



Christopher Nolan's plot schematic charting how Cobb and his team pull off inception.

PREFACE

DREAMING / CREATING / PERCEIVING / FILMMAKING

AN INTERVIEW WITH WRITER-DIRECTOR
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

INTERVIEWED BY **JONATHAN NOLAN**

Jonathan Nolan: Let's talk about the script. You've been working on this one for a while.

Christopher Nolan: Ten years, I think.

JN: Is it ten? I was trying to remember the first time you talked to me about the idea because there were several different versions of corporate espionage scripts that you were playing around with.

CN: I was. Then I took the idea of corporate espionage and applied it to the thing I'd been working on even longer, which was dreams.

I remember the initial genesis quite clearly. My interest in dreams comes from this notion of realizing that when you dream you create the world that you are perceiving, and I thought that feedback loop was pretty amazing. I remember when I was in college you had free breakfast that finished at nine o'clock...

JN: [laughs] That would be an important part of your life.

CN: It was very important. So you had to wake up to get the free breakfast and then you would go back to bed because you hadn't gone to sleep until four in the morning. But I would make sure I got it and then I would go back to sleep for another two or three hours. And in that slightly weird, discombobulated sleep I discovered that you can have active dreams, and that when you realize you are dreaming, you could control the dream.

I thought that was really amazing. I remember having a dream and saying to myself, "Okay, there's a bunch of books on the shelf. If I pull a book off the shelf and look at it, can I read the words in the book?" And I could, because your brain is making up the words in the book. Or you could be walking on a beach in your dream and pick up a handful of sand and you'd be looking at all the grains and thinking, "Well, my brain is putting all the millions of grains in this handful of sand."

What this immediately suggests—forgetting the alleged firewall between creation and perception in your brain—is the infinite potential of the human mind. To me, that is what is exciting. Because we talk about this all the time, using the analogy of the computer for the human brain. I am always interested by things that seem to defy that analogy. And I think dreaming...

JN: ... dreaming is a pretty good one.

CN: Yeah, because being able to create a whole world and to have a conversation with someone in a dream—you feel like you're having a conversation, but you're putting all the words into that other person's mouth.

JN: You're playing chess against yourself without realizing you're your own opponent.

CN: Yeah, which you can't do in waking life. There's no form of shadow boxing like that while you're awake.

JN: I think the first time I ever considered the fact that dreaming is different than perception was when you first described how sophisticated it is to me. It's a fascinating insight into what the mind is truly capable of because dreaming is so much bigger than perception. And yet it doesn't seem like there's a lot of critical scientific research being done on it.

CN: I would imagine dreaming doesn't attract a lot of scientific interest because of its subjectivity. It's so anecdotal.

JN: The subject has also been yoked into slightly bizarre and obsolete theories about psychology that have tainted it a bit. But none of those theories are really technical, although the mechanics of dreaming are incredible.

CN: Yeah, and I think it's possible to analyze those mechanics. It's when science and philosophy cross over, when this science of the human mind meets the philosophical edge, that I think people drift into abstraction. So what the film tries to do is keep it in the realm of science fiction—to keep it in the realm of the mechanical and the relatable so it doesn't become abstract and incomprehensible. There are rules to the way the characters use dreaming, which defines reality, which defines the dreams they enter. The characters take great pride in knowing these rules and that they apply absolutely.

JN: You get this great set of rules because the premise is that the dreamer can't know they're dreaming. You have to keep it bound. It's that much more exciting because it feels close to reality.

CN: I was definitely looking for a reason to impose rules in the story during the writing process. When I saw the first *Matrix* film, I thought it was really terrific, but I wasn't sure I quite understood the limits on the powers of the characters who had become self-aware.

Inception, on the other hand, is about a more everyday experience with dreaming. It's about a more relatable human experience. It doesn't question an actual reality. It's just saying, "Okay, we all dream every night. What if you could share your dream with someone else?" And it becomes an alternate reality simply because the dream becomes a form of communication—just like using a telephone or going online. I wanted it, then, to have a rule set, a set of reasons that you could graph for why it's not chaos and anarchy—for why it has to be order, and why you need architects and an architectural brain to create the world of the dream for the subject to enter.

JN: Everyone can be a Superman in their own dreams. But your protagonists approach the dream with expertise and subtlety—the subtlety of the way they manipulate the dream.

CN: Yes—exactly. It's about the subtlety and that is where the heist movie idea came from. I'd been dealing with the world of corporate espionage and so forth, but as soon as you want to present the subtle art of conning somebody, of fooling somebody, then you enter the world of the heist movie. And that is when I consider this script to have begun, when I figured out that I was going to use a heist movie structure to wrangle these ideas in, which was about ten years ago.

