

MA Graphic Design

Coexistence Perspectives (ADAA7000)

Assignment Component:1

Research and critically evaluate the work of either one or two artists/designers/makers in the context of time & memory. Employ critical analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives to evaluate the examples that you choose.

Problem Statement

How does the movie 'Inception' deal with the concepts of time and memory in respect of the concepts of 'the crystal image of time', durée, and Paramnesia'?

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Registration Number: 2404837

Date of Submission: 09/01/2025

Word Count: 4084 (excluding references)

Introduction

Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* is widely regarded as one of the most intellectually stimulating and thematically thoughtful movies of the 21st century. Nolan, who both wrote and directed the film, considers the complexities of the human mind, the nature of time, and the boundaries of reality through a narrative structure that is unique. At its core, *Inception* follows the story of Dom Cobb, a skilled thief specializing in extracting secrets from people's subconscious during shared dream states. However, the film goes beyond the traditional heist genre as Cobb got a task to frame an idea in the mind of a business tycoon 'Robert Fischer' to discontinue the company of his dying father and start on its own. At this point, Cobb uses the word 'inception' and explains how inception can be done during a shared dream with multiple dream layers. Nolan has shown his creative and unique choice of using philosophical ideas in the movie *Inception*, making it an ideal subject for academic analysis especially regarding the concepts of time and memory [1].

In this essay, I will first explore the concept of the crystal image of time as explained by Gilles Deleuze in his cinematic theories and examine how it is demonstrated within *Inception*. Deleuze's theory emphasizes the coexistence of multiple time phases (past, present and future) within a single image [9], and this notion is related strongly with the film's layered dream worlds, where past, present, and future intermingle in ways that blur the boundaries of linear time. Next, I will focus into paramnesia, a psychological phenomenon characterized by the confusion of memory and imagination [10]. Finally, I will analyse *Inception* through the lens of Henri Bergson's theory of duration, which says that time has a qualitative and fluid nature based on the personal experience rather than a strictly quantifiable sequence of moments [11].

Christopher Nolan was born in London in 1970 and he has established himself as one of the most innovative and intellectual filmmakers of his generation [2]. Nolan is known for his fascination with themes of time, memory, and identity and frequently attempts complex way of storytelling as compared to the conventional storytelling [2]. Before *Inception*, Nolan has received a lot of praise and fame for his films like *Memento* (2000), which explores memory loss and fragmented identity through a non-linear structure [3,4], and *The Prestige* (2006), a tale of obsession and sacrifice that manipulates time and audience perception [5,6]. Furthermore, his work on *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012) redefined the superhero genre by integrating psychological depth and sociopolitical commentary [7,8]. These films illustrate Nolan's obsession with themes of duality, reality, and human perception. These are the themes that he kept as the central concept to *Inception* as well. However, there is a unique element in the movie *Inception*, that is its intricate interplay between

dreams and reality, and a vague ending, which Nolan employs to push the boundaries of cinematic storytelling and to dive into deep philosophical analyses [1].

The Crystal Image of Time and Inception

Gilles Deleuze was a French philosopher known for his influential contributions to a wide range of philosophical fields. Born in Paris, Deleuze studied philosophy at the University of Paris, where he later became a professor. He is often associated with post-structuralism and is considered one of the key figures of French philosophy in the 20th century. He developed an interesting concept named as 'crystal image of time', about the nature of time by defining time as a form of a crystal. According to this concept, time is represented as a crystal image where the past, present, and future meet, and the boundaries between these become indistinguishable [12]. A crystal is a physical object that reflects light in all directions, this is how Deleuze describes certain cinematic moments, where one can't clearly separate what is real from what is remembered, imagined, or anticipated. Deleuze also described time as non-linear and fragmented rather than a smooth sequence of moments [13]. In the movie inception, there are individual dreams and multiple layers of dreams where time seems to loop or fold in on itself. The dreams are the perfect example of the concept of crystal image of time as a person cannot distinguish if one is in his past or present or future. Similarly, Cobb was dreaming in the movie at multiple occasions and while dreaming he encountered his wife Mal. In Cobb's present life Mal was not existing as she died because of her suicidal attempt [14] but when he dreams, Mal comes in various locations and talks to him. This depicts the concept of crystal image of time as Cobb experiences his past (his dead wife), while he is dreaming (present) and talks and plans about what is going to happen and what to do next (future). In one dream, Cobb sees Mal and she says to him 'you said you had a dream that we would grow old together'. At this dream state, he is remembering the memories of his wife while living a present life and dreaming about a future together with his dead wife. The past, present and future is coexisting, and this contradicts the linear concept of time and supports Deleuze's concept of time as a crystal [12].



