

ABSTRACT

A Critical Analysis of Inception with Respect to the Culture Industry

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Prima facie Christopher Nolan's blockbuster movie *Inception* presents a seemingly fanciful idea: the idea that one can successfully implant an idea in the mind of an unaware subject insomuch that the subject believes that the idea is his or her own. Yet, upon further analysis, perhaps there is a more substantive theory that we can gain from Nolan's work—something practical and far from fanciful. Perhaps inception is real. Theodor Adorno's book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a discussion of the deceptive culture industry that undertakes some of the very same actions taken by Nolan's characters in *Inception*. The objective of this thesis is to analyze the deception in Nolan's *Inception*, analyze the deception in Adorno's understanding of the culture industry, and, finally, compare the two analyses.

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INCEPTION WITH RESPECT TO THE
CULTURE INDUSTRY

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PREFACE

When Christopher Nolan's *Inception* was released, there were a variety of reviews—both negative and positive. Some people were intrigued by the power and deception of inception. Others were appalled by the deceit and trickery exhibited by the concept of inception. Yet, at least one thought passed almost universally through the minds of every person that viewed the movie: what if inception became a reality? *Prima facie* this is a scary thought: the idea that we could possibly be (unknowingly) manipulated to believe certain things that we would not ordinarily believe. It is likely the case that many people easily dismissed this thought as fanciful. However, the thought did not leave my mind in this manner.

I began to wonder if there was a lesson to be learned from *Inception*. The first example that I immediately came up with was an extreme hypothesis that combined Descartes' Evil Genius and Dreaming arguments. Now, granted, this is an extreme example that only the most rigid skeptics would entertain at length. However, I do wonder whether we may understand *Inception* in light of this example. Clearly, inception takes place while the subjects are dreaming. Furthermore, we may view Cobb as a type of "Evil Genius" that is manipulating his subjects' thoughts. So, what? Where can we take this line of inquiry?

The answer to those questions is precisely the purpose of this thesis. I will analyze the themes of deception in *Inception*, discuss Adorno's idea of mass deception in the culture industry, and draw analogy (and hopefully, a lesson) between deception in *Inception* and deception in the culture industry. To put it precisely, I will describe a "soft" version of the

extreme example described above (Evil Genius plus Dreaming hypothesis): that perhaps the culture industry may be understood to be Cobb—the Evil Genius figure—and that perhaps we may in some way be dreaming—not literally dreaming, but perhaps mentally unaware. All in all, I am concerned with what we can learn from *Inception* and how (if at all) we can increase our awareness of the way the culture industry affects us. It is my desire that this reading will be as enjoyable to the reader as was the writing to the author.

Sincerely,

Ben Aguinaga

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I would like to thank my God for giving me the ability to write and think critically for His honor and glory. I thank Dean Hibbs for his guidance and patience throughout the creation of this work. Additionally, I thank my two readers, Dr. Whitlark and Dr. Baird, for their willingness to read through quite an unconventional paper. Lastly, I thank my parents and my beautiful sister for always supporting me through my endeavors and the pursuits of my dreams.

DEDICATION

To my sister, my best friend, and my confidant: Abigail.

in·cep·tion [in-sep-shuhn] *noun*:
the act of instilling an idea into someone's mind by entering his or her dreams.

CHAPTER ONE

The Deception in Inception

This is inception. The seed of the idea we plant will grow...it'll change him. It might even come to define him.

The Necessity of Deception in Inception

The concept of inception, the act of planting an idea in an individual and causing the individual to believe that the idea is his or her own, finds its foundation in the necessary art of deception. Perhaps, if we were unconditionally willing to allow ideas to be planted in our minds without our knowledge, then deception would not be necessary. However, human nature is predisposed to believe that it thinks for itself independently; therefore, any intrusion on said independence is seen as an unwanted violation of self. Thus, without successful deception, inception would be exposed as the blatant violation of self that it is. Therefore, for Nolan's *Inception* at least, deception seems to be inextricably tied to inception. Whether or not deception is also implicit in the antics of the culture industry will be discussed in the following chapters.

In the movie *Inception*, there is an essential dichotomy that must be analyzed: the dichotomy between the deceived and the deceiver. What does director Christopher Nolan tell us concerning the perspectives, the struggles, and the strategies of the deceived and the deceiver? The prime example of the deceived in *Inception* is Robert Fischer (hereafter, Robert), the heir to the Australian energy conglomerate, Fischer Morrow. A

significant portion of the plot is dedicated to a plan to cause Robert to split up his father, Maurice's, empire. On the opposite side of the deception dichotomy, Dom Cobb is the epitome of the deceiver in that he is tasked with incepting the idea to dismantle Fischer Morrow in Robert Fischer's mind. Using these two examples, we will seek to discern how Christopher Nolan portrays the role of deception in *Inception*.

Dom Cobb: the Deceiver

Dom Cobb is a mastermind of a twisted type of corporate espionage called "extraction." Extraction occurs when Cobb enters a subject's mind through his or her dreams and proceeds to steal (that is, extract) important information. While extraction is an exceptional feat, Saito, a wealthy businessman, confronts Cobb with the even more daring prospect of inception, specifically, inception on Robert Fischer. Saito has an invested interest in Robert Fischer because Saito's company is the last company standing between Fischer Morrow and complete energy dominance by Fischer Morrow. Saito believes that, unless he finds a way to intervene, Fischer Morrow (under Robert Fischer's control) will not only put Saito out of business, but it will also control the energy supply of half the world; it would blackmail governments and dictate policy. In essence, it would become a new superpower. Saito places such gravity upon the issue that Cobb agrees to the task and pursues successful inception on Robert. In doing so, Cobb employs a variety of deceptive techniques necessary for inception. The following analysis will discuss the two most important techniques that Cobb uses: namely, the manipulation of emotions and the manipulation of key authorities.

Manipulation of Emotions

The first technique that Cobb employs is the manipulation of emotions. From the outset, it behooves the reader to critique the interaction between emotions and ideas in *Inception*. While many interpretations of this relationship may be made, I argue that Cobb uses emotions as a *foundation* upon which to launch the inception of ideas in Robert Fischer's mind. That is, he manipulates the orientation and power of Robert's emotions in order to create a Robert that would be receptive to the ideas that Cobb would incept in his mind.

First of all, Cobb strategically manipulates the emotions of the subject. He asserts that the subconscious is motivated *not* by reason, but by *emotion*. Thus, in order for him to successfully incept the idea of splitting apart Fischer Morrow in Robert, Cobb must convert the big picture into a slick manipulation of Robert's emotions. Furthermore, it must be the right channeling emotions; specifically, Cobb must execute the inception upon the foundation of *positive* emotion. According to Cobb, "positive emotion trumps negative emotion every time. We yearn for people to be reconciled." This presents an interesting situation for Cobb and his team who are presented with the fact that Robert has had a very strained relationship with his dying father. It would be easy to simply convince Fischer to give a final middle finger to his father by dismantling his empire. At the end of the first of level of the dream, Cobb discovers that the relationship between Robert and his father is worse than they had thought, and he is excited about this. When his excitement is questioned, Cobb merely responds, "the stronger the issues, the more powerful the catharsis." Cobb stands firm in his belief that Robert, like all people, desires reconciliation; thus, he looks for an alternative, *positive* method of inception.



