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## **Exploring Instability in Dream-Based Narratives : A Comparative Analysis of "Vanilla Sky" and "Inception"**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to dissect the deliberate destabilization that emerges from Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* and Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. By stripping away stabilizing elements and weaving intricate dream sequences, Nolan and Crowe craft a cinematic experience that blurs the distinction between reality and imaginary. The means in which Nolan and Crowe execute this is through several ways. Firstly, through the exploration of the symbiotic relationship between the characters' bodies and minds within the dream narrative. Secondly, through the deliberate creation of spatial and temporal instability, which blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy or the imaginary. Lastly, both films deliberately avoid conclusive endings, leaving audiences grappling with ambiguous conclusions that perpetuate the narrative's unresolved nature. This thesis is a comparative analysis of *Vanilla Sky* and *Inception* in which it identifies and analyzes these destabilizing techniques.

*Keywords:* instability, disorientation, ambiguous endings, "Vanilla Sky", "Inception"

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Exploring Instability in Dream-Based Narratives: A Comparative Analysis of “Vanilla Sky” and  
"Inception"

By

Sara Glemaud

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

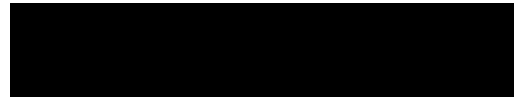
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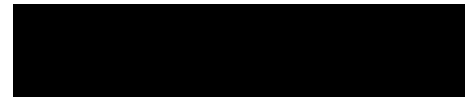
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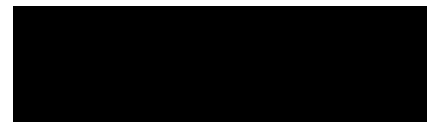
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**EXPLORING INSTABILITY IN DREAM-BASED NARRATIVES: A COMPARATIVE  
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Dream-based narratives can be appealing due to a multitude of factors. Often, oneiric narratives can be appealing because of their science-fiction nature, their ability to challenge a cohesive narrative, or their psychoanalytical components. Dreams can be fascinating because of their close correlation of reality with the mind. This close correlation can attune for oneiric narratives to cross the boundaries of reality and thus impair the orthodox perception of a text, leaving ambiguous interpretations. *Vanilla Sky*, directed by Cameron Crowe and *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan both utilize oneiric narratives that intentionally disorient and deceive their audience through the difficulty of distinguishing reality from the imaginary. Their dream-based narratives set the stage for instability.

Nolan and Crowe remove stabilizing anchors from their films by utilizing these dream narratives, but also through cinematic properties that disorient the frames and scenes. Both films' protagonists are unreliable narrators, which enhances the instability as the audience cannot clearly receive a coherent chronological storyline. There are three apparent techniques through which *Inception* and *Vanilla Sky* pursue instability. First, through the link between the body and mind of the characters, which is seen through the dream narrative. Second, through spatial and temporal instability, making the boundaries between reality and fantasy dissolve. And third, through the removal of a clear conclusion, leaving behind ambiguous endings.

*Inception* follows the protagonist, Cobb, whose profession is to extract information from dreams. The premise of *Inception* involves Cobb receiving an opportunity to implant information in a dream rather than extraction. The main mission in *Inception* is for Cobb to "incept" the dream of a wealthy businessman, Fischer, to make him believe he wants to scatter his father's company after his father's passing. The method Cobb and his team use to accomplish this mission is to create an emotional link, a positive one, between the distribution of the company

and Fischer's mind in order to convince Fischer that splitting the company is his idea. The goal for Cobb is to implant an idea in the mind of a dreamer without them knowing it was implanted there. That emotional change in a person's desires highlights the link between a dream and a dreamer. It demonstrates that dreams can be more than a visual representation of the subconscious or unconscious, but an experience that can impact a person's reality outside the dream.

At the start of *Inception*, Cobb and Arthur are on a mission to extract information from Saito, who later becomes their partner on their 'incepting' mission. During this mission, Cobb and Arthur are on a boat. Although the mission occurs in a dream, the physical movements between the dream and reality affect each other. Outside of the dream, Arthur and Cobb's unconscious bodies are in the midst of chaotic destruction as people riot in the streets and explosions are going off. In the dream world, Cobb and Arthur can sense the occurrence of the mayhem due to the ground in the dream shaking and objects rattling. They question what is going on "out there". As their body feels the changes in the environment, the dream accommodates the movement and shifts their bodies are experiencing. The direct correlation between the dream world and reality can cause a sense of incoherence.

As the environment shift can transfer over into the dream, so can any direct physical alteration occurring to the dreamer. When Arthur and Cobb are discovered by Saito on their extraction mission, Arthur attempts to wake Cobb from the dream. Arthur throws Cobb into a bathtub of water. In the dream, water begins to pour through the boat's interior. The visuals in the dream change as the bodies of the dreamers' experience change. When enough change has occurred, it causes the dreamers to wake up. What is happening directly to the dreamers can then impact the dream itself and even cause it to come to an end. This type of "real" impact dreams

have on the characters demonstrates how *Inception* maintains a sense of instability. From the very start of *Inception*, the boundaries between reality and dream have been crossed and the anchor that holds onto stability has been cut off.

