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ON *TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH*. ART, IMAGINATION AND LIMINAL EXPERIENCES[1]

Abstract: This paper argues for the centrality of fiction, imagination and art for psychology and for life in general. It proposes an integrative theoretical framework examining art as liminal experiencing which supports transitions by engaging imagination. Grounded in a process philosophy, drawing on Vygotsky, it thus demonstrates the transformative power of art. The paper offers a close reading of the liminal and transformative properties and contents of Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*. Treating the film as a single case study which echoes a wider range of classical and contemporary art work, the paper promotes a complex and multi-layered reading of art and imagination as part of life in society.

Public significance statement: This paper challenges psychology to take art and imagination more seriously by showing how art can use imagination both to deal with and facilitate transformative experiences. This poses a challenge to the tendency within modern scientific psychology to start with an assumed distinction between objective fact and subjective fancy. Through an analysis of Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* this paper shows how art works dynamically with tensions between fact and fiction as part of experience, rather than as an assumed starting point for objective knowledge.

Keywords: Liminality; imagination; art; *Inception*

[1] **Author note** – some prior dissemination of the ideas in the manuscript took place at an event at Aalborg University, 26/08/2019 as part of the event *Theorizing liminality : between art and life.*

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On the seashore of endless worlds, children play.

Tagore.

Quoted (inexactly) by D. W. Winnicott (1971/2001, p. 95).

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychology and the social and behavioural sciences have long tried to account for simple mechanisms at work in our daily experiences as we engage with real world matters like learning, working, and relating to others, or not being able to love and work. Beyond this real world, these sciences have also devoted much attention to what might be called experiences of the untrue, or the unreal, the imaginary or the fictitious. These experiences, however, tend to be treated within the dominant ontological framework of scientific materialism as distortions with respect to a pre-given standard of reality. When contrasted against this standard, these experiences are then explained in terms of underlying pathology, lack of developmental maturity, or temporary lapse of rationality (Stenner, 2018). 'Confabulation', for example, indicates a pathological condition – often connected to brain lesions - in which psychiatric patients report or act upon information that is evidently false or context inappropriate (Carruthers, 2018). Piaget's (1972, p.202) notion of 'fabulation' indicates a phase of development during which children struggle to distinguish 'between

fabulation and truth', in contrast to a rational ideal of adulthood. Temporary lapse of rationality is indicated by a vast literature which treats affects and emotions as natural and functional distortions to a rational ideal and hence, although part of 'normal' psychology, as the primary suppliers of grounds for divorce from reality. Indeed, it is notable that the word 'psychological' itself implies a subjective experience or belief that may lack a relation with an external reality, as when illnesses without correlative disease entities are deemed 'psychological' and 'psychosomatic' (Greco, 2012). When a person's feelings, perceptions or convictions come adrift from reality, one calls for a psychologist, psychiatrist or psychotherapist.

Despite a long history of critical alternatives (Teo, 2015), this concept of the psychological as a special kind of internal reality that is more or less divorced from external reality is pervasive within psychology (Stainton Rogers et al, 2005, Valsiner, 2014), although below we discuss areas of cultural, social and developmental psychology that do take experience more seriously. Theoretically, it is attributable to the largely implicit ontology of scientific materialism that informs modern experimental psychology and neuroscience alike, and practically it is arrived at by interposing some objective standard of truth upon subjective experience. That standard is often scientific (e.g. by comparison with a conclusion demonstrated by experiment), but it can also be juridical (e.g. when children are deemed inappropriate court witnesses due to their fabulations) or medical (e.g. when somatising patients imagine unreal diseases). This comes, however, at the considerable cost of consigning fiction, fabulation, imagination and indeed art and 'creativity' more generally to the 'other side' of a clear-cut distinction with truth or reality (Stenner, 2018). Even when treated as part of so-called 'normal' psychology, these core psychological processes are

distorted and, at best, marginalised to the merely decorative role of entertaining the senses. But what if psychology did not begin with the scientific realism of this standardised bifurcation between subject and object? How would this change the way in which psychologists think about imagination, the emotions and the arts?