Figure 1: Cobb (background) prepares to begin inception on Robert Fischer (foreground).

Secondly, he specifically targets emotions that the subject is predisposed towards. In the first level of the dream, Cobb targets Robert's emotions that are related to his relationship with his father by incepting the idea, "I will not follow in my father's footsteps." This emotional trigger hits home with the current emotions that Robert is going through with his father due to the strained relationship. In the second level of the dream, Cobb targets Robert's emotional proclivity to ambition and self-esteem by incepting the idea, "I will create something for myself." This emotional trigger caters to Robert's young age and his soon-to-be position of incredible power; he will have reached a pinnacle of authority and will be prone to wanting to achieve more, hence the incepted idea to create something for himself. In the third level, Cobb targets Robert's emotions concerning independence and self-worth by incepting the idea, "My father doesn't want

me to be him.” Although this seems to be a negative idea, it is essentially a positive idea in that, if Maurice did not want Robert to follow in his footsteps, Robert would believe that he was not obligated to be the great man that his father had been. In other words, Robert could be his own man without the pressure to live up to the standards that his father had set.

In conclusion, Cobb utilizes the emotional vulnerabilities exhibited by Robert in order to incept Saito’s idea. He steers clear of negative emotions that could potentially derail the inception and, instead, focuses on positive emotions. Cobb’s crucial emphasis on strictly manipulating positive emotions as opposed to negative emotions is vital to my proposed interpretation of emotions as being foundations for the inception of ideas. As stated before, this relationship will be discussed in a future chapter. For now, it suffices to say that Cobb’s deliberate choice of positive emotions for manipulation was imperative for his overall manipulation of Robert’s emotions.

Manipulation of Key Authorities

The second technique that Cobb employs is the manipulation of key authorities, specifically in the subject’s (Robert’s) life. In order to perform the perfect inception of an idea, Cobb realizes the importance of specifically focusing on everything that Robert relies upon. In the previous section, Cobb attacked Fischer’s emotions, which are key aspects of Robert’s psyche and decision-making. In this section, we will analyze Cobb’s attack upon the value that Robert places in the authorities in his life.

Peter Browning

First of all, Cobb manipulates the image of one of the most influential people in

Robert's life: his godfather, Peter Browning. Browning serves Maurice Fischer, Robert Fischer's father, as his legal counsel. Nolan depicts the closeness of the relationship between Browning and Robert by Robert repeatedly calling Browning "Uncle Peter." The intimacy of this relationship will prove to be crucial in Cobb's attempt to manipulate the relationship. During the decline of Maurice Fischer's health, Browning's power increased as Robert Fischer did not show much interest in the affairs of Fischer Morrow. Cobb recognized this power and strove to manipulate it in a unique fashion: Eames.

Eames is a member of Cobb's team whose specialty is a unique form of secret deception. He can project the image of a person insomuch that he literally forges the identity and appearance of an individual in a dream. That is, Eames can impersonate anyone in a dream in such a way that, unless one had prior knowledge of the forgery, one would believe they had seen the person whose image Eames had projected. He is so good that even his own teammates can be fooled by his ingenuity; one comical scene demonstrates Eames' special talent as he (in the form of a beautiful blonde woman) pushes Saito back into an elevator and begins to touch Saito's lapels. Saito blushes and grows quite flustered until he looks in the mirror and realizes that it is merely Eames playing with him. Eames' talent is particularly important in that he is able to impersonate Robert Browning as he states, "I forge each emotional concept in the style and manner of Peter Browning, a key figure in Fischer's emotional life." Saito enables him to analyze Browning up close so that he could perfectly mirror Browning's mannerisms and demeanor in the upcoming dream.

In the first level of the dream, Cobb introduces the idea that Robert's father kept a personal safe in his office. Naturally, Robert replies that he has never seen the safe and,

thus, does not know the combination. In response, Arthur, a member of Cobb's team, states, "We have it on good authority that you do." To emphasize this point, Robert hears screaming coming from the next room, and he unsurprisingly assumes that someone is being tortured to give Cobb and his team the information concerning the "safe." This authority, of course, is "Browning," who is actually Eames *impersonating* Browning. Cobb's team sows doubt in Robert's mind by telling him that Browning had told them that Robert knew the combination to the safe. In fact, "Browning" himself tells Robert that Robert knew the combination. Since "Browning" is bloodied and bruised from apparent torture by Cobb's team, Robert is given no reason to doubt "Browning." This enables "Browning" to begin to plant ideas in Robert's mind. When Robert asks what is in the safe, "Browning" tells him that there is an alternate will that would divide Fischer Morrow into a multiplicity of companies, taking power from Robert and giving it to the boards of the companies. Because Browning is a trusted authority, Robert does not question the idea that this will could destroy his inheritance. Under duress and because "Browning" had said he had to know the combination, Robert gives the first six numbers that come to his mind and Cobb takes these numbers (5 2 8 4 9 1) to manipulate Robert in the subsequent levels of the dream.

In the second level, Cobb completely reverses the role that "Browning" plays in Robert's dream. Whereas "Browning" was the bewildered, tortured godfather in the first level of the dream, in the second level of the dream, he is "exposed" as the key behind Robert's kidnapping in the first level. Robert is led to believe that Browning is selfishly attempting to gain access to the (nonexistent) alternate will that would enable Robert to dissolve Fischer Morrow. However, just when Cobb succeeds in turning Robert against

“Browning,” “Browning” sells the idea to Robert that he was trying to help him. He convinces Robert that his father instilled a taunt in the alternative will that would challenge Robert to build something for himself. Essentially, “Browning” is being used to imply that Robert is not worthy of his father’s achievements. Moreover, Robert is being molded to view the alternate will as a direct challenge from Maurice Fischer to try to make himself worthy of his father’s empire.

The multiple roles of “Browning” that Cobb instructs Eames to employ are a testament to how efficiently Cobb manipulates the authoritative figure of “Browning” in Robert’s life. Robert unconditionally relies upon “Browning” until it is shown that “Browning” has ulterior motives. Yet, even though these motives are exposed, Robert still believes, in the end, that “Browning” was looking out for his good. It is critical to understand the juxtaposition of roles of “Browning” as the roles relate to Cobb’s prior emphasis on the utilization of positive emotions as opposed to negative emotions.

The first presentation of “Browning” to Robert in the first level of the dream was a “Browning” that endured “torture” as he tried to help Robert. This can be viewed as somewhat positive in that this endears “Browning” to Robert; he is led to believe that “Browning” is looking out for his good. Then, at the beginning of the second level of the dream, Cobb plays with fire as he allows Robert to “discover” that “Browning” was behind his kidnapping in the first level of the dream. This can undoubtedly be viewed as a violation of Cobb’s predisposition to manipulating *positive* emotions, rather than negative emotions. In fact, Cobb bets that Robert’s adverse reaction would allow him to be receptive to them taking him into yet a third level of the dream. However, before Robert can make this move, Cobb allows “Browning” to rearrange Robert’s perception of

“Browning.” “Browning” tells Robert that he was actually trying to help him—to shield him from the alleged taunt that Maurice Fischer left in the alternate will. This is a return to the manipulation of positive emotions that Cobb adheres to in that Robert is convinced that “Browning” probably had his best interests in mind.

