

'Inception' visionary sci-fi thriller



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Writer/director Christopher Nolan has accomplished an extraordinary cinematic high wire act with **"Inception,"** a genuinely visionary science fiction thriller that should have audiences on the edge of their seats for every one of it's two hours and thirty minutes. Nolan's movie ranks easily with Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" and

the Wachowski Brothers' "The Matrix" as a

mindbending visual experience that raises the bar for everyone else. But it's also an absorbing caper movie and thriller that provides a gripping *raison d'etre* for the visual spectacle.



Michael Caine, Leonardo DiCaprio in "Inception" Photo: Courtesy Warner Bros (c) 2010

Leonardo DiCaprio stars as Cobb, an industrial spy in a near future who is a master of a new technology that lets the user invade the dreams of a sleeping subject to extract secrets from the subconscious. He's very good at his illegal job, but it's being made increasingly dangerous by subconscious visions of his dead wife (Marion Cotillard), who tends to show up at the worst possible moments to throw a monkey wrench into his missions. We meet her early on during an attempted dream extraction on wealthy businessman Saito (Ken

Watanabe), who turns out to be merely auditioning Cobb for a more dangerous job. The target is a soon-to-be rival, Cillian Murphy, and the object is not stealing an idea but planting one: dissolving his own inherited business empire.

Planting an idea is "inception." And it apparently can't be done during a routine dream. The implanters have to go deeper, into a dream within a dream within a dream, requiring the subject to be actually sedated, and that makes things all the more complicated. (See, if you die during a dream, you wake up...unless of course you're sedated and *can't* wake up, which would send you into a subconscious limbo and that would be bad.)

Once the premise is established, the movie becomes sort "Mission: Impossible" meets "The Matrix," and it turns out to be a winning combination. Cobb puts a together a team, including prior associates



Ellen Page in "Inception" Photo: Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures, (c) 2010

Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Tom Hardy, and Ellen Page, an architecture student of Cobb's former mentor, Michael Caine. Dream invasion requires an architect to design the outline of the subconscious world the thieves are going to burglarize.

Nolan throws a lot of information at his audience, both in terms of imagery and plot. Cobb's team orchestrates scams within cons worthy of "The Sting" or "Mission: Impossible" as they undertake their assignment. What's truly impressive is the number of balls Nolan keeps in the air without confusing his audience. As the film races towards its climax, he's adroitly intercutting between action in three levels of dreams and reality.

Time is relative in "Inception's" dream worlds. Each level of dream operates at a different rate of speed. What takes minutes in objective reality (and what constitutes "reality" is a subject of debate for the movie's brainy characters) takes hours in the first level of dreaming, but weeks in the next, and decades, finally, at the deepest level. Explaining this stuff to a paying audience could be almost as exciting as expert testimony on DNA at the OJ Simpson trial, but Nolan's script manages not to bog itself down in exposition and the film moves at breakneck

pace throughout.

This is the most original stuff out of Hollywood in years, and certainly the most original movie of the summer so far by far. That doesn't mean "Inception" exists in a vacuum. "Dreamscape" (1984) also dealt with technology that allowed people to enter and manipulate the dreams of others, and in "The Matrix" (1999) human beings and computer-generated "agents" fought it out in a virtual reality created by artificial intelligence. 1990's "Total Recall," based on a Philip K. Dick story, featured implanting memories of vacation adventures that hadn't happened, and what constituted reality was a major story point. (In fact the movie's closing shot nonverbally echoes the question asked by Rachel Ticotin to Arnold Schwarzenegger at the end of "Total Recall.") And note the absence of a number in the title. That alone gives it a certain amount of cred this summer.

Nolan has traversed some tricky stories before, as in his 2000 indie thriller "Memento," which opened at the climax and presented each preceding scene in reverse chronological order, ending at the beginning, and in his "Batman Begins"/"Dark Knight" non-franchise intermezzo, "The Prestige," in which the key to a mysterious magic trick turns out to have been right in front of the audience's noses all along. That film, by the way, remains quite popular with teenagers, who contrary to popular belief, often like movies that get them thinking. They're going to like "Inception" as well.



Ken Watanabe, Marion Cotillard in "Inception" Photo: Melissa Moseley (c) Warners 2010

And although Nolan keeps one step ahead of his viewers for pretty much the entire movie, he does tie everything up fairly neatly at the end. There will be a lot of post-mortems over post-movie pizzas, however. And perhaps once some viewers have seen this movie several times, and there will be plenty of those, lists of plotholes will begin appearing online. Nonetheless, this

movie, for all its labyrinthine plotting, holds together pretty cohesively.

The story provides lots of opportunities for big action and big special effects. Some of the effects, notably a dizzying fight scene in a hotel, are done in-camera, with updated versions of rotating set effects done in the 1951 Fred Astaire musical "Royal Wedding" and "2001: A Space Odyssey." And these scenes will get some of the biggest gasps. But the effects exist to serve the story, and not the other way around.

This is an exceptionally handsome movie. Nolan and his longtime director of photography Wally Pfister shot in six countries on four continents. Production designer Guy Hendrix Dyas, who's also worked for Steven Spielberg, the Wachowski Brothers, Tim Burton, Guillermo del Toro and Bryan Singer, has been given latitude to create a dizzying world that's stone cold realistic one minute and right out of M.C. Escher the next. Remember those impossible, paradoxical stairways to nowhere your geometry teacher had hanging up in the classroom? They're here. Also note the movie is not in 3D. Reportedly Nolan resisted suggestions that it be converted. The movie doesn't need it, and in 3D some of these sequences might have made people sick.

Nolan also provides plenty of the type of action fans of the "Bourne" movies have gotten used to and they won't be disappointed here. One dream-within-a-dream set piece involves a chase on skis and snowmobiles right out of a James Bond movie, and Hans Zimmer's thunderous score temporarily seems to turn into John Barry.

The cast, as is absolutely necessary in a movie this fantastic, treats it all very seriously, and they're so believable you end up taking it all seriously. DiCaprio is an excellent blend of movie hero bravado and sensitivity, treading some of the same ground Scorsese aimlessly but pretentiously and uneffectively meandered over in "**Shutter Island.**" Joseph Gordon-Levitt, already a favorite among teenage girls, is likely to broaden his fan base significantly with a surprisingly macho and debonair performance.

Ellen Page, already rocketing to stardom, increases her stock here, in a part that requires brains but no romance. Ken Watanabe, briefly glimpsed in Nolan's "Batman Begins," has a much larger part here and is hypnotic. Marion Cotillard is simultaneously smoldering and threatening. Nolan repertory regular Michael Caine has a small but pivotal role. **Tom Hardy** is likewise fascinating to watch, and Nolan regular Cillian Murphy brings more sympathy to his role of heir to a corporate empire than you're expecting. Tom Berenger is almost unrecognizable, but at least out the direct-to-video ghetto.

"Inception" may not match the billion dollar grosses of "The Dark Knight," but this could easily turn into the big one of the summer.

Visually spectacular and dramatically absorbing, "Inception" is pure and simple a remarkable film. In any event, in a summer of sequels, it's a clear standout, not to be missed.

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