In “The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*,” Mark Fisher discusses how the multilayers of dreams and the cold action sequences throughout the film serve as a commodification of the psyche: “Dreams have ceased to be the spaces where private psychopathologies are worked through and have become the scenes where competing corporate interests play out their banal struggles” (Fisher 45). *Inception* introduces the concept of dreams having an economic function. Incepting one’s dreams is Cobb’s profession. Corporations have found means of obtaining valuable and hidden information from their competitors through what is arguably the most personal violation, one’s dreams. The ability for corporations to complete these extractions showcases the embodiment of dreams and how dreams translate into reality. Aligning dreams with a real source of income or commodity, can deceive viewers with the proprioception between reality and dreams.

The foundational theory of dreams originates in the work of Sigmund Freud: “I am led to regard the dream as a sort of substitution for the thought-processes, full of meaning and emotion, at which I arrived after the completion of the analysis” (Freud 147). Dreams can hold therapeutic importance—therefore, it can be apparent for what occurs in the dream to make an impact on the dreamer’s reality. Because of the sentimental and therapeutic importance dreams hold on the individual, the dream scenes in *Inception* can cause a distortion. The dreams hold psychological attachment to the dreamer character as it can pertain to sentimental values, emotions, and desires. Mal is someone who constantly infiltrates Cobb’s dreams and this can only happen because he allows her to. Cobb has sentimental and therapeutic ties to Mal, which is why she frequently



appears in his dreams. His dreams are the only place remaining in which Cobb can see Mal. The emotion and meaning that dreams hold can lead to a dissolving between reality and dreaming.

Nolan emphasizes how thin the line can be between reality and dreams. He demonstrates this concept mainly through Mal. She became lost and confused between what was a dream and what was not. Cobb explains how he implanted the idea of the dreamworld into Mal's mind to create a peaceful place for them, but it didn't work as planned. "I never knew that idea would grow in her mind like cancer. That even after she woke, that even after you came back to reality, that you'd continue to believe your world isn't real ... If you jump, you're not going to wake up, remember?... Mal: We're going home to our real children" (Inception). Cobb understands the illusion that dreams can appear as reality very well from his first-hand experience with Mal's suicide. "Dreams feel real while you're in them right? It's only when you wake up that you realize they were strange. You know when you're in a dream that you're always in the middle of the action. Tell me... How did we get here?" (Inception 26:32-42). In creating this thin layer that separates dreams from reality, Nolan emphasizes the important sentimental ties of dreams and the longing for the desires and wishes that appear in the dreams. He shows the mental impact it can have on an individual. In Nolan's worlds, "it's not only that we deceive ourselves; it's also that we're deceived about even having an authentic self. There's no separating identity from fiction" (Fisher 39). Fisher speculates on how well Nolan dissolves that line between fiction and one's identity.

Nolan creates a variety of laws for the dreams in *Inception*. Certain fears, such as the fear of pain, can be mental. On this first mission, on the boat, Mal infiltrates Cobb's mind and appears in this dream. "Cobb: There's no use in threatening him in a dream, right Mal? Mal: That depends on what you're threatening. Killing him would just wake him up. But pain...pain is

in the mind” (Inception 18-38). Mal targets Arthur because he is the “architect” of this dream, which means if she wakes Arthur, then the dream will collapse. This unique law of dreaming allows for dream and reality to merge as it dissolves the lines that distinguish one from the other. Nolan creates an illusion of real pain in dreams. When Mal shoots Arthur in the dream mission, it appears that he feels the pain of a real bullet. These notions of pain aim to destabilize the perception of reality because dream pain is not understood to cause real pain, yet Nolan implements this, which allows the dream to be presented as reality. Through dream pain Nolan opens a path for the embodiment of dreams. A path in which dreams are bound to one’s physical body.

In “Dreaming-machine: Diurnal Insomnia in Digital Wonderland”, Marek Wojtaszek argues that,

“The popular sense of dream as an aspiration, ideal or wish dates back to the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (OED), and paradoxically implies that ideals can come to life only in dreams. Consequently, ‘dreams’ will retain their proximate relation to reality — whether in sleep by unconsciously re-playing remembered experiences, or by inspiring our conscious choices and actions. This similarity of dream and reality is exactly what distinguishes it from fantasy that, in essence, imaginatively expresses a digression or flight from reality, helping us to experience the (im)possible in a more approachable and delicate manner; only dreams (can) come true” (Wojtaszek 2)

This notion that there is a connection between dreams and reality is perhaps what effortlessly makes the line between the dream world and reality blurred. These similarities make it difficult to distinguish the difference. Dreams feel real when in them because the absurdity of the dream is subtle.

There are instances in *Inception* where the dream is “uncovered” as a dream because of its absurdity. However, before the dreams can be discovered as dreams, they feel real. Cobb says, “because it’s never just a dream, is it? And a face full of glass hurts like hell. When you’re in it, it feels real” (*Inception* 28:18-24). Dreams are usually in disguise and it is not common for a dreamer to recognize that they are dreaming. Even if the dream exhibits strange behavior, oftentimes the mind will dismiss the strangeness and pass it off as a part of the world of the dream. Because the dream will be in disguise and hard to uncover, the mind will trick the dreamer into thinking that they are truly hurt or truly in danger. Nolan perhaps utilizes this notion to create confusion because the characters seem to actually be hurt, even though they are dreaming.

