Serat: Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies Vol.03, No.03, November 2026
eISSN:3047-8332

RECONSTRUCTING REALITY IN *INCEPTION* (2010): A COGNITIVE-CULTURAL ANALYSIS THROUGH PIAGET

Muhammad Abid Ma'ruf, Reza Anis Maulidiya
Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta
Email: abid.m23@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id, reza.anis@staff.uinjkt.ac.id

ABSTRACT. This study investigates how *Inception* (2010) dramatizes memory distortion, perception instability, and the construction of reality through the lens of Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory. The film's protagonist, Cobb, experiences internal dissonance and psychological fragmentation as unresolved emotional trauma warps his cognitive schema. Using Piagetian concepts such as assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium, the analysis reveals how *Inception* visualizes the mind's struggle to maintain stability in the face of repressed memory and external manipulation. Beyond individual psychology, the film engages with contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding the fluidity of truth, the unreliability of memory, and the mediated construction of reality in a post-digital age. The layered dream architecture becomes a metaphor for modern cognitive confusion, where the boundaries between fact and fabrication collapse. This paper contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on how film can serve as a cultural lens for examining psychological dissonance and epistemological uncertainty. In bridging cognitive theory with narrative cinema, the study positions *Inception* as a reflection of collective memory crises in 21st-century cultural consciousness.

Keywords: Cognitive development, cultural memory, *Inception* (2010), Jean Piaget, memory distortion

MEREKONSTRUKSI REALITAS DALAM FILM *INCEPTION* (2010): SEBUAH ANALISIS KOGNITIF-BUDAYA MELALUI PIAGET

ABSTRAK. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana *Inception* (2010) mendramatisir distorsi memori, ketidakstabilan persepsi, dan konstruksi realitas melalui lensa teori perkembangan kognitif Jean Piaget. Tokoh utama film ini, Cobb, mengalami disonansi internal dan fragmentasi psikologis ketika trauma emosional yang belum terselesaikan membengkokkan skema kognitifnya. Dengan menggunakan konsep Piaget seperti asimilasi, akomodasi, dan keseimbangan, analisis ini mengungkapkan bagaimana *Inception* memvisualisasikan perjuangan pikiran untuk mempertahankan stabilitas dalam menghadapi ingatan yang tertekan dan manipulasi eksternal. Di luar psikologi individu, film ini melibatkan kecemasan budaya kontemporer seputar fluiditas kebenaran, memori yang tidak dapat diandalkan, dan konstruksi realitas yang dimediasi di era pasca-digital. Arsitektur mimpi yang berlapis-lapis menjadi metafora bagi kebingungan kognitif modern, di mana batas-batas antara fakta dan fabrikasi menjadi runtuh. Makalah ini berkontribusi pada diskusi interdisipliner tentang bagaimana film dapat berfungsi sebagai lensa budaya untuk memeriksa disonansi psikologis dan ketidakpastian epistemologis. Dalam menjembatani teori kognitif dengan sinema naratif, penelitian ini memosisikan *Inception* sebagai cerminan dari krisis ingatan kolektif dalam kesadaran budaya abad ke-21.

Kata-kata kunci: Perkembangan kognitif, memori budaya, *Inception* (2010), Jean Piaget, distorsi memori

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of psychology and cinema offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary inquiry, particularly when film narratives engage directly with the instability of human cognition. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) exemplifies this convergence through its recursive structure, perceptual ambiguity, and manipulation of memory. The film constructs a world in which dreams become architectural spaces, memories are reconstructed and implanted, and the distinction between reality and illusion collapses. These formal and thematic elements resonate with contemporary neuroscientific findings on memory malleability (Schacter & Loftus, 2020) and the emotional foundations of perceived reality (Phelps & Hofmann, 2019), situating *Inception* as a cinematic articulation of cognitive instability.