At the end of the second level of the dream, therefore, we arrive at a point where Robert willingly volunteers to go down to a third level of the dream: the level where Robert would be incepted with the idea that his father did not want Robert to follow in his footsteps. In order to make this transition, Cobb and “Browning” bring Robert to a point of independence, an idea that he is his own man, *the* idea that “I will create something for myself.” This is, undeniably, a positive emotion as it depends on the successful, constructive future that Robert will build for himself. This was Cobb’s goal all along.

Fischer’s Subconscious

In addition to his manipulation of Robert’s reliance upon Browning, Cobb also focused on manipulating another key authority in Fischer’s life: his subconscious. Nolan does a stellar job of depicting Robert’s subconscious as people that seem to be an army of secret personnel that wander around alertly in Robert’s dreams with weapons, seeking to uncover and eliminate any intruders that would harm Robert or steal his thoughts (extraction). A realistic interpretation of Nolan’s idea of a “subconscious” could be the morals and values taught by parents to their children. As the children grow older and leave the house, they are frequently immersed in situations in which they are forced to apply the standards of their parents to the questionable nature of the situation. In other

words, since the parents most likely taught those standards in an effort to protect their children, the role of the standards impressed upon the children are directly correlative to the role of Robert's subconscious: protection.

As part of his grooming to take over his father's empire, Robert had undergone training that conditioned his subconscious to protect him from extraction. That is, he had protection in place that would guard him from anyone who would try to access his mind through his dreams. In the second level of the dream, Cobb understands this and, instead of trying to hide the fact that Robert is dreaming from him, Cobb *tells* him that he is dreaming. The reality is that, with respect to Robert, Cobb himself is the intruder and Robert's subconscious is Robert's guardian angel. Cobb's strategy completely reverses reality; he aims to convince Robert that *he* is Robert's protector and that Robert's subconscious is, in fact, the "bad guy," the intruder in his dreams. Cobb endears himself to Robert and seeks to alleviate any doubt concerning his character by stating; "My job is to protect you from any attempt to access your mind through your dreams." Under the guise of protecting Robert, Cobb shoots and kills Robert's subconscious (again, depicted as people in an army), the very subconscious that was trying to save Robert.

The irony of this situation is that the climax of Cobb's deception in *Inception* is such that Robert accepts a lie for the truth; he confuses reality with fiction. We may now refer back to the example of the standards that parents teach their children. We have established that these standards, similar to Robert's subconscious, are in place most likely to protect the children. I submit that the culture industry can embody the spirit of Cobb



Figure 2: Dom Cobb (left) convinces Fischer (right) that he is the head of Fischer's subconscious security.

by attempting to portray itself as the “protector” or “benefactor” of the public. In doing so, the culture industry can set out to construct and manipulate the very qualities of the public that were designed to protect the public (e.g. morals, ethics, standards, rules, etc.). Just as Robert’s subconscious succumbed to the hands of Cobb, an intruder and deceiver, so also can the values and standards of the public shrink under and conform to the hands of a culture industry bent on inception. This is inception in real life. We will pursue this issue further in the proceeding chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Adorno and the Culture Industry

In his book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno includes a chapter entitled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” In this chapter, Adorno adopts what many may view as a pessimistic view of the role of the culture industry in society. The culture industry, as Adorno understands it, is such that “films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part.”¹ This understanding alludes to the underlying theme that pervades the entirety of the chapter: that all of society is part of a system and that “culture impresses the same stamp upon everyone.”² Thus, this analysis will expound upon the evidence that Adorno offers as demonstrations of his above assertions.

The Culture Industry

The first thing about this system that Adorno immediately points to is the lack of freedom of the individual. He remarks, “City housing projects designed to perpetuate the individual as a supposedly independent unit in a small hygienic dwelling make him all the more subservient to his adversary--the absolute power of capitalism.”³ This is a striking point in that it acknowledges that individuals are led to believe that they are acting independently when they inhabit a housing unit. They consciously make this

¹ Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Continuum Publishing, New York, 1989. 120.

² *Ibid.* 120.

³ *Ibid.* 120.

choice and believe that they are in control of this choice. Yet, Adorno points out that, even though the individual is *apparently* acting independently, these individuals are being fooled in that they are unknowingly buying into the government and capitalism, which has its hold on individuals. Adorno illustrates how something as simple as participating in a city housing project carries a far greater implication in that an individual's sovereignty is not as impregnable as it may seem.

Subsequently, he enhances the example of a city housing project to model the culture industry as a whole. Imagine the culture industry as a system under whose umbrella citizens are supplied with their basic needs. Just as an individual inhabits and cares for his own unit in the housing project, a citizen under the culture industry is "free" to construct his life to his heart's content. He can assemble goods and interact with others seemingly independent of any external influences. Yet, by his very participation in purchasing goods and participating in what John Rawls would call "social cooperation," he is operating according to the rules prescribed by the culture industry. Thus, we see how the housing project analogy models the culture industry's almost indistinguishable hold over the individuals' lives that live under the culture industry.

The second thing that Adorno points out about the culture industry is its incredible power. He discusses the argument that the standards of the culture industry are tailored to respond primarily to the needs of consumers. In response, he states, "The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows every stronger."⁴ In other words, the more the culture industry positively responds to the needs of consumers, the more the consumers become enslaved and entangled with

⁴ *Ibid.* 121.

the culture industry. Money and revenue is certainly a large factor in this dilemma.

Adorno argues, “The basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest.”⁵ Thus, the increase of revenue from consumers directly funds the culture industry and fuels the power of the culture industry over the individuals. This ironic fact serves to further illustrate the subtle manipulation that the culture industry engages in with respect to individuals.

Perhaps the most striking attack that Adorno engages in is upon technology. A remarkable contrast he draws is the contrast between the telephone and the radio. In the former, he emphasizes how the individual retains liberal freedoms in that he can respond as a subject to the individual on the other side of the phone. Yet, the move from telephone to radio was a drastic one. Adorno states, “The latter is democratic: it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same.”⁶ In other words, individuals, willing or unwilling, are not given the liberty of responding to programs that are forced upon them. One may argue that programs such as talk shows defy this opinion. Yet, Adorno points out that even the most “non-scripted” programs have filters and are censored to ensure program output that is consistent with the wishes of the culture industry. Adorno argues, “Any trace of spontaneity from public in official broadcasting is controlled and absorbed by talent scouts, studio competitions and official programs of every kind selected by professionals.”⁷ That is, the broadcasting that we as individuals encounter is specifically and meticulously controlled by the culture industry; nothing is completely natural and

⁵ *Ibid.* 121.

⁶ *Ibid.* 122.

⁷ *Ibid.* 122.

void of culture industry intervention. Thus, technology and the radio and television industries are substantial parts of the culture industry that Adorno is so concerned with.

However, one of the most crucial assertions that Adorno makes concerning the culture industry is the belief that submission to the culture industry by the individual is *inescapable*. Adorno states, “Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended.”⁸ Adorno makes this statement while discussing the fact that films and magazines are differentiated with respect to the various classifications of consumers. He argues that consumers are reduced to mere colors on statistics charts from which the culture industry gains its insight on how to provide specialized goods for every consumer. This is an incredibly important aspect of the culture industry because, if it is inescapable by the individual, what implications will resound with respect to that individual’s happiness and freedom? This is question that will be taken up in the proceeding chapter. However, perhaps a more pertinent and relevant issue to critique is Adorno’s understanding of the power of film within in the culture industry. After all, the contention of this thesis is that there is something to be learned from *Inception*. How, if at all, does Adorno view the effects of movies upon individuals?

