

A Study of Narrative Techniques in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

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Abstract: Narrative techniques play a very important role in establishing a great film. In fact, the essence of a picture lies in the presentation of its story. Christopher Nolan, a highly acclaimed English director, has received numerous accolades for his distinct way of storytelling. In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the different techniques deployed in *Inception* by Nolan.

Keywords: Analepsis, paralipsis, mimesis, dreams within a dream, and modular narrative

Inception, a 2010 heist thriller, is written, produced and directed by Christopher Nolan. His films are rooted in philosophical, sociological and ethical concepts. They explore human morality, the construction of time, as well as the malleable nature of memory and personal identity. His works are suffused with metafictional elements, temporal shifts, nonlinear storytelling, practical special effects, and analogous relationships between visual language and narrative elements. His contributions to the film industry are *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), *Insomnia* (2002), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-12) and *Interstellar* (2014). Mere entertainment is not Nolan's prime interest as he loves to engage his audience with engrossing stories and incredible settings of events. The film *Inception* stars a large ensemble cast: Leonardo DiCaprio, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Marion Cotillard, Ellen Page, Michael Caine, Ken Watanabe, Tom Hardy, Dileep Rao, Cillian Murphy and Tom Berenger.

Narrative is the main feature of all films and being a successful director, Nolan possesses the tact of narration. He knows very well the effective usage of film language (shots, camera movement, and scene) for building up a fictitious world and for making his audience understand the logic of 'his' world. Although *Inception* strictly follows the very classical rules of Hollywood storytelling: introduction, development, climax, resolution, and epilogue, it breaks the trend of following the much used ways of storytelling. It can be performed in two ways either one narrate a story in a chronological manner (sequential order of things) or one begins it from the middle, which is also called *media res*. The second pattern is being widely used in novels and films. But in *Inception*, the ending makes the beginning. In the introduction, the protagonist, Leonardo DiCaprio as Dom Cobb, is found on the harbour in a delirium. A few Japanese speaking gunmen pick him up and present him in front of their master. Both the captive and master find an acquaintance through their conversation. Then, the scene shifts and audience meet the same delirious man in a very energetic form. He and his partner, Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Arthur, introduce their client, Ken Watanabe as Saito, with their profession of stealing valuable secrets from the dream state of a person. They teach him lessons to protect his mind so that he can save himself from getting harmed by some other extractors. But the client does not get impressed with their proposal. Suddenly in the same scene, there is vandalization of public property and the director takes the audience in a new time and space where a new character is keeping an eye on all of the three unconscious persons. Their dreams are connected through a machine. Then, gradually the next shift in time and space occurs when they all start waking up from their common dream. The same four men are shown travelling in a train. So, at the outset of the narrative, there is an extensive distortion of time and space. The complete action which continued for fifteen minutes and fifteen seconds is comprised of dreams within a dream. As per Mikhail Bakhtin, time and space are interconnected and he termed it as chronotope in the essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". Both elements are central to the narrative. In the twentieth century with the progress in science and technology, there has been an evolution in the relationship between time and zone. In science fiction, there is an intelligent play with them. Time and space, in other words, are two complementary aspects that together cover all the dimensions of empirical existence. Furthermore, time provides the coherence or linearity to the narrative. Literature is basically an art of time. In narratology, the involvement of time with story and plot leads the audience to a concrete and clear idea or concept.

According to the film, *Inception* is the planting of an idea into someone's brain. The question like how does it take place meets its answer in the second phase of the film. The director introduces more information and logic rules of Cobb's job. He does this by focusing on Cobb's hunt for the best people to form a team of specialists. Cobb wants to be successful in the new job of planting an idea in Robert Fischer's mind rather than performing their usual act of stealing.

There are different techniques which have been used by the director to strengthen the narrative. One of them is mimesis which means 'showing' or 'dramatized'. Gerard Genette has talked about it in the fourth chapter of her book, *Narrative Discourse*. The opposite of mimesis is diegesis which means 'telling' or 'relating'. In diegesis, the linking information is just imparted to the audience without taking any pain to show it as happening. The former is extensively exploited in the film rather than the latter. When Cobb gets his team ready, he explains all the rules of *Inception* to them. For this purpose, the director does not only rely on the narration of events (how the *Inception* would take place) but also shows the exact way to perform the deed. This helps the audience to assimilate the

process of the job. Then, the director has also used the technique of paralipsis, which is to hold the information. This technique is often used to create suspense in the text. Moreover, it has a heavy contribution in forming a successful brain teaser like *Inception*. For instance, at the very beginning of the film, the director displays the pictures of two small kids playing in the garden and a lady who is in bad terms with the main character (Cobb). Later scenes show that they are his children and wife. Further, the information regarding Cobb's job is also held back. The job of planting an idea in the mind of Robert Fischer, an entrepreneur's son is provided by Saito with the bait of helping Cobb to meet his family. This raises a question regarding his ability to go home on its own. Why does he take Saito's assistance for his reunion with the family? Who was the old man in the opening scene and why was Mal (the lady) after her husband (Cobb)? Even the director does not let paralipsis go at the end of the film. He ends it with the shot of spinning top which otherwise indicates the continuation of dream. He just not allow the dream state to pass with the film.

All the conflict resolves in the third phase, climax. The director has designed two conflicts for the film: an outer conflict and an inner conflict. The outer one relates to Cobb and his team members who are trying to infiltrate Robert's mind for planting an idea. The inner one is about Cobb's relationship with his wife (Mal) and his inner struggle to get out of the belief of murdering her. Therefore, with the help of dreams within a dream technique, the former gets resolved whereas the latter remains unsolved.