While much scholarship has examined the film's postmodern aesthetics (Brooker, 2016), philosophical dilemmas (Wartenberg, 2019), or psychoanalytic motifs (Žižek, 2012; McGowan, 2011), relatively few studies have explored its compatibility with cognitive developmental theory. This study addresses that critical gap by employing Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development to analyze the film's portrayal of memory, identity, and epistemological uncertainty. Piaget posited that memory is not a passive recording device but an adaptive, reconstructive mechanism shaped by schemas, emotional equilibrium, and stages of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1973). When applied to *Inception*, Piaget's framework reveals how the protagonist, Dom Cobb, suffers cognitive disequilibrium as his traumatic memories disrupt the assimilation of new reality schemas, thereby distorting his perception and behavior.

For instance, the movie portrays various Piagetian theories including assimilation, accommodation, and schema conflicts through the internal mental conflict of Cobb. The dreams of Cobb about Mal, both real and invented, are seen in all dream levels and affect the decision making of Cobb. This is similar to the theory put forth by Piaget where emotional disturbance is an inhibitor of cognitive equilibrium and leads to maladaptive thoughts. Moreover, the movie has a dream-within-a-dream format which is reflective of the recursive and non-linear nature of memory reconstruction.

In addition to the psychological context, *Inception* is also an articulation of deeper cultural fears about memory, perception, and the construction of truth in the age of information. In the era of disinformation, the role of artificial intelligence in modifying content, and the act of curating one's history online, memory is no longer a solely psychological affair but a cultural issue. This is seen through the core question that the film poses – how does one know if he/she is awake? It can be said that *Inception* is an analogy for the epistemological crisis in the post-truth world.

Existing research in literary and cultural studies has long recognized memory as an interpretive, unstable force, capable of both preserving and distorting the past (Assmann, 2011). In line with this tradition, this study positions *Inception* within the expanding field of cognitive literary criticism—an approach that reads film and literature as models of human thought and emotional regulation. By foregrounding Piaget's theory of development alongside cultural theory, this paper expands the interdisciplinary potential of film analysis and repositions *Inception* within conversations about memory, trauma, and meaning-making.

The originality of this study lies in its application of Piagetian theory to a cinematic text that has rarely been interpreted through this lens. It contributes not only to film and psychology scholarship, but also to literary and

cultural studies by showing how *Inception* visualizes the mind's vulnerability to trauma, memory distortion, and manipulated perception. In doing so, the study reveals how narrative film can engage viewers in complex cognitive and emotional experiences that reflect broader cultural uncertainties.

To explore how *Inception* enacts the psychological consequences of memory distortion and reality confusion, this research adopts a qualitative, interpretive method grounded in film analysis. The following section outlines the theoretical and methodological approach, with Piaget's framework serving as the primary lens for interpreting character development, narrative structure, and thematic concerns.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach within the framework of literary and cultural analysis. Drawing from narrative and film studies, it analyzes *Inception* (2010) as a cultural text that engages psychological, philosophical, and symbolic concerns. The research integrates close reading with cognitive theoretical application to investigate how memory distortion, perception, and identity are constructed and destabilized within the film's narrative structure. *Inception* is treated not simply as entertainment but as a complex visual narrative whose meaning emerges through repeated patterns, symbolic encoding, and cognitive-emotional resonance.

Although Jean Piaget's work is rooted in developmental psychology and education, his theories have proven increasingly useful in analyzing cultural narratives, particularly those that visualize internal cognitive processes. In literary and film studies, Piaget's concepts—such as assimilation, accommodation, and schema restructuring—allow scholars to interpret how characters experience and process dissonant realities. Applying Piaget to cinema thus bridges psychological theory with interpretive criticism, offering a cognitive lens for understanding narrative complexity, trauma representation, and the structure of memory in filmic form.

The data used in this research come from the feature film *Inception* (2010) by Christopher Nolan. As the film lasts more than two hours and combines multiple plot lines, such as corporate heist, dynamics of dream-extraction team as an ensemble, and the political motivation of Fisher inception, it is not true that every scene in this film is relevant to the problem under consideration. That is why the analysis of the film is carried out using the criterion-based approach and only the scenes meeting certain conditions are chosen as analytical units. The scene is considered relevant if it either shows Cobb's interaction with Mal in different forms – memories, projections, and dream figure – which is the most direct representation of reality reconstruction, cognitive conflicts, and the use of Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation, or it shows the work of Ariadne in reshaping dream architecture, which is the most direct way to make the subject undergo schema changes in the film. The scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs meeting the above-mentioned conditions are treated as semiotic units in the context of *Inception's* complex narrative architecture.

