Sharing a Dream of Skepticism: Parasitism, Plagiarism and Fanaticism in Christopher Nolan's Inception.

By Stephen Mulhall

WHEN A FILM PROJECTS A WORLD IN WHICH PEOPLE CAN NOT ONLY SHAPE and inhabit one another's dreams but follow one another into dreams undergone within *those* dreams (and even into dreams undergone within those dreams) in order to exploit our proneness to take our dreams for reality, in which these manipulative protagonists themselves require a means of private reassurance in order securely to distinguish reality from the nested dreams in which they operate, and in which two central characters are driven to the point of madness by a quarrel over whether their world is real or merely a dream, then I hope I can take it for granted that it has an interest in what philosophy calls skepticism—as so famously epitomised in the Cartesian meditator's attempt to subvert our conviction in the reality of the world as revealed to our senses by asking us to consider whether we have any way of distinguishing these revelations from what presents itself to us as reality when we are dreaming, and so whether we have any reason to accept our current sensory testimony as veridical, or indeed to keep faith with the very idea of a world external to our experience which that experience might either reveal or conceal.

For a long time now, however, my understanding of the architecture of philosophical skepticism has been shaped by Stanley Cavell's Wittgensteinian conception of it as under study in Shakespeare as tragedy, and in (some of the best) Hollywood films as comedy and melodrama—more specifically, as what is at stake when marriage is either ratified (as in the comedies of remarriage) or rejected (as in the melodramas of the unknown woman). So what struck me most forcibly on a first viewing of *Inception* was the extent to which its projection of skepticism appeared responsive to the contours of that Cavellian reshaping, to the point at which even when it exhibited inversions or reversals of key conceptual polarities in Cavell's vision, it proved the general validity of that vision precisely

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by extending it fruitfully in unforeseeable directions; for only a vision of the sceptical field that was deeply inward with Cavell's own could subject it to such fatefully precise contestation.

Before I can begin to assess the trajectory and consequences of their differences, however, I must establish the basic commonality of Nolan's and Cavell's vision of skepticism; and that in turn will require a recapitulation of Cavell's conception of the shape (and the reshaping) of skepticism in Wittgenstein, in Shakespearean theatre and in the Golden Age of Hollywood.[1]

1. Knowing Men, Unknown Women

On Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, skepticism about the existence of the external world cannot be refuted; but neither can it be accepted, at least not in the terms in which it presents itself for our acceptance. For the philosophical sceptic undertakes to reveal to us that we cannot claim to know that the external world exists, thereby presuming both that we think of ourselves as knowing or being certain that it exists, and that we should instead think of ourselves as doubtful or uncertain of it; and his opponent traditionally undertakes to demonstrate that we can and should claim to possess the certainty that the sceptic claims we lack, by refuting his grounds for doubt. According to Cavell, the real difficulty is one in which both parties to this dispute are equally implicated, and to which they are equally blind—namely, the deeper presumption that the human relation to the world is fundamentally one of knowing (or of failing to know), that is, that it is an essentially cognitive relation; for on Wittgenstein's perception of the matter, that relation cannot intelligibly be characterized in such terms as knowledge, doubt, certainty, or belief.

That particular things in the world are thus-and-so—that the pen is in the drawer, or that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch—is something of which we might be doubtful, or that we might believe as opposed to knowing with certainty; but it makes no more sense to claim to know that the world as a whole or as such (the worldly horizon or context within which we relate cognitively to particular objects and states of affairs) exists than to claim that there are grounds for doubting that it does. The world is not an object, not even an enormously large one, the largest; our relation to the world is not (as our relation to objects might often reasonably aspire to be) one of knowing—such a way of conceptualizing it makes that relation more distant, less intimate than it really is; it is rather one of acceptance (or rejection), accepting (and accepting responsibility for) that in the absence of which any claim to know that something is thus-and-so would be empty, unintelligible.

On Wittgenstein's view of that matter, what one thereby takes responsibility for (or fails to) —what aligns speakers with their world—is grammar: the criteria in terms of which one identifies an object as the kind of object it is, and that constitute a speech-act (say, one of claiming to know or to doubt) as the kind of act it is. The sceptic is thus wrong to claim that our relation to the world is cognitively deficient, because he is wrong to conceive of it as cognitive in the first place; but then any opponent of skepticism who takes it as his task to refute the sceptic, by recovering certainty or knowledge in the face of such doubt, thereby retains the sceptic's fundamental assumption and so his

critique of skepticism merely gives it further expression.

The sceptic manages at once to acknowledge and to occlude the critical difference between objects and the world by attempting to imagine a context in which the fate of a particular claim to know an object might appear intelligibly to figure the fate of our capacity to word the world as such. This would be a best case of knowledge—the kind that leads us to say 'If I don't know this, I don't know anything'; and a best case of knowledge necessarily involves what Cavell calls a generic rather than a specific object (or better, an object conceived of generically rather than specifically). A specific object would be a Louis XVI chair (as opposed to one designed by William Morris) or a goldfinch (as opposed to a sparrow); the claim to know that this chair is a Louis XVI or that this bird is a goldfinch can be questioned and settled by the citation of criteria: a concrete ground for doubting the truth of a concretely entered claim can be countered by a ground for rejecting the (ground for) doubt: 'True, sparrows also have those eye-markings but not that distinctive wing shape.' A generic object is a tomato or a chair—not one genus of tomato as opposed to another, but a tomato taken simply as exemplary of objects in general (of objecthood or externality as such), and taken as presenting itself to us in cognitively exemplary circumstances (with no specific ground for doubting our capacity to know of its real presence, no respect in which we are less well placed than we could be for the making of that judgement): 'If there is legitimate ground for doubting that that thing is really there, here and now, then the cognitive accessibility of the world as such is uncertain.'

