The Inception *of Cynicism from the Ruins of Sexual Difference: Christopher Nolan's Dialectic of Masculine Enlightenment*

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Résumé/Abstract
This paper maps the antagonism of two subject positions, in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, that mediate the contradictions of the film's late capitalist universe. Drawing on the Lacanian formulas of sexuation, it argues that the *femme fatale*, Mal, has a relation to the social symbolic order that embraces it in its totality, together with its symptoms, without the nostalgic longing for a transcendental other space. By contrast, Cobb, the male protagonist, represents the phallic dialectic separating the "true" universe of symbolic law from its dream-world exceptions, multiple fantasmatic layers which, in the postmodern spirit of full transparency, he can enter to manipulate the official phallic norm from a distance, reawakening in the end to his simulated truth with an enlightened false consciousness.

À propos de l'auteur/About the Author
Tamas Nagypal is a PhD candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at York University, Toronto. His current research is a Lacanian and historical materialist analysis of cynicism and capitalist realism in contemporary neo-noir film. He has published essays in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* and the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*.

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is a science fiction heist thriller/film noir about a group of dream thieves who are hired to do an unusual job: instead of stealing secrets from their target's mind while he's asleep, they are supposed to plant an idea deep enough into his unconscious so that when he wakes up, he would simply assume it as his own. In psychoanalytic terms, their task is none other than to alter someone's fundamental fantasy, the primordially repressed original scene of loss constitutive of human subjectivity that serves as the necessary blind spot of consciousness, driving everyone to repeat unique patterns of behavior beyond their control. In the analytic setting, Lacan referred to such a life-changing event as the "traversing of the fundamental fantasy" (Lacan 1981, p. 273), through which the existing coordinates of the subject's libidinal economy are undone, liberating her by shattering her ego and its passionate attachment to an imagined trauma (Žižek 1998a, p. 7). In the film the role of the analysand is played by Robert Fisher, the soon to be heir of a multibillion-dollar international corporation whose unconscious the team of dream extractors has to manipulate into splitting up his father's fortune after his imminent death. They accomplish this quite literally by performing an ad hoc psychotherapy on him, replacing the resentment he feels towards his cold-hearted father for neglecting him with the fantasy of a loving smile hidden behind the old man's mask of rigidity. And indeed, when Fisher wakes up at the end of the film he is magically reconciled with his father; a suffocating weight is lifted off his shoulders. This is what the procedure of inception is all about: it offers someone the opportunity to have his cake and eat it too with regards to the fundamental fantasy; inception helps to gain a distance from its traumatic centrifugal force but without having to pay the price and go through a painful "subjective destitution" (Žižek 2008, p. 263). As if one only had to find the right angle from which the scene of terror would reveal itself as an image of happiness. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, inception is the commodified, decaffeinated version of the Lacanian traversing of the fantasy that helps the faint-hearted avoid confrontation with the traumatic real kernel of their desire, with the fact that they never really lost anything, that lack is rather constitutive of their existence.

Yet, the film is not simply an allegory of the pervasive influence of today's neoliberal ego psychology and cognitive behavioral therapy that produces happy idiots pursuing narcissistic pleasures in the society of the spectacle. The presupposed infantile position of Fisher is only the background against which the real drama of Cobb, the protagonist's life can unfold. Much like in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), the official science fiction narrative covers the true libidinal focus of the film, which

revolves around the main character's guilt over his wife's, Mal's, suicide. Her specter returns again and again to disturb Cobb's well prepared descents into his targets' (and his own) unconscious. The dead wife's spirit drives the plot both as the loved one to be mourned and as the *femme fatale* posing a threat to masculine identity, following the genre conventions of film noir. By sabotaging the group's mission, she serves as the ultimate obstacle to her husband's wish fulfillment, that is, his reward of a clean criminal record in the U.S. enabling him to return home to his children. As Todd McGowan points out, she thus occupies the position of the object-cause of the hero's desire (what Lacan called "objet *a*"), the constitutive distorting element in his fantasy which, precisely by preventing the reaching of its goal, keeps his desire alive through an infinite postponement of satisfaction (McGowan 2012, p. 158). In a postmodern self-reflexive twist, the director makes his protagonist aware of all this from the very beginning: Cobb deliberately holds onto Mal's spectral appearance, and the painful emotions repeatedly stirred up by it, to build a protective fantasy screen against something even more traumatic. It helps him avoid the encounter with the Real of *jouissance* in his fundamental fantasy which the film, through multiple flashbacks, presents as Cobb's passive enjoyment of his inability to prevent his forced separation from his children. His "heroic" endeavor, and the plot's main objective, then is to "mourn" the loss of his wife and confront the Real of his desire by going through the fundamental fantasy and then reunite with his children as a reward. What prevents him from doing this is the paralyzing guilt which he can redeem himself from, much like the classical noir hero, by transferring it on the *femme fatale*, blaming his wife for getting caught in the powerful illusions of her dreams and abandoning her family. Significantly, this resolution that eliminates the feminine threat coincides with the male hero's return to his father, suggesting a phallic outcome to his crisis.