The Movie Industry

This question is perhaps best answered when we analyze the culture industry as it relates to the film industry. Adorno makes the following statements:

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just

⁸ *Ibid.* 123.

left, is not the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.⁹

Adorno enunciates a very unique perspective on the modern film producer. He argues that film producers endeavor to create continuity between reality and what is portrayed in a movie. Now, assuming that Adorno's idea holds true, there are two possible reasons for this desired continuity: either the producer wants to create a movie that is as realistic as possible *or* the producer wants to instill an idea or experience in an individual that transcends the movie experience and permeates individuals' lives.

The former possible reason—that the producer wants to create a realistic movie merely for the sake of entertainment—seems plausible and not very controversial. After all, what incentive would we have to watch a movie to which we cannot relate at all? Now, perhaps one objection to this sentiment is that movies (for example) such as science fiction movies are not very realistic; yet, many people are still drawn to them. This is certainly true; however, it behooves us to look at the *foundations* of such movies. Take the movie *300* as an example. The average American knows at least a minimal amount of knowledge concerning the history of the Spartans. Without much substantive information, yet through our status as human beings, we are able to relate to the love that Leonidas showed his wife and son. We sympathize with the Spartan who watched his son die in battle. These scenes elicit emotions that are very realistic to us. Yet, after having induced these emotions within us, director Zack Snyder places an unrealistic object before us: a chained monster whose strength and size is more animal and superhuman

⁹ *Ibid.* 126.

than human. Yet, the monster fights as a man with absurd power and we accept his existence and relevance to the movie without question. In this sense, the movie, while not wholly realistic, was made relatable to us by way of its realistic foundations.

Or take, for example, the X-Men movies. The overarching idea of “mutants” is slightly farfetched, even given the technological advancement of our generation. Yet, *X-Men: First Class* takes great pains to contextualize the story in such a way that the farfetched outgrowth finds its foundation in something very real to us. For example, the opening scenes take place in a World War II concentration camp in Poland in 1944. This setting brings to mind immediate images that we associate with death camps and the Holocaust. It is upon these images that we conjure up that director Matthew Vaughn slowly builds the idea of mutants with unrealistic powers. Furthermore, as the plot develops, Vaughn integrates the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union that were present during the Cold War. These allusions to true historical facts provide the movie goer with plausible reasons to treat the unrealistic aspects of the movies as not uncommon. However, I do not think that these simple moves are what concerns Adorno. Rather, I believe that Adorno is concerned with the second possible idea: that the producer wants to instill an idea or experience in an individual that transcends the movie experience and permeates individuals’ lives.

The corresponding question that must be asked of this perspective is as follows: “What issues, ideas, or experiences may transcend a movie and permeate an individual’s life?” As a corresponding interjection, it is worthwhile to reflect upon Cobb’s father-in-law’s quote: “Everybody dreams, Cobb. Architects are supposed to make those dreams *real* (emphases added).” That is, it seems that a movie producer is compelled to create a

work that transcends reality. Perhaps, if we read Adorno charitably, social issues and ideas about social issues may transcend movies and reality in such a way that humans experience and (perhaps) act upon this continuity. Two social issues that are especially prevalent in today's society are teen pregnancy and gay marriage. If Adorno's contention holds true, then there should be some examples of movies that seem to offer ideas concerning these issues. Let us explore some possibilities.

The issue of teen pregnancy used to be a taboo subject. In the 90's, conversations concerning pregnant teens were hushed and ripe with judgment and condemnation. Yet, today, the issue is as prevalent as ever; however, we have endeavored to speak more openly about such issues. What is the correct way to resolve or approach the issue? In the movie *Juno*, director Jason Reitman subtly portrays a unique way to approach the issue. Juno is a young teenager who, through some questionable decisions, became pregnant. After Juno breaks the news to her parents, her mother makes a very curious statement: "I think kids get bored and have intercourse. And I think Junebug was a dummy about it. But we have to move on from here and help her out." She offers these sentiments as if they are commonly held; yet, these ideas are very different from how the issue had been broached in society. In times past, teen pregnancy and teen intercourse was condemned. Yet, Juno's mother submits that it is something that happens and that we should just go with the inevitable. It is perhaps plausible then to argue that Adorno is correct in this case: that a new approach to teen pregnancy in a movie transcends both the movie and reality. Perhaps the movie indeed is offering us a new approach to teen pregnancy.

In like manner, the issue of gay marriage is also center stage in the arena of social issues. Historically, the issue has met a wide range of criticism, especially with respect to



Figure 3: Juno's parents react to the news that she is pregnant.

the rights of gays and lesbians as well as the rights of gay couples. Yet, there has been a push for toleration and acceptance of gay couples. In fact, this push is most notably demonstrated in the movie *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*. Chuck and Larry are (non-gay) firefighters who enter into a civil union in order to reap the benefits of an insurance policy. The film depicts an incredible array of persecution and ridicule to which Chuck and Larry are subjected, including the verbal abuse of alleged Christians. This is certainly reflective of the real adversity that gay couples face in America today. However, in the movie, the characters that disparaged Chuck and Larry gradually warmed up to them and accepted them for who they “were.” Those who formerly hid the fact that they were gay were encouraged to proclaim their status. Those who had hated gays changed their views. Thus, this movie suggests the idea that perhaps gays and lesbians should be accepted for who they are. It is important to note that this movie was

set in New York where the Marriage Equality Act succeeded the movie. Thus, it seems that Adorno's perspective of a continuity between movies and reality is exemplified in these movies that deal with prevalent social issues.

While these examples illustrate the plausibility of Adorno's thesis concerning the culture industry, they demand the question of whether or not we *know* the effect that movies like these have on us. Furthermore, if we *do* know the effect that these movies have on us, to what *extent* do we have such knowledge? That is, are we being unconsciously affected and caused to adopt ideas that we think are our own when, in fact, they are not? Adorno's ideas of the culture industry as enunciated above allude to his belief that the culture industry caters to every whim of individuals. His idea of the "freedom" of an individual being subjected to the cares of the culture industry is especially important in this discussion of the effects of movies on individuals. Do these types of movies affect our alleged freedom of deciding for ourselves what is the best way to approach an issue? *Are we being taught to believe what and behave how the culture industry wants us to believe and behave?* Adorno's theories of the culture industry force us to pursue the answers to these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

Truth and Happiness

Having established that deception plays a fundamental role in inception, Nolan compels us to discuss the relationship of truth and happiness to inception. Two questions must be asked in order to discern this relationship. First of all, can truth exist in inception? Secondly, can one truly be happy under the influence of inception? In response to the first question, I will argue that truth cannot exist in inception. In response to the second question, I will argue that one cannot truly be happy under the influence of inception.

Can Truth Exist in Inception?

I believe that truth cannot exist in inception. For the sake of clarification, by “in inception” I mean literally in inception (in a dreamlike state) and in reality associated with inception (in a non-dreamlike state; e.g. those planning inception, those that are conscious and seemingly not under the influence of inception). In order to support this proposition, I will primarily articulate which type of “truth” is under review. Secondly, I will provide examples from *Inception* that demonstrate the validity of this proposition.