If there were some deficiency in our expertise or our position with respect to this tomato, then a doubt about its identity or its reality might be made to stick; but by the same token, that doubt would not generalize—would not indict human cognitive capacities as such. It is only in the absence of such local deficiencies that the fate of knowledge as a whole, and so the reality of the world as a whole, can appear to be at stake; but then the difficulty for the sceptic is to enter or invoke a ground for doubt that we are willing (even compelled) to take seriously, to regard as intelligible, despite floating free of any specific feature of the subject, object and context under interrogation—a willingness that would force us to regard ourselves as being in a position to enter an intelligible claim to know that object, in the absence of any concrete other to whom those words might intelligibly convey information, knowledge that we could imagine him lacking. And for Cavell, that problem is insuperable, because resolving it would require the criteria in terms of which we articulate our basic grasp of objects to function as criteria of existence, made to settle the sheer reality of things, when they are in fact and could only be criteria of identity—criteria for something's being *so* (this as opposed to that) rather than for something's *being* so (being real, really there as opposed to illusory or otherwise unreal).

This means, first, that we cannot use criteria to rebut doubts about the sheer existence or reality of things: there are no criteria satisfied by a real chair or tomato that could not be satisfied by a chair or tomato encountered in a dream or a hallucination (as Kant puts it, existence is not a predicate, not a matter of a thing's possession or lack of a specific feature or features). And second, it means that the criterial alignment of speakers with the world is something that can indeed suffer failure: the failure is one of will as opposed to cognition (call it the

willingness or capacity to make sense, to consent to continue employing criteria, taking responsibility for their application, accepting the world they disclose); but failure it nonetheless is, and equally catastrophic in its way (since such a failure or withdrawal of consent amounts to a loss of intelligibility, the onset of disorientation in the world and within oneself as an inhabitant and articulator of that world).

In the modern era, of course, skepticism comes in two main variants: as well as skepticism about the external world, there is skepticism about other minds; and Cavell's conception of the complex relation between these two expressions of the sceptical impulse can be illuminated by asking whether there can be a best case of knowledge of another mind. On the one hand, even though the recognition of others possessed of minds like our own involves the application of a distinction within our world (rather than casting doubt on that world as such), generating a concrete ground for doubting that another humanoid creature is minded (as opposed to being an artefact, or a zombie) will still face the double bind of aspiring to generalize doubt on the basis of a concrete ground: either the ground is specific, and so won't generalize, or it will lack any specificity, and to precisely that extent will lack any content. On the other hand, if we recollect Cavell's conviction that our relation to the world is one of acceptance rather than cognition, then we should expect there to be an analogous contrast available in the other minds case—that, say, the reality of other minds should be seen as a matter not of knowledge but of what Cavell calls acknowledgement or its absence. To acknowledge another, however, requires acknowledging that other's relation to me (I cannot acknowledge this woman as my daughter without acknowledging myself as her father); and this reflexive structure holds open the possibility that acknowledgement will single out both knower and known. So our question about a best case of knowledge amounts to asking: is there a case in which a given other embodies my view of psychic reality as such, an other who is (not generically or unexceptionably other but) exemplary of all others, of humanity as a whole? Is there a particular other upon whom I stake my capacity for acknowledgement (which means my capacity for acknowledging the existence of others and for revealing my own existence to those others) altogether?

Note first that there is no general a priori answer to the question, so formulated: whether there is a best case of knowledge of other minds is for each person to answer for himself or herself, whereas with external world skepticism, if there is a best case at all, it is available in principle to all, impersonally. If, however, we were to acknowledge the existence of such an exemplary other, then the very singularity of the relationship would allow skepticism to generalize (rather than disallowing it): for if I cannot credit what *this* other shows and says to me, then the remainder of the world and my capacities in it will become irrelevant—matters not beyond my knowledge but past my caring. I am not removed from the world; it is dead for me. All for me is but toys; there is for me no new tomorrow; my chaos is come (again?). In short, skepticism about other minds begins to disclose itself in the terms of Shakespearean tragedy: what philosophy encounters as an intellectual difficulty is dramatized in the relationships between Lear and Cordelia, or Othello and Desdemona, as a matter of psychic life and death. These couples live their skepticism, with the women bearing the brunt of the men's jealousy,

vengefulness, and narcissism, their inability to acknowledge the woman's separateness or independence.

But Cavell is not content to utilize Shakespeare simply to contrast other minds skepticism with external world skepticism; he is equally concerned to elaborate the idea that the former is allegorical of the latter. One ground for that idea lies in another aspect of the grammar of the concepts of belief and doubt: since their primary use is to characterize one's relation to the claims of others (we believe or doubt others' testimony, and so believe what they tell us), the sceptic's willingness to employ them to characterize one's relation to the external world places that world in the position of a speaker, someone lodging a claim on us (so that the grammar of belief discloses the idea of the generic object as a displacement or inflection of the exemplary other). This is a vision of the world as not only animate, but as making claims upon us within a relationship of exclusive intimacy; and it recasts external world skepticism as having an affective as well as a cognitive significance—quite as if a loss of conviction in the reality of that world would place it past our caring as well as beyond our knowledge (so that our ways of picturing our relation to it betray an emotional dimension analogous to that disclosed in other minds skepticism – acting as covers for, and so as expressions, of love, jealousy, hatred, and despair concerning the reality of its independence from us). One might say that, just as the concept of acknowledgement incorporates that of knowledge by tying it to a requirement for a response, so with the concept of acceptance: this idea of the world as requiring an acknowledgement of its independent reality, and so an acknowledgement of ourselves as transient inhabitants of that world, hence finite or conditioned, is what ties skepticism on Cavell's view of the matter to Romanticism.

For our purposes, however, the most significant of Shakespeare's stagings of skepticism for Cavell is *The Winter's Tale*, and for two reasons. First, in that play, Cavell understands skepticism to be presented as inflected by gender: for if we accept Leontes as giving expression to sceptical doubt in the form of jealousy, then that jealousy itself takes the form of a doubt about whether his child is really his (a doubt he recites in good Cartesian fashion by looking for specific physiognomic features possessed by both, then ruling out the testimony of others, then considering his dreams, all the while insisting that he is being reasonable). But such a doubt is not one to which the child's mother has access (as Cavell puts it, 'What would it look like for Hermione to doubt whether her children are hers?'[2]): it is the doubt of a father, a man's anxiety. Does this mean that skepticism as such a not a female business at all, or at least not the business of the feminine aspect of human character more generally? Or does it rather mean that sceptical doubt will, in the female or feminine case, take either another object (say, the father of the child rather than the child) or another passion (say, fanatical or unconditioned love rather than hyperbolic doubt)?