As Mark Fisher’s article in *Film Quarterly* continues, he discusses the duplicity of Nolan’s films. “Nolan himself has specialized in setting puzzles that can’t be solved. Duplicity—in the sense of both deception and doubling—runs right through his work. It’s not only the case that Nolan’s work is about duplicity; it is itself duplicitous, drawing audiences into labyrinths of indeterminacy” (Fisher 37). The manners in which the dream elements of *Inception* become difficult to grapple with and difficult to distinguish are the ways in which Nolan deceives his audience.

The architects in *Inception* cultivate spatial instability. Architects take special caution when creating the dream setting. They are careful to make the features of the dream as realistic as possible so that the dreamer does not recognize they are dreaming. Likewise, *Inception* itself plays with the lines of reality, but is careful not to cross the line in making elements too unrealistic so that the audience may be as disoriented as the characters. Ariadne is introduced to the idea of extraction and inception by Cobb. He recruits her as an architect on their mission to

incept Fischer. Cobb brings Ariadne into a dream state to demonstrate the abilities of a dream architect. As Ariadne is toying around in Cobb's dream to feel out how crafting a dream works, she fiddles with the realness of the dream. She begins to change aspects of the dream that allow it to feel real. Ariadne changes the structure of the buildings, she defies gravity by allowing building walls of the city to float, and removes bridges and structures of the city into new spots. Cobb warns Ariadne about altering too many aspects of the dream, "The more you change things, the quicker the projections start to converge. They sense the foreign nature of the dreamer. They attack like white blood cells fighting an infection" (Inception). The architects have a major impact on the spatial instability in *Inception* as they wield a particular power Nolan crafts to destabilize the sense of environmental control of the setting. *Inception*'s architects allow for Nolan to defy the laws of gravity and other factors that would otherwise stabilize the environments and settings of *Inception*.

As the environment becomes unstable in *Inception*, it causes unease and a disturbance. Gravity plays a key role in the spatial instability of *Inception* as well as the environmental shifts that cause a change in the dream world. During a scene in which the "extractors" are being chased by the security of Fischer, the extraction subject, the van the extractors are in, continues to shift. This then causes difficulty maneuvering in the dream world. The gravity of the dream is altered and shifts by the van's chaos as the dreamer's bodies are being chased. The "extractors" are in different areas of the dream but are all experiencing the shift in gravity. Arthur is fighting with Fischer's security team but is not able to stay in place due to the gravity shift his body is experiencing in the van. The van is flipping while Arthur is being chased, so he is not able to stay in place. Their fighting aligns with where they're rotating in the van. The free fall into the

water causes Arthur to float through the air in the dream. These changes in gravity indicate to the dreamers the circumstance that is occurring outside the dream.

Writing on this scene, Fisher notes that “An unsympathetic viewer might think that the entirety of *Inception*’s complex ontological structure had been built to justify clichés of action cinema—such as the ludicrous amount of things that characters can do in the time that it takes for a van to fall from a bridge into a river” (Fisher 39). Masking *Inception* with the cliché of an action movie would downplay what *Inception* pursues with its action scenes. The action scenes rather create a spatial instability. Stating that Nolan is covering a cliché with these techniques would imply that the intentions of *Inception* are to be a simple action film and ignores the complexities Nolan incorporates.

The start of *Inception* involves a confusing scene with an older Saito and a deranged Cobb. Saito not being introduced or being known to the audience yet makes the start of *Inception* confusing until the connection can be made towards the end. To start with what seems to be a time skip foreshadows some sort of loop that will perhaps later be revealed. This technique impairs a coherent chronological structure. Already from the start of *Inception* it isn't clear where Cobb is or when this is taking place. Although Nolan doesn't incorporate many scenes that jump time, including this beginning scene is imperative to the temporal instability as the image of this scene will linger throughout the storyline.

Nolan introduces and illustrates a concept of multilayered dreams. For example, on the boat mission, when Arthur is shot, he awakens to what appears to be reality, however, later on Nolan reveals that Arthur has awakened into another dream instead. This can be a common experience in which an individual is dreaming and “wakes up,” but is actually still dreaming. Nolan uses this experience of a multilevel dream and takes it to another level in *Inception*. On

Cobb's special mission to incept Fischer, he sets up a multitude of dream layers in which Cobb and his crew will be in three different layers of dreams. This adds to Cobb's ruse that he is in the dream as "security" for Fischer rather than there to implant information. These three levels of dreams could give Cobb enough time to incept Fischer's mind. This challenges the narrative's coherence as it flashes between all three different layers.

In his article regarding the dream's functions in *Inception*, Wojtaszek states,

"This peculiar dreamlike ambiance of timelessness creates an ambiguous sensation of there (both in reality and in dream) being plenty of time (an impression generated in a dream) and no time at all (time increases exponentially as you move deeper through dream levels). Dominic Cobb says, 'When you dream, your mind functions more quickly, so time seems to pass more slowly'. Apparently asleep or apathetic at one level, the characters are wide awake and hyperactive at another. Since the film commences and concludes with dream scenes and the majority of the narrative is a dream, experienced by a sleeping Cobb on the airplane, it is impossible to adjudicate where and when the real might be, providing a standardized ground for measuring velocity of the time flow, thus creating a sensation of timeless presence" (Wojtaszek 8)

Nolan fiddles with the notion of time. He crafts the notion of dream time in which, as Cobb states, time progresses more slowly. What this does for *Inception* is alter the different ways scenes move forward. All three levels of Fischer's dream have different time progressions. The deeper the level, the slower the time. This allows Nolan to then complete an array of fights and activities with Cobb and Fischer in the third and deepest level of dream, while the first layer, with Yusuf, is still stuck in a car chase. Having three different time progressions taking place simultaneously is hard to follow logically. Nolan cuts from one scene to the next, which is in the

same shared dream, yet are all in different spaces and time.