Christopher Nolan has used recurrent images, dialogues, and devices to keep the film intact. For instance, the image of his children is constantly displayed from the beginning till the end; the dialogues like- "To take a leap of faith," "An old man filled with regret," "You are waiting for a train. A train that will take you far away. You know where you hope this train will take you, but can't know for sure. But it does not matter. Because we'll be together"; a device that puts them into sleep; and the use of kick which ultimately snaps them out of the multiple levels of dreams. The film is indeed quite different from the films which are being made all over the world and there is no doubt that it is Americans who come to the fore with such type of mind-storming ideas. Even Scott MacDonald brags about this quality:

[a]s the Hollywood film industry expanded during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and into the 1950s, it came to regard itself- and most Americans came to regard it- as the only truly significant producer of cinema, and implicitly the only major source of this particular aspect of spiritual community.(4)

Considering the frame narrative technique, the main story is about "typical corporate espionage". Saito heirs Cobb and his team for the purpose of making Robert Fisher believe that he should have to be an independent man and discard the inheritance of his father:

Robert: You know, the will means that Dad wanted me to be my own man not

Just to live for him. That's what I am gonna do, uncle Peter.

The second story deals with the life of Cobb, his earnest desire to go back to his family and to get rid of his own guilt. While injecting a new thought in Fisher's mind, he simultaneously uproots his own thoughts of guilt regarding the death of his wife. Freud's concept of subconscious is aptly applied here. Here, the control of subconscious over the conscious state gets its perfect portrayal. Cobb plans a dream within a dream exercise to accomplish the mission in which they have to go deeper than before. As they fall asleep, the time starts running fast as "brain function in the dream will be about twenty times the normal and when you enter a dream within a dream the effect is compounded." The division of the whole process is into three levels: at first level, they try to open up the relationship with his father; at second, they inoculate a belief of creating something for himself; and at the third level, the belief that his father does not want him to follow his footprints is inserted into him. But the things do not run smooth. Their plans meet with number of complications as Robert has already secured his mind to prevent any infiltration into it. He has got the training which Cobb tries to deliver Saito in the very beginning. So, the security of Robert's mind commences a war with the infiltrators. A lot of gun firing takes place in which Saito gets hit and death in a dream before its right time would send a dreamer into a Limbo, "unconstructed dream space" or "just raw, infinite subconscious". To resolve the issue, they agree to continue their work as Cobb says: "Downwards is the only way upwards." But going deeper also means Mal's intervention into the work. She will be down there to unsettle Cobb's plans. After great struggle, he gets over with his guilt and takes Saito back to life. Here the audience come to know that the first old man is Saito who is "filled with regret, waiting to die alone." The two plots are gravely intermixed with each other to create an utmost interest among the viewers. Warren Buckland in his work *Hollywood Puzzle films* has discussed *Inception*. According to him, this has an anachronic modular narrative, one that entangles different times, primarily past and present. Modularity allows a high degree of uncertainty and instability to permeate a narrative. So, by using this narrative form *Inception* has made the blending of spatialized time and temporalized space in order to articulate and overlay a range of spatiotemporal models. The actual term modular narrative was given by Allan Cameron in his work *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Fiction*. In the very beginning of the work, he explains this narrative form as:

Since the early 1990s, popular cinema has displayed a turn towards narrative complexity. In many cases, this complexity has taken the form of a database aesthetic, in which the narrative is divided into discrete segments and subjected to complex articulations. These films, which I am calling 'modular narratives', articulate a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation. They suggest both the pleasures and the threats offered to manipulation. They suggest both the pleasures and the threats offered by a modular conception of time. 'Modular narrative' and 'database narrative' are terms applicable to narratives that foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling. (1)

The film is structured according to the typical Hollywood dual focused narrative, in which the two plots are intertwined. Buckland has even discussed in the fourth chapter that the puzzle films are set in everyday reality, involving childhood experiences, domestic conflict or infidelity but the ordinary reality is combined with ontological pluralism, mental illness, and science fiction elements, especially time travel. So, he has rightly put this film in the category of puzzle films because it creates the ambiguity between the different realities it presents on screen. Even, the ambiguity does not end with the film as he meets his two children in the same

position and doing the same activity which he sees in his dreams. Apart from this, it ends with the focus on the 'spinning top' on the dining table which as per Cobb implies that the world is not real and "the owner is most likely stuck in somebody else's dreamscape". The audience are left with an undecided fate of the 'hero'.

As the major part of the film is concerned with the process of inception, the director has meticulously planned the activities at conscious and subconscious levels. Further, the film has made the use of analepsis. The device is excessively used by the 20th century novelists like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner who by applying stream of consciousness technique bring to the fore the actions happening at the back of their character's mind. The novelists present this transition by using past tense but in cinema these temporal and chronological changes are shown with the shift of scenes so that a spatial and temporal coherence can be maintained. As Russell J. A. Kilbourn has stated:

The most common example of [re-ordered chronology in a film's plot] is the flashback, when events taking place in the present are interrupted by images or scenes that have taken place in the past.... Flashbacks typically emphasize important causal factors in a film's fabula.... Editing also allows filmmakers to reveal a character's dreams or fantasies. Like a flashback, a dream is usually signaled [sic] by a shot transition that indicates the boundary between reality and fantasy. (15)

Though the film is fully loaded with new ideas, there is something in the film which in terms of Aristotle gets successful in raising pity and fear among its spectators. Despite his involvement in an illegal act, a father's aspiration to meet his family; to see his two little cute children becomes successful in arising sympathy for him. Indeed, he appears as an anti-hero because he takes the side of an evil doer. Narrative intricacy is an invitational technique of Hollywood films embracing the idea of 'mainstream complexity.' Hence, Nolan with his crafty storytelling becomes successful in fetching the total attention of his audience.

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