The second reason for giving priority to *The Winter's Tale* is that Cavell cites it (and in particular its presentation of Hermione's death and resurrection at the hands of Leontes and Paulina) as one of two canonical theatrical sources for the genre of remarriage comedy that he identified through an interpretation of seven films made in Hollywood's Golden Age. These individual films do not belong to that genre by virtue of manifesting some single set of features that

are necessary or sufficient for membership, as if each mindlessly reiterated the essence of every other: on Cavell's view, their generic relationship rather depends upon their common inheritance of certain conditions, procedures, subjects, and goals that are subject to critical study in each of the films. One might think of this inheritance as a myth of which each film provides an interpretation (and thereby an interpretation of other films in the genre). It may do so by emphasising a certain aspect of that inheritance, or even by omitting one such aspect altogether (call this testing its claim to essentiality); but if a particular film does lack an established clause or feature of the myth, then it must compensate for that lack by the provision of another feature, which will itself contribute to a further, more fruitful interpretation of the original myth. So understood, a genre of film functions as an artistic medium.

The founding myth of the medium of remarriage comedy emerges by contrast with that of Old and New Comedy; its goal is not to get two young people together despite the obstacles in their path, but rather to get two rather less young people together again, back together in the face of a quarrel which has pushed them apart. In order to do so, the woman must receive a certain kind of transformative education that will allow her to awaken again to her desire, and the man must prove his right to provide that education by manifesting a certain willingness to suffer humiliation in the pursuit of his desires, and more generally by a capacity to sustain a meet and happy conversation with the woman, one through which they acknowledge a mutuality of desire and a shared imagination of a diurnal mode of existence that would constitute its satisfaction.

If membership of this genre is primarily constructed by the operation of compensation, then an adjacent (that is, a different but internally related) genre can be constructed by the operation of negation—that is, by positively cancelling clauses or features of the founding myth of remarriage comedy without providing anything resembling recompense for their absence, anything that might be thought of as forging even a radical reinterpretation or recounting (hence a continuation) of that myth as opposed to the founding of a new (but of course not entirely unrelated) myth. And the genre Cavell called 'The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman' is derived by just such an operation. For whilst it retains a concern with the legitimization of marriage, it focuses upon women who could neither manage nor relish relationships with men of the kind their comedic sisters construct, and so must achieve genuine existence (or fail to) apart from marriage. They lack a common language with the (always inadequate and often villainous) men of their world, so that their words are pervaded with an isolating irony, often rising to arias of severance from all around them, to which those around them react with bewildered hostility. This vision of the crippling, self-lacerating, and mutually victimizing loneliness of such (mis-)marriages is at the heart of Milton's sustained pleas for divorce, and finds canonical theatrical expression in Ibsen's *A Doll House*; and the route to re-creation or recovery canvassed by the women of the melodramas involves a systematic negation of the existing world's claims upon them, in the name of a higher, unattained state of society in which alone genuine individuality is attainable for them, and apart from which that society's claims upon them are shown to lack any real authority.

The connection between the preoccupations of these related genres of

film and those of philosophical skepticism depends upon taking marriage (call it the inhabitation of the domestic) as the artistic equivalent of the domain of the ordinary or the everyday against which sceptical doubt directs its attentions. Then we should expect the threat to the ordinary that skepticism represents to show up in art in the form of (most likely melodramatic) threats to marriage such as divorce, and to see the issue of the legitimization of marriage as a figure for the issue of legitimately overcoming skepticism's desire for a divorce from one another and from reality. Seen this way, the men and women of the remarriage comedies manage to overcome skepticism, even if they can do so only by constructing a domain of domesticity whose ratification by mutual acknowledgement remains a private rather than a public matter (its validation being something over which the state exercises no authority, despite the fact that its validity amounts to a ratification of the society whose arrangements tolerate it). By contrast, the women of the melodramas either succumb to sceptical fantasies of revenge and fanaticism induced or reinforced by those around them, or they manage to refuse those temptations and keep private faith with the reality of their own existence as unknown, as currently unacknowledged although capable of acknowledgement in some as yet unrealized future; but either way, they suffer divorce from their world – from its arrangements, its inhabitants and its words.

2. Totems And Criteria

SUPPOSE WE THINK OF THE COMPLEX AND RAMIFYING MATERIAL I HAVE JUST RECOUNTED as Stanley Cavell's evolving myth of skepticism (part of which tells us that skepticism finds different mythological expression in different fields of culture—philosophical, theatrical, cinematic); then we can think of the world of *Inception* as Christopher Nolan's cinematic revision of that myth. But one of the ways in which Nolan revises Cavell is by creating his revision of Cavell's myth by means of operations upon its philosophical, theatrical and cinematic manifestations that are not properly characterized either as ones of compensation or of negation—at least not as Cavell employs those terms in recounting his conception of cinematic genres. Nolan's characteristic mode of operation is indeed to negate specific articulations of Cavell's myth, but in ways that do not appear to generate an adjacent myth so much as a revision of the original—so that one appears forced to call it negation as compensation, or compensation as negation. The best way of illustrating what I mean is to make it concrete by tracing the significance of two elements that are central to the world of Inception, and showing thereby the extent to which they become fully comprehensible only against the background of Cavell's myth of skepticism. The two I have in mind are the role of the totem, and the figure of Mal.

The central members of the team that Dom Cobb has assembled for his current work as an extractor (which involves introducing targeted individuals into dreamworlds constructed by other team-members—known as architects—with a view to locating and extracting commercially valuable secrets) have adopted a rather theatrical means of establishing the reality of any world in which they find themselves, one that was invented by Cobb's dead wife Mal: they use a totem—a small, everyday object that they have altered in a way that they reveal to no-one else (Arthur has a loaded die, Ariadne a fractionally unbalanced chess piece,

and Cobb makes use of Mal's original totem—a pewter cone that can revolve on its axis like a miniature spinning top). However painstaking the architect of a dreamworld might have been, he cannot have reproduced in his dream-representation of a totem any feature of its real original that is known only to its possessor; so any extractor can always tell whether she is inhabiting a dream designed and realized by someone else simply by checking whether her totem possesses its talismanic property.