The theoretical framework centers on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, with particular emphasis on his concepts of assimilation, accommodation, schema theory, and cognitive conflict. According to Piaget (1954; Piaget & Inhelder, 1973), memory is not a static repository but an active reconstruction shaped by one's current cognitive structures and emotional equilibrium. Knowledge, from this perspective, is not merely received but organized and reinterpreted through schemas formed in interaction with the environment.

This view directly informs the interpretation of Cobb's psychological state, as his emotionally charged and guilt-infused memories of Mal override his rational schemas and distort his sense of reality. Piaget's mid-century account of memory as active reconstruction rather than passive retrieval is not merely a historical curiosity; it anticipates, and is substantively supported by, more recent cognitive and neuroscientific research. Contemporary reality-monitoring studies locate the neural signature of exactly the process Piaget described in behavioral terms: the brain does not passively replay stored images but actively adjudicates, moment to moment, between internally generated and externally sourced information, an adjudication that predictably falters under emotional load (Simons et al., 2022). Zeki et al. (2023) extend Piagetian schema theory into the domain of predictive processing, treating cultural narratives such as this one as test cases for how minds construct, and lose confidence in, a coherent sense of reality when control over incoming information is uncertain. These contemporary frameworks are treated here not as a separate body of evidence running alongside Piaget's theory, but as an empirical extension of it: where Piaget theorized assimilation and accommodation as the mechanisms of cognitive adaptation, this later research describes the neural and predictive-processing substrates of the same adaptive struggle.

The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages:

1. **Identification** of key scenes and dream sequences where memory distortion and perceptual instability occur, particularly those involving Cobb's internal conflict.
2. **Interpretation** of these moments through the lens of Piaget's theory and its contemporary cognitive-neuroscientific extensions, focusing on processes such as assimilation of trauma, failure of accommodation, and equilibrium breakdown.
3. **Synthesis** of findings to demonstrate how the film critiques the reliability of memory and explores the consequences of unresolved cognitive dissonance on perception and agency.

With the theoretical and methodological framework in place, this study now turns to a scene-specific analysis of *Inception*, guided by Piagetian cognitive development. Using close reading techniques drawn from film and literary criticism, the analysis explores how visual motifs, character behaviors, and narrative devices embody the reconstructive nature of memory and the shifting boundaries of perception. Rather than summarizing the film, this section interrogates key cinematic sequences as dramatizations of psychological mechanisms—such as assimilation, schema conflict, and reflective abstraction—thus positioning *Inception* as a cognitive allegory of mental adaptation in the face of emotional trauma and perceptual instability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Memory Reconstruction and Cognitive Conflict

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) vividly dramatizes Jean Piaget's theory of memory as an active and reconstructive process shaped by cognitive schemas (Piaget, 1954; Piaget & Inhelder, 1973). Rather than functioning as a passive archive, memory is shown to be malleable, emotionally charged, and prone to distortion. This is particularly evident in the character of Dom Cobb, whose repeated visions of his deceased wife, Mal, are not faithful recollections but distorted projections of unresolved guilt and trauma. Cobb's mind continually reshapes these memories to fit his present emotional state, illustrating Piaget's assertion that memory reconstructions are

governed by current schemas rather than objective truth.

Fig. 1: Mal's projection assassinates Arthur during the Saito dream level, disrupting the mission within a tightly framed, visually chaotic composition. This staging visualizes schema intrusion and cognitive disequilibrium.
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

Mal's violent interruptions within shared dreams are emblematic of traumatic schemas overriding rational control. Compositionally, the assassination crowds Arthur, Mal, and the dream team into a single cramped interior, and the sudden intrusion of gunfire breaks the otherwise orderly blocking of the heist sequence; the frame's disorder is not incidental but externalizes the disequilibrium Piaget describes when an existing schema cannot absorb new, threatening information. These projections represent Cobb's failure to assimilate loss into his cognitive framework, and the compositional chaos renders that failure legible as image rather than only as plot event. The layering of dreams further intensifies this instability. As Cobb descends deeper into the dream world, his control over Mal's appearance diminishes, echoing Piagetian ideas of schema breakdown under emotional stress and aligning with modern findings on trauma-related memory interference (Anderson et al., 2020).