On the other hand, in epistemological terms, the solution that *Inception* offers to his mature male protagonist's emotional impasse is that of enlightenment; Cobb can awaken from the dream world of illusions by renouncing both Fisher's adolescent naiveté and the irrational lure of Mal's feminine sexuality.[1] The film thus introduces a postmodern variation of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno identified as one of the earliest myths of (masculine) enlightenment, Homer's story about Odysseus and the Sirens. There the coordinated effort, the distribution of

[1] On the allegorical parallels between the film's multiple scenes of awakening and Western enlightenment, see Michael J. Bloulin (2011).

labor between two masculine positions (the master and his servants), allows them to navigate their ship past the mortal danger posed by the female voice. On the one hand, his men tied Odysseus to the mast to prevent him from jumping into the abyss towards the alluring sound, yet allowing him to gain knowledge of it. On the other hand, the rest of them plugged their ears so that they could keep rowing and get everyone out of there alive (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 34-35). The elaborate dream-architecture of *Inception* operates as a similar machine of patriarchal reason where one exceptional figure, Cobb, is designated to investigate the feminine Real in order to keep the rest of his crew (and especially Fisher) at a safe distance from it, allowing them to live a life of illusory happiness. Cobb, like Odysseus, returns from his submersion into the vertigo of the Real as a tragic hero who, after a glimpse at eternity suddenly loses his taste for ordinary living. However, his knowledge is not turned into critical negativity in hope of a different world in the way that Adorno and Horkheimer's modernist pathos still could. In the film's postmodern twist, the enlightened Cobb becomes a cynical realist, someone for whom the failures and shortcomings of the reigning symbolic order are turned into signs of *his* authenticity, into proof that he is special among the living by carrying the burden of a terrible truth. It is out of epistemological narcissism that he learns to accept his world as it is in the end, cynically embracing the apparent falsity of his moment of reconciliation with his father and children. His awakening, then, paradoxically coincides with the assumption of a false consciousness, a phenomenon that Peter Sloterdijk labeled cynical reason, the ultimate outcome of Western Enlightenment (Sloterdijk 1987, pp. 3-10). The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the film's ideology of cynicism nonetheless fails to produce a fully transparent self-consciousness about the blind spots of its symbolic texture, in the same way as Cobb's theater of confronting the Lacanian Real through the traversing of his fundamental fantasy ends with its fetishistic disavowal. What the film's masculine machinery of totalizing representation cannot account for is not the sublime, unrepresentable vertigo of the Real but an alternative, feminine organization of its whole symbolic space, put forward by Mal, which has to be forgotten for the pieces of the narrative's puzzle to come together.

The Phallic Exception

For Lacan, reality and the Real are diametrically opposed. While reality refers to the social symbolic order as the site of meaningful fictions framing human lives, the Real is what escapes symbolization,

attesting to the necessary inconsistency of every symbolic universe. It is this incompleteness of the Symbolic, the fact that big Other is always necessarily lacking, that leads to the subject's encounter with the alienating enigma of the Other's desire, the traumatic Real she tries to filter through fantasy. The imaginary of fantasy, which Jean Laplanche appropriately calls the mise-en-scène of desire (Laplanche and Pontails 1986, p. 8), is always an ultimately failed attempt to answer the question "What does the Other want from me?", and thereby accounts for the subject's place in the world (Žižek 2008, pp. 95-145). In traditional Œdipal societies the function of the symbolic father is to alleviate the anxiety of subjects facing this overwhelming question by providing some answers to it, intervening into the dyadic relationship between the flawed imaginary shield of fantasy and the terrifying real of the Other's desire by symbolically suturing part of the subject into the big Other, stitching together its holes by giving someone authority over it. The postmodern crisis of the father function, on the other hand, leads to the disappearance of this mediation which, according to Mark Fisher, can be seen in *Inception* as a "general ontological indeterminacy, in which the nature of the whole fictional world is put into doubt" (Fisher 2011, p. 37). For Cobb, the words of his father trying to influence him to enter/come back to the real (symbolic) world instead of getting lost in the dreamscapes of his fantasy seem to fall on deaf ears; for him, such a stable reality with the comforts of American middle class family life is nothing but a memory of a long-lost past, the object of nostalgic longing; hence when he does return to his children at the end, there is a strong suspicion both in him and the viewer that he is still dreaming (Faraci 2010).