In order to discuss the matter of truth in inception, we must first define “truth.” The observant critic of the existence of truth in inception will immediately point out that truth and deception cannot, in any way, be compatible. This may be true; however, for

the sake of argument, let us assume that it is at least *possible* for truth to exist in inception and, subsequently, possible for truth and deception to be compatible with each other. However, under this assumption, we have the possibility of “truth” that may transcend the divide between consciousness and unconsciousness: that is, truth that prevails even in a dreamlike state. To illustrate this, one need only look at a few examples in Scripture. Joseph, Jacob’s son, experienced seemingly outlandish dreams that depicted his brothers as bowing down to him; yet, the events in these dreams were true and came to fruition. In like manner, Joseph, Mary’s husband, dreamed of the angel Gabriel telling him of Mary’s immaculate conception. Despite the absurdity of the dream, the content was true and came to pass. Thus, we conclude that it is possible for truth to transcend dreams and reality.

Secondly, we also have the possibility of “truth” that is offered as “truth” in a dreamlike state, but is a falsity: that is, a lie offered as a truth in order to deceive a subject. A clear example of this proposition occurs in *Inception* when Cobb tells Fischer that he is in charge of Fischer’s subconscious security. Cobb passes this lie off as a truth and causes Fischer to believe it insomuch that Fischer is turned against his own subconscious. In this example, we see the powerful effect that a lie passed off as “truth” can have on the subject. Thus, these are the two possible types of “truth” that we will make reference to in the proceeding analysis.

In *Inception*, we do not see a major prevalence of the former type of “truth”: that is, truth that transcends consciousness and unconsciousness. Rather, we see Cobb submitting “truths” that are attempts at forging legitimate truths. In their attempt to win Saito over in a dream, Cobb and Nash try to recreate Saito’s apartment (or secret “love

nest”). In doing so, Nash screws up the type of carpet that is the apartment, making it wool instead of the polyester contained in the real apartment. Not knowing their mistake, they attempt to pass the experience of the apartment off as a “truth.” Saito, upon seeing the mistake in the carpet, automatically recognizes the falsity and points it out.

Note that in the previous passage, I was careful to qualify which type(s) of truth are present in *Inception* by stating, “We do not see a *major* prevalence of the former type of ‘truth’.” It is crucial to emphasize that inception would not be possible at all if it was not founded upon something that the subject views as completely true in reality. In other words, a true world must first be created for a subject before lies passed off as “truths” can be incepted into the subject. If inception were not founded upon real truth, the subject would be predisposed to disbelieve everything in the dream. Thus, we must affirm that real truth is necessary in inception. However, in order for the purpose of inception to be fulfilled (through deception), it is not the *prevalent* form of truth that we find in inception.

With this understanding, we can view a significant part of inception as the submission of lies as “truths.” That is, we can define a part of inception as the art of presenting a false world as a true world. However, this “truth” has repercussions that extend beyond the unconscious world of inception into the world of reality. We see this play out in the tragic end of Mal’s life. Cobb had experimented with the idea of inception by manipulating the top that Mal had placed in a safe. This top was a totem (an item which demonstrates whether or not a person is in a dream; if the top is endlessly spinning, the person is in a dream; if the top falls, the person is not in a dream). While in a dream, Cobb broke into Mal’s safe, spun the top, and closed the



Figure 4: Cobb must live with Mal's top--her totem--that ultimately led to her death.

door so that, when Mal opened her safe, she would see a spinning top, which would indicate that she was in a dream. This worked in that it convinced Mal that limbo (a desolate dream space where one can become stuck) was not reality. However, when Mal truly came back to reality (that is, she woke up from her dream), she remained convinced that this was not reality. Thus, she believed that the only way to “come back to reality” was to kill herself (as she had done earlier to escape limbo). Unfortunately, Cobb could not prevent her from committing suicide and, ultimately, lost his wife. In this example, we see the power of the mistruth submitted in the dream state of Mal. It had an incredible impact on Mal within the dream; yet, outside of the dream, it took on even more power as it compelled Mal to kill herself. Thus, it is not farfetched to conclude that truth cannot

exist in inception when the very deception in inception projects lies that are far-reaching.

Can One Truly be Happy under the Influence of Inception?

I do not believe that one can truly be happy under the influence of inception. However, prior to discussing the possibility of being happy while under the influence of inception, it behooves us to define “being happy.” In reality (assuming we are not dreaming as Descartes wonders), we have the gratification of “knowing” when we are happy. I put “knowing” in quotation marks because I do wonder (with the intention of provoking the reader) whether or not we actually know that we are happy. We can take the Platonic Form of Happiness and say that we partake in it; yet, Plato would say that we could never obtain full perfection of the form of Happiness. Rather, we only achieve approximations of this form. This raises a question the answer to which this thesis intends to pursue: if indeed we live under the system of the culture industry (the correlation being drawn to the inceptor and inception), what is happiness to us? Are we taught to *call* it “happiness” because it is an emotion that affects us positively (by “positively,” I mean that we believe that whatever provoked the emotion of happiness is beneficial to us)? Or is “happiness,” as we understand it, a pure form unadulterated or manipulated by the culture industry (or inception)?

I am prepared to argue that happiness may be of the latter form: namely, something we are taught or something that comes by inclination rather than something pure and unadulterated. We encounter a compelling discussion when we address the individual who says, “I *know* that I am happy.” For example, take the wife of a soldier who is overseas in combat. She is accidentally told that he will return home in a week,

when in fact he has just died. In that moment, she is incredibly happy; she will unequivocally swear, “I was happy!” Yet, upon learning the truth, she succumbs to despair. I have no doubt that she, indeed, experienced happiness in that moment. However, false information gave her that feeling of happiness. In other words, her “happiness” was contingent both upon false information and upon her lack of knowledge of the false information. If the truth had been told to her from the very beginning, I do not believe she would have experienced “happiness.” Let us (unreasonably, but for the sake of argument) assume that we *always* encounter truth; then, I believe we could conclude that we always experience true happiness (granted that the situations affect us positively). However, *because* we cannot realistically assume such a thing, we must account for the possibility of certain falsities that are presented to us as truths. It is under this scenario that I propose that our “happiness” becomes contingent upon false information inasmuch that we are taught to be “happy” without understanding that we should not (perhaps, can not) be happy.

In dreams, we *do* have complete confidence in the valid existence of something that makes us happy, regardless of whether or not that “something” is true. I posit that we are not actually happy; rather, we are taught or manipulated to be “happy” by the creator of the dream. We are conditioned to be uncritical of our surroundings in a dream; thus, we take the dream *prima facie* and respond accordingly. In doing so, we forego a heightened sense of awareness and fall victim to what the creator of the dream designs for us. Therefore, if the creator (or inceptor) wants us to be “happy,” he creates a situation that induces “happiness.”