In this paper we aim to 're-imagine' psychology in a way that puts fiction, imagination and art back at the core of psychology's agenda (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2016, Stenner, 2017, Glăveanu & Zittoun, 2018). We challenge the fundamental bifurcation between subjective imagination and objective reality and we take seriously the constructivist position that the human capacity to inhabit *worlds* is inseparable from our symbolically mediated spheres of experience (Zittoun, 2006). Imagination and the arts, from this perspective, are core to the reality of our worlds and to human cultural life as such. Building on the idea that the real worlds we inhabit are complex material and semiotic spheres of experience and practice, we argue that art and associated imaginings become particularly relevant during *liminal times of transition* when those worlds collide, unravel, blur, or are ruptured. We will suggest that challenges to the very notion of reality are for this reason a core theme within the cultural experiences engendered by the arts. This of course is a theme that is regularly recognised by artists themselves and by art theorists (see Harrison and Wood, 2003 for extensive examples), but our concern in this paper will be on articulating a distinctively psychological perspective capable of addressing this 'challenging of reality'.

2. THEORETICAL SCOPE

In this section, we highlight three features of this paper that contribute to our re-imagining of a psychology that might adequately approach art.

2.1 A FILM AS PARADIGMATIC CASE STUDY

First, empirically speaking, we will approach our 're-imagining of psychology' by examining a film. We have selected *Inception*, by film director Christopher Nolan (2010), precisely because it explores the relation between reality and the worlds of imagination, fiction and dream. We thus use *Inception* to propose a paradigmatic case study (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 307), which enables us to investigate the role of imagination and art in life and, by extension, in general psychology (Valsiner, 2019; Zittoun, 2017). There are good reasons for a theoretical psychological analysis of artworks, as well as valid precedents. Artists are often better observers of human nature and social life, than social scientists themselves (Szakolczai, 2016a). Their close attention to the world around them, or to the nuances and richness of their own inner life or human consciousness at large, keeps inspiring and revealing readers or audiences to themselves. Furthermore, their sensitivity to their times often brings artists to thematise emerging issues ahead of psychologists and social scientists. Hence, novelists and painters were able to account for the deep transformations of the industrialisation of society before sociologists (Zola, 1877), or were able to share and elaborate their experience of the war before psychologists knew how to address such realities (Levi, 1947/2015; Remarque, 1918/1989). Consequently, many psychologists and social scientists have found in artworks, not just telling examples for their own reflections, but inspiration for them in the first place (Freud, 1914, 2001a; Stenner, 2015b; Valsiner, 2014, 2018; Wagoner et al., 2011; Zittoun, 2007). Artworks contain privileged information about human experience which can complement and enrich the interests of social scientists (Brinkmann, 2009, 2014; Zittoun et al., 2013).

2.2 A NON-BIFURCATED ONTOLOGY

Second, philosophically speaking, meeting our goal will involve operating with an ontology that does not begin with a 'matter / meaning' bifurcation between an objectively determined external reality ('object') and a separate realm of subjective psychological experience ('subject'). Typically, the division of labour between science and art follows this dualism by allocating external reality to science and subjective experience to art. Just as theatre is understood to enact a stage-play about something taken to be reality, so experience is cast as if it merely *represented* reality. When lured by metaphor into this bad choice for casting the concepts of subject and object, we can fail to grasp that in fact experience is also *part of* reality and constitutes a 'cumulation of the universe and not a stage-play about it' (Whitehead, 1929, p. 237). Viewing any experience as part of reality requires putting aside the reliance upon a pre-given standard of 'extra-subjective' reality that we described above as the familiar gesture of scientific psychology.

This path does not lead immediately to a solipsistic nihilism, but to a very concrete interest in *experience* (and not just conscious experience) as part of, and formative of, real worlds (Dewey, 1934). Experience, by definition, entails a unity of subjects *in relation to* objects. Within biology, Von Uexküll long ago developed the concept of *Umwelt* to indicate how different organisms function within distinct worlds (each world a unity of system-environment relations) (Von Uexküll, 2004). Compared to a fly, a sea urchin has a distinctive way of affecting and being affected by events because its receptors and effectors, having evolved in different surroundings, differ from those of a fly and are also combined differently in the *Funktionskreis* (functional circle) which mediates its activity. These different *experiences* of fly and sea urchin amount to different *worlds*, but those worlds really exist as part of reality. Building on Von Uexküll, Cassirer illustrated how the scope for

variety of world-forms is considerably expanded by the human capacity for symbolism (Stenner, 2017). Emergent *symbolic forms* provide a third link or 'Zwischenreich' between human organism and environment (Cassirer, 1949, p. 874). From an observer's perspective, the fly may occupy the same room as Jules, but the romantic scene of candlelit drinks that Jules is hoping for means nothing to the fly, preoccupied as it is with the heat from the candles and the sweetness of the drinks (Zittoun, 2006, p. 5). This is precisely not to distinguish a 'real world' from a 'symbolic world', but to show that Jules' real symbolically mediated world is radically different to the *Umwelt* of the fly.