Fig. 2: Cobb stands before a mental elevator whose vertically stacked, sealed compartments compartmentalize his memories of Mal; the architecture itself performs the metaphor, with each floor functioning as a discrete, walled-off schema isolated from the others by design. This spatial organization captures schema fragmentation and the psychological architecture of repression.
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

Ariadne's function as dream architect gives this compartmentalization concrete narrative form, and her role is established before the film puts it to psychological use. In the Paris sequence, Ariadne folds the city's streets back on themselves while Cobb explains, "You create the world of the dream. We bring the subject into that dream, and they fill it with their subconscious" [00:49:33]. The line assigns Ariadne, and by extension the audience, a Piagetian vocabulary ahead of the plot's need for it: dreaming, like schema



construction, is described as an act of active building rather than passive reception. When Ariadne later turns this architectural authority on Cobb's own compartmentalized memories, forcing open the elevator that Figure 2 depicts, she applies the same principle reflexively — if

a mind's world is constructed, it can be reconstructed. Her presence and her questions, pressing Cobb on what happened to Mal and refusing his evasions, perform the function Piaget assigns to accommodation: they do not allow an existing, inadequate schema to stand unchallenged. This is confrontation rather than comfort, and the film marks it as such by having Cobb repeatedly warn her away from his private levels even as she keeps entering them. Ariadne's role as dream architect thus mirrors schema therapy in mechanism, not only in metaphor. By compelling Cobb to revisit his traumatic memories rather than route around them, she facilitates accommodation — the modification of existing cognitive structures to integrate information a subject would otherwise assimilate defensively or exclude altogether. Her interventions are akin to therapeutic exposure strategies aimed at reconciling traumatic schemas (Brewin, 2021): she does not remove Mal from Cobb's dreamscapes, but repeatedly stages structured encounters with her until his schema of his wife can no longer remain unexamined. This dynamic illustrates how cinema can portray cognitive conflict and emotional healing through visual and narrative mechanisms alike, with the Paris-folding sequence establishing the architectural logic that the elevator scene, and later the snow-fortress confrontation, put to direct psychological use.



Fig. 3: Cobb and Mal in limbo, staged within a decaying, half-submerged interior where architecture and weather blur into one continuous, dissolving surface. This spatial dissolution reflects Piaget's formal operational stage, where abstraction and temporal dislocation coexist.
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

Cobb's repeated failures to reconcile reality with memory lead to an internal collapse, necessitating a reconfiguration of his schemas through accommodation. When he finally acknowledges Mal as a mere projection ("You're just a shade of my real wife"), the narrative externalizes Piaget's reflective abstraction: the mind reorganizing itself through higher-order reasoning.

Perception, Reality, and Existential Uncertainty

The film's final act underscores the instability of perception and the fragility of constructed reality. The iconic spinning top scene deliberately omits resolution, leaving viewers in epistemic suspension. Cobb's uncertainty about whether he is dreaming symbolizes the limitations of cognitive self-assurance when memory and perception fail to cohere.



Fig. 4: Cobb's spinning top wavers on a bare table as the screen cuts to black before it settles. The shallow depth of field isolates the totem from any surrounding context that could confirm the world around it, visually enacting unresolved schema conflict and cognitive dissonance.
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

This ambiguity evokes Piaget's formal operational paradox: mature thought allows abstract reasoning but remains vulnerable to regression when emotional trauma resurfaces (Gopnik, 2020). Cobb's persistent use of the