The problem I had was finishing it, because the heist movie as a genre tends to be deliberately superficial. It tends to be glamorous. It tends to be light entertainment. And I realized that when you're talking about dreaming, when you are talking about this universal human experience, you need the stakes of the story to have a much more emotional resonance. So the risk we're taking with genre in the case of *Inception*—rather than it being science fiction meets James Bond or whatever those sorts of things are—is saying, “Okay, we'll take a heist movie and we'll give it massive emotional stakes.”

JN: In a funny way, it actually takes dreaming back to a kind of Freudian, Jungian place that speaks to how your innermost secrets are locked away in your dreams. So instead of stealing money or something superficial, you're actually stealing something very, very important. Or in this case, implanting something very, very important.

CN: Well, when you look at the world that the film suggests, your subconscious is going to start literally fortifying your secrets in the dreams. If you were in a dream-share and understand the rules of it, once your subconscious knows that it can create structures to defend itself or to protect information, then it's going to fortify naturally.

But also, in the way that our own minds are sort of treacherous, it's going to start leaking more and more secrets, and more and more things you're worried about, into that world. So it's this sort of weird escalation.

Think of Cobb, with his issues, as the onion of his character peels away during the film. And Ariadne, who is very much the person who pokes at that. The idea is that somebody who's really done a lot of this is going to be much stronger in the dream. But they're also going to be way more vulnerable, because their subconscious knows the stakes and knows all the things that can happen in this world. They're not innocent, in other words.

JN: Let's go back to the process of it. Ten years. What brought you back to the project?

CN: After I finish every film, I look at what I might do next. I would get the draft for *Inception* out and would read it, again. I would show it to Emma [Emma Thomas] and sometimes show it to you to get more thoughts on it. But I never quite knew how to finish it until I realized that the antagonist of the film should be the guy's wife.

JN: The antagonist had originally been his partner.

CN: Yes, it originally had been his partner. The heist movie conceit. His partner in crime, who had betrayed him and so forth. But that didn't lead anywhere emotionally. It didn't have any resonance. And as soon as it became his wife, that flipped the whole thing for me. That made it very, very relatable.

JN: Kind of unlocked the end of the film for you.

CN: It completely unlocked the end of the film. It completely unlocked how you could make something that a wider audience might care about. Because to me, whenever you deal in the world of esoteric or overly complex science fiction, or heist movies, or film noir, you're working for a smaller audience. If you're going to do a massive movie, though, you've got to be able to unlock that more universal experience for yourself as well as for the audience. That's what it took for me. As soon as I realized that Mal would be his wife, it became completely relatable.

JN: [laughs] Someone suggested to me—someone who had seen the film and admired it—that being married to one of your characters is a very, very bad idea. And when you tally it up, pretty much every film of yours has a dead wife in it. Dead wife. Dead girlfriend. Dead fiancée.

CN: I've written quite a few dead wives, that's true. But you try to put your relatable fears in these things. That's what film noir is, and I do view *Inception* as film noir. You take the things you are actually worried about in real life, or things you care about in real life, and you extrapolate that into a universal...

JN: ... domestic drama—painted as large as possible.

CN: You turn it into melodrama. People always talk about melodrama as a pejorative but I don't know what other word there is.

JN: It's fuel. That's why so many of these things always come back to it. And how it still manages to seem fresh each time. Hopefully.

CN: Well, yeah, hopefully.

JN: How about writing while you're directing? Is that tricky?

CN: I don't find it tricky because with everything I've worked on, whether I'm working on it with you or other writers (I worked with Hillary Seitz on *Insomnia*, for example), I've always taken it upon myself to do the last set of re-writes. And that lets me make it all go through the mill of my brain, my fingertips, my computer, whatever. And that allows me to feel as connected with it as stuff I've made up from nothing.

JN: But this one's all you. This is you carrying an idea for ten years. Is it different?

CN: No, it's no different to me than an adaptation. With *Memento*, for example, you gave me the short story, but from that point I was on my own in terms of feeling like, "Okay, now how do I make all that?" With *Inception*, while I came up with the concept myself, I started to take it for granted quite rapidly—almost like it was somebody else's thing. So it's not really that different.

The difference is that when you are working with your own idea, you are relying more on your own judgment for a much longer period of time. Whereas, when we write together, I'm looking at what you've done and then I'm—for a much shorter period of time—imposing my own judgments on that, and then getting it to you again. So there's this back and forth, and you deal with the idea intermittently for much shorter periods of time. When you're on your own for months and months and months, it's much harder to be objective about it.