A perfect example of a subject who maintains this “heightened sense of

awareness” and does *not* fall prey to Cobb is Saito. In his apartment (in his dream), he feels that something is wrong and begins to look for something out of place. He subsequently discovers the discontinuity in his carpet and responds accordingly with apprehension. In like manner, Nolan portrays a subject’s subconscious as an army whose job is to maintain this heightened sense of awareness and guard against anyone that may manipulate the subject’s dream. The paradox in this scenario is that, even if the subconscious maintains its awareness, the inceptor still controls the dream. I (albeit controversially) submit that perhaps the subject is never in control of his fate while in a dream; rather, the creator--the architect, the inceptor--is in control of the subject’s dream. If this is the case, then happiness is not up to the subject; rather, “happiness” is up to the inceptor. In this respect, can we truly consider whatever “happiness” the inceptor bestows upon the subject to be true happiness?

Let us explore this paradox further. Cobb relates a story of how he and Mal, while stuck in limbo, built entire cities together for fifty years and grew old together. Cobb states, “It’s not so bad at first, being gods. The problem is knowing it’s not real. But Mal accepted it; she’d decided to forget that our world wasn’t real.” Here, Cobb represents a person with a heightened alertness that is maintained throughout the dreamlike state. As the creator of his dream, he understands that the “happiness” that he and Mal are experiencing is not true happiness; he does not give to the allure of the dream. On the other hand, Mal succumbs to the attractive “reality” of her dream;



Figure 5: Saito discovers the discrepancy in the carpet.

she has created marvelous things with her husband, she has a seemingly wonderful life. Yet, she fails to maintain the knowledge that, as the creator of her dream, she created something that was false: something that could not induce true happiness. The most significant part of this story is that she *decided*--she consciously *chose*--to forget that their world was not real. It was as if she willingly surrendered her capacity for a heightened awareness in order to believe something that was not real. In this scenario, we can see the paradox more plainly; Cobb understands that he, as creator, has not created true happiness and he guards himself against believing otherwise. Mal, however, foregoes this heightened awareness of the falsity of her dream and, instead, chooses to believe otherwise. As the creator of her dream, Mal cannot bestow true happiness upon herself because she has believed in the deception of the dream that she created.

With the ideas of truth and happiness with respect to inception in mind, we may subsequently inquire about the truth and happiness that we think we experience under Adorno's perspective of the culture industry. Quite frankly, Adorno's somewhat negative perception of culture industry seems to fall in line with our dire conclusions concerning truth and happiness in inception.

Happiness, for Adorno, seems to be the pivotal factor influenced by the culture industry. He carefully describes how the magazine stands take into account every type of person and, thus, how those magazines are designed to bring about the happiness and enjoyment of every person that peruses the stands. The thousands of television channels are specifically designed to cover the diverse interests of the American population. So, it would seem that the culture industry, as Adorno understands, is primarily geared towards satisfying the population.

This brings us to two fundamental questions that overarch this work: first, is the general public aware of this deception of the culture industry? Secondly, are we ever truly happy under the influence of the culture industry? Let us address these questions sequentially.

The issue with the first question is that, if Adorno is right in his understanding of the culture industry, it presupposes that we are indeed *capable* of being aware of this negative influence of the culture industry. That is, to use Descartes' idea of the Evil Genius, do we merely *think* we know what the culture industry is up to, when in fact the culture industry is merely further deceiving us? If we believe in the veracity of Adorno's ideas, then the answer to this question must be an emphatic "no" because Adorno himself is the self-proclaimed prophet who has brought to light the antics of the culture industry.

Thus, for the sake of argument, we may assume that Adorno's theories hold true which brings us to the second question of whether we are ever truly happy under the influence of the culture industry.

According to Adorno, it does not seem very likely that we can ever obtain true happiness. Rather, the "happiness" that we experience is merely the deception of the culture industry manifested in such a way that it caters to our desires. Does the mere fulfillment of our desires constitute true happiness? It seems that we encounter a regression argument when we analyze this question. For example, as incomplete, insatiable humans, we are never satisfied with what we have. One need only reflect back on his or her childhood years at Christmas time to realize this tension. For me, I remember, at age 7, setting my eyes on a bright yellow, remote-controlled bulldozer in the days leading up to Christmas. After much persuasion, my parents purchased the bulldozer for me for Christmas. I excitedly threw myself into the biggest dirt pile that I could find. Yet, after a few hours of furious excavation, I discovered that I "needed" the backhoe that sat alongside my bulldozer on the Wal-Mart shelf in order to adequately excavate. Once I obtained the backhoe, I needed the tractor, and so the regression went on. We see this in everyday life; we want the newest model of our car, we want the newest fashionable clothes, we stay up until three in the morning to watch the midnight premiere of our favorite movie. And, Adorno would say, *the culture industry is more than happy to create the things that we want*. In a sense, Adorno seems to argue that we became slaves to what the culture industry can offer us.

Thus, we return to the critical question of whether we are ever truly happy if indeed we are bound to the whims of the culture industry as described by Adorno.

Perhaps we merely “learn” to be happy, perhaps we merely associate the concept of happiness with a feeling of fulfillment and nothing deeper. Granted, this is quite controversial and I do hope that it causes the reader to discern whether Adorno’s theory of the culture industry is too rigid or whether it is a plausible understanding of the culture industry.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reconciling *Inception* and Adorno

In conclusion of this analysis, we must decide for ourselves how (if at all) to reconcile *Inception* and Adorno. In this dissertation, I will put forth my belief that, while I believe that Adorno's view of the culture industry is too rigid and negative, the general idea of his work coincides with what I believe we may learn from Nolan's work.

Adorno's implication that we are hopelessly entangled within whims of the culture industry is questionably rigid. Under this view, it seems that we cannot escape should we want to escape. I am inclined to shy away from this dangerous perspective and adhere, instead, to the idea that we *are* capable of being aware of the potential negative influences that the culture may have upon our lives. Through this capability, we may respond as we see fit to the advances of the culture industry. Most importantly, however, *how* can we recognize the danger signs that alert us to potential dangers with the culture industry? I submit that the answer lies within our analysis of *Inception*.

In Chapter 1, we discussed two important factors of deception that Nolan described in *Inception*: the manipulation of emotions and the manipulation of key authorities. With respect to the manipulation of emotions, the most important aspect that we can learn from Nolan is the power of the manipulation of positive emotions as deception. It seems reasonable to argue that, as responsible citizens of America, we

should be consciously aware of the positive emotions that the culture industry causes us to experience. Granted, some positive emotions may be justifiable and beneficial to us. However, it is just as likely that there may negative effects of these positive emotions. Let us distinguish between these two possibilities.

With respect to the positive ways that the positive emotions induced by the culture industry can affect us, take the movie *The Blindside* as an example. The story of a strong mother who has compassion on a troubled, young African-American reaches into the depths of viewers' hearts. Leigh Anne Tuohy is portrayed as the average southern wife who does her best to lead her family. As viewers, we can relate to this portrayal because we see this type of woman everyday at the mall, at church, etc. We sympathized with the abuse, anger, and hate that tortured Michael Oher's life. Yet, while feeling his pain, we were encouraged by the transformation that took place in his life—we were impacted by the compassion that made his dramatic rise to the spotlight possible. Contrast Michael's abused, towering African-American presence with the sweet, tiny innocence of S.J., the youngest boy of Leigh Anne Tuohy's strong white family, and we see a beautiful suggestion of a bridge being built across the chasm of segregation. The movie concludes by strongly emphasizing this relationship as S.J. went on to enter the field with Michael during his college football games. *Prima facie* the movie, based on a true story, was an inspirational rags-to-riches story. Yet, *The Blindside* covers more ground than the average inspirational movie does. It strives to bring different races together; it aims to impress upon the viewer the "good feeling" of one race walking hand-in-hand with another race.