This doesn't mean, however, that the diegetic universe is filled with psychotic hallucinations and surreal outbreaks of the repressed unconscious. Quite the contrary, as Fisher observes: considering its topic, *Inception* is remarkably un-dreamlike (Fisher 2011, p. 40). Its dream world rather resembles today's corporate non-places: anonymous hotel lobbies, conference rooms and bars that could be in any financial district in the world; airports, elevators, parking garages, etc. As Marc Augé puts it, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver." (Augé 1995, p. 103) It is this uncanny experience of the de-realized late capitalist space without identity and historicity that the film's dreamscapes draw upon, giving a spatial expression to the crisis of the oedipal order. On the other hand, Fisher is quite right in emphasizing the distance of this emphatically contemporary mise-en-scène from the suffocating paranoia of noir

classics like Orson Welles's adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1962). There, the imagined panoptic gaze of the disciplinary apparatus is palpable everywhere, adding a sense of claustrophobia even to vast, open spaces; here (in Nolan's film) we are already in the age of the post-panopticon of automated, anonymous surveillance where those who were supposed to be watching have slipped away, leaving behind a sense of emptiness in the surveyed masses (Bauman 2000, p. 11). Perhaps this is also why the heist team constructs a dream-maze out of non-spaces for their mark; their elaborate scheme is based on Fisher's (and the viewer's) nostalgia for paranoia itself, a desire for someone, something, to fill in the void of the Other's gaze to cover up the gaping hole of the Real. It is for this reason that on the first level of the dream Cobb offers a conspiracy theory to Fisher — not a very convincing one, but the sheer fantasy that someone is there watching him still gets the man hooked immediately. At that moment the dreamscape around them also undergoes a fundamental change: the flat, featureless monotony of brightly lit corporate non-places suddenly gives way to dark corridors with looming shadows, presented with film noir-style deep focus photography and low-key lighting. The former indistinction between the hotel's inside and outside, produced through mirrors and looped architecture, also becomes undone as explosions of unknown origin on the street reveal the vulnerability of Fisher's habitual bubble. The irony, of course, is that although this simulated conspiracy narrative appears crude and obviously manipulated, it also happens to be true. Telling Fisher that he's been put to sleep by hostile agents aiming to steal company secrets by controlling his dream, Cobb lies in the guise of the truth, exploiting the gap that forever separates the Real of the Other's desire and its particular symbolization. He can do this because he knows that his gesture of arbitrary master signification will touch on the personal relationship between Fisher and his father, offering a symbolic frame the blanks of which the anxious son can fill in with his own fantasy. At that moment, the trap is complete insofar as he misrecognizes his own role in the otherwise true plot: he misses the fact that they are not in his dream but in one of the inceptors'. The same limitation doesn't apply to the viewer, whose knowing participation in the construction of the dream/film narrative gives him an epistemological advantage over the duped Fisher, an advantage that by the end the film Nolan aims to extend into a complete and unrestricted knowledge of the story world by explaining all of its remaining blind spots.

Yet, this blinding of the subject to a part of the Other's desire, to its *jouissance*, is not simply a technique of deception but precisely the

function of the paternal metaphor doing the work of symbolic castration so that what formerly appeared to be a lack, a paralyzing negativity in the texture of the world, all of a sudden appears as a meaningful problem that the subject can participate in solving (Lacan 2006, pp. 575-585). It is such a shift that is signaled by *Inception*'s change to noir style and to a new topology: instead of the flat ontological indeterminacy of a universe made out of non-places, Fisher is now offered another layer of reality, a transcendental other place that supposedly holds the secret that is key to understanding the apparent vacuity of the upper level as well as his actual life. Here we enter what Lacan called the masculine logic of language based on a constitutive exception. In this paradigm, normal symbolic reality reaches its completeness only through a cut, an incision whereby a little piece of the Real, standing in for its inherent inconsistency, is expulsed only to appear fantasmatically beyond the horizon in the form of the real phallus of absolute power which, like the Holy Grail, magically completes the universe by fulfilling everyone's desire (Žižek 1996, pp. 155-159). For Fisher, this exceptional object will take the form of a toy he gave his father as a young boy — to his mind the fact that the old men kept it all along will prove his true affections for his son.

On the other hand, the postmodern, post-metaphysical topology of *Inception* also complicates the standard phallic duality of worlds by positing not one, but a potentially endless series of exceptions, dreams within dreams that nonetheless follow a clear hierarchical structure where every level can be manipulated by one below it. As McGowan notes, this is ultimately a paranoid structure of a "bad infinity" (McGowan 2012, p. 154), symptomatic of the aforementioned crisis of paternal authority which cannot be restored through its simulation. As Žižek points out, in a well-functioning symbolic order organized around the phallic exception, the official level of normative interaction always has its obscene supplement where the explicit rules of the social are transgressed in a no less coded and ritualistic fashion, providing an outlet of *jouissance* away from the ignorant gaze of the symbolic father (Žižek 1998b). With the decline of the father function, however, the stabilizing effect of these collective transgressions also disappears; it is eclipsed by the logic of the superego exemplified, for instance, by political correctness which demands complete obedience without exception, for which reason it is never satisfied with the subject's performance. Fisher's father is clearly such a figure of the superego whose last words to his son are the expression of his general disappointment without any specific content. The inceptors' job is then precisely to translate these words back into the logic of a (simulated) good, symbolic father, introducing a gap between

their literal meaning and their intention, suggesting that the dead father's disappointment was caused by Fisher's inability to transgress against him and defy his explicit orders. Accordingly, Fisher can find peace with his father when he is able to accept and enjoy the exception to the old man's legacy offered to him by the dream extractors (the splitting up of the company) as his own phallic act.