And there's a lot of insecurity that comes with that. So when you put it out in the world and start to actually make the thing, there are definite moments. I had it with *Memento* and very much had it with *Inception*. We were checking prints, and I said to Jordan [Jordan Goldberg], about halfway through Reel 5, "I just suddenly realized: This is a really strange film—really strange!"

JN: But I do believe you've said that about most everything [laughs] we've worked on.

CN: Possibly, but with *The Dark Knight*, you see, I was able to look at the ferry scene at the end while mixing it, for example, and I'd say,

"Wow. This is a really unusual way to end a big action movie." But I already knew that because it was something you put in your draft, which made me immediately think, "I don't know about that." [CN laughs] I know that I spent months and months trying to see if that could change, but it couldn't.

JN: That's funny. We had the inverse relationship on *Batman Begins* with the microwave emitter, when you and David [David Goyer] came up with that. I sat there looking at it for a while [CN laughs] and finally said, "This is what it has to be."

CN: So when you're working with your own idea, on your own, there's no second-guessing in that sense. Second-guessing yourself is much harder than second-guessing other people. Much harder.

JN: I'm doing that right now on another project. It's a tricky one.

CN: It's very tricky.

JN: How about working with actors? This is a film where you've got some great actors, some great characters. How much work is required to bring those two things together?

CN: It's a great cast. I've been fortunate enough to work with great casts on all my films. Particularly with a lot of the smaller characters, the supporting characters, a great actor will come in with a whole take on it and they'll literally give what's on the page some kind of life that you hadn't foreseen. You're always in a much more intensive relationship with the protagonist since the truths of their character define where the narrative is going. Leo's [Leonardo DiCaprio] job on this film was very much the same as Guy Pearce's job on *Memento*. He had to open the sort of puzzle box emotionally for the audience and guide them through it. And Leo takes the truths of a characterization very seriously.

By far, the biggest burden on me as a screenwriter and director was during pre-production of the film, because I had to do an enormous amount of re-writing based on my conversations with Leo about Cobb. All of which I think was very productive for the movie, very essential to the movie. But I had to do that while I was prepping a film in six countries. Which was quite a big burden. But it had to be done, and I think we got it done very effectively.

I've had this with other actors—when they come in and they simply pull at why their character does particular things. Not in an

abstract sense of “What’s my motivation?” or whatever. They just sort of go, “Okay, I’ve walked in this door and I’ve walked up here and I say this. Why am I saying this? Why aren’t I just going here?” And you have to actually think of it. And sometimes you have an answer. And sometimes you have an answer and they don’t buy it. [JN chuckles] And other times you just don’t have an answer and you know you’ve cheated on something and you’ve taken leaps. And certainly with Leo, you couldn’t get by with any of the cheats, any of the situations where it’s like, “I kind of know how to get from A to C through B, but not really.” And so we put a lot of attention to working those things out. And I think we worked them out to my satisfaction, and hopefully to the audience’s satisfaction, because that’s really what the actor is helping you do at that point. They’re sort of trying to be the conduit for the audience.

JN: They parse the film for the audience, as a proxy.

CN: Yeah.

JN: Well, that’s a good segue to the next question I wanted to ask you, which is about the complexity of the film. This really, to me, feels like a marriage of all the different aspects of movies that I’ve seen you make: the sensibility of *Memento* and the complexity of that film, the interactivity of that film, the way that it asks the audience to work a little bit harder; and then the large-scale excitement and fun of something like *The Dark Knight*. This one really feels like you’re using both skill sets. Did you ever think to yourself when you were working on the script, “Okay, no one’s going to be able to follow me?” Is there a point of complexity where you feel like you hit your rev limiter and you don’t want to go any further than that?

CN: There are points where you worry that you might be putting too much in and alienating the audience. But, funnily enough, some of those fears aren’t correct. Sometimes, when you start thinking too much about what an audience is going to think, when you’re too self-conscious about it, you make mistakes. Somewhere in the back of my mind, for example, I had assumed the business with the spinning top in the safe would wind up being cut out of the film. But when we started showing the film to people, that scene...

JN: You actually thought you’d have to cut it out?

CN: I thought we’d have to lose it because it was a symbol too far. Or an image too far. But what we realized in showing it to people is that they actually grasped the imagery as something to hold on to, as an illustration of things that had happened off camera.

JN: Right.

CN: So you can often misjudge that. The underlying philosophy for me, in terms of the complexity of the film, had always been that those things that had allowed *Memento* to succeed with audiences in a very mainstream fashion could be tapped to make a huge-scale movie. And that’s the premise on which *Inception*’s been built. I tried to do it with my Howard Hughes project first. And when that wasn’t going to fly, I put a lot of that thinking into this; into fusing the scale and entertainment value of a large film with something more—and I really don’t want to say “challenging for an audience,” because I don’t think it is—that’s just a little different and a little bit of a shift.