totem reflects a reversion to concrete operational thinking, a psychological crutch when conceptual equilibrium collapses.
The scene's power comes from the way two registers of explanation converge on the same image rather than compete with it. Read through contemporary cognitive science, the unresolved totem reflects predictive-coding accounts of perception (Clark, 2018), which describe the brain's continuous effort to arbitrate between external cues and internal models when reality-testing fails; Cobb's totem functions, in effect, as an external prosthetic for a reality-check his own cognitive system can no longer perform with confidence. Read as existential cinema, the same gesture shows a Piagetian subject unable to complete the shift to fully abstract reasoning, clinging instead to a physical object because concrete, sensorimotor proof feels more trustworthy than internal conviction — a regression that reveals the fragility of the assurance frameworks adults ordinarily take for granted (Marcus, 2021). Nolan lets both readings stand at once: the totem is simultaneously a cognitive-scientific detail and an existential confession, and it is precisely this doubleness that keeps the scene from resolving into either a psychological case study or a philosophical parable alone.
Beyond its psychological dimensions, the film functions as a cultural artifact that mirrors twenty-first-century anxieties about the boundaries of experience and the construction of personal truth. Zeki et al. (2023) read it in precisely these terms, treating it as a cultural test case for an era in which control over one's own perception can no longer be assumed. In a digital ecosystem shaped by algorithmic suggestion — recommendation systems that pre-select what a person sees before they choose to look for it — curated online identities, and increasingly convincing synthetic media, the recursive dream levels eerily anticipate how contemporary individuals navigate environments where it is often unclear which inputs originate from the self and which have been engineered by an outside system. Cobb's totem fixation, in this light, echoes a contemporary dependence on external validation — whether biometric data, platform metrics, or the persuasive authority of algorithmically generated content — to confirm the "realness" of experience under conditions where that confirmation can no longer be taken for granted. Nolan's depiction of collapsing dream layers becomes a metaphor for cultural disorientation in a post-truth era, where memory and perception are no longer privately owned but socially and technologically distributed, and therefore vulnerable to manipulation by algorithmic suggestion and synthetic media alike. By connecting cognitive instability with this socio-technological disruption, the film suggests that personal identity, like narrative, is always under revision — contested, negotiated, and sometimes hijacked by unseen systems rather than only unseen people.

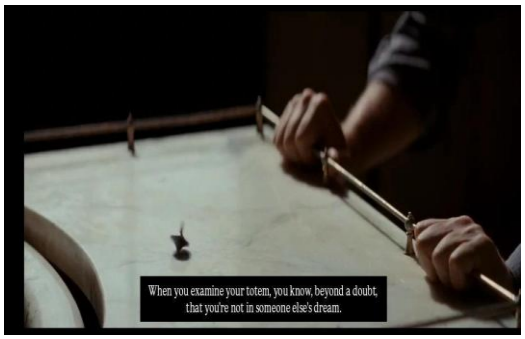


Fig. 5: Team members are shown mid-collapse as a dream level gives way beneath them, bodies tilted at disorienting angles within a frame that offers no stable horizon line. The absence of a fixed visual anchor externalizes how external manipulation overrides individual perception, supporting Piaget's theory that unassimilable new stimuli can destabilize existing cognitive equilibrium. (01:38:15).
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

By freezing on the spinning top, Nolan demonstrates what modern neuroscience confirms: memory, perception, and reality-monitoring are probabilistic constructions (Hohwy, 2020), not binary states. The film's ingenuity is making the viewer share Cobb's cognitive limbo, leaving us whispering with Mal: "You're waiting for a train…". (01:58:22), unsure whether it will arrive.



Fig. 6: Cobb and Mal reenact their shared past within a limbo assembled from fragments of remembered domestic space, the same rooms recurring with subtly altered details each time they are revisited. This instability of setting illustrates the seductive power of emotionally charged schemas and their resistance to cognitive restructuring.
(Source: Nolan, 2010)

Inception's layered dream design, particularly the warped timelessness of limbo ("Downwards is the only way back" [Ariadne, 02:02:10]), serves as a Piagetian stress-test for both Cobb and the audience. When Cobb has to choose between remaining in a fabricated reality with Mal ("You're waiting for a train..." [01:58:22]) and confronting his guilt in the snow fortress, the film depicts what Piaget called the equilibration crisis (Piaget, 1977), in which cognitive dissonance forces either assimilation (accepting illusion) or accommodation (restructuring reality models).