Disavowing Sexual Difference

Phallic *jouissance*, however, is not the only manifestation of the real in the film. In line with its film noir generic core, what disturbs the masculine fantasy about a real phallus existing in the state of exception is the specter of Mal, the film's *femme fatale* who undermines the male homosocial team's effort to symbolically castrate Fisher, that is, to endow him with patriarchal authority.[2] What we encounter here is the Lacanian Real of sexual difference (Lacan 1998, p. 73), that is to say, the necessary coexistence of two incompatibly "sexuated" subject positions with regards to the totality of the symbolic order, representing two irreconcilable ways to relate to its constitutive lack. This antagonism cannot be resolved through a third position of a meta-language; "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship" (Lacan 1998, p. 57) means that ontological indeterminacy is the necessary condition of the universe and this very "impasse of formalization" is what Lacan calls the Real (Lacan 1998, p. 93). Furthermore, the fundamental asymmetry of the feminine and masculine sides in the formulas (figure 1) arises from the fact that the masculine logic as such is nothing but an attempt to disavow this Real by fantasmatically positing a meta-level beyond everyday reality — an obscene underside where the rules and restrictions of the symbolic law are suspended; sites where a privileged group of sovereign people (men) can create and destroy worlds without the alienating/castrating mediation of the big Other. In such spaces of exception the spirit of the Freudian primordial father is temporarily resurrected under the superego imperative to "Enjoy!" (Lacan 1998, p. 3), which in the masculine scenario plays out as a disidentification from, and mockery and manipulation of, the explicit rules of the phallic order, typically through male homosocial rituals like the carefully choreographed heist performed by *Inception*'s dream extractors.

[2] The only female member of the group is Ariadne, the dream-architect (played by Ellen Page) who fully accepts the masculine rules of her colleagues, underplaying her femininity.

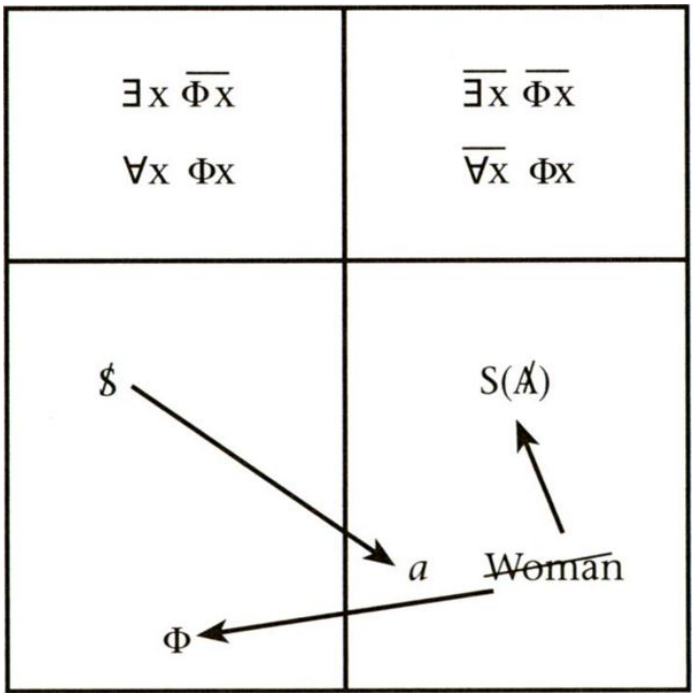

Figure 1

Here a typical male chauvinist reading of the Lacanian sexual difference would suggest that while men can escape the control of the social norms through their collective critical distance, women don't have the capacity to do so. Yet, Lacan's conclusion is the exact opposite. First of all, in his formulas of sexuation both the feminine and masculine positions are defined in relation to the phallic function, the apparatus that symbolically stiches together a consistent universe. However, as Žižek stresses, all men are caught in the phallic function precisely *because* they maintain a subjective distance towards it, that is, because phallic signification posits its own exception (top left of figure 1). This exception, the semblance of the impossible fullness, presented as the Real phallus, "merely 'gives body' to the impotence/inconsistency of the big Other." By contrast, Lacan's famous feminine non-all (top right of figure 1) can be interpreted as the position of a subject who "'sees through' the fascinating presence of the Phallus, that she is able to discern in it the 'filler' of the inconsistency of the big Other." (Žižek 1996, p. 157) This is how we should read, Žižek claims, the paradoxical formula that not all of woman is caught in the phallic function precisely *because* all of woman is submitted to it *without exception*. It is only men who fantasize about the female essence located beyond the Symbolic, in some mythical hyper-phallic exception where Woman would be one of the names of the (primordial) father with absolute power (Žižek 1996, pp. 157-159). For