Of all the seductive images projected by *Inception*, Cobb's totem is the one most viewers will carry away with them—if only because of the film's ending, in which the camera first shows us Cobb reunited with his children, then tracks back to reveal the cone he has set spinning on the kitchen table, as it continues to spin, then begins ever so slightly to wobble, or at least to sound as if it is wobbling slightly, or might be doing so; but the screen fades to black without allowing us to see whether or not it falls, and so without allowing it to determine whether or not this reunion scene is real (in which case the top will inevitably stop spinning) or merely something in a dream (in which case it will keep on spinning without end). In a film which has managed to present us with a dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream, each dream world the setting for a distinct narrative that is nevertheless cunningly interwoven with the other two narratives, all of which culminate in the inhabitants of these dreams re-emerging into the reality of a long flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, what could be more vital than establishing the reality of that reality? Hence the frustrated pleasure of so many viewers, deprived of this crucial piece of information; hence also the question of whether Nolan's refusal to supply that information amounts to an evasion of his responsibilities (a failure to resolve an absolutely fundamental issue in the world he has created) or an acknowledgement of the viewer's autonomy (whether because the film elsewhere provides everything we need to work out the answer to this question, or because it means to leave us with the room to determine for ourselves what the right answer should be).

Anyone familiar with Cavell's Wittgensteinian way of envisioning skepticism will, however, already be suspicious of what is being presupposed by both the makers and the viewers of Inception insofar as their assignments of significance to its totems presuppose their possession of such anti-sceptical power. For to believe in such power would be to believe that the difference between reality and dream might be established by establishing whether an object possesses or lacks a particular feature—that one might tell the difference by means of the satisfaction or otherwise of criteria; it would, in other words, amount to assuming that the possession of a piece of criterial knowledge might constitute a definitive rebuttal of sceptical doubt. Whereas on Cavell's view of the matter, the truth of skepticism lies precisely in its revelation of the fact that the difference between reality and dream, whilst critical, is not criterial; it is not a matter of knowledge but of acknowledgement (understood in this case as acceptance).

Matters are not quite so simple, or so simply unCavellian, as they may appear, however. For the film foregrounds, and so apparently takes as exemplary of its various totems, the one Cobb inherits from Mal—the spinning cone; it thereby invites us to consider just how generic of totemhood that instance really is, and the moment we take up that invitation, specific differences begin to multiply. To begin

with, whereas the critical properties of the die and the chess piece are manifest to touch, that of the cone is purely visual (a matter of showing rather than telling), and so is uniquely well-suited to revealing the (un)reality of things as easily to viewers of the film as to its protagonist. Furthermore, whereas the cone's tell-tale property reveals the capacity of dreams to suspend or violate basic physical laws, the die and the pawn reveal unreality in ways essentially unrelated to that aspect of its nature; more specifically, the cone's way of revealing the unreality of its world allegorizes existence in a dream in just the way exploited by the nested-dream architecture and plotting of the film as a whole—that is, as frictionless free fall, so that the world of a dream not only lacks weight or substance, but is essentially limited in its ability to make a real impact on its inhabitants, as if its ways of limiting or conditioning them (and so declaring its independent reality) are fundamentally attenuated.

Most significantly of all, however, whereas the die and the pawn do their revelatory work by virtue of properties that distinguish them from other objects of the same kind, the cone does its work solely by virtue of a capacity that it shares with all other such cones, and indeed with all other physical objects (its subjection to physical law). Hence, whereas Arthur and Ariadne use their totems by exploiting a private cognitive resource that sharply distinguishes their position in relation to the totem's criterial property from that of any other human knower, what Cobb knows about his totem is not only knowable but actually known by anyone who knows what it is for an object to inhabit the spatio-temporal system of nature; more precisely, it is something that no-one who grasps what it is for an object to be an object (who grasps the concept of an object) could possibly fail to know, something of which no competent worder of the world (a group which includes not only every other person in the world of the film, but also every viewer of it) could conceivably be informed.

In Cavellian terms, then, whereas Arthur and Ariadne attempt to ward off sceptical doubt by means of specific objects, Cobb does so by means of a generic object; only his cone might be thought of as exemplary of objecthood as such, sheer externality. Hence only Cobb is confronted with a best case of knowledge: only with respect to his totem might its possessor intelligibly think: 'If I don't know this, then I don't know anything.' And the film makes it clear that Cobb suffers the consequences of this singling out: for whereas Arthur and Ariadne are never shown to make use of their totems, let alone to display anything resembling sceptical anxiety about the existential status of the real world or any of the nested dreams they inhabit, Cobb is obsessively anxious to spin his cone after every exit from what he believes to be a dream world (whether in Japan, in Mombasa, or in the USA). In other words, and exactly as the terms of Cavell's myth would predict, of all the extractors, only Cobb suffers from—indeed, is increasingly disabled by—sceptical doubt, until its climactic overcoming in his encounter with Mal in Limbo.

So should we say, on reflection, that Nolan's revisioning of skepticism is not essentially anti- or un-Cavellian but rather absolutely Cavellian in its architecture? Alas, even to pose the question in such terms is to fail to register a further reach of significance in the film's apparent assignment of totemic significance to its totems in relation to skepticism. For although it has seemed

almost impossible for viewers of the film to hear or to take this in, the film makes it clear at the moment of their introduction that the extractors' totems are designed to address a problem essentially distinct from the one that philosophy attempts to raise by raising the question of how we know that the world we currently experience is not a dream. The problem totems are intended to solve is that of establishing whether or not one is inhabiting the world of another person's dream (an issue that is of pressing importance to people whose working lives are devoted to passing off dreamworlds created by others as dreams of the subjects inserted into those worlds); they are not intended to, and they patently could not, solve the problem of establishing whether or not the possessor of the totem is currently inhabiting a dream of their own (since in that case, the dreamer—who in this case is also the architect of the dream—knows everything about the totem that its possessor does, given that dreamer, architect, and totem-possessor are one and the same person). But it is precisely the latter problem that the phenomenon of dreaming, as canonically invoked by the Cartesian meditator, is meant to raise.