Figure:1 Mal and Cobb in Cobb's dream

Not only with Cobb, but also with Robert Fischer who is the son of the businessman, the same concept is applicable. In his dream, Fischer meets his dying father and talks to him about the hidden item which is present in the locker, and this feels like a present situation to Fischer. While talking to his father in his dream, Fischer's father (Maurice Fischer) tells him the code of the locker which has something very important and confidential in it. When the locker gets opened, Robert, finds his father will and a toy windmill. It triggers a deeply emotional memory of his father. The object acts as a bridge between the past (his childhood and strained relationship with his father), the present (Fischer's interpretation of the dream as real), and the future (his resolve to honour his father's legacy by breaking free from his control). This moment is a good example of the theory of 'crystal image of time' as Fischer is experiencing multiple layers of time at once: the memory of his father giving him the toy windmill, his current emotional realization, and the future choices that this realization will inspire [17] . The scene blurs the lines between reality and memory, creating a crystal image where time folds together. The dream manipulates Fischer's perception, but his emotional reaction feels authentic, showing how dreams can collapse past, present, and future into a single, reflective moment, as mentioned by Deleuze [13]



Figure:2 Robert meeting with his dying father in his dream



Figure:3 The toy windmill present in Maurice's locker (Robert's dream)



Figure:4 The frame present on the side table of dying Maurice

An important aspect shown in the movie is that Cobb does not see the faces of his kids (James and Philippa) in his dreams (figure 1), but he sees them from their back. This can be a critical point as well because this represent his memory of leaving his kids behind and not saying them goodbye while he was leaving. But this also represents his current guilt and his wish to return to home (present) and his fear of whether he will be able to ever meet his kids again (future). These dreams, where he watches his children from their back creates a blur boundary between his past, present and future, hence representing crystal image of time. In the end of the movie, he got to see the faces of his kids (figure 2) but even this moment reflects time as crystal because it merges his memory of leaving his kids (past), reunion with them (present), and hope to now live a normal and happy life with them (future). [17]



Figure:5 Cobb's kids in his dream



Figure:6 Cobb's kids in the end of the movie

Another occasion in the movie, when Ariadne is sitting in the cafe with Cobb, she believes it to be reality until Cobb question her how she got there. She suddenly remembers that she must have entered the dream earlier (the past), then she realizes she is currently dreaming (the present), and then as the dream begins to shatter, she anticipates that it's about to collapse completely (the future). The cafe then shatters into small pieces and that can be a representation of Ariadne's sudden awareness of the layered nature of time and reality in the dream. The "present" (sitting in the cafe) becomes inseparable from the "past" (entering the dream) and the "future" (the dream collapsing). All these layers of time coexist in that single moment, blurring the boundaries of linear time [21].



Figure:7 Ariadne and Cobb's first dream together

The movie, Inception, is filled with scenes that present a good example to explore non-linear time, where the past, present, and future reflect and influence one another as described by Deleuze's philosophical idea of the crystal image.

Paramnesia and Inception

The concept of paramnesia, introduced by German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, describes memory distortions, where people confuse real events with imagined ones or forgets when or where something happened. From the perspective of time and memory, paramnesia shows how memory is not fixed and how it constantly changes based on how we think and feel in the present. Our memories and sense of time are deeply connected. For example, in cases like déjà vu, it feels like one has lived in the present moment before as if past and present are overlapping. This shows that memory doesn't work like a perfect recording instead it is more like a puzzle where pieces of the past, present, and imagination coexist and affect each other [10]. The concept of Paramnesia is well integrated in the movie Inception and can be observed in various scenes.