Although the narrative of *Inception* exudes instability, the cinematic properties also feed into the instability. The most intense and unstable section of *Inception* would be once all three levels of Fischer's dreams have been revealed and in motion. The first level, the raining city, is where Yusuf is driving a van full of his dreaming comrades while being chased by Fischer's dream security. The second level, the hotel, is where Arthur fights off Fischer's second level of dream security. Lastly, the third level, the snow forest hospital, is where Cobb leads Fischer to his dying father in order to implant the plan of the split-up. This section of *Inception* exudes instability in several different ways regarding the camera movements and scene transitions. Firstly, there are continuous cuts from one dream level to the next. In one shot the camera focuses on Arthur attempting to escape the dream security, then the next shot the camera focuses on Yusuf driving through terrain to escape the dream security on his level. The fact that all three levels have dream security does not aid in the stability of the scenes as it makes it difficult to distinguish the different levels when there are fast paced shots between each level. The shots for all three levels presenting fighting and escaping security causes an incoherence as to which dream level the scenes are in at any given moment.

The editing pace during this section picks up its speed and turns into a rapid editing in which it cuts from one shot of each dream level to the next. All levels simultaneously attempt to "wake up" at the same time. The instability of this section also stems from the effects each dream level has on the next. Because Yusuf is driving recklessly trying to escape the security, this causes Arthur's dream level to then defy the laws of gravity as the hotel walls turn over. The camera violently shifts following Arthur grappling against gravity as he attempts to hold on to the turning walls of the hotel corridor. The camera also attempts to handle a dynamic amount of

movement within one frame. In the hotel shots, not only does the camera enter Arthur's fight with security, but all the chaos within the hotel. There are papers flying in every direction, the walls are continuously shifting, all while Arthur tries to hunt for a weapon. The camera movements of the focus of what's occurring in the frame do not provide a singular stable focus to grapple with.

The final "kick" scene is a collection of shots that follow no particular order. This scene doesn't move from one level to the next in its order nor does it thoroughly follow one character. The shots move rapidly from Cobb to Arthur to Ariadne. Nolan makes it challenging to follow the narrative with dynamic movement, sounds, and lighting changes through the shots. The "kick" is different for every level, but has a thread that is consistent in all three levels: the falling sensation. In the midst of the chaos of this section, it is only clear who wakes up from the mission. Cobb seems to have stayed behind with Mal as Ariadne accepts the "kick", while Saito has clearly moved into limbo. What feeds into the instability of the camera movements and shots of these scenes, is the ending being unclear of whether Cobb is in limbo or if the "kick" worked and woke him. Nolan is able to create these different methods of deliberate instabilities due to *Inception's* dream-based narrative. Although the spatial and temporal instabilities may be hard to grapple, the dream-based narrative allows for that latitude of instability that would not be comprehensive in reality-based narratives.

As Nolan demonstrates through *Inception* the mastery of instabilities, Crowe also sets the stage for unique instability techniques in his *Vanilla Sky*. Cameron Crowe, centers his film around protagonist David, who is a businessman living what appears to be a happy and healthy life. The narrative takes a dark turn and uproots David's life when a female companion, Juli, commits suicide. Juli intentionally crashes her car while David is riding as a passenger. The



accident and Juli's suicide leaves David's face and ego deformed, impacting his lifestyle and effecting a new relationship with Sofia. Perhaps from his guilt, or perhaps from his lack of ability to cope with the pain of his new reality, he decides to invest in Life Extension Company and enter a state of lucid dreaming. Similar to *Inception*, *Vanilla Sky* showcases a strong link between the body and mind which results in the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. As *Inception* begins with a dream, so does *Vanilla Sky*, which foreshadows the nature of the film. At first, it is clear that David is in a dream. There is chaotic and eerie music to pair with an empty Times Square over shots of a car moving wildly. Once David wakes up, everything in the dream is repeated except in his reality, Juli is there. The significance of dreams is signaled at the start with Crowe's decision to begin *Vanilla Sky* in a dream. This not only foreshadows the significance of dreaming, but also foreshadows the foggy and blurriness of dreams. Although the anchor in *Vanilla Sky* becomes very distant over time, it does exist in the start, which creates an illusion that there is something to hold on to as the confusion of the film accelerates.

There is immense confusion during the suicide scene in the car between David and Juli. Post accident, it isn't clear if David dreamed about the accident with Juli as he is speaking with Sofia in the park. Is the car scene a dream or is the park scene a dream? There are cut shots between reality and dreams. As David realizes that perhaps his conversation with Sofia was indeed a dream, he says, "My dreams are a cruel joke. They taunt me. Even in my dreams I'm an idiot... who knows he's about to wake up to reality. If I could only avoid sleep. But I can't. I try to tell myself what to dream. I try to dream that I am flying. Something free. It never works" (*Vanilla Sky* 46:50 - 47:30). This provides the needed evidence to prove he is dreaming in this scene with Sofia; however, it also alludes to a grander meaning behind dreams and sleep. It leaves a residue behind that has yet to have a clear meaning.