It would seem to follow that the significance of the film's culminating and teasing preoccupation with Cobb's spinning cone cannot be what it appears to be. For at that point, if the film's viewers experience any sceptical anxiety, it surely concerns the canonically philosophical doubt about whether Cobb has actually succeeded in really returning to his actual children, or merely in inhabiting a wish-fulfilling dream of his own devising (the anxiety voiced by his father and teacher Miles during their interview in Paris). But if he were, then he (or rather, his subconscious) would know that in order to convince himself of the dream's reality he must dream that the cone stops spinning; so we could expect it to stop no matter what the truth of things is. Indeed, even if he were instead inhabiting the world of another dreamer, that dreamer would no more contemplate realizing a world in which cones went on spinning for ever than would Cobb himself (it is not as if such unearthly behaviour—unlike that of paradoxical structures like Penrose staircases—would serve any pragmatic architectural purpose); so again the cone is bound to stop spinning. Either way, then, Cobb's totem evinces an ineptitude to which neither Arthur's die nor Ariadne's pawn are subject; it necessarily fails to perform the task apparently assigned to it—that of giving him, and so us, assurance as to the reality of his world.

Can Christopher Nolan simply have misunderstood so basic a point about the original shape of philosophical skepticism? I would prefer to consider another possibility: that it is only by appreciating the failure of totems directly to address the primary or primal form of sceptical doubt that we can properly appreciate their significance as elements in Nolan's attempt to revise Cavell's myth of skepticism. For what the film encourages us to do is to conflate (and so to reflect upon the internal relatedness of) two anxieties about the existential status of our current experience: a doubt about whether we are confusing reality with a dreamworld of our own devising, and one about whether we are confusing it with a dreamworld of another's devising. Canonically understood, skepticism is a doubt that tries to address an essentially isolated subject, that attempts to engender anxiety about the deliverances of the subject's senses solely by invoking resources internal or private to the subject himself; skepticism about the external world could not, after all, consistently engender itself by means which presuppose the reality of someone

other than the subject, some other subject (who would have to be external to the subject of the doubt). But in the world of Inception, the subject's anxiety about the unreality of his experience derives from a suspicion that it possesses only the reality of another's dream. Accordingly, Nolan's reason for so reformulating it may be to suggest that the canonical Cartesian expression of sceptical doubt by the invocation of dreaming is a cover for the form it takes in Inception.

So taken, it would reinforce the Cavellian assumption that external world skepticism is allegorical of other minds skepticism, so that the logical privacy of the resources deemed permissible in the canonical Cartesian recital of skepticism is an expression of the human desire to deny the reality of other minds; and it would further suggest that a primary reason for that denial is that one primarily experiences other minds as always already internal to one's own, as having designed and realized the world that one's subconscious wishes to think of as its own, to the point of striving murderously to eradicate any elements of that world that it deems to have their origin outside itself (as Robert Fischer's militarized projections devote themselves to doing at every dream-level of the central heist scenario).

The devotion of the protagonists of the world of Inception to their totems is thus not an expression of a concern with something other than skepticism; it is an expression of Christopher Nolan's Cavellian re-interpretation of skepticism as primarily a doubt about the reality of other minds, a doubt which in turn conceals a vision of the reality of other minds as undeniable, more precisely as undeniably threatening to dispossess the subject of his own mind, to claim ownership of that which is most intimately his, possession of himself in all his privacy or interiority. In this way, skepticism disguises and discloses an anxiety about whether the innermost contents of our minds are ours, something we possess inalienably, or rather essentially the possessions of others, whether because they can dispossess us of them (extraction) or deceive us into accepting what originated with them as having originated with us (inception). It thereby inverts the epistemological polarities of the Cartesian cogito (according to which only immediate self-certainty escapes sceptical doubt), so that certainty about the independent reality of other minds is not only given but also deprives us of any certainty about the independent reality of our own; and it also reinterprets Descartes' sense that a perception of God as Creator will alone permit us to recover the world from our bastion of self-certainty – for (in the light of God's death) the idea of our world as another's creation acquires a paranoid tinge, promising only a threat to its and our integrity. This is a vision of sceptical anxiety as concealing (and so betraying) a conception of ourselves as inherently or inveterately either plagiarizing or plagiarized, hence of human beings as the site of crimes against intellectual property.

3. Leontes, Lady Macbeth, And Mal

This connection allows us to move from the first to the second of the two elements I earlier proposed to isolate and explore in Nolan's revision of Cavell's myth of skepticism—from the image of the totem to the vision of a cursed marriage that grounds the film's elaborate heist scenario in human reality. For Cobb's motivation for involving himself in the business of extraction in the first place was his desire to return to his children in the United States; and his willingness to

attempt inception on Robert Fischer is grounded in his client's promise to make the criminal charges that currently prevent him from re-entering the United States disappear permanently. Hence, as the heist scenario unfolds in a broadly linear way, we are also given (by means of episodic flashbacks narrated by Cobb) the key fragments of the story of how and why he has been left responsible for those children on his own, and invited to fit them together into the following portrait of a marriage.

