An Asymptote of Reality: An Analysis of Nolan's "Inception"

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An Asymptote of Reality: An Analysis of Nolan’s Inception

In the first act of Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010), dream invaders Thomas Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Ariadne (Ellen Page) are walking through the world of a dream. This being her first time in the alternate reality, Ariadne is in awe of the realism of the world. Cobb explains to her that it will be her job, as a dream architect, to design the dream world to make it accurately reflect real life. Ariadne seems intrigued by this challenge and inquires, “…What happens when you start messing with the physics of it all?” At this, the pair stop in their tracks as Ariadne starts to reshape the world of the dream, folding the horizon up into the sky until it comes to rest upside down, one hundred yards above the two protagonists’ heads. Director Christopher Nolan uses this sequence and the entire movie to showcase the awesome technological capabilities of cinema. Inception pushes the limit of how far the onscreen reality of a film can be stretched while still having the audience believe in the ontology of the image, exemplifying French theorist André Bazin’s ideas about cinematic realism.

André Bazin was the first film critic to effectively challenge the formative tradition of film that dominated the early twentieth century. He saw the innovation of photography as a groundbreaking event in the process of capturing and reproducing reality. Specifically, Bazin writes:

For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. (“Ontology” 161)
All of the arts of the time were based on human intervention. Whether it be sculpting, painting, or drawing, a work of art was always a human’s interpretation of reality. Whereas in film, the artist’s discretion is limited to choosing what to frame, the actual capturing and reproducing of the image is achieved by an entirely mechanical medium. As Bazin writes, “It is true that…the film director has at his disposal a margin within which he is free to vary the interpretation of the action but it is only a margin and allows for no modification of the inner logic of the event” (“The Evolution” 48).

Another significant element of Bazin’s focus is the beneficial use of deep focus cinematography. This style of filming uses wide-angle shots to let all of the action unfold in front of the camera, as opposed to narrowing in with close-ups to dictate what the audience should be focusing on. A prevalent characteristic of deep focus shooting is multiple layers of action. Bazin argues that, “Depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic” (“The Evolution” 50). This constant focus on and interaction with physical reality is an innate human obsession, and one that Bazin considered to be the driving force behind cinema.

Bazin believed that the future of cinema held more opportunities than were available at his time to advance the field and move it closer and closer to a direct representation of reality. He referred to film as an “asymptote of reality,” arguing that technological developments would render screen perception ever closer to natural perception, although there would always be a clear dividing line between the two. This idea is expressed in an article titled “The Myth of Total Cinema” in which Bazin talked about this evolutionary and constant advancement of film technology.

André Bazin and Christopher Nolan would agree on the positive nature of cinema’s technological advancements. Inception was Nolan’s seventh feature film, and one that he worked on for ten years before making. The reason for the wait was Nolan’s awareness of the constant evolution of technology; the longer he waited to make the film, the more he could do to stretch the technological warping of the onscreen world. In
addition to embracing these developments, Nolan instilled Bazin’s concepts of realism into his film.

A sequence in *Inception* that best displays deep focus shooting is onboard the 747 when the plot to enter the dreams of Robert Fischer begins. Every shot in this scene exemplifies the in-depth style of mise-en-scene that Bazin valued. The audience first sees the inside of the cabin from a wide shot that shows multiple layers of action. We see Saito in the foreground, already seated, studying a newspaper, Ariadne in the center of the frame, staring at a book but probably not digesting a single word, and Arthur in the background of the frame. As Arthur enters, the camera tilts upward to show his concerned look as he peers across the cabin to the other members of the party. It is not until this action that Nolan cuts, showing Cobb and Eames settling into their seats in the foreground, as Fischer has a conversation with the flight attendant in the background. Bazin praises this style of shooting when he says, “In addition to affecting the structure of film language, [shooting in depth] also reflects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle” (“The Evolution” 50). What Bazin is saying here is that these types of in depth shots can go beyond merely serving as a way to capture the action on screen but can actually add to the meaning of the image.

This idea of shooting in depth developed in opposition to the concept of montage which was the focus of the prominent formative film theorists of the time. By the mid twentieth century, montage in film was used mostly to convey an idea through the
juxtaposition of multiple images. It was the idea of combining two seemingly unrelated shots that alone carry no metaphorical weight, but when juxtaposed propose an entirely new message. Thus, montage was a great directorial tool to cement the concrete meaning of a sequence into an audience’s mind. Directors like Nolan and Welles, however, preferred longer shots in deeper focus than, for example, Sergei Eisenstein (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925). With everything in the frame in clear focus and multiple layers of action happening at once, things are left open to interpretation for the audience. Instead of the film imposing an idea on the viewer, the viewer digests the images and interprets them on their own.

This idea of leaving a scene open to interpretation seems to be one of the fundamental elements Christopher Nolan had in mind when making *Inception*. The audience is left to wrestle with the ideas of truth and actuality as the characters travel in and out of different levels of onscreen “reality.” As Thomas Cobb raises a gun to his head in the first act, not sure if he is in a level of the dream world he created or planted in reality, the only thing the audience can be sure of is that everything we see looks convincingly real. Disregarding whatever content the film may be experimenting with, we grant it credibility because it is based in a photo-realistic medium. Even though we know that what is taking place on screen is not real, the objective camera angles and unobtrusive editing of the film grant it reality.

Although the audience believes the images on screen to be real, the same thing cannot be said for its protagonist, Thomas Cobb. Throughout the film he struggles with the idea that his world isn’t real. Nolan chooses to manifest this complex in the form of a spinning top that Cobb always carries around with him. We are told by Cobb himself that if the top, when spun, slowly comes to a stop, he is in the real world, but if the top is spun and continues to spin without stopping, he is not in reality but rather inside someone else’s dream.
In the last scene of the film, when Cobb finally believes he has made it out of the dream world and is back home in reality with his children, he spins the top on a table before running out the door to greet his children. In an in depth shot that Bazin would appreciate, the camera slowly pans from Cobb and his children to center on the top spinning on the table. With Cobb and his children still embracing in the background of the frame, we see the top teeter for a second as if it may be starting to lose its gusto, but before we can be certain, the screen cuts to black and the credits begin to roll. *Inception* has at its core the idea that the reality perceived by the main characters is not real. In the same way that André Bazin thought audiences should accept what they see onscreen as a perception of reality, Cobb began to tell himself that the dream world was real because it was a perception of his reality.

By shooting in depth, Nolan makes a choice to leave certain aspects of a shot or a scene open to the audience’s interpretation. Bazin argues that “The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on to the film is built into the very design of the image” (“The Evolution” 50). Because of this artistic choice, at the end of *Inception* we are left with many questions concerning the mindset of the main character. Thomas Cobb’s journey in *Inception* parallels André Bazin’s perception of the evolution of film world toward “total cinema.” Through his journey, Cobb gets closer and closer to reality, but we can’t know whether or not he ever makes it. The same can be said of the nature of cinema: technological developments will bring the art closer and closer to that of natural perception, but the two lines of reality will never intersect.
Works Cited