Although up until right after the accident, *Vanilla Sky's* moments of instability have been linked and blamed on David's dreaming, which held as an anchor of stability as it is a clear reasoning, until the club scene plays out. Dreaming is always an effective rationale for adding unrealistic and fantasy elements into a film without raising suspicion from the audience regarding the genre of the film or losing any particular genre of viewers. However, during this club scene, no dream is involved, yet all sense of what exactly occurred at the club that night is lost. Another common rationale for confusion or delirium is when drugs enter the picture. The blame of the oddness in the club can then be shifted to David being drunk. Slowly Crowe is removing those anchors of rationalization to dissolve the separation between the mind and body. Crowe incorporates moments of instability that are linked to a dream state or to alcohol and slowly removes those factors which leave no logical sense or rationale to the absurdity that then occurs.

In the article, *The Lucid Dream of an Unconscious Solipsist: Post-Truth and Hyper-Reality in Vanilla Sky*, Edman Timucin states, "The blurry scene occurs in the movie first because we cannot understand whether the characters are in a dream state or, if there is reality, to what extent we are experiencing this reality. Naturally, lucid dreaming is an aspect of this movie. Lucid dreaming is a state whereby the dreamer takes control of his/her dream, knowing that that is a dream" (Timucin 158). Crowe meticulously selecting lucid dreaming as the state for David to be causes this sense of disarray. A collection of dreams would implement a stabilized plot in which it would be clear when David awakens. However, lucid dreaming is much more complex. Lucid dreaming places *Vanilla Sky's* narrative in a dreamlike state for half the duration of the film. Additionally, this form of lucid dreaming allows David to also dream from within his trance state. These dreams within other dreams of David can implant a disorientation.

As *Vanilla Sky* progresses, those subtle confusing moments that were blamed on dreaming and alcohol become more and more frequent. David's reality becomes thinner and thinner. What seems like in real life, David begins to confuse Juli with Sofia frequently. At this point, the rationalization of David's delirium can then perhaps be blamed on his guilt. Perhaps he feels guilty about what happened with Juli and so he envisions Sofia as Juli. This happens in several scenes such as when in jail, he imagines Sofia coming to visit him or when he is intimate with Sofia, but begins to see her as Juli. Throughout David's progression of delirium, the reasoning is not clear, but can only be speculated.

When the lines become blurred for David, after a dream, he tends to wake up and complete the same tasks or activities in order to be sure he is awake. This is similar to how Cobb in *Inception* spins the top head to insure if he is awake or in a dream. The lines between reality and dream become so thin for David that he can no longer be sure which is which. As more derangement occurs in the film, that anchor of coherence and rationale breaks apart and can no longer support what is real and what is not in David's mind.

David's lawyer, McCabe, spends much time pulling information from David to help his case. "The subconscious is a powerful thing. You treated Juli carelessly, didn't you? Your feeling of responsibility or guilt over Juli might have easily turned Sofia into Juli. Do you know what derangement is? I need your help. All I know is, you killed your girlfriend and I don't know what's in your mind" (*Vanilla Sky* 1:43-44). More of the story is placed into perspective as it is understood at this moment why exactly David was in jail as the flashbacks catch up with the "present" time of the story. At this moment in *Vanilla Sky* the structure changes and the audience no longer receives jumps between timelines.

Edmund, the Life Extension employee explains to David the functions of Lucid

dreaming, similarly to how Cobb explains the dream world to Adradne. Also, similar to when Cobb later explains it to Fischer. Edmund explains, “What if I were to tell you that you can take control of all of this, of everything? Even me. David, look at all these people. Seems as though they are all chatting away, doesn't it? Nothing to do with you. And yet, maybe they're only here because you wanted them to be here. You are their God. Not only that, but you could make them obey you...or even destroy you” (*Vanilla Sky* 1:34 -35). David realizes that Edmund is telling the truth as when he wants everyone to be quiet, they do. As Fischer didn't know he was dreaming until Cobb pointed it out, David was in a similar position as Fischer was. *Vanilla Sky* could be interpreted as from the point of view of the one being “incepted” while *Inception* is from the point of view of the “interceptors”.

Timucin points out that “David’s world might be a complete and endless parody, the copy of the copy of the copy; a dream in a dream and so on. There is no limit in the perception of the human mind. He has the capacity to produce images and realize the imagery as real, transforming it into hyperreality” (Timucin 153). Crowe toys with the perception of reality through David. He removes any boundaries of the human mind with his special crafting of lucid dreaming. David’s subconscious seeping through into his lucid dreaming state, allowing David to recognize the state he signed to be in, leaves *Vanilla sky* free falling into nothingness as all stabilizing ground is removed underneath it. *Vanilla Sky* free falls until the end, when David lands on his feet and fully understands the absurdity of his life.

As *Vanilla Sky* begins to close, David receives a better understanding of all the derangements that have been occurring to him over what he believes to be the past few months.

“Your death will be wiped from your memory. Your life will continue as a realistic work of art. Painted by you minute to minute, and you’ll live it with a romantic abandon of a

summer day. With no memory of how it all occurred, save for the knowledge that everything simply improved. And in any instance of discontent, you'll be visited by technical support. A living dream. Life extension's promise. David: What if the dream becomes a nightmare? Rebecca: of course, your subconscious can always play tricks on you" (Vanilla Sky 1:50 - 51).