the feminine subject, on the contrary, *jouissance* is not coming from such a transcendental other space but from within the Symbolic; it is the *jouissance* of the Other that includes its own symptoms rather than excluding and disavowing them. Or, to put it in Kaja Silverman's terms, while men can have both the phallus (the symbolic signifier of castration) and the penis (place of partial enjoyment supported by the Imaginary), what they can never have, because it doesn't exist, is the real phallus in which the two would coincide without a gap (Silverman 1992, pp. 15-52). It is this real phallus that Lacan identifies with ~~Woman~~, the nonexistent signifier of full enjoyment that would complete the symbolic order (Lacan 1998, p. 4; 2006, p. 583).

Contra Lacan, the central ideological procedure of *Inception* is the disavowal of sexual difference as real, that is, as a threat to the masculine logic of phallic exception. Throughout the film the feminine Other *jouissance* of Mal is reduced to phallic *jouissance* and woman becomes a special subspecies of man, his symptom (excess), a memento reminding him that one can always descend into further and further exceptions, destabilizing the previous ones. The first move in this direction is the very frame of the film that presents Mal as a mere projection of Cobb's guilt for not being able to prevent her suicide. As we learn later, the suicide was the unintended consequence of an idea planted into her mind by him, the idea that the dream world is not real and she can wake up from its illusion only by killing herself. The real question is, of course, why was it necessary for Cobb to perform inception on his wife in the first place? Here we encounter the second ideological step towards the elimination of sexual difference. While, according to the narrative, the couple initially constructed a dream world together using their real-life memories, it was Mal who gradually lost the ability to tell dream and reality apart while Cobb always maintained a distance towards their virtual playground. Instead of simply reproducing the standard male chauvinist myth about women's diminished capacity for critical thinking, however, *Inception* presents it with a postmodern twist: it is Mal herself who chose her self-stupefaction to forget the weight of ordinary reality. The "elegance" of this politically correct solution is that unlike classical misogyny, which excludes women from the space of phallic exception, here woman is presented as having full access to the phallic power of creation and destruction, which she enjoys so much that she never wants to leave its source, abandoning even her real-life duties as a mother. The male protagonist, by contrast, is able to show restraint and therefore sacrifices part of his enjoyment for his family.

All this, of course, represents Cobb's interpretation of the events. It is his belief that by artificially planting the idea of the dream's unreality into Mal's mind he would cure her of her irresponsibility, turning her into a rational (castrated) human subject like himself. What his move accomplishes, however, is the exact opposite: his wife's phallic obsessions are not cured by it but amplified; now she wants to find the place of absolute exception, and she is ready to kill even her physical self for it. Here, it becomes obvious that Cobb's assessment of Mal's initial behavior in cyberspace as irresponsibly, excessively phallic is a retroactive justification of his own violence against her, whereby he tries to account for the trauma of her feminine *jouissance* by forcefully integrating it into the masculine logic. What comes to haunt him later, however, is not her phallic excess but the very feminine logic he disavowed, a different way to totalize each symbolic universe. Mal's specter appears to him on each level of the dream maze asking Cobb to stay with her and accept the necessary inconsistency of every symbolic order, instead of looking for the exceptional angle from which one of them looks perfect. Cobb, however, "heroically" resists this temptation in the name of fatherly responsibility.

In this, *Inception* follows Hollywood's ostensibly post-phallic turn in the early 1990's that introduced kinder and gentler male heroes taking over traditionally feminine, often maternal roles (*Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993, dir. Chris Columbus), *Kindergarten Cop* (1990, dir. Ivan Reitman)), deconstructing the previous hegemonic masculinity of "hard bodies" (Jeffords 1994). According to Tania Modleski, however, such a move all too often leads to the male appropriation of femininity *against* feminism and thus against women themselves (Modleski 1991). The softness or even masochism of the new man can be understood as a Nietzschean resentment towards his phallically empowered female counterpart which takes the form of putting the blame on women for the excesses of neoliberal individualism, now seen as ruining traditional male-dominated communities and the patriarchal family unit. In neo-noir films, such a panic over the successful self-made woman is played out most effectively in erotic thrillers such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987, dir. Adrian Lyne), *Basic Instinct* (1992, dir. Paul Verhoeven) or *The Last Seduction* (1994, dir. John Dahl). *Inception*'s corporate non-spaces haunted by a phallic woman offer a further variation of this fantasy in its more advanced stage, where the feminine threat is eventually contained and eliminated.