On the subject of resolving the divide that was so prevalent between races in

America, *The Blindside* is not the only movie to subtly relay such progressive ideas to



Figure 6: Leigh Anne (Sandra Bullock) reading a bedtime story to Michael and S.J.

its viewers. *Remember the Titans* more forwardly depicts the racial tension as the African-American coach and players routinely experienced persecution. Movies like these are truly great stories; yet, on an even more substantial scale, they present us with ideas that perhaps we Americans implement in our lives. Perhaps these positive portrayals of overcoming racial tension are presented to us in order that we may unconsciously agree with and retain them. However, this idea is not tied to merely social issues. What about environmental issues?

One of the lasting concerns that has been present in America is the issue of natural resource conservation. Most importantly, America has been subjected to intensive logging practices that have eliminated whole forests. Yet, despite the large-scale effects of this logging, we do not normally hear about this destruction. This absence of

knowledge is what makes movies like *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* incredibly important and subject to further inquiry. The playful, animated movie portrays FernGully, a rainforest, as a beautiful rainforest completely unmolested by humans. However, the likable Batty, a crazy bat, soon warns that *humans* have endeavored to destroy FernGully. Thus, the viewers are immediately treated to a dire depiction of humanity corrupting nature. Humanity enlisted the services of Hexxus, an evil-looking, oily creature, who in turn employs a vicious logging machine called “The Leveler.” At this juncture, however, the movie takes a turn and changes its angle of raising awareness to an angle of preventive measures. The inhabitants of FernGully find a supporter in a *human* named Zak. Zak realized how much danger both FernGully and its inhabitants faced in the onslaught of logging, and worked furiously and successfully to derail the logging attempts. Finally, after successfully stopping the logging of FernGully, Zak is depicted as setting off to attempt to stop *all* deforestation. This the strongest sentiment that is left impressed upon the viewer. While this is an animated movie and mostly aimed at younger viewers, it profoundly impresses upon the viewer the dangers of deforestation and shows the viewer the value that *one* human can have in stopping the destruction of nature. Additionally, whether or not the younger viewers are aware of the realistic applicability of the happenings in the movie, they are unconsciously stamped with idea of the evils of deforestation. They are disposed to associate and relate more to Zak and the likable creatures of FernGully than to the evil humans attempting to destroy nature. Perhaps we may be so presumptive as to say the viewers may act on those feelings in the future.

This is one aspect of what I believe we may learn from the deceptive use of the

power of positive emotions in *Inception*: perhaps (even though we may not be aware of the way these movies' ideas affect us) we may grow positively as individuals under the influence of this type of "inception" by movies.

This line of reasoning is almost directly correlative to the reasoning of both Cicero and Gorgias who argued that lying through rhetoric could be justified if it benefits the subject. In fact, this argument was made much more emphatically by one of the greatest rhetoricians of the twentieth century when Hitler stated, "For myself personally I would never tell a lie, but there is no falsehood I would not perpetuate for Germany's sake."¹⁰ The idea of a lie being justified finds its emphasis on the *telos* of the subject: is the subject better off under the influence of the lie? Now, our discussion of the culture industry's subtle influence through movies need not necessarily imply that the culture industry is *lying*; rather, we are more concerned with the deception—the wool pulled over our eyes, if you will—that the culture industry employs. Perhaps it is justifiable for the culture industry to manipulate us through the "inception" of ideas in movies if we are benefited by said deception.

Indeed, one could reasonably point to the above examples taken from *The Blindside* and *Remember the Titans* that impress upon the viewers a propensity to bring races together and argue that we benefit from movies like these because they aid us in bringing about the betterment of society. That is, even though we may not be aware of the manipulative effects that these movies may have on us, these movies and their directors are justified in their actions because of the teleological benefits bestowed upon us. While, of course, any acquiescence to the manipulation of one's self should be met with some

¹⁰ Cited in Walter *Hewel's Diary*, 1945.

inquiry, I am inclined to agree that perhaps it is justifiable for the culture industry to institute these deceptive measures if they benefit society. However, discerning how much deception is justifiable is a gray area that increases in size as we analyze some examples in which the incitement of passions by films might be adverse in nature.

Perhaps one of the videos that will go down as most quickly going viral during my generation was the *Kony 2012* short movie. Within the span of one day, over half of my Facebook friends changed their profile pictures to a picture that resembled a political campaign picture and read “KONY 2012.” Facebook statuses proclaimed, “Stop Kony!” and Facebook soon became a viral battleground of new “social activists.” Having studied the atrocities committed by rebel Joseph Kony in Uganda and surrounding areas, I was intrigued by what had spurred so many of my peers to denounce someone that most had never heard of before. Simply put, *Kony 2012* described in very graphic detail the horrors that Kony has implemented in Uganda. Without reserve, it relayed the violence that has occurred under the terror of Kony. Quite naturally, these injustices incited many of my friends to “action” as they dedicated their social media outlets to “stopping Kony.” However, it soon became apparent that *Kony 2012* was not telling the whole story. Contrary to the mass armies that Kony was said to be operating, Kony’s forces have actually thinned so much that they are struggling to exist. Most of the atrocities depicted in *Kony 2012* happened years ago and, thus, made much of the information outdated. Yet, the video itself incited such passions and disgust in its viewers that they immediately responded without further consideration and research into the facts of the Kony issue. The immediate propagation of outcries against Kony in the social media was stunning, to say the least. It demonstrated that, if a movie arouses a viewer’s emotions regardless of

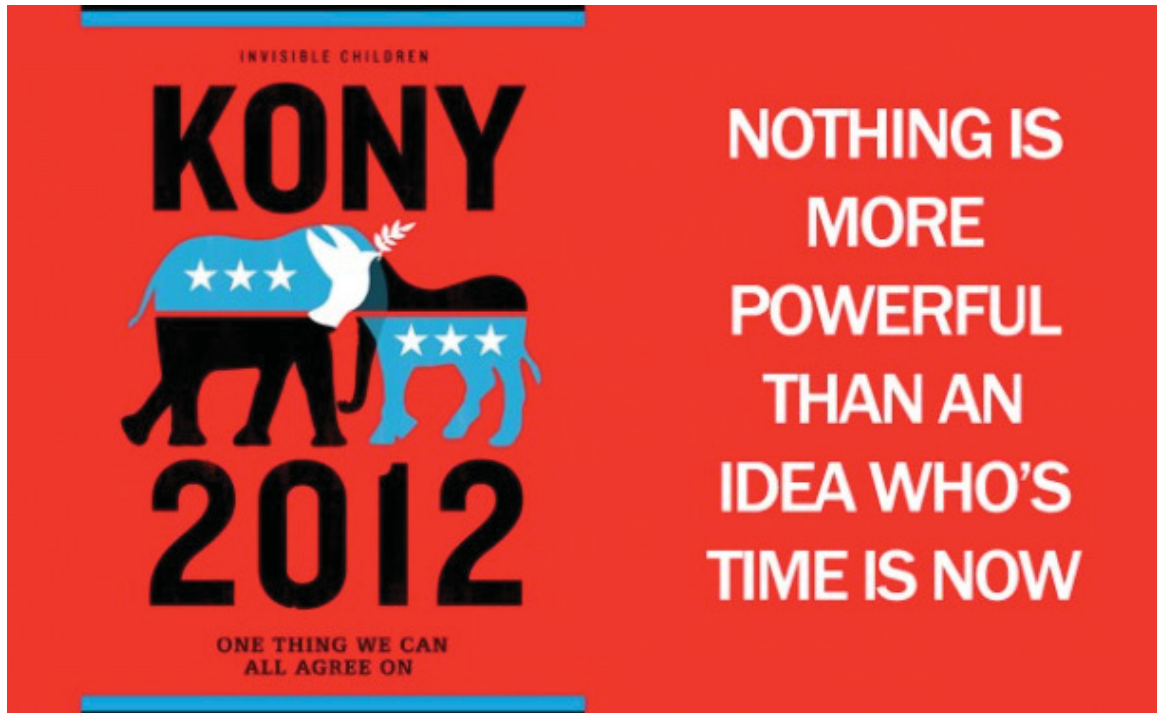


Figure 7: One of many Kony 2012 pictures that overtook social media.