David's subconscious kept fighting to reveal he was lucid dreaming since the incident with Juli. The subconscious, through Life Extension, gives clues to the lucid dream nightmare.

As L.E. reveals the truth behind the lunacy of the past few months of David's life, it's difficult to decide which events actually occurred and which were attributed to David's "madness." David soon realizes that he never actually murdered Sofia, but rather that this was a part of the nightmare of lucid dreaming. Edmund explains, "You were missed, David. It was Sofia who never fully recovered. It was she who somehow knew you best... and like you, she never forgot that one night where true love seemed possible" (Vanilla Sky 2:00:10-50). Once again the subconscious of David seems to be reaching for him as he takes the pills to "die" in his dream. The reasoning for David's accidental murder of Sofia is then revealed as a part of the subconscious warning David of Sofia's real death outside the lucid dreaming. At some point, Sofia does pass away, and this was David's mind reminding him of this as so much time passes in his dreaming state.

In addition to the dream-based narrative being the foundation of instability, spatial instability is constructed in *Vanilla Sky* through an array of scenes. David has these confusing moments where he cannot tell the difference between Juli and Sofia. These "delusions" of David lead to the "death" of Sofia. The delusion does not go unnoticed by the people in David's life. "Thomas: Right now, I want you to look at these photos, then I'm going to destroy them. Sofia's

testimony is also in here. It won't exist. She's not going to press charges. David: Press charges against me? Thomas: David, wake up. Now as a friend, I think you should see what you did to Sofia. David: Tommy, this is Juli. This is not Sofia. (*Vanilla Sky* 1:29 - 30). Confusing Sofia's pictures with Juli's in jail is disorienting. At this point David is lucid dreaming and these are moments his subconscious is reaching out to him. However, when this scene appears, the explanation for David's confusion has yet to be revealed. The structure in which information is revealed in *Vanilla Sky* is imperative for its pursuit of instability.

In addition to the spatial instability, *Vanilla Sky* incorporates moments of unclear periods of time, causing a temporal instability. Throughout the film, there seems to be significant time skips that are not fully explained. *Vanilla Sky* jumps from the time before David is in jail to after he is incarcerated with facial deformity. The reason for him being in jail is not explained until the aftermath of Juli's death. Even then, it is understood why David wears a mask, but has yet to understand the reasoning behind his incarceration. As time passes, the realization that he isn't in jail due to the death of Juli, but rather for the death of Sofia. The series of flash forwards and the limited information given about David's incarceration intentionally emphasizes that perhaps David was incarcerated for Juli's death. These moments of uncertainty enable an incoherent structure.

In a New York Times film review, *Plastic Surgery Takes A Science Fiction Twist*, Stephen Holden states,

“Here the story abruptly wanders into alien territory, as David, wearing the mask, finds himself questioned by a sympathetic doctor (Kurt Russell) in a mysterious interrogation room. Racing against time, David must come up with evidence that he wasn't responsible for Juli's death. "Vanilla Sky" turns into a Hitchcockian riddle, at times reminiscent of

"North by Northwest" and "Vertigo," that takes a giant, awkward leap into allegorical science fiction" (Holden)

The leap is the switch when David decides to invest into the Life Extension Company and agrees to enter his lucid dreaming state. Although this may seem like an abrupt change in plot and can be considered unexpected, the movie does hint to this change. *Vanilla Sky* does not allude to an expected narrative. The dream narrative of *Vanilla Sky* is revealed early on which alludes to its instability. Although subtly hinted at the instability of the film, *Vanilla Sky* makes these sudden switches to increase the effects of the instability.

Crowe enhances the sense of instability continuously throughout *Vanilla Sky* with cinematic properties that create high intense emotions. Early on in the storyline, the emotions intensify due to the dark twist the plot takes. However, Crowe is sure to enhance that experience through specific camera techniques. Before Juli's suicide, David leaves Sofia's apartment smiling and gentle band music is playing in the background, which creates a sense of ease and tranquility. The music fades as Juli appears and becomes abnormally quiet for a New York City Street. The ease dissolves, but not unnerving, yet. Soft romantic music begins to play in the background as David decides to enter Juli's car. The beginning of the car ride is blissful and Crowe shows no indication of any chaos or tragedy to occur, but in an instant, the mood shifts. As Juli's emotions intensify, so do the cinematic properties. The camera movement begins to violently shift around framing the chaos Juli causes with the other cars on the street. The scenes begin to abruptly cut from one car to the next and from the passed stop signs and traffic lights. The music is cut and is replaced with sounds of tires screeching and horns honking. When the car finally crashes and comes to an abrupt stop, all the movement and sounds stop as well. Crowe mimics through cinematic properties each emotion on every step of its development. The

progression of emotions that Crowe enables destabilizes a set tone or mood for *Vanilla Sky* and rather prepares for the opposite.

The dream-based narrative of *Vanilla Sky* provides many of its unstable properties, but Crowe continues to create instability with the editing techniques he decides to incorporate. As David begins to lose sense of reality, the camera shots showcase and enhance the image of that loss. During the scene where David is intimate with Sofia, the camera's main focus begins with emphasizing their passion for one another. However, it takes a dark turn. The camera begins to cut from David to Sofia, back to David, and all of a sudden, Juli. Although this is to emphasize David's "insanity" or rather his subconscious hinting that he is lucid dreaming, the camera's cuts from Juli to Sofia create a sense of instability. Although this scene is a collection of close-up shots with one focus in the frame, the blink of an eye change of characters gives the scene a sense of dynamism.