That is to say, the neutralization of feminine *jouissance* through its reduction to an extreme case of phallic exception wouldn't be complete without the male hero beating his female counterpart in the game he

forced her to play, the rules of which are rigged in his favour. It may be true, according to the masculine mythology, that Woman (as one of the names of the primordial father) can control any place of exception to everyday reality; but she cannot re-emerge from there like man can. Woman is, thus, the masculine name for a man who got intoxicated with phallic *jouissance* and went too far after it, pursuing exceptions ad infinitum, reaching a point of no return. In this she is similar to male psychotics like Saito, who falls off the edges of the deepest layer of the dream labyrinth (not unlike Mal in her real-life suicidal jump) into an eternal state of limbo from which Cobb has to rescue him. Contrary to Woman and the obscene father of the primal horde, really existing masculinity always involves a dialectic between the Symbolic and its imaginary (never quite *real*, that is, absolute) exception, which helps men not to get lost at the level of fantasy. Accordingly, the final test of Cobb's masculinity, guaranteeing his triumph over Mal, is the traversing of his fundamental fantasy after which he can awaken as an enlightened man.

Traversing the Fundamental Fantasy

The key to Cobb's final act of disavowing sexual difference is that while it is in fact a compromise formation between two opposite extremes represented by the two incepted, he still perceives his move as the only truly radical one. He is supposed to be the brave hero who goes after the Thing itself in his desire instead of remaining fixated on his "objet *a*" (the *femme fatale*) that distorts it into a fantasy scene (it is only him, not Mal, who is able to descend into the deepest layer of the dream). This is curious since the dialectic of the masculine logic presented throughout the film involves a circular path between the Symbolic and its (merely simulated) real exception, which is opposed not only to Fisher's naïve willingness to be satisfied with a clichéd narrative, but more importantly to Mal's infinite chase after the truth behind the veils of illusion which, one would think, is a more accurate manifestation of the passion for the Real. Here the difference between this Mal of the bad infinity, who is the masculine fantasy of the Woman, literally created by Cobb, and the Mal of feminine *jouissance*, who is not looking for the true exception and who for that reason poses a real threat to the phallic logic, is crucial. The latter is simply killed off on the fourth level by Ariadne, who acts as the emissary of patriarchal authority (McGowan 2012, p. 156). She intervenes as the third term into the noir couple's dyadic relationship, potentially deadly to masculinity, preventing Cobb to be lured into the abyss by the female voice, or, from the feminine perspective, to stay in an eternally suspended limbo where the Real and the Symbolic can't be told

apart. Spatially, the representation of this feminine domain of Mal resembles the topology of non-places introduced earlier in the film. We see a sandy beach, which is at the same time the middle of a crumbling metropolis — a landscape collapsing the modernist spatiotemporal opposition between city (future) and countryside (past), thereby producing a sense of timelessness. Significantly, even the simulation of the more traditional looking brick house where the couple used to live is intertwined with blocks of inoperative corporate architecture: a rectangular pond with metal railings, surrounded by a sterile concrete path and steel pillars supporting an office building. While there is certainly melancholy in the air, the indistinct grey tonality of the sequence is markedly different from Cobb's own recurring nostalgic memory of his children playing in the garden, depicted in vivid colors. Mal's crumbling-regenerating universe of non-places stands for a life made out of a discarded, abandoned, (un)dead substance whereas Cobb's ideal space is built on the disavowal of death, which for him is a purely destructive force embodied by the feminine Other.

The threat of this feminine Mal is neutralized through its separation into two masculine figures. On the one hand, she is reduced to the infantile naivety of Fisher as both of them are shown to be incapable of waking up on their own, for which reason they have to be enlightened by someone else. The crucial difference between them is that, while Fisher merely needs "the push" from a more mature man (someone on an upper level to make his sedated body fall, activating his inner ear function that would wake him up), Mal is not capable of such enlightenment; when she is killed on the deepest level of Cobb's unconscious memory bank she simply disintegrates. On the other hand, when the Mal of feminine *jouissance* is eliminated, she also dies as a masculine fantasy of absolute power: her role as the Woman, as a name for the obscene father standing in for the real phallus, is taken over by Saito, Cobb's multibillionaire employer who allegorically stands in for the infinite power and flexibility of capital itself. He plays the film's ultimate "subject supposed to know", showing up out of nowhere in the real world always in the right place at the right time, making it all too clear to everyone that it is his game they are playing (when the heist team is brainstorming about how to sedate Fisher on an intercontinental flight, he simply buys the airline, etc.). Cobb's descent into the last (fifth) level of the dream to confront the real of his fundamental fantasy is also an encounter with the real gaze of Saito as the primordial father, the Thing as the real-impossible object of desire beyond fantasy. Until that moment in the film the Thing that was primordially lost for Cobb had been symbolized, of course, by his