This equilibration crisis is not simply a narrative conceit; it maps onto what contemporary reality-monitoring research describes at the neural level. Simons et al. (2022) find that emotional bias — precisely the kind of pull limbo exerts through the promise of remaining with Mal — can override prefrontal regulation during reality-monitoring tasks, which is another way of describing the equilibration crisis Piaget theorized decades earlier: an emotionally loaded schema strong enough to compete with, and sometimes defeat, the cognitive apparatus that would otherwise correct it. The snow fortress's violent catharsis, when Cobb finally tells the projection of Mal, "I have to let you go" [02:10:45], completes the accommodation that Ariadne's earlier interventions set in motion. The scene functions as the narrative's clinical parallel to the accommodation phase of exposure therapy in PTSD treatment (Brewin, 2021): Cobb does not simply forget Mal, but restructures the schema that had kept her locked in an idealized, controlling form.

Crucially, Nolan lets the viewer feel this paradigm clash rather than merely observe it in Cobb. Limbo's extended, elastic sense of time distorts the narrative schemas viewers rely on to track duration and sequence (Hasson et al., 2020), so that the audience's own temporal cognition briefly falters alongside Cobb's. The film's moral ambiguity works through a related mechanism: Saito's "leap of faith" and Cobb's persistent totem dependency both dramatize the tension Kahneman (2011) describes between fast, intuitive judgment and slower, deliberate reasoning (Evans, 2019) — a tension that, in Piagetian terms, is simply cognitive conflict rendered as character choice rather than laboratory task.

This study's Piagetian analysis demonstrates that *Inception* is more than a film: it functions as a working model of cognitive development, in which memory operates as an adaptable but flawed tool and reality dissolves into subjective construction. Nolan's narrative

exemplifies what Piaget called reflective abstraction (Piaget, 1977): the mind's ability to rebuild its own processes using external artifacts. When Cobb reconstructs Mal in nightmare after nightmare, or when Ariadne folds Paris onto itself in the sequence discussed above, the film literalizes Piaget's principle that "the mind organizes the world by organizing itself" (1952, p. 11); dream architecture becomes cognitive architecture made visible.

Taken together with the equilibration crisis discussed above, *Inception* operates on two further registers that this analysis has so far treated separately but which are best understood as facets of the same cognitive function. As a philosophical experiment, the film interrogates the boundaries of perception in ways that align with predictive-processing accounts of mind (Hohwy, 2020), which likewise treat the sense of a stable, singular reality as an inference the brain maintains rather than a fact it simply registers. As a cognitive mirror, the film exhibits how narrative itself drives schema development in its audience (Oatley, 2022): watching Cobb's schemas break and reform gives viewers a structured occasion to rehearse the same cognitive work in miniature. Neither register competes with the Piagetian reading advanced throughout this study; both describe, in different vocabularies, the same adaptive struggle between existing mental structures and destabilizing new information that Piaget termed disequilibrium.

What is the film's ultimate revelation? That film, like memory, is a shared construction in which spectators' minds work with Nolan's to construct (and question) reality frame by frame. The cognitive conflicts and memory distortions experienced by Cobb culminate in a narrative that invites philosophical reflection as much as psychological insight. The following conclusion highlights the study's contribution to the understanding of film, memory, and cognitive theory.

Culturally, then, the film's refusal to resolve its narrative definitively is not a stylistic indulgence but a continuation of the same cognitive logic examined throughout this analysis. Read alongside predictive-coding theories (Clark, 2018; Hohwy, 2020) and cinematic explorations of subjective reality (Zeki et al., 2023), *Inception*'s unresolved ending asks the audience to sit inside the same equilibration crisis Cobb experiences, rather than resolving it on their behalf.

Ultimately, *Inception* is not just about dreaming but about thinking: how minds build, distort, and rebuild reality. Cobb's journey through memory and perception stands as a cultural parable for a world increasingly shaped by virtual experiences and uncertain truths. Through Piagetian analysis, this study reveals how Nolan's narrative aesthetic enacts cognitive theory, making the viewer an active participant in reconstructing meaning frame by frame.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a novel contribution to literary and cultural studies by applying Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, read alongside its contemporary neuroscientific extensions (Simons et al., 2022; Zeki et al., 2023), to Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), revealing the film as a conceptual site where memory, perception, and reality collapse into cognitive disarray. Cobb's journey, haunted by the shifting projections of Mal and redirected by Ariadne's persistent architectural interventions, dramatizes Piagetian processes — reconstruction, assimilation, accommodation, and disequilibrium — transforming psychological abstraction into cinematic architecture. Rather than a mere science-fiction spectacle, *Inception* emerges as a dramatization of how memory is shaped, distorted, and weaponized by emotional trauma, and of how, through Ariadne's insistence and

Cobb's eventual accommodation, it can also be reworked.