Another destabilizing technique Crowe implements through cinematic properties is utilized in the euphoric club scene post Juli's suicide and David's facial deformity. The euphoric club scene post Juli's death mimics and mirrors the quick changes in David's life. For a few moments, there are quick scene changes that cut from the shots the bartender pours, to David, to Sofia, to Brian. Brian mentions that David has changed and that everyone misses the old David. In a matter of seconds, David's life had changed since Juli's suicide. The club scene's chaotic nature and rapid scene changes alludes to a pivot in the film. From this point forward there will be a change in the trajectory of David's life. As the audience and David later discover, after this day, David will seek help from the Life Extension company and enter a state of lucid dreaming.

Both *Vanilla Sky* and *Inception* have themes that can help to understand or interpret their ambiguous endings. *Vanilla Sky* highlights the theme of broken families. Prior to his death,



David's father seemed absent from David's life, yet decides to leave the magazine company to him. This leaves the board hating David because they believe they should have ownership of the company. This applies pressure on David for which his father did not prepare him. Had his father been more involved in his life, he could have helped David's transition into ownership. David's broken family ties into his behaviors and perhaps his lack of ability to endure the challenges he faces, which resulted in his lucid dreaming. When David decides to wake up, it shows his character growth and development. He is ready to have control and ownership of his life.

In his review, Holden goes on to write,

“As it leaves behind the real world and begins exploring life as a waking dream (this year's most popular theme in Hollywood movies with lofty ideas), 'Vanilla Sky' loosens its emotional grip and becomes a disorganized and abstract if still-intriguing meditation on parallel themes. One is the quest for eternal life and eternal youth; another is guilt and the ungovernable power of the unconscious mind to undermine science's utopian discoveries. David's redemption ultimately consists of his coming to grips with his own mortality, but that redemption lacks conviction” (Holden)

Although lucid dreaming would provide eternal life and youth, David doesn't make the decision to keep dreaming. He decides to wake up to reality. What *Vanilla Sky* portrays through David is perhaps self-fulfillment or happiness. David may have had a different perception of happiness at the start of *Vanilla Sky* than he does towards the end. He had been forced to accept the bitter with the sweet.

There are repeated lines in *Vanilla Sky* that may hold some significance in its ambiguous ending. There are several variants of the lines “Without the bitter, the sweet isn't as sweet” and

“Sweet is never as sweet without the sour” that are spoken by Brian throughout the course of the story all the way to the end when Edmund warns David that if he returns to the present time that this will still be the case. These lines can indicate that David does indeed return to reality. David had to endure the sour of the nightmare lucid dreams and the sourness of the grief and guilt he experiences with Juli and through his subconscious with Sofia, in order to finally have the sweet of reality. Those lines perhaps wouldn't hold significance and would not have been repeated if David was meant at the end to continue dreaming or to fall into his death.

Suicide is a theme in both *Vanilla Sky* and *Inception*. In *Vanilla Sky* the theme of suicide is apparent through Juli's character, while in *Inception*, the theme is apparent through Mal's character. Both suicides are influenced by the men in their lives. Both suicides caused the events in the film to spiral and happen the way they did. If Juli had not committed suicide, then David's life would not have changed the way it did and he would not have signed up for lucid dreaming. Similarly, if Mal had not unknowingly committed suicide, then Cobb would not have incepted Fischer's mind and needed to carry out this job in order to return home to his family. When in jail, David blames himself for the death of Juli, like Cobb does with the death of his wife. Both men caused the death of women in their lives based on their selfishness. With Cobb, he causes the death of his wife indirectly by wanting to be in limbo, incepting his wife. Mal, begins to blur the lines between reality and limbo and gets lost in which is which, leading to her unintentional suicide since she believes she will “wake up” when in reality she dies. As Mal lost her mind in terms of what was real in *Inception*, David experiences the same confusion. Both David and Mal are lost in this new state of mind.

The characters hold a key to deciphering the films as well. Both David and Cobb have trouble with authorities. Cobb seeks to return home to his children, but cannot due to issues with

the law. David seems to be incarcerated sometime in the future of the timeline of *Vanilla Sky*. While Cobb tries to remain strong and not reveal his past and how he copes with the death of his wife, David loses his “perfect image” and what seems like his entire mind after the death of Juli. How David shaped his lucid dream life reveals much about his character. David’s face is “fixed,” yet he still wears the mask in his lucid dreams. David envies a small life as the audience sees him appreciating and longing for a life like Sofia’s. This mentality of trying to have it all is what led to events of David’s life to be where they are in *Vanilla Sky*. David wanted to have both Sofia and Juli, which led him into the car with Juli and like a domino effect led to the lucid dreaming and drastic changes in his life. Perhaps the same for Cobb. He wanted to experience the perfect dream world with his wife, but in the process “incepted” Mal’s mind, which led to her confusion between reality and fantasy.