From this perspective, human development is not just a matter of a world expanding in time (with increasing inclusion of future and past), space (with increasing awareness of different places and things beyond current experience) and intersubjective meaning, but also of the capacity to move between the *multiple worlds* at play in any complex human society. The world of a newborn infant may be relatively limited to their dependency on a caregiver, but the caregiver, after feeding and comforting the baby, may return to the bigger world of the household, perhaps enter the world of art through watching a movie, and perhaps then re-enter the still different world of work. Each of these worlds has the quality of being a lived unity of system / environment relations.

2.3 Integrating critical traditions

Various traditions of critical and non-dualistic psychology have been developed over the last decades or so, but these remain somewhat fragmented (Teo, 2015). Diverse theoretical vocabularies perpetually perish and are continually re-discovered (Stenner & Brown, 2009)

and similar insights can be couched in different terminologies, making communication and collaboration a hazardous enterprise. Hence a third concern of this paper is an effort at theoretical cross-fertilisation (Zittoun, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2009). It experiments with bringing together the largely independent reflections of the two authors, who were formed within two different 'alternative' traditions of critical psychology. One the one hand, we draw on a transdisciplinary psychosocial approach (Stenner, 2015a, 2017) which has roots in British critical psychology (Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, & Stainton Rogers, 1995), including Curt's critical polytextualism (Curt, 1994), critical discursive psychology (Burman and Parker, 1993) and post-structuralism (Henriques et al, 1984). On the other hand, we work within a sociocultural psychology (Zittoun, 2006, 2018; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2013) that has roots in social psychology of development (Duveen, 1997; Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1994; Perret-Clermont, 2015; Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009), cultural psychology in its semiotic orientation (Rosa & Valsiner, 2018; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Vygotsky, 1971) and psychoanalysis (Green, 1999; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011).

Theoretically speaking, both traditions share various features, including a rejection of fundamental dualism (traceable to Spinoza), attention to symbolic / semiotic mediation, and concern with the mutual constitution of the socio-cultural and the psychological. At the heart of these features, however, is a re-thinking of time which yields a theoretical commitment to reality as ultimately *processual*: 'the actual world is a process' (Whitehead, 1929, p.22). This idea that an entity's 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming' is expressed as 'process thinking' (Stenner, 2011, 2017; Whitehead, 1938) or as a developmental epistemology (Valsiner, 2005, 2007; Zittoun et al., 2013). It is important to note that the global ('Gestalt') stability implied by the concept of 'worlds' (Stenner, 2017) or 'spheres of

experience' (Zittoun, 2006) need not contradict the fact that this stability or continuity is the emergent effect of an ever-unfinished 'open-ended process' unfolding irreversibly in time (Zittoun, 2006, p.3). Whether we are talking about the human psyche, a conversation, a football game, or a fly, we are dealing with an ever dynamic, ever moving set of relational transactions which nevertheless exhibit 'Gestalt' qualities. Reality, in fact, is a process composed of transient events that occur and then perish. If all events (whether an experience, an utterance or an action), happen and then pass away, then the key question becomes: how do these events coalesce and relate across temporal distance such that something with structure and pattern can endure and perpetuate itself? Essentially, any 'being' is a temporary accomplishment built out of multitudes of events coordinated into a self-sustaining 'form'. Hence what for simplicity's sake we call a 'world' should also be grasped as a *form of process*. Put abstractly, in human existence, our forms of process are experiences and actions unfolding in material settings mediated by symbolic forms which provide a pattern or a relational order for the constant movement.

Now that we have set up the idea of a 'world' or sphere of experience as a 'form of process' we arrive at our focal interest in (liminal) *experiences of transformation*. These are experiences associated either with qualitative changes to the *forms of process* (including de-formations), or with movements between different forms (Greco & Stenner, 2017). Tania Zittoun (2008), for example, has studied biographical 'ruptures' followed by 'transitions', where the latter may include people's uses of art work, literature and films as 'symbolic resources', and on imagination, understood as dynamic at the heart of human development and social change (Zittoun, 2018; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Paul Stenner has been concerned in recent years with the relations between liminality and affect. In dialogue with

Szakolczai's sociological research (Szakolczai, 2009, 2016b), his recent collaborations have investigated the relation between literature (and the arts more generally) and experiences of liminal transformation (Stenner, 2017, Stenner & Greco, 2018). The current paper allows us to explore some of the important connections between imagination, world-ruptures and liminal transitions, and to hone in on the role of art in this process.