Nolan has introduced the use of 'Totems' in the movie. These totems are used to distinguish the reality and the dreaming world. Mal had a metal top as her totem which helps her to differentiate between her dreams and reality. If upon spinning, the top keeps on spinning, it shows the person is still dreaming as in the real world, the top would fall due to gravity. When she entered the dream state of Limbo with Cobb, she hid her totem somewhere deep as she was so absorbed in the dream world that she got distracted and confused. She started believing that the dream was her real life and did not want to get back to reality. This portrays a good example of use of the concept of Paramnesia in the movie where there is involvement of blur memories and distorted boundaries between memory and reality.



Figure:8 Mal's Totem

Another good example can be Cobb's warning to Ariadne to not use her memories to directly build dreams as there is then a strong chance of blending the reality with imagination. He explains that memories, when used as the foundation for a dream, can become distorted and cause confusion between what is real and what is imagined. He advised her to use her imagination rather than her past events or memories. This is a key element of paramnesia, where a person's memories become distorted or misunderstood, leading to false recollections or the feeling of experiencing something that never actually occurred.



Figure:9 Ariadne constructing a dream

Paramnesia is about distorted memories but also about how one feels about his memory at present. This is depicted nicely in the scene where Cobb and his team kidnapped Robert Fischer in their shared dream. Suddenly some people appeared in a car and tried to kill Cobb and team and to save Robert. These were apparently Robert's bodyguards in his dream, and these were prepared to protect him even as his subconscious state. They actively resist the team's mission to plant an idea in Fischer's mind, attempting to prevent them from succeeding in their goal. These bodyguard projections can be connected to paramnesia because they represent how Fischer's subconscious mind misremembers or distorts his emotions and the people around him. Even though Fischer is unaware of the dream's manipulation, his mind creates these figures to protect him [15]. It seems like as if he were recalling the protective, defensive measures his mind believes would exist in moments of danger when he is awake. This reflects how paramnesia works in real life. Our memories can blend with feelings, often creating a distorted version of what we think would happen in specific situations. Fischer's subconscious doesn't simply accept the dream team's mission instead, it creates these projections to protect his mental state and block out anything that threatens his inner emotional world, even if those projections are based on distorted memories or a confused version of his reality.



Figure:10 Fischer's projected bodyguards trying to save him in his dream

In different dreams, throughout the movie, Cobb encountered his dead wife and talked to her about various things. This shows that Cobb's struggled with paramnesia as his memories of Mal frequently invade his dreams, making it hard for him to distinguish between past and present. When Cobb is on any mission in his dreams, Mal appears in the dream and tries to inhibit his missions. He forgets what he is expected to do at present because of Mal. This shows how memories can interfere with present.



Figure:11 Mal interfering in Cobb's dream

Another example of paramnesia from the movie is when Ariadne entered Cobb's dream and she was in an elevator and went down to the ground floor where she entered the hotel room where Mal did suicide, Mal was furious with Cobb, and she was asking him to come back to her. Mal then tried to hurt Ariadne while shouting on Cobb to fulfil his promise of coming back to her [20]. This intense scene depicts that Cobb has a distorted memory and guilt in him which comes out in the form of Mal's projection in his dream and the conversation between them is based on his memory of Mal, but it is mixed with his present life.

