

Gina Physis

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Manifestations of the 'Male Gaze' in *Inception*

The movie *Inception* was released on July 16, 2010. Directed by Christopher Nolan, who also directed *The Dark Knight*, the movie grossed over \$21 million dollars on its opening day. In total, the film has grossed \$804,201,000 worldwide, thus far. The film follows Dom Cobb, a skilled thief played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Cobb is the absolute best in the dangerous art of extraction: stealing valuable secrets from deep within the subconscious during the dream state when the mind is at its most vulnerable. Cobb's rare ability has made him a coveted player in this treacherous new world of corporate espionage, but it has also made him an international fugitive and cost him everything he has ever loved. Now Cobb is being offered a chance at redemption. One last job could give him his life back but only if he can accomplish the impossible -- inception. Instead of the perfect heist, Cobb and his team of specialists have to pull off the reverse: their task is not to steal an idea, but to plant one. If they succeed, it could be the perfect crime. But no amount of careful planning or expertise can prepare the team for the dangerous enemy that seems to predict their every move. An enemy that only Cobb could have seen coming (Yahoo! Movies).

Will Wright's analyses of the hero in classic American Western films relates directly to DiCaprio's character. "Instead of being outside of the society, the hero begins as a valued member of the society. But the society is revealed to be the real 'villain' in

opposition to the hero and those outside society and civilization” (qtd. in Storey 76). This plays out interestingly in *Inception*, as the societies that the audience becomes familiar are created through the dreams of characters, and thus are societies that are escapable by simply waking up. However, the role of these dreamt societies is important when understanding the functioning of the ‘male gaze’ in *Inception*. Wright claims that the real villain is the society that is juxtaposed against those outside of it. Although much of the movie takes place in dream-like states, Cobb and his crew are outsiders to such societies, because they exist in reality. Whereas Cobb’s wife, Mal (played by Marion Cotillard), who committed suicide, can only exist within dreamt societies because she does not exist in reality, but in the mind of Cobb, where dreams manifest. Thus, making her, “the dangerous enemy that no one saw coming” (Yahoo! Movies).

Theorist Laura Mulvey claims that, “the inscription of the image of women in this system (film) is twofold: she is the object of male desire, and she is the signifier of the threat of castration” (qtd. in Storey 77, parentheses mine). This is very apparent in the character Mal. Cobb misses her so intensely that she constantly emerges through his dreams, yet at the same she is a huge threat to the success of his ability to fulfill the task of inception. This is even supported by the character’s name, which means “bad” in Spanish.

In order to escape theoretical castration, the male unconscious can take two paths toward safety in order to salvage pleasure. The first means of escape is through detailed investigation of the initial moment that the female protagonist began “causing trouble”. The second means of escape is through complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it

becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (qtd. in Storey 78). DiCaprio's character takes the second means of escape. In order to recognize when he is in a dream or in reality, Cobb carries a spinning top with him at all times. If the top falls, he is in the "real world," if the top never stops spinning, he is in a dream world. However, it is only after Mal's death that Cobb begins carrying the spinning top, because it belonged to her previously. Cobb's use of the spinning top is also his ability to remember Mal without dreaming her into existence. The top is a representation of Mal that Cobb uses for reassurance. Over time this object becomes fetishized, and in turn fetishizes Mal as it is a representation of, and substitution for her.

Although most analyses of *Inception* have questioned the movie's ending, it is also important to recognize that there are other elements to be understood within the movie outside of understanding the levels of dreams. In looking at the ways the 'male gaze' functions in *Inception*, it seems that the development of Mal as a destructive character was very intentional, as represented by her name. A focus on the 'male gaze' in *Inception* also shows that gender manifests within film in very particular and calculated ways.

Works Cited

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