The protagonist of *Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010), Cobb, leads a team of thieves with the unlikely speciality of entering people's dreams and extracting information from them. Cobb is not a criminal by choice; he faces a murder charge that makes it impossible for him to apply his skills of dream architecture and exploration in a legal way, as well as barring him from entering the United States and seeing his two children again. As is usual in all big heist movies (a genre that supplies *Inception* with its surface structure), he's made an offer he can't refuse: in exchange for performing the seemingly impossible feat of *inception* — planting an idea in someone's mind instead of stealing information from it — his powerful prospective employer will make the charges against him disappear and ensure his entrance into the United States.

Of course, the job will turn out to be more dangerous than expected, and Cobb's personal baggage, which is very much related to the murder he has been charged with, complicates matters further. During the movie we discover that Cobb and his wife spent fifty years in a dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream he refers to as "Limbo" (subjective time passes exponentially faster the further you go down the rabbit hole). During that time his wife forgot or chose to forget the oneiric nature of the reality they were experiencing, and the only way Cobb found of convincing her to return was to plant into the deeper recesses of her mind the idea that the reality she saw was a dream, and only by killing themselves inside the dream they could go back to reality. This was, indeed, an inception... and it ended catastrophically for them, as the idea was still influencing Mal after they woke up, prompting her to kill herself while framing her husband for her death. Not only was Cobb forced to flee the United States leaving his children behind, but the relentless persecution inside his dreams by a vindictive "Mal" (a projection of his subconscious guilt) made dreams a dangerous place for him.

The movie glosses over any technical difficulty in accessing other people's dreams. The main difficulty lies in keeping the target unaware that they are in a dream, *while always knowing yourself whether you are in a dream or not.* Like professionally paranoid career con men, Cobb and his team are always suspicious of the reality they find themselves in. The key to both recognizing and escaping dreams is physicality, in the form of material objects with specific signatures of weight and balance that other dream architects would find impossible to replicate, and in the wake response of in-dream physical impact or drowning. Matter and force, the physical world, is the only lifeline they have to get back to reality

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(labyrinths are often mentioned in the movie, and it's no coincidence, in one way or another, than the latest addition to Cobb's team is a young architect called *Ariadne*).

But there's a subtler, more familiar form of dream the protagonist of *Inception* finds himself trapped in. Although aware that the "Mal" that appears in his and other people's dreams is ultimately a projection of his subconscious, he refers to her and interacts with her as if she were his wife. Although seldom in such a literal way, most of us do carry inside ourselves ghosts of people we have lost, some of them not at all happy with us, and the climactic moment of the movie happens when Cobb is finally able to see that the woman inside his dreams is not his wife, and, if not let go of the guilt, at least let go of his fabrication of her ghost. *Inception* offers no certainty in ontological terms; despite its obvious similarity with *The Matrix*, there is no absolute ground level of reality accessible to either the protagonists or the viewers, and even the existence of such a reality is left undecided. However, in the emotional counterpart to this argument, the movie takes a definite stand on the difference between Mal and Cobb's dream and nightmare of her. In a way reminiscent of other movies like *AI*, the "reality of the real" is put in doubt, but not the reality of love and the loved one. Perhaps to question both at the same time would be too unsettling.

Time itself deserves a separate mention. Although the exponential speedup of subjective time while in the shared dream state is used very effectively as a narrative device and to underscore the psychological danger of Limbo (where minutes of "real time" are experienced as decades of isolation), none of the potential implications and uses of this extraordinary fact is explored any further. This is understandable, given the potential complexity of the issues raised, but nonetheless frustrating. Time is a key element of both our perception of reality and our experience of ourselves, and the way in which the movie moves between different realms of subjective time is at least as powerful a premise as the (certainly much more visually appealing) ways in which movie characters manipulate the perceived architecture inside dreams.

Ultimately, the movie itself is a dream, a shared unreality that it's not so much a logical exploration of its premises as a visible manifestation of our ontological anxieties. As humans, and even more so as technology-using humans, we show a remarkable capability to immerse ourselves in increasingly sophisticated symbolic worlds, from books to online games to stock markets. At times, if not most of the time, these worlds feel the only real ones. There's no need to postulate *Matrix*- or *Inception*-like technologies to observe that these worlds are becoming richer and more complex, and that we are spending more and more of our lives in them. This is not necessarily a new or negative development (reading still being one of the most effective technologies of both Virtual Reality and inception), but it's not surprising to find ourselves worrying at times about the depth and nature of our dreams.