3. Core concepts

This section defines the core concepts needed to address imagination and the arts as transformative experiences.

3.1 Symbolic Resources and Devised and Spontaneous Liminal Experience

We articulated above a concept of world (as form of process) that resists a simple bifurcation into objective reality and subjective experience. This does not mean that we fail to see the differences captured by common-sense distinctions between fiction and fact, imagination and reality, and art and life. In Book 8 of Homer's Odyssey we find Odysseus incognito in the palace of King Alcinous, listening to the bard Demodocus sing of the fall of Troy. Nobody present yet knows that the lost hero Odysseus is in fact with them in person. He is seeking homeward passage after 7 long years entrapped in Calypso's cave, but for now he is moved to tears by Demodocus' song:

> Odysseus' heart melted and tears poured from his eyes. He wept pitifully as a woman weeps who throws herself on her husband's dying body, fallen in front of his city and people, trying to ward off that evil moment from the city and his own children: watching him gasping for breath in dying, she clings to him and screams aloud, while behind her the enemy beat her back and shoulders with their spears: then she is led

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> into captivity to endure a life of toil and suffering, her cheeks wasted pitifully with grief. He hid the falling tears from all except Alcinous, who, aware because he sat by him, noticed all, and heard him sighing deeply. (Keening, 2004).

Here we note, but will not dwell upon the important fact that Demodocus' song is a song within Homer's song (the Odyssey was designed as a song). Acknowledging this means that everything here has the 'doubled' quality of an artful construction, itself affecting the listener and requiring their attention and imagination. Homer's song enables us to experience both Odysseus' experience of Demodocus' song, and its relation to wider events in his life. Taking the song for now at face value, however, Homer shows us Odysseus' emotional response to Demodocus' song. His heart melts and he weeps. We observe Odysseus *going through* a profound emotional experience, and yet that experience is occasioned and mediated by the song. His 'here-and-now' body, and those around him, meanwhile, remains comfortably seated in a banqueting hall, surrounded by hospitality, although he covers his head with a cloak to conceal his tears. Using Winnicott's specific meaning of this phrase, Odysseus is having a *cultural experience* (Winnicott, 2001). His tears are mediated by the song which serves as a 'symbolic resource' (Zittoun, 2006). That is to say, in occasioning this experience, the song allows Odysseus to connect in a new way (a way that is indirect and mediated) with certain other important things that have happened in his life. In this case, the song takes him out of the here-and-now banquet and connects his present with the past of his real experience of heroic victory over the Trojans, followed immediately by the tragic dispersal and loss of his comrades, and a 7 year rupture in the fabric of his own life. Of course in this very special case the song is not any song, but a song that is actually about *Odysseus'* adventures, and so the connection that it makes with his life

cannot be missed. But the same contrast between cultural experience and actual life is 'laid on thick' without reference to Odysseus' own life experience when his weeping is compared with how 'a woman weeps who throws herself on her husband's dying body'.

We can use the contrast described above to distinguish two intimately related kinds of liminal experience (Stenner, 2017). On the one hand, the cultural experience had by Odysseus in Alcinous' palace can be described as a *devised* liminal experience because it involves a transition that is enacted virtually and mediated by a symbolic resource (liminality 1). On the other hand, his experience of battle in Troy, of victory followed by disaster, shipwreck and capture (to the extent that we consider these real-life experiences that actually happened to him), can be described as spontaneous liminal experiences involving world-rupture and subsequent transformation (liminality 2). Devised liminal experience (liminality 1) is, in a sense, something that happens which we *do to ourselves* in a rarefied virtual space/time abstracted from daily practical reality, whilst spontaneous liminal experience (liminality 2), embedded in practical reality, follows from what happens to us despite our actions, in the irreversible time of 'outrageous fortune'. Both forms of liminality presuppose a contrast with forms of process which are sufficiently stable and predictable to be taken for granted as a shared world of mundane practical reality. The distinction between two forms of liminality is of interest – not in and of itself – but because of the connections that open up between them. Indeed, for the Homeric Greeks it was the very work of the Gods to spin 'threads of death through the lives of mortal men (liminality 2), and all to make a song for those to come' (liminality 1). We will approach these connections – by which art and life reciprocally interpenetrate one another – through the concept of *liminal affective*

technologies (Stenner, 2017; Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel, 2013), but first we will define liminality, transition, rupture and imagination more precisely.