Through its interdisciplinary framework, this analysis bridges cognitive psychology and narrative criticism to address broader cultural concerns about the instability of truth in an age of curated digital realities. By reading the film through a Piagetian lens, this study not only fills a critical gap in existing scholarship but also illustrates how cinema can visualize psychological theory while engaging collective anxieties about identity, trauma, and epistemic collapse.

As a cultural artifact, *Inception* mirrors the dilemmas surrounding memory manipulation and perceptual doubt examined throughout this analysis. In a digital era shaped by the same algorithmic suggestion and synthetic media linked above to Cobb's totem fixation, the film's recursive dreamworld becomes eerily prescient rather than merely speculative. Cobb's disorientation is not isolated; it echoes a collective condition in which personal memory, emotional residue, and technological interference converge. This cognitive-cultural reading thus positions *Inception* as more than a film: it becomes a philosophical mirror, reflecting the fragile architecture of the modern mind.

This study also opens pathways for future research that bridges cognitive psychology and cultural theory in film analysis. As speculative cinema increasingly dramatizes internal mental processes—from memory to moral reasoning—it becomes a fertile ground for examining how narrative structures reflect evolving models of the mind. Applying Piagetian frameworks beyond developmental contexts enables a more dynamic understanding of how stories, like cognition itself, adapt in response to conflict, trauma, and transformation. In this light, *Inception* is not only a filmic exploration of memory and identity, but also a cultural blueprint that mirrors how we think, doubt, and reconstruct truth in an age of blurred boundaries.

REFERENCES

Anderson, M. C., Bjork, R. A., & Bjork, E. L. (2020). Retrieval-induced forgetting: Evidence for a recall-specific mechanism. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *149*(6), 1129–1144. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000712

Bridge, D. J., & Paller, K. A. (2022). Neural correlates of reactivation and retrieval-induced distortion. *Journal of Neuroscience*, *42*(15), 3328–3341. https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2021-21.2022

Brewin, C. R. (2021). Memory processes in post-traumatic stress disorder. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, *1*(4), 247–258. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00036-8

Clark, A. (2018). Predictive processing and cognitive agency. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 41, e1. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X17001987

Evans, J. S. B. T. (2019). Dual-process theories: Perspectives and problems. *Thinking & Reasoning*, *25*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2018.1471462

Hohwy, J. (2020). Self-supervision, normativity, and the free energy principle. *Synthese*, *199*(1), 29–53. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02622-2

Oatley, K. (2022). Fiction as cognitive and emotional simulation. *Review of General Psychology*, *26*(2), 169–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/10892680211068927

Rubin, D. C. (2021). Schema-driven construction of autobiographical memories. *Memory Studies*, *14*(3), 384–

399. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020985412

Schacter, D. L. (2023). Memory distortion: An adaptive perspective. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *27*(8), 685–698. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2023.05.003

Simons, J. S., Garrison, J. R., & Johnson, M. K. (2022). Brain mechanisms of reality monitoring. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 143, 104937. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.104937

Sterzer, P., Adams, R. A., Fletcher, P., Frith, C., Lawrie, S. M., Muckli, L., Petrovic, P., Uhlhaas, P., Voss, M., & Corlett, P. R. (2023). Predictive processing in psychiatric disorders. *JAMA Psychiatry*, *80*(1), 47–55. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2022.3424

Wade, K. A., Garry, M., & Pezdek, K. (2020). Deconstructing rich false memories of committing crime. *Psychological Science*, *31*(5), 513–523. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620905568

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow. Farrar, Straus and Giroux*.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*. International Universities Press.

Piaget, J. (1977). *The Development of Thought: Equilibration of Cognitive Structures*. Viking Press.

Nolan, C. (Director). (2010). *Inception* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.