In one of his concluding points in his *Film Quarterly* article, Fisher states, “However intractable his films might appear, they are always based on a definitive truth. As he said of *Inception* in an interview with *Wired*: ‘I’ve always believed that if you make a film with ambiguity, it needs to be based on a true interpretation. If it’s not, then it will contradict itself, or it will be somehow insubstantial and end up making the audience feel cheated. Ambiguity has to come from the inability of the character to know—and the alignment of the audience with that character’” (Fisher 37)

The tactics to make Cobb an unreliable narrator allow Nolan to then make Cobb unable to distinguish or even care whether he is in limbo with his family or in reality with his family. Because Cobb is the character followed and the perspective watched, the audience then aligns with Cobb’s unknown fate. Fisher argues that “this ending has more than a suggestion of wish-fulfillment fantasy about it, and the suspicion that Cobb might be marooned somewhere in a

multilayered Oneiric labyrinth, a psychotic who has mistaken dreams for reality, makes *Inception* deeply ambiguous” (Fisher 38). At the end of both *Vanilla Sky* and *Inception*, there is a choice of reality or dreamland. Both David and Cobb seem to be living in the “real world” by the end of the film. At the end of *Vanilla Sky*, David is posed with a dilemma: Continue to dream happily in L.E or wake up to reality. David chooses reality. “I want to live a real life... I don't want to dream any longer” (*Vanilla Sky* 2:06:10). Although Crowe does not give the audience a clear vision if his choice actually matters and is carried out due to the sharp end to the film.

Why is there alarm in Sofia’s voice even from the beginning of *Vanilla Sky*, before David meets her? *Vanilla Sky* seems to be through the perspective of David’s memory as a recollection of the events that occurred in his lucid dreaming state. Perhaps because the events of the story unfold from David’s state of dreaming, the alarm is in Sofia’s voice. David could be recalling these events after he has met Sofia. Rather than *Vanilla Sky* being in chronological order, it is a flashback from David’s post lucid dreaming life. There is also subtle narration that indicates the film's point of view being from David with the subtle hint of Sofia’s voice that it is a flashback. David walks the audience through the confusion he experienced and the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. The confusion between Juli and Sofia was recalled just as he remembered it to keep the illusion of how it occurred to him in that present moment, alongside the confusion of his deformed face and as to whether it remained deformed or was fixed. These blurred moments allowed *Vanilla Sky* to portray David’s experiences as it happened to him.

Timucin speculates on the ambiguity of *Vanilla Sky* and the inability of the audience to distinguish reality from imaginary:

“He strives for happiness and rejects the reality of the bitter one. In this sense, Sofia creates a new dream for David each time he faces terrifying experiences, which puts it in

the category of the imaginary, of the dream. Sofia wakes David up into a new utopian happy dream, with no satisfaction of happiness. As we do not have the experience of a justified reality, it is not possible to make a clear distinction between the real and the imaginary. The film starts with the voice saying ‘wake up’ and ends with the same voice saying ‘wake up’” (Timucin 153)

Timucin speculates that perhaps Sofia has an effect on David’s dreaming state. Perhaps this is the cause of David’s subconscious and Sofia’s power on his mind. Sofia’s ability to influence David’s lucid dreaming blurs the lines of reality even deeper as she could be in control of David’s fate at the end. Because David was able to recollect these events, this can shed light on the ambiguous ending: David has reached reality. He did not continue in lucid dreaming nor did he die, since he was able to retell his story post lucid dreaming.

What adds to the ambiguity of *Inception* and *Vanilla Sky* is their protagonists both being unreliable narrators. Although Nolan and Crowe may have a solid answer as to where David and Cobb are at the end of their productions, the instability of Cobb and David’s mind leaves that answer unclear. Cobb’s mind is clearly distorted and conquered by the grief of losing Mal. In all of Cobb’s dreams, Mal makes an appearance and sabotages his missions. If dreams are a manifestation of one’s unconscious thoughts, Mal sabotaging his missions is really Cobb self-sabotaging. With his mind clearly occupied by Mal, Cobb’s whereabouts at the end of *Inception* cannot be trusted if it is from his perspective. Similarly, if *Vanilla Sky*’s storyline is through the perspective of David, then his fate is also unclear. “What are Nolan’s films about, after all, but the instability of any master position? They are full of moments in which the manipulator—the one who looks, writes, or narrates—becomes the manipulated—the object of the gaze, the character in a story written or told by someone else” (Fisher 38). Both David and Cobb seem to

make the same decision to choose reality, however, neither *Vanilla Sky* nor *Inception* make it certain that their decisions are where their fate lies. Both films make sure to omit just enough detail so that it is not clear exactly where David and Cobb end up.

There is a strong urge to want to uncover the truth behind the narratives of *Inception* and *Vanilla Sky*. A desire to have a clear answer as to whether Cobb is home with his family or imprisoned in limbo. A desire to know if David wakes up from his lucid dreaming, continues dreaming, or even if he survives. There is an urge to understand if there is any deeper meaning behind *Vanilla Sky* and *Inception*. However strong these urges and desires may be, what Crowe and Nolan seem to pursue with these two productions, are not to satisfy those desires or urges. Rather, Nolan and Crowe challenge the audience through deliberate instabilities and blur the lines between reality and dreaming. Their destabilizing techniques executed through the dream-based narratives, spatial and temporal instabilities, and ambiguous endings pursue a challenging experience for the audience. Although a definitive meaning and ending may be required to maintain structure, an open interpretation allows for the instability to conquer. Rather than having clear stages of plot, these films enable the audience to interpret and fit the pieces of their rigid coherence together like a puzzle.

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