmatic desire is to know the missing scene; to see the end because where full enjoyment resides. Therefore, it makes us to think that in the real world ideology leaves us nowhere, as most of our questions remain unanswered thus we enter into our “fantasmatic” world of reality offered by ideology and worth noting that what is desired in the world of fantasy is the desire of the other (194). This fantasmatic world created by ideology structures everything for us, whatever has been offered is held true and real and thus it makes us forgetful of, as illustrated Althusser, that our relationship with ideology is not real but imaginary (qtd. In Lucas Rutledge). That is where we are driven by what is dictated by ideology and thus it, ideology, asks and who

are to think otherwise.

CONCLUSION

It is self-contradictory to reach a conclusion when you are thinking and writing within ideology. There is no end to the tale but throughout this thesis, we can decipher the dream and concludes following pathways: the exploration of ideological control within the cinematic realm of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* which offers a fascinating lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of ideology in our own reality. Through the metaphor of shared dreaming and the manipulation of subjective experiences within the dream space, the film illuminates how external forces shape our understanding of reality and influence our beliefs and behaviors. Drawing parallels between the dream manipulation techniques depicted in *Inception* and real-world mechanisms of ideological propagation and control. Moreover, the concepts of interpellation, fantasy formations, misrecognition, and ideological enjoyment deepen our understanding of how ideology functions to maintain existing power structures and suppress alternative perspectives and foster social change.

Two questions were raised in the introduction. The first one was: How does *Inception* portray the manipulation of subjective experience and ideological control within the context of shared dreaming? From the analysis we conclude that *Inception* delves into the intricate interplay of subjective experience, ideological control, and the manipulation thereof within the realm of shared dreaming. Through the practice of *Inception*, the protagonists navigate the depths of the human psyche, planting seeds of thought that take root in the target's subconscious, ultimately influencing their waking beliefs and actions. This process mirrors the subtle coercion present in everyday life, where seemingly free choices conceal deeper orders and manipulations. Central to the film's exploration is the notion of unresolved issues acting as fertile ground for implanted ideas. By exploiting the target's emotional vulnerabilities, such as guilt or fear, the team orchestrates dream scenarios that catalyze the acceptance of the planted idea

as the individual's own. This manipulation of perception and emotion is akin to crafting a symbolic order within the dream, guiding the target towards a predetermined conclusion while allowing glimpses of the repressed truths lurking in the subconscious. The dream architects, however, must contend with the disruptive force of the Real, embodied by the liminal space of Limbo. Here, the clash between the symbolic and the real exposes the fragility of ideological constructs, leading to internal conflict and a blurring of the lines between dream and reality. Limbo becomes a battleground where the unconscious asserts itself, challenging the very foundations of the dreamer's worldview. Ultimately, *Inception* prompts reflection on the nature of reality, free will, and the ethical implications of manipulating core beliefs. It serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us of the dangers inherent in the manipulation of subjective experience and the imposition of ideological control. In the shared dreamspace of *Inception*, the boundaries between manipulation and liberation, between illusion and truth, are perilously thin, urging us to tread carefully in the labyrinth of the human mind.

The second question examined that how does *Inception* challenge perceptions of reality and agency through its exploration of ideology, consciousness, and fantasy?. From the analysis we concluded that *Inception* offers a profound exploration of reality, agency, and ideology through its intricate narrative and thematic depth. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Slavoj Žižek, the film challenges viewers to reconsider their perceptions of truth and illusion, inviting them to confront the pervasive influence of ideology on individual consciousness and behavior. Through the manipulation of dreams and the planting of ideas, the film explores the delicate balance between freedom and control, highlighting how deeply ingrained ideologies can shape our perceptions and actions. Characters like Cobb and Fischer navigate a landscape where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur, prompting them to question their own agency and desires. The concept of interpellation, as depicted in the film, underscores the power of ideology to shape

consciousness and subjectivity. Characters like Ariadne are drawn into the dream world, their perceptions manipulated by the architects of the dream. This process mirrors how dominant ideologies subtly influence our beliefs and behaviors, often without our conscious awareness. Furthermore, *Inception* challenges viewers to confront the ambiguity of reality and the limitations of their own perception. The film's ambiguous ending, symbolized by the spinning top, leaves audiences questioning the nature of truth and illusion, inviting them to consider the role of ideology in shaping their understanding of the world.

Ultimately, *Inception* serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the complexities of human consciousness and the power dynamics at play within the realm of dreams. By weaving together elements of ideology, consciousness, and fantasy, the film invites viewers to engage critically with the nature of reality and the forces that shape our perceptions. In doing so, it prompts us to reflect on our own agency in the face of ideological hegemony, challenging us to ask ourselves: Who are we to think otherwise in the face of the pervasive influence of ideology.

REFERENCES

- Bloomsbury Academic. 2022. pp. 400." *International Dialogue* 13.1 (2023): 3.
- Danyluk, Martin. "Dreaming Other Worlds: Commodity Culture, Mass Desire, and the Ideology of *Inception*." *Rethinking Marxism* 27.4 (2015): 601-610.
- Ferretter, Luke. *Louis Althusser*. Routledge, 2007.
- Fisher, Mark. "The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3, Spring 2011, pp. 37-45. University of California
- Press, DOI: 10.1525/fq.2011.64.3.37. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2011.64.3.37>.
- Hulnick, H. Ronald, and Mary Hulnick. *Loyalty to your soul: The heart of spiritual psychology*. Hay House, Inc, 2011.

- Jameson, Fredric. "Imaginary and symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, psychoanalytic criticism, and the problem of the subject." *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 338-395.
- Lacan, 1981:LACAN, Jacques, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concept of Psychoanalysis, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, W.W Norton and Co, 1981.
- Miller, James T. M. "The Unavoidable Dream Problem." *Inception and Philosophy*, edited by David Kyle Johnson, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012, p. 72
- Nagypal, Tamas. "The inception of Cynicism from the Ruins of Sexual Difference: Christopher Nolan's Dialectic of Masculine Enlightenment."
- Nobus, Dany. *Key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Other Press, LLC, 2020.
- Sankowski, Edward, and Betty J. Harris. "Review Essay: Enjoyment and Ideology Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed Slavoj Žižek. London:
- The Pervert's Guide to Ideology directed by Sophie Fiennes.
- Sinha, Amresh. "The Ideology of *Inception*." *Film and Philosophy*, January 2017, DOI: 10.5840/filmphil2017217.
- Southworth, Jason. "Let Me Put My Thoughts in You: It Was All Just a Dream."
- Inception and Philosophy*, edited by David Kyle Johnson, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012, p. 44.
- Stamp, Richard. "Our Friend Žižek, on The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory, by Slavoj Žižek." *Film-Philosophy* 7.4 (2003).
- Zakin, Emily. "Rethinking Marxism." *Emerging Trends in Continental Philosophy*. Routledge, 2014. 49-67.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso Books, 2019.
- . "From 'Passionate Attachment' to Disidentification." *UMBR(a): Identity/Identification*, 1998, pp. 3-19.