Cobb trained as an architect in the traditional sense before being introduced by Miles to the chemical-induced business of dream-sharing, which his father valued as a way in which architects might not only realize even their most fantastic ideas but share them with others.[3] Mal was another such student, of French extraction: they got married and had two children, whilst continuing to explore the world of dreamsharing, and in particular the concept of dreams nested within dreams.[4] On one of these joint explorations, they went down so many dream levels that they encountered Limbo—'raw, unconstructed dream space—infinite and empty'. On the one hand, this realm maximized their joint capacity for creation, rendering it godlike in its scope; on the other, because at each succeeding dream level brain function speeds up (and hence the perceived passage of time slows) by a factor of twenty, Cobb and Mal experienced their residence in limbo as lasting for fifty years (and as capable in principle of continuing without any perceivable end). Mal's response to this offer of infinite scope in space and time was to accept it: already equipped with her cone totem, she created a safe within her limbo-reproduction of her childhood home in which to lock it away, thereby (as Cobb puts it) 'deciding to forget that our world wasn't real'. Cobb's response was, by contrast, to tire of this divine mode of being because he either couldn't or wouldn't forget its unreality. In order to get Mal to agree to return to reality (something that could only be achieved, as any upward transition between dream levels must be achieved in the world of *Inception*, by killing themselves), he hunts for and locates her safe, opens it, finds the cone sitting on its side, and sets it spinning again. Thus recalled to limbo's unreality, Mal lies with her husband on a set of train-tracks, and the two are catapulted back to reality by an onrushing freight train of their own creation. However, Mal brings with her the resilient idea that her world is not real, an idea which applies itself parasitically to the real world of their marriage and even to their children, whom she interprets as projections in a dream of her husband's to which she is currently being subjected, with her real children out of reach on the next level up: 'I'm their mother; don't you think I can tell the difference?' After failing to get Cobb to acknowledge the truth of her idea, she decides to place him in a position which will compel him to join her in another joint suicide pact, the necessary means of their reaching the 'real' real world. She sets the scene of their usual wedding anniversary celebrations in an elegant hotel room as the site of a violent struggle with her husband, whom she has described in a letter deposited with her lawyers as having threatened to kill her; so if he refuses to join her when she leaps from a window, he will be arraigned as her murderer, and so lose the children whose need for him she knows he will cite as his reason for staying in this dream of reality. She jumps, but he does not; and he manages to escape to Europe just before his arrest, although only by abandoning his children and abandoning himself thereby to a peripatetic

lifestyle in which he attempts to earn the money needed to overcome his legal difficulties by using the only talent he possesses. But every time he enters a dream world for extraction purposes, his projection of Mal bursts through from his own (supposedly professionally self-disciplined) subconscious to disrupt the team's manipulations with an extremity of coldly violent but calculated hostility.

A more concise recounting of this narrative might run as follows: Cobb and Mal awake from a shared dream in which they grew old together, to find that their marriage no longer constitutes a shared dream of mutually satisfied and fecund desire. Mal's loss of faith finds expression in a sceptical paroxysm: she turns their previously meet and happy conversations turn into a mutually uncomprehending argument about the reality of their present world, in the course of which her sceptical hypothesis turns out to be irrefutable by her husband, and she finds herself capable of doubting that her children are hers; her passion to reach a genuinely real reality is such that she is willing to abandon her children and force her husband to choose between suicide, incarceration, and exile in order to attain it. More specifically, she wants Cobb to choose death (and so real life) with her over life with their children (but without her); and in so doing, she recapitulates in reality what she had already declared in limbo, by locking away her knowledge of its unreality in order fully to inhabit a world of unending, mutually satisfying creative collaboration with her husband alone—a world in which it appears there is simply no room for children. This is the fanaticism of love: Cobb can truly be hers only if nothing and no-one else stands between them—only if they are everything to each other, exemplary of the world as such in a world that is utterly subject to their essentially single will. In comparison to this, the real world of independent others (including the autonomous offspring of their love) becomes as toys; she chooses to die to a world that has gone dead for her, and in a manner calculated to make chaos come again for her family.

The pervasiveness of Cavellian tropes and turns of phrase here is uncanny, and overwhelming. The shape and trajectory of Cobb's and Mal's relationship draw upon the founding myths of remarriage comedy and their companion melodramas with fanatically loving attention to detail; more precisely, their story pivots around the point at which the two people's prior willingness endlessly to remarry one another (in effect renewing their vows every time they return from dream to reality) runs out, in which their meet and happy conversation is negated by sceptical irony and mutual victimization, in which the root motive for their subjecting themselves to the accelerating threat of divorce (one person's passionate refusal to accept the other's independence, or the independent reality of the world they inhabit, or the internal relation between the two as that finds expression in the natural consequence of their sexual satisfaction) is apparently death-dealing.

So taken, *Inception* might be seen as addressing a question that the adjacency of the comedies and the melodramas invite us to pose: what happens to the spouse who appears immune to, or at least capable of resisting or overcoming, skepticism when the spouse who succumbs to it has definitively removed herself from the scene? How might someone whose self-legitimizing marriage was transformed into a mutually-lacerating travesty of itself survive the experience when the other partner to the marriage has placed herself absolutely

beyond recall, and so has placed the marriage essentially beyond recovery? In the comedies, the irruption of sceptical anxiety proves overcomeable in light of the couple's continuing willingness to remain available to educate one another; in the melodramas, when the unacknowledged woman divorces herself from the villainously inadequate man (even removes herself from the scene altogether, as Lisa does in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*), she reveals their relationship as never having been (or even having had the potential to be) mutually satisfying, hence not something that could be recovered or redeemed. The issue Cobb faces in *Inception* is (related but importantly) different: it is how to accept the incomprehensible and unalterable transformation of his marriage from a state in which it realized the best aspirations of the comedies to a state in which it realized the worst fears of the melodramas.

Such a reading of the film would present it as creatively revising the founding myths of these genres in order to address questions that are essentially continuous with, and so expressible in some revised version of the basic terms of, Cavell's myth of skepticism. One might even accommodate in this way one of the film's more pointed revisions of the myth of remarriage comedy, in which children are generally absent from the couple's lives, which Cavell interprets as making it possible for them to devote themselves more purely or exclusively to the mutuality of their imaginations of one another (which in part means keeping lines open to their own shared childhood, hence facing the challenge of parenting one another—a feature that Inception correspondingly negates by imagining its couple as having rather grown old together). On the one hand, *Inception* implies that Cobb and Mal initially and for some time succeeded in incorporating children into their meet and happy conversations, which suggests a certain narcissistic shallowness in the mutuality of the comedic couples; but on the other, their later presence proves to incite and concentrate lacerating tensions between them in just the manner predicted and studied in the companion melodramas (in which, as Cavell emphasizes, the women's maternal relation to children is insisted upon).