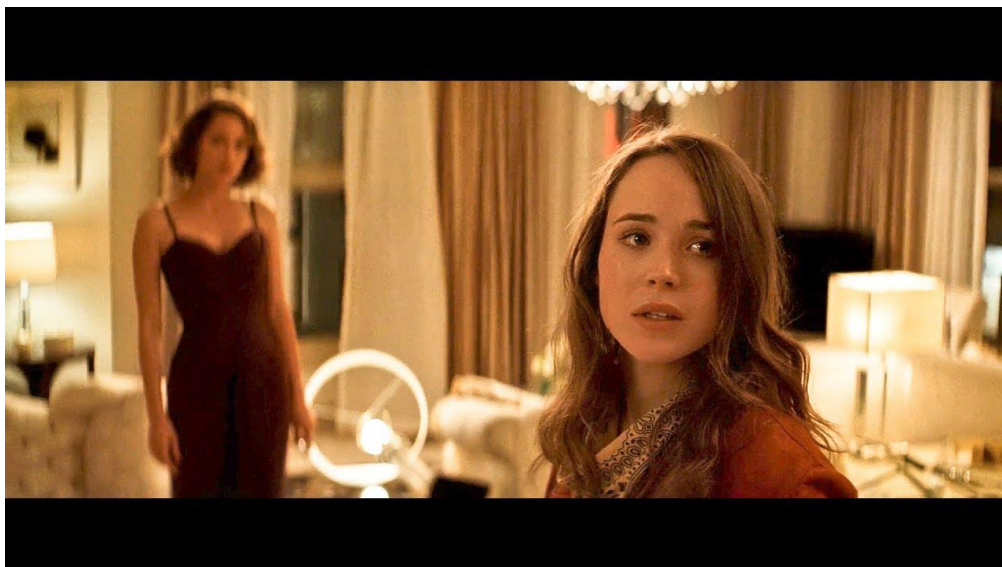


Figure:12 Ariadne met Mal in Cobb's dream

Ariadne then asks Cobb that why is it so important for him to dream and he replies that in his dreams they (Cobb and Mal) are still together and therefore he dreams. He dreams to keep Mal alive. This shows how Nolan included the philosophy of paramnesia in his movie.



Figure:13 Cobb commenting about Mal's existing in his dreams

In the end of the movie, Cobb overcomes the state of Paramnesia by acknowledging that this "Mal" is not real, but a mere fragment of his memory, shaped and warped by his own mind. He confronts the fact that she is not the Mal he loved in reality, but instead a creation of his unresolved emotions. He realizes that he cannot live in a world dominated by distorted memories and must accept the real world, with all its imperfections and uncertainties.

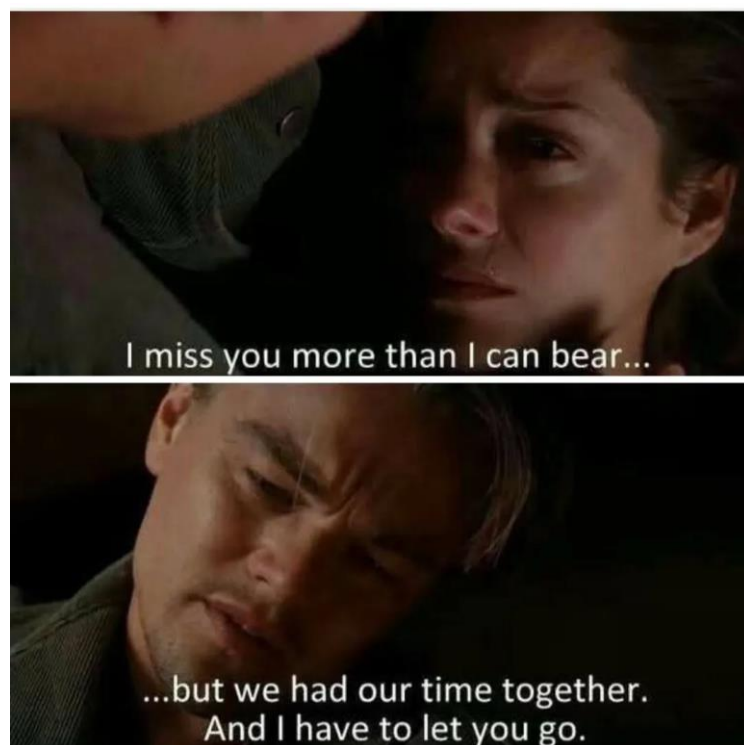


Figure:14 Cobb let go off Mal's memories

Durée and Inception

Durée, also known as Duration, is a key philosophical concept developed by French philosopher Henri Bergson. According to this concept, the time that a person lives is based on the continuous flow of lived experience in consciousness rather than the mechanical, measured time. Bergson describes time as a qualitative thing rather than a quantitative property and it can be subjective to different people under different conditions. He also considers durée a pure, unbroken succession where our past flows into our present in an organic, indivisible way. He emphasizes that durée cannot be divided or measured as it is not like a clock time but a time that is felt by the quality of it [11]. This concept challenged the scientific, mechanistic view of time prevalent in the late 19th century, suggesting that our true experience of time is more adaptable and diverse than mathematical models can capture. Through durée, Bergson highlighted how our conscious experience resists quantification and segmentation, flowing instead as a continuous stream where past moments continue and diffuse with the present [11].