children for whom he would sacrifice everything. However, it is clear that the recurring image of him glimpsing at them for the last time while they were playing peacefully, not knowing about their father's imminent departure, is itself what Freud called a screen memory, covering up the real trauma that cannot be represented (Freud 1953, pp. 301-322). Within the film's diegetic universe we never actually see the scene of Cobb's fundamental fantasy. As Žižek emphasizes, such a scene doesn't have an existence outside the analytic process (Žižek 1997, p. 149). It can only be constructed as the gravitational center of the subject's other, more manifest fantasies, such as Cobb's inability to say goodbye to his children or prevent Mal's suicide. A possible construction of his (and the narrative's) primordially repressed fundamental fantasy could involve the death of his children out of the negligence of parents. This would explain why Cobb's father simply tells him to "come back to the real world" after his son tells him about the last big heist he has to pull in order to reunite with his children. It's possible that the elaborate story about the murder investigation against him in the U.S. is yet another screen memory he has built up to keep the truth out — that his children were killed by a train while their parents were busy dream surfing (this would explain the sudden intrusion of trains into various dream levels). Yet, as Žižek stresses, the fundamental fantasy is definitely not some kind of final truth of the subject. It is, rather, "the ultimate, founding lie" holding her libidinal economy together (Žižek 2001, p. 650). What is crucial in such an imagined scene invisible to the eyes of the subject is that she, nonetheless, acts as if there was a gaze out there for which the fundamental fantasy would fully reveal its secret. Incidentally, this is also the significance of the large number of audience speculations about the film's true meaning. While there is no consensus about the definitive content of the plot, the very form of these theories indicates a shared belief that there is one, potentially visible if looked at from a unique angle. It is this real-impossible gaze itself that Lacan identifies with "objet *a*", that is to say, the missing piece primordially separated from the subject appears to her as an imagined gaze beyond the horizon of the Symbolic that has knowledge about this very lost object (Lacan 1981, pp. 67-123). Consequently, the subject can traverse the fundamental fantasy when she realizes that this transcendental gaze of the Other, the ultimate "subject supposed to know", is blind, that it has no secret to tell — an act of deconstruction Nolan most certainly does not perform on his own text.

To illustrate this point, in *Seminar XI* Lacan tells the story of his own youthful Odyssean journey to find his true self by working as a fisherman in a poor seaside town of Brittany. One day, while engaged in hard labour

on a boat, one of his fellow seamen pointed at a sardine can floating in the water: "It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me: — 'You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!'" (Lacan 1981, pp. 95-96). Lacan describes his feeling after this encounter as "rather out of place in the picture". In what picture? In the fantasmatic one that positioned him as a manual labourer, the "supposed supplier" of belief in the panoptic gaze of the Other who in exchange had knowledge about his true, raw, authentic self. This fantasy scenario was, of course, properly unconscious until the encounter; until that point, he was convinced that his attempt of self-discovery among "common people" was a form of dis-identification from a phallic exception to the routines of academic life. The light reflecting on the sardine can reveals to him the futility and ridiculousness of this enterprise insofar as the Other appears now as the rather banal object of the fishing industry which Lacan calls the stain of the picture. The moment it floats into the visual field, the subject's fantasy frame becomes de-realized, traversed.

Something similar happens to Cobb on the last level, in the "limbo" of *Inception*'s dream-labyrinth. He goes there to bring Saito back. We see Cobb's body washed ashore off the ocean (a properly idyllic one this time); he is half unconscious, hallucinating his children playing in the sand, but they don't turn their faces towards him; he passes out. The next shot is that of a soldier waking him up by poking a gun at him; the reverse shot shows the gleam of the sun blinding Cobb (and the viewer) until the soldier's head comes to block it. They take him to Saito's oriental palace where he has to sit at a conference table opposite to him. Saito looks a hundred years old, despite the fact that Cobb just left him a minute ago one level up, indicating how much slower time flies down there. He slowly examines the two objects Cobb brought with him, a gun and a spinning top, the latter of which is Cobb's "totem", an object that can tell someone whether they are in a dream or not (if it never stops spinning the person is in a dream). He spins the top and looks up, but his eyes are completely dark, his eyelids only half open. "Have you come to kill me?" he asks with a feeble voice, but it is not an interrogation; it is a request. Cobb then looks up and stares at him with horror: the most powerful man he knows is sitting there broken, impotent, waiting for someone to kill him. Instead of a hidden meaning, there is only the blind repetitive movement of the totem, the stain of the fundamental fantasy, demonstrating that the real of "*jouissance* is what serves no purpose" (Lacan 1998, p. 3). Cobb then utters the words he told Mal before when

he tried to castrate/enlighten her by waking her up: "I came back for you to remind you of something. Something you once knew; that this world is not real." — Saito: "To convince me to honour our agreement." — Cobb: "So we can be young men together again." What didn't work with Mal now succeeds through the symbolic pact between two men. They wake up, and a moment later Saito indeed makes the phone call that allows Cobb to enter the US and reunite with his children as his payment for the successful inception-job on Fisher.