whether or not the movie's content is true, a movie can instill an idea in its viewers and cause them to act hastily and perhaps rashly upon that idea.

The Kony example illustrates the power of the manipulation of emotions in movies. If a movie that is based upon questionable premises can incite us into action without further thought, we must be hard pressed to understand and guard against the possible negative influences of the movie industry's manipulation of our emotions. This leads us to overarching questions alluded to by this final chapter: what can we learn from *Inception* and Adorno and how can we reconcile them?

I believe that both *Inception* and Adorno call us to adopt a higher sense of awareness: awareness of how the culture industry and, more specifically, the movie industry affects us. How many times do we enter a darkened theater and give our mind

and imagination over to a producer for two hours to do with them as he or she pleases? The character of Dom Cobb seems to be an allusion to role of movie producers; they possess the power to implant ideas within the viewers of their movies, most times without the viewers consciously being aware of their newly acquired ideas. Perhaps Nolan's work in *Inception* can be viewed as a warning to us of the power that we give up when we enter a theater and the power that can be exercised over us.

Adorno's reflections on how he views the movie industry as attempting to transcend both movies and reality work hand in hand with Nolan. Just as Cobb incepted an idea in Fischer's mind that caused Fischer to live his life differently in reality, so also can the transcendent ideas in movies cause us to amend the way we live our lives. Thus, we should be aware of these potential effects. Yet, *how* exactly do we increase our awareness and alertness?

I believe the best example that we can learn from is the character of Saito. In the afore-mentioned scenario where he realized that the carpet style was incorrect, Saito demonstrated two types of critical dispositions. First of all, he was predisposed to critically analyze every facet of his surroundings. He was cautious of the setting that he was placed in and he evaluated that setting against what he *knew*. Secondly, once he discovered a discrepancy, he was predisposed to apply the knowledge of the discrepancy holistically in order to see how it affected reality. In other words, he looked past the immediate effects of the discrepancy in order to view the general effects—in this case, the fact that he was still dreaming.

It is the combination of these two dispositions that I believe can be acted upon in response to Nolan and Adorno. While, first and foremost, we should allow ourselves to

be entertained by the movies that we watch, it behooves us to critically view the ideas and positions that are set forth in these movies: which ideas are already adhered to by us and which ideas are new to us? Once we delineate this difference, we may more ably decide for ourselves whether we agree or disagree with the new ideas. Secondly, once we establish our agreement or disagreement with these ideas, we may step back and look holistically at how these ideas affect both our society and us. In the *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* example, perhaps the generous views of the rights of gay couples are impressed upon the viewer insomuch that the viewer becomes active in promoting gay couples' rights. If this happens to a significant number of viewers, we may reasonably conclude that a solid movement of proponents of gay couples' rights will form. Through acting upon these two dispositions, we may discern how these movies can change and transform us. However, what if one refuses to maintain a heightened sense of awareness with respect to these movies?

One of the most striking quotes of *Inception* occurs in quite a gloomy setting. Cobb needed a dosage of drugs that would put Fischer to sleep for an incredible amount of time in order to perform the inception. So, he contacted his former associate Yusef, who took him into a dark, dingy backroom of a pharmacy to demonstrate the effects of a drug he had. In this room, there are about twenty individuals lying on cots connected by tubes in their wrists. According to Yusef, each of these individuals would come to this room every day just to dream. In fact, the drug that Yusef gave them to sleep was so strong that the individuals could be slapped in their faces and still not wake up. When Saito asks why anyone would willingly undergo this treatment every day, Cobb quietly responds, "After a while...it becomes the only way you can dream."



Figure 8: The elderly bald man stands in the middle of the backroom surrounded by dreamers.

What exactly Cobb means by this is momentarily ambiguous as the viewer attempts to reconcile the prostrate people who can only dream in this induced state. At this moment, we are introduced to (in my opinion) the most pivotal character in the movie: a nameless, elderly, bald man. As he lovingly looks upon the people that he has bestowed dreaming upon, the elderly bald man states, “They come to be *woken* up...the dream has become their reality.” That is, these people have given themselves so completely to the power of their dreams that they have chosen that as their reality. While there are a variety of ways to interpret this, it is certainly reasonable to inquire about whether or not this is an indictment of people who forsake being *aware*—people who choose instead to be swayed by the ideas and positions impressed upon them. Perhaps this is an indictment of people who approach movies without a care for how the movies might affect them—people who would rather experience the false fancy of a false “reality” rather than the truth of reality.

Granted, this is only one possible interpretation of this unique scene in *Inception*; however, if true, it demonstrates the immense value that Nolan places on remaining in a constant state of heightened awareness. This is what I believe we should learn from *Inception*: that heightened awareness should not be taken for granted, but should be rigorously and consciously pursued.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion of this chapter and work, perhaps Nolan only intended to make a provocative, entertaining film and nothing more. Perhaps Adorno was simply wrong. Or perhaps Nolan *did* intend to impart a lesson unto the viewers of his film. And perhaps Adorno presents a genuine and valid concern about the power of the culture industry. It is up to the reader to decide for himself or herself whether or not the intersection of *Inception* and Adorno's views of the culture and music industries is as this thesis has presented it.

Even though our opinions may differ, one thing is certain: we must answer the call to a heightened sense of awareness about how the things that we buy, the things that we watch, and the things that we read affect us. The advertising industry is entirely dedicated to convincing an individual to buy or participate in a product. How far will they go to ensure that the individual is adequately convinced? At what point does one draw the line and say that the methods are too deceptive or manipulative? I do not know the answer to this.

However, through much reflection, I do believe that we can stand strong against the temptation to give ourselves over to the whims and wills of these industries, contrary

to the people in the back room who willingly put themselves under just so that they could dream. Instead, we can remain vigilant and alert, cautiously critical of how we let these industries affect us. If Adorno is right, the Cobb's of this world are relentless and powerful—almost everywhere.

Friends, let us be citizens who are responsible and aware of everything around us. Let us investigate new ideas for ourselves and validate or deny it after thorough research and careful reflection. Let us not act hastily upon the suggestions of the culture industry. Rather, let us value the power of the individual freedom of our being and exercise that freedom in a manner of conscious discernment.

After all, inception is not real. Or is it?

The End

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