The movie, Inception, is a good example of the philosophical concept of durée. The entire movie is based on dreams and dream levels and how time changes as a person goes in the deeper layers of dreams. The main character Cobb said, “ You can never remember the beginning of a dream and that dreams that seem to cover hours may only last a short time.” This time change is a brilliant example of how time can be a subjective and qualitative property instead of the mechanical and measurable property, described by physics.

There are various occasions in the movie that can be quoted as examples of durée, one being the ‘Limbo’ state of dreams where Cobb and Mal got trapped in Limbo. There they experienced decades of life together, constructing an entire dream-world, despite only hours passing in the waking world. They were so submerged in the qualitative nature of time that Mal started believing that they were not dreaming but living in real life. She did not want to come out of that limbo state, but Cobb was more focussed towards the reality and the objective time, hence he convinced his wife to die in dream. When they woke up from their limbo state of dream, it was only few hours passed in the real world. This part of the movie explains how time is dependent on the subjectivity and emotional connection of the events that happen with a person and not on the clocks [21].



Figure:15 Cobb and Mal living their life in limbo state of dream

In the movie, different dream layers have different time dilations. The first layer being very close to the real lifetime (objective time) but then as one enters the second layer, the dilation increases. The minutes in the second layer of dreams are equivalent to seconds in the real objective time. This dilation is even intense as third layer comes, hours spent in dreams are equivalent to seconds in real World. The movie starts with a portray of an old man, which later is revealed to be 'Saito'. He got trapped in limbo and was waiting for Cobb to get him out of this state. In the real world, it was only a flight of 10 hours from Sydney to Los Angeles but in their dream, Saito, and Cobb have grown very old with saggy, folded skin [18]. This is a good representation of the concept *durée* as Saito was waiting for Cobb which shows that longing and waiting for someone is way longer in experience as compared to the measurable time. In real word, only few hours have passed but in the dream many years have gone by for Saito waiting for Cobb's arrival.

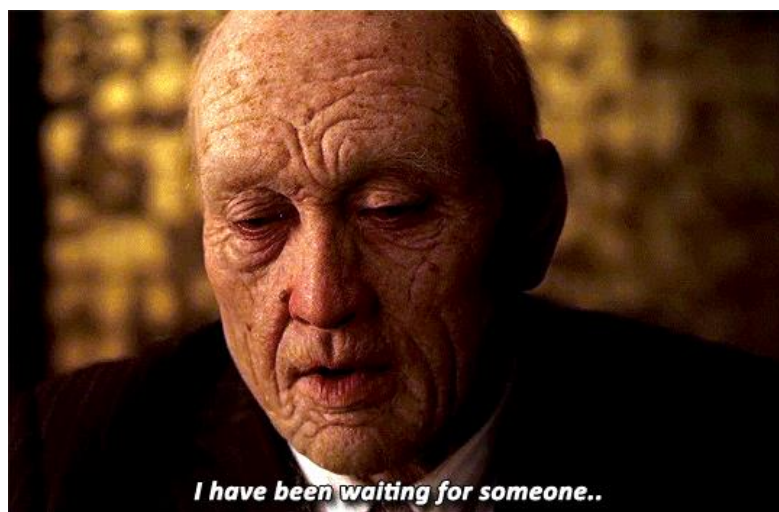


Figure:16 Saito in the dream state of limbo

Another good example of *durée* is the scene showing a time comparison between a falling car with Cobb and his team in it (1st dream layer) and then Cobb and team doing the mission in the snow fortress in 3rd layer of dream. The bus was falling from the bridge and normally a freefall taken only a few seconds to happen but in the third dream layer, Cobbs team was guiding Fischer to talk to his dying father (Maurice). Fischer and his father had a long conversation where Maurice told him the code of the locker and Robert discovered his father's will and the toy windmill [19]. This conversation between son and father took a long time but on the 1st dream layer, the car was still falling. This difference in times in various dream layers shows the variability of time based on emotional experience and quality of events, as explained by *durée*.