I had always felt that there was a big version of a film like *Memento* that could reach a wide audience, but the thing that gave me confidence in this idea was listening to how audiences reacted to *Memento* in a very mainstream way. Not by admiring it or finding it clever, but by just enjoying it. Guy Pearce was a huge part of that. Because I think I approached *Memento* in a quite cold manner. I approached it as a bit of a puzzle box. Casting an actor who looked for the emotional truth of the character and put it into every scene, though—that opened it up for an audience that never would have come to our film. And I learned from that. I learned that I had to trust Leo and his assessments of his character Cobb’s truths. I also learned that in the script I had to pay attention to the feelings, to my emotional engagement with the material, insofar as I was standing in for the audience.

JN: There’s a lovely moment close to the third act when Ellen Page as Ariadne makes a crack. You’re rolling into the lowest level of the dream and she wonders whose dream we are in. And I remember watching the film for the first time with an audience and being struck with relief at that moment. It was like being let off the hook, as if the film was saying “Okay, this is a lot that’s coming at you. But that’s the point. It’s fun.” The complexity of it became part of the fun of it.

I think the proposition for you from *Memento* onwards, and I’m very much on board with this, is that the audience is not given enough credit—that people tend to think that there are very clear rules to what an audience can handle and what they can’t handle. And this movie is a double barrel shotgun at those expectations.

CN: Well, I've done really well so far in my career by trusting the audience to be as dissatisfied with convention as I am, as a filmgoer. You want to go see a film that surprises you in some way. Not for the sake of it, but because the people making the film are really trying to do something that they haven't seen a thousand times before themselves.

JN: Exactly.

CN: I give a film a lot of credit for trying to do something fresh—even if it doesn't work. You appreciate the effort, to a degree. I think the thing that I always react against as a filmgoer, though, is insincerity. That is to say, when somebody makes a film that they don't really enjoy themselves, just to produce an effect on the audience. And what really frustrates me with a film like *Inception* (or really anything that I've worked on) is when you show somebody the film and they think you're trying to be clever. Or show off. I always feel like I've completely failed at that point. Because I know as a filmgoer that's something I react against. Whether it's conventional or whether it's unconventional, you want to believe—you want to know—that the filmmaker loves the movie, loves what that movie does. That they love actually sitting there and watching that movie.

JN: Isn't that kind of the sad irony of making movies like this? Do you feel there's a little tinge of regret in the fact that you've written the script and made the movie, but that you will never really get to watch it? You end up making the movie you've always really wanted to see and then never really get to see it.

CN: I do get to see it. Because with every film there'll be one screening where, for whatever reason—because of who the audience is, or because of where I am technically in the process, or because of what elements I'm watching—I am actually able to watch the thing in a completely fresh way, like it isn't mine. And that's always a huge, huge pleasure. It's also a little frightening, and a little daunting, because you watch it in an incredibly heightened manner. And I think one of the reasons I still really love to screen the work print, cut it and tape it together, is that it's an incredibly stressful way of watching a film. Because the image is raw—it's not dressed up at all. It's an incredibly high-resolution image. But every splice can break, and the projector can bounce too much; you're terrified of the technical aspects for the audience. And that, in itself, makes you watch it in an incredibly attentive manner. You just see things and feel things you haven't felt while watching it on the Avid for months and months. It kind of reinvigorates the experience.

JN: When you describe the fragility of the work print, it occurs to me, drawing us back to the beginning of the conversation, that your job is an interesting one because you're not just watching the movie—you're creating the movie. You're not just experiencing reality—you're dreaming it for yourself. Did you think a lot about the connections to filmmaking and the dream-share technology in the film?

CN: You know, I never made that connection at all until you said it.

JN: [*laughs*] You're not supposed to let on about that.

CN: The heist movie aspects, too, closely parallel the process of making a film. You have a team of people working together. You've got a writer, you've got an actor, a production designer, a DP. But it had never occurred to me that everything I'm saying about creating a thing and trying to perceive it at the same time, which is what you're doing as you edit the film, relates absolutely to the filmmaking process. That's the whole thing you're trying to do: You're literally presenting this thing in which you've put words into people's mouths, and you're trying to watch it as if you're fresh to it.

JN: And the time shifting of it is similar because you get two years say, on average, to work on the projects you've done, and that's to create about two hours worth of perception. You can see, as you watch the film, how long it took you to shoot each individual moment, and it sort of congeals into something that suddenly goes by very quickly.

CN: But I would never want to make a film literally about filmmaking. But making something that you really relate to because of the work you do and the process you're engaged in, that's actually a lot of fun.