It's worth pointing out here that such a conclusion with the hero's successful wish fulfillment is utterly alien to the classical noir narrative. As Hugh Manon (2005) stresses, the desire of the noir protagonist is a perverse one, fetishizing the abyss of feminine otherness only to forever delay the moment of encountering it. It is this perverse libidinal economy that leads to a spatiotemporal suspension unique to film noir, what Vivian Sobchack calls the chronotope of "lounge time", where men and women idle their life away in the non-places of hotel rooms, bars, cafes and cars, cut off from productive work and the safety of home alike, forever fixed in a transitory moment without arriving anywhere (Sobchack 1998). Conversely, the hero of *Inception* emphatically does arrive home in the end, precisely by traversing this quintessential perverse-noir fantasy that would trap him in an eternally suspended state of limbo. The question is what price does he have to pay for his enlightenment?

Conclusion: Towards and Enlightened False Consciousness

Many commentators emphasized the ambiguity of the film's ending (Faraci 2010). True, Cobb is able to return to his children but these final images of happiness are shot in a way to resemble standard Hollywood depictions of a dream: bright lights, warm colors, slow motion, people smiling. Cobb himself seems to be skeptical about their authenticity, that's why upon arriving to his old house, which somehow looks exactly like he remembered, he spins the top just in case. But then he finally sees his children turning towards him and he ignores the result. The last shot of the film shows the top spinning, perhaps just about to fall, but then we suddenly cut to the end credits without really knowing. The viewer, much like Cobb himself, is encouraged to simply ignore the outcome of the test while knowing very well what result it might bring. That is to say, the top's previous function as the stain of *jouissance* undermining one's fantasy frame doesn't simply disappear through another primordial repression but remains there as part of the picture. After his enlightenment, there is no way back to such naiveté for Cobb or the viewer. For this reason, despite its appeal, the final scene of happiness

cannot but have something uncanny, unreal about it, not unlike the corporate non-places that dominate the rest of the film. Such derealization of reality is characteristic of the "post-ideological" (post-symbolic) world of full transparency, the Baudrillardian age of the simulacra that seems to lack nothing insofar as even the stains that used to serve as its constitutive outside are now included in it. For the viewer's knowledge of the diegetic events, this paradigm means that by the end of the film there should be no unexplained plot holes, all pieces of the puzzle have to be put into their proper place.

While Nolan is certainly obsessive-compulsive enough about placing every minute detail in his narrative into a causal chain, *Inception* nonetheless reveals, perhaps unwittingly, the fundamentally ideological nature of such a postmodern space of full transparency that differentiates it from the superficially similar feminine logic of the non-place. The film's ending shows how Cobb's (and the spectator's) epistemological control over the narrative relies on an act of fetishistic disavowal, the split of his consciousness between knowing very well that his world is not real but nonetheless acting as if it was, opposing himself to the totem, his fetish object that is unable to perform such a cynical distance.[3] Yet, his false consciousness doesn't simply result from this theater of deliberately choosing an illusion over the truth. The ideological misrecognition of his situation lies rather in his assumption that he could, if he wanted to, go after the truth (again) which is always transcendental, adding one more layer of phallic exception to the symbolic status quo. His masculinist assumption is that if he didn't show restraint and looked away from the totem, he would find himself in the bad infinity of Woman, and the happy scene of his family home would turn out to be level six of an endless dream labyrinth. This way, he misperceives the de-realization of his reality as the tragic price of his heroic-cynical enlightenment. The traumatic Real he is not ready to confront is, however, the opposite, and this is what the Lacanian feminine subject stands for: there is only one world, one in which his children are always already dead, so to speak (even if they are alive they are ignorant of Cobb). The ideology of cynicism allows him instead to heroically take the boring petty-bourgeois reality as it is, with its simulated pseudo-pleasures modeled after advertisements, and still feel like he was a revolutionary by doing so — just like the viewer, who after the self-congratulatory results of his cognitive labour of piecing the narrative puzzle together might overlook the clichéd, rather unimaginative aesthetic form of the film.

[3] On the concept of fetishistic disavowal see Mannoni (2003).

The top becomes the ultimate fetishistic support of Cobb's (and the viewer's) new cynicism insofar as it stands for Mal (the top was her totem) after her fatal inception by her husband. As McGowan points out, in Freud's theory the totem is the substitute for the (primordial) father after his death/castration (McGowan 2012, p. 169). What the totem as fetish provides is the film's real machine of inception through which feminine *jouissance* is always already captured in an apparatus of phallic exception: the top's centrality in the final scene neutralizes the audience's doubts about the reality of the happy end by opposing the "real enough" of the simulated images to the vertigo of madness. While in the feminine logic all symbolic universes are incomplete (non-all), the masculine position turns femininity into a window to transcendence, as if women were hysterics looking for a perfect other world. The paradox revealed here is that such utopia is a masculine fantasy *par excellence*, which is presupposed through the proxy of Woman, then disavowed to reach a cynical enlightenment guaranteeing that it never gets realized.

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