But the issue of children carries a further, more problematic charge in *Inception*: for the film utilizes that issue positively to negate a fatefully central clause or provision of the sceptical myth as it finds expression in the Shakespearean source of its cinematic incarnations, *The Winter's Tale*—the clause which states that insofar as skepticism finds expression as a doubt as to whether your children are yours, it is not a feminine business. For *Inception* does everything it can to underline the fact that Mal is precisely someone whose skepticism finds expression in that form, and thereby dictates the basic shape of events in her world: the fate of her children is the fundamental issue for its protagonist, and its resolution provides the climax of the film. One might say that it provides an answer to the rhetorical question I earlier reported Cavell as posing in this vicinity, showing it thereby to be something other than purely rhetorical: Mal is what it would look like if Hermione doubted whether her children were hers.

Might we say that the apparent conflict here between Nolan's and Cavell's ways of seeing things dissolves if we utilize the latter's distinction between the female (as opposed to the male) and the feminine (as opposed to the masculine), and conclude that Mal is, although a woman, giving expression to the masculine side of her (and of human) character? Matters cannot be quite that simple:

for in response to his revelation of skepticism as a gendered business, Cavell canvasses two possible ways of distinguishing its feminine from its masculine inflections—by reference to the object of the doubt, and by reference to its prevailing passion. The object of Mal's doubt is definitely masculine (the children as opposed to their father, and as subject to the telling of specific differences); but her passion—being an exemplary instance of obsessive or fanatical love, a drive towards an unconditioned form of its fulfilment that amounts to a refusal of finitude (as manifest in her devotion to the Limbo version of her marriage)—is equally definitely feminine. And yet Cavell also ends his discussion of the fanaticism of love understood as the refusal of finitude with the (far from transparent) declaration that 'this... is what permits me to describe Leontes as a portrait of the sceptic as fanatic'.[5] Perhaps, then, we should say that Mal is a projection of the actual Leontes rather than of an imaginary Hermione—that she is a cinematic realization of a Cavellian interpretation of Leontes' skepticism as combining masculine hyperbolic doubt with feminine hyperbolic love, hence of each inflection of skepticism as internally related to the other (and so as available either as a proxy or as a disguise for the other), as the feminine is to and for the masculine.

There is, however, a further complication—and one that connects the film's way of envisioning other minds skepticism most closely to its way of envisioning external world skepticism: the issue of plagiarism. For if Mal becomes possessed by the sceptical idea and destroys her husband and children as a consequence, how does it first come into her possession? The film's answer is clear: she brings it back with her into the real world because her husband devoted all of his energies in Limbo to the task of implanting it in her (achieving its inception by locating and manipulating the tell-tale cone which she had consigned to irrelevance out of love, so that it might once again activate her desire to reinhabit the everyday reality of their marriage and family life). Mal's subjection to skepticism, and her family's subsequent subjection to it, is thus ultimately the responsibility of her husband: the idea is his, although she gives it expression and application. In other words, Mal's fate is to live her husband's skepticism – the skepticism that he alone lives out after her death, as if having been always already made for it; and his simultaneous persecution by the monstrous hostility of his projections of Mal whenever he subsequently enters a dreamworld amounts to a further acknowledgement of his own guilt about the consequences of that originally sinful act of inception.

One response to this realization would be to transfer absolute responsibility for the cursing of the Cobb marriage from wife to husband, so that Mal is transformed from malignant demon to unknowing victim and Cobb from noble warrior against a lethal intellectual virus to ignoble manipulator and disseminator of it. And there is certainly a Cavellian case to be made against Cobb the inceptor of skepticism, since to a striking extent he exemplifies Cavell's conception of the villainous male of the melodramas—perhaps most directly the character of Paula's husband, Gregory Anton (played by Charles Boyer) in *Gaslight*, whose attempts to locate a hoard of jewels leads him to implant ideas in her mind which loosen her grip on reality, deprive her of words for the world of her experience and threaten to destroy the psyche they inhabit. Nolan's film

presents us with a comparable image of marriage as vampirism, cursed, or curdled intimacy as a matter of one life's sapping of another; and it elaborates its version of that image by touching upon another key reference point in Cavell's explorations of this topic—his deployment of texts from Freud and Henry James to suggest that the masculine inflection of other-minds skepticism takes the form of wanting to know what the woman knows.[6] That is, the male sceptic pictures the woman's unknownness as a matter of her knowing something that he does not, something she prevents him from knowing by withholding it, locating it somewhere inaccessibly private; and he devotes himself to gaining control over it, whether by penetrating that privacy or by ensuring that whatever it contains never finds expression—both approaches being routes for mastering the woman's voice, more precisely for depriving her of a voice of her own. But this obsessive desire to open or close the woman's private chamber or closet is in fact a projection: it pictures her individual reality as posing a problem of knowledge rather than of acknowledgement, and it externalizes a secret about himself that he cannot not know but that he nevertheless refuses to acknowledge—call it the feminine register or tone of his own (human) voice, a register that he thinks of as essentially private in order (according to circumstances) either to account for his failure to use it, or to deny that it finds expression despite himself in everything he says.

Cobb's act of inception against his wife involves him in penetrating and manipulating the contents of just such a private space; he does so in order that she do what he wishes without doing it because she wants to do it, so that from that point on her life and her voice are no longer her own; and even after her real voice is silenced, she endlessly re-appears within him as a persecutory self-projection, more specifically as someone who knows everything he does (from whom nothing can be hidden or withheld) and whose implacable hostility must therefore give expression to a feminine aspect of himself that he experiences as essentially beyond his control and as having violent and lethal designs on his subjectivity. His initial response to this incessant self-betrayal is to attempt to imprison his wife in a chamber of memories of their marriage before its encounter with Limbo, an unstable stack of self-serving scenarios in which he claims in effect to know that she is happy, and nothing but happy (as wife, as mother)—to tell her what there is to know about herself, to determine who she is. And his redemption comes only when he allows himself to engage in an increasingly emancipatory relationship with another woman (Ariadne), whose conversational thread leads him through his internal labyrinth to acknowledge what he did to initiate Mal's skepticism, which brings him for the first time to acknowledge both her and him, and so to acknowledge the Minotaur of their marriage as a thing of the past—available to memory and in unaccommodated subconscious drives, but essentially beyond recovery or redemption, to be mourned but not to be fixated upon. As for the children: they get their father back in the end, but hardly free of guilt not only in relation to their mother but in relation to them. After all, in the aftermath of Mal's suicide he was not willing to risk his own liberty in order to stay close to them; and the primary effect of Mal-as-projection during his sojourn in exile from America is to disrupt his extraction plans, and thereby to defer his return to his home and his offspring. To blame those delays on Mal would be to conflate her projection with her real self; Mal-as-projection is in truth Cobb's

way of delaying himself, of maintaining himself at a distance from his children, converting them into a fantasy.[7]

