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Theseus in Modern Culture: The Labyrinth of Inception

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Inception, a science fiction heist film written and directed by Christopher Nolan, is a highly imaginative and multi-layered voyage through the human mind, and a meditation on the elusive nature of reality. It blurs the boundaries between internal and exterior reality, offering the possibility of multiple levels of meaning and abolishing the line of demarcation that exists between fantasy and reality.² The characters, together with the audience, tread the solid, reliable ground of a highly wrought reality, one shrouded by illusion and self-deception, until it collapses beneath their feet under the weight of another, more objective reality, revealing the abyss into which they must inevitably fall.³ Much like in the myth of Theseus, the abyss into which the character of Cobb falls into is a twisting labyrinth, a maze of tunnels concealing the beast that lies within.

The ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur recounts Theseus's journey towards Crete and his subsequent encounter with the monstrous figure of the Minotaur. Sometime before this incident, the King of Crete, Minos, had appealed to Poseidon to confirm his right to rule over the island.⁴ Upon hearing his request, the god presented him with a magnificent white bull, a sign that the seat of power in Crete was rightfully his on condition that King sacrifice the bull in his honour. However, deciding that the animal is too exquisite to kill, King Minos was seduced by his greed and attempted to deceive the god by offering him an inferior bull in its stead.⁵ Enraged by this act of ingratitude, Poseidon compelled the king's wife, Pasiphae, to fall in love with the bull. The Minotaur, a creature that is half-bull and half-man, was the result. The King, appalled by this perversion of nature, ordered Daedalus, a skilful craftsman, to build him a labyrinth that could conceal the beast within its twisting passages. And, after conquering the Athenians, the King compelled them to send seven men and seven women every nine years to be sacrificed, offered as tribute to the Cretan Minotaur, a monster

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² Johnson (2012) 11ff.

³ Brislin (2016) 199ff.

⁴ Childress (1996), 111f.

⁵ Morford and Lenardon, (1999) 451ff.

who fed on their flesh and gnawed at their bones.⁶ Theseus, an Athenian hero set upon liberating his country from this tribute, travelled to Crete in order to defeat the Minotaur. Once there, Theseus became attached to King Minos's daughter, Ariadne. The princess, attempting to aid the hero in his quest, provided him with a ball of red string, thus providing him with the means of making his way out of the seemingly inextricable maze.⁷ With Ariadne's help, then, Theseus successfully slew the Minotaur and emerged from the tunnels triumphant.

In *Inception*, another Ariadne helps Cobb navigate the dream world. The myth depicts Ariadne as the 'Mistress of the Labyrinth' another had built,⁸ so too does *Inception's* Ariadne play the role of architect and guide, taking over the dream world that Cobb has constructed and contriving the labyrinth that the dream weaver will inevitably inhabit.⁹ And just as the Minotaur has been placed within a labyrinth of stone, so too does a monster lurk in this dream world, the husk of Cobb's dead wife, Mallorie, placed there by Cobb's inability to confront the reality of his wife's death. Jungian psychology suggests that the attainment of the self can only be achieved through the individual's confrontation with his psyche.¹⁰ Mallorie is the monster that lurks in the labyrinth of Cobb's dreams, thwarting his plans whenever he attempts to access his subconscious.¹¹ Cobb must descend deeper into the layers of mazes that populate the dream world and slay the Minotaur that he himself has brought into being. Theseus had travelled across the Aegean, encountering various obstacles in the path leading to his confrontation with the Minotaur.¹² Similarly, in *Inception* Cobb enters the realm of dreams, descending the levels of the dream world, and navigating through the open sea, ultimately washing up on the shore that will lead him to his encounter with Mallorie. Cobb also uses the spinning top as a 'totem' which allows him to distinguish between the dream world and the outer world. Similarly, it is the un-spinning of the ball of string which allowed Theseus to ascend back into the 'real world'.¹³ Dreams, referred to by Freud as *via regia*,¹⁴ the royal passage into the subconscious, possess a seductive quality, capable of luring one into their convincing reality if he dwells too long in their perilous depths. Thus, the dreamer finds himself trapped in the 'underworld', unable to find his way back to waking reality. In *Inception*, Cobb overreaches; he has breached those human boundaries that have catalysed

⁶ Childress (1996) 112f.

⁷ Morford and Lenardon (1999) 453.

⁸ Hansen (2002) 166.

⁹ Fisher (2011) 37ff.

¹⁰ Bishop (2009) 152ff.

¹¹ Eberl and Dunn (2017) 133ff.

¹² Guerber (1896) 26ff.

¹³ Botz-Bornstein (2011) 11.

¹⁴ Scherer (2018) 75.

the downfall of many heroes in ancient Greek myth. Cobb is punished for his transgressions; he remains trapped in limbo, an endless plain of the subconscious and the underworld of the dream weaver.¹⁵

Inception blurs the barriers between internal and external perceptions, reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming. The film's narrative is interwoven with myth, immersing its audience in this illusive reality where death and life have no meaning, and the boundaries between worlds have been eradicated underneath crippling awareness: the realization that the division between these two states is no longer meaningful.¹⁶ The spinning top is now unable to indicate whether one is dreaming or awake, and one is no longer capable of distinguishing between waking reality and the festering world of dreams.¹⁷

Inception is built on a classical premise, a perversion of the ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The perversion of art is to turn upside down, to distort its original course. Similarly, the metal top in *Inception* is inverted at the end of the film. It is left spinning upside down, effectively muddying any clear-cut delineation between our seemingly objective reality and the dreams that are woven in the recesses of our subconscious.¹⁸ The totem doesn't stop revolving in the closing scene of the film, condemning Cobb to an existence where he is trapped between worlds that bleed into one another, perpetually spinning *ad infinitum*.

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¹⁵ Johnson (2012) 183ff.

¹⁶ Brislin (2016) 199ff.

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¹⁸ Danyluk (2015) 601ff.

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