Figure:17 Car falling from the bridge to awaken Cobb and team from dream

The entire movie is a depiction of the qualitative nature of time and how time is measured by the moments, and events one experiences in it. It also represents the effect of the company one has in a particular duration for instance, when Mal and Cobb were stuck in Limbo, Mal didn't realize that it was a very long time there because she was in love with the moments spent with Cobb. This shows that when you are happy, the time seems to pass quick, and you don't realize even if its hours or days with your loved ones. On the contrary, when one is sad or in a difficult situation or waiting for someone, time seems to dilate and stop like Saito got old waiting for Cobb to come and bring him back to normal life. Another good example is Cobb's kids. They never seem to grow or even change clothes in Cobbs dreams as for him time stopped the moment he left his kids in a hurry however, in the ending of the movie when we reunited with his kids, they quickly turned around and ran towards their father. This shows how time is subjective to the emotional state of a person.

Conclusion

The movie, *Inception*, by Christopher Nolan's masterfully explores complex philosophical concepts of time and memory and present them as linked and coexisting perspectives that shape the characters' experiences and the film's narrative structure. Through the crystal image of time, paramnesia, and Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, Nolan constructs a layered story where past, present, and future collide and coexist, creating a clear exploration of the human mind's relationship with time and memory. These theoretical frameworks are not only embedded in the theme of the movie but also serve as the foundation for its dreamlike and unconventional storytelling.

The crystal image of time, as proposed by Gilles Deleuze, is prominently visible in the movie's portrayal of dreams, where past, present, and future blur into a single reflective moment. For example, Cobb's dreams allow him to encounter his wife, Mal, who represents his past, while also living in the present moment of the dream and imagining potential futures with her. Similarly, the scene where Fischer confronts memories of his father illustrates how a single object, like the toy windmill, can act as a bridge between different layers of time [1]. By portraying time as nonlinear and fragmented, Nolan effectively integrates Deleuze's philosophy, turning the dreamscapes into crystal images that show the complex subjective and qualitative nature of time rather than the mechanical nature of clock time [13].

Paramnesia, the psychological phenomenon of distorted memories, is another key element one can see in the film. Nolan uses this concept to show how memories can influence and distort the present, creating confusion between reality and imagination [10]. This is most evident in Cobb's relationship with Mal, whose projection haunts his dreams because of his unresolved guilt. By blending real memories with imagined scenarios, Nolan illustrates how paramnesia can trap individuals in an endless loop of emotional conflict. Additionally, the use of totems, such as Mal's spinning top, highlights the struggle to distinguish between dream and reality, further highlighting the coexistence of memory and imagination.

Henri Bergson's concept of *durée* which discusses the subjective, qualitative experience of time, is also central to *Inception*. The varying speeds of time across different dream layers, from seconds in the waking world to decades in the limbo state, emphasize the fluid and personal nature of time. For example, Saito's prolonged wait in limbo demonstrates how emotional experiences like longing and regret can make time feel immeasurably long [14]. Similarly, the subjective perception of time is reflected in Cobb's dreams of his children, where time appears frozen, representing his emotional state and unresolved longing to reunite with them. These coexistence perspectives that are Deleuze's

crystal image of time, paramnesia, and Bergson's *durée* are nicely woven into *Inception*. This shows Nolan's ability to integrate deep philosophical ideas into his narrative. By using dreams as a canvas, Nolan blurs the boundaries between memory, imagination, and reality, creating a story that not only entertains but also challenges viewers to reflect on the nature of time and memory. In the end, Cobb's decision to let go of Mal and accept reality highlights the film's central message that while memories shape who we are, embracing the present is essential for moving forward. Through these perspectives, Nolan creates a film that is both intellectually profound and emotionally resonant, redefining the boundaries of cinematic storytelling [16].

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