In the end, however, to demonize Cobb would be no more accurate to the film's perception of things than to demonize Mal. After all, it is Mal rather than Cobb who first creates the private safe, and invents its resident (not to mention investing it with totemic status); and he violates that safe only in response to her hyperbolic attempt to make their relationship infinite and all-consuming, thereby denying their finitude. As these details suggest, it would be more accurate to say that attempts to assign responsibility for the corruption of their marriage to one party or the other fail to appreciate the most significant thing about it—the fact that the boundary between Mal and Cobb is one that neither finds it possible to draw, or to acknowledge. Just as their creations in Limbo are essentially joint affairs, so neither seems in a position confidently to claim any idea about themselves or their world to be theirs as opposed to their partner's. Ownership of the sceptical idea is not ultimately settleable—not because ideas possessed of such resilience transcend the idea of personal ownership, and not because the origin of an idea is as nothing compared to the uses to which they are put, but primarily because neither Mal nor Cobb has succeeded in acknowledging the separateness of each others' minds, and so each others' independent reality.

The Cavellian reference point here is his reading of *Macbeth*, according to which the Macbeth marriage is one in which each reads the other's mind so readily and exhaustively—each constantly articulating what the other has it in mind to say, or not saying what the other will not say, each imagining the other to have conceived of the idea on which he or she is acting, hence thinking of himself or herself as the embodiment or externalization of that other's thoughts—that they seem to be trapped or imprisoned in one another's minds, quite as if the idea that there are two such minds at issue remains unacknowledged or unrealized (and of course, in a way that raises questions about their children). This inflection of the cursed marriage as a species of vampirism is reflected not only in Nolan's presentation of Cobb's inability to mourn as a continuous dramatization of his mind as ineradicably inhabited by Mal, but also in the means of his redemption being his willingness to acknowledge that the Mal he encounters in his nested dreamworlds all the way down to Limbo is not Mal herself—not the real, independent person whose separateness is definitively established by the fact that her death does not cause or constitute his. Only when Cobb acknowledges himself as alive can he free himself from the limbo of his current existence, and confront the existing consequences of his love for his dead wife.

4. Conclusion: The Architect, the Dreamer, And The Subject

Imagine Inception as one of the dream worlds it contains; then Stanley Cavell's philosophical consciousness would be the subject of that dream, and Christopher Nolan its architect. This essay would then amount to an attempt to determine whether, and if so at what points, Cavell's subconscious might realize that it did not design or create the world in which it finds itself, and deploy its defensive projections in order to combat the foreign nature of the dreamer, like white bloods cells attacking an infection. In general, I have found that Nolan's revisions of the Cavellian myth of skepticism tend to diverge far less

straightforwardly or significantly than might at first appear to be the case, or at least that the most central of these divergences can be seen as unfolding ideas that were either implicit in Cavell's myth or that function to elaborate its underlying economy in fruitful directions; others may be more inclined to find that a more highly militarized response is appropriate.

What, however, if we regard the conceptual articulations of this essay as the architecture of a dream world of which Christopher Nolan is the subject? Would he sense the dispositions of that world as essentially foreign in nature to his own subconscious designs and goals—even as being so distant from his concerns as to constitute an essentially unrecognizable backdrop for his dreaming mind? The risk my interpretation of *Inception* runs is that it attempts an act of inception on the film's maker—that it attempts to pass off another's idea of skepticism as his own, thereby simultaneously denying Nolan's originality and assigning a god-like status to Cavell (as if he were the first cause of anything cinematically creative, essentially omnipresent and incapable of being transcended or outstripped). Put otherwise: is this essay's elaboration of a moment of critical inspiration more creation than it is discovery (to displace the film's own schema for creativity, as sketched by Cobb for Ariadne)? How might I tell the difference between being enabled by Cavell's originality to acknowledge the originality of others, and being disabled by it, to the point of denying the autonomous creativity of others (by finding that any world they construct amounts to an extraction from a Cavellian vision of reality) and losing the autonomy of my own experience (of this film, and of film more generally)? Perhaps by measuring the extent to which my interpretation allows for some degree of friction between subject and dream, and thereby some acknowledgement of the independence of the world I experience from my experiences of it (with its consequent capacity to apply the brakes to my freely spinning subjectivity).

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Notes

[1] For those wishing to explore in more detail the background to the next section of this essay, the relevant Cavell texts are, respectively: *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1979); *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003); and *Pursuits of Happiness* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1981) and *Contesting Tears* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1996).

[2] Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p 425.

[3] This is one of the very few points at which this essay's reading of Inception draws on information contained in the shooting script of the film rather than a transcript of the dialogue contained in its theatrical release consult Christopher Nolan, *Inception: The Shooting Script* (Insight Editions: San Rafael, CA., 2010).

[4] The reality of the children's presence before their descent into Limbo is implicit in the fact that Cobb tells Ariadne of their creation of a facsimile of the apartment to which they moved upon the arrival of their first child.

[5] *Disowning Knowledge*, p 17.

[6] Cf 'Postscript: To Whom It May Concern' in *Contesting Tears*.

[7] If time and space permitted, this would be the point at which to compare Leonardo DiCaprio's role as Cobb with his role in the only other film in which he appeared in 2010 – Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island*, in which DiCaprio's status as husband and father is also positively insisted upon, in which he kills his wife in response to her drowning of their three children, and in which he constructs and inhabits a world of fantasy in which to evade acknowledgement of his sense of responsibility for all four deaths (since his problems with alcohol led him to ignore his wife's mental instability). What is it about DiCaprio's lengthy and challenging screen transition from beautiful youth to mature male that engenders so close and tense a tie between marriage and parenthood, and between paternal love and maternal murderousness?