3.2 Rupture, Transition and liminality

In describing a 'world' as a form of process we admit the transient and temporal nature of *all* experience. We reserve the term *transition*, however, for situations where that constant change does not cohere and appear as the more-or-less predictable and stable unity implied by the word 'world', but as a qualitative transformation *of* world and / or a transition *between* worlds. Some transitions between worlds are smooth and uneventful, as when a seasoned traveller nonchalantly crosses back and forth between countries. Sometimes transitions are preceded and provoked by events that disturb, interrupt or de-form a symbolically mediated form of process. We have described these events which interrupt the smooth flow of everyday, habitual activity as experiences of rupture (Zittoun, 2006). Ruptures can be caused by all kinds of events – transformations in a person's environment, moves in their social or symbolic space, loss or changes in their relationships, or even sudden realizations (Dewey, 1896; Erikson, 1970). Homer gives the extreme example of the woman wrenched away from her husband's dying body and carried off into captivity by the enemy who invade her city. Life cannot continue as it once did after such a world-rupture, which suspends action and sense-making, and calls reality itself into question. A rupture is not itself a transition, but in an experiential sense, ruptures may open spaces of possibility for transformation or transition to a *new* world, or may oblige such transformation. Transition, then, implies actual *passage to a new form of process*. This need not happen. Unless new resources, including new meanings and symbolic forms are discovered, a rupture may merely lead to a permanent sense of a destroyed world, or a person may return unchanged

to what is effectively the same form of process (this would be a 'transitive' experience, like going out on a bus and returning home unchanged). As passage between worlds, then, transition may involve deeper transformations that entail a reorganisation of the whole system/environment world that is intransitive and hence cannot be undone (Valsiner, 2007; Zittoun et al., 2013). Either way, the concept of transition implies *liminal* experience or the experience of traversing the sensitive threshold 'betwixt and between' worlds (Turner, 1967).

The notion of the liminal itself comes from anthropology, where it classically designates the second of the phases that constitute the *three-fold pattern* of a rite of passage. Van Gennep (1981) also referred to liminal rites as *rites of transition.* During initiation rituals, for example, the liminal or transition phase follows the parting of the person to be initiated from the wider group (rites of separation), but comes before re-joining the group as a new person, with a new status (e.g., the rites of incorporation during which young men become adults). Strictly, then, the term 'liminal' was used by Van Gennep to designate a particular type of ritual. As cultural elements, liminal rites are rituals that *symbolise* transition. In this respect they are more like a song about rupture than a rupture (although song and rite both entail at least a short phase of separation from routine life). Precisely because liminal transitions threaten to disrupt the collective and individual lives of those whose worlds are transformed, the affectivity generated requires careful 'management'. In the course of a life, rituals provide a means to encourage and trigger liminal transitions (and hence experiences of becoming) in circumstances of likely rupture (Stenner, 2017; Zittoun, 2006). Since they long pre-existed writing, rituals can be considered as one of the first and most primordial means for guiding and shaping an actual life transition through the mediation of a culturally

devised liminal experience. They are technologies for facilitating liminal experiences of transition.

3.3 Imagination and Liminal affective technologies

Devised liminal experience, like that produced through ritual means or like that of Odysseus listening to Demodocus' song, gives particular importance to imagination. Imagination can be defined, for a person or a group, as the process of temporarily leaving the flow of the here-and-now ('proximal') experiences of workaday shared practical reality, to explore 'distal' past, future or alternative experiences (Vygotsky, 2004; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Drawing on a variety of classical debates, we consider imagination as creative (and not merely reproductive) and as implying multiple modalities (and not only images). It can be embodied and affective, but can also be combined with more rational modes of thinking and reasoning. It can be personal, but also collective, as when musicians improvise to create a shared, temporary musical universe (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2012), or when a generation of poets and then scientists eventually realize their dream of sending people to the moon (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). As with dreams, imagination involves bracketing the rules of the dominant social and material reality (Bogdan, 2013; Freud, 2001b; Schuetz, 1945). For example, in imagination the rules of irreversible and linear time can be suspended so that we can explore our past, or undo and reinvent events that have happened. Likewise, we can suspend physical and social rules and imagine such things as flying children ruling the world. This feature of creating a sphere of experience that is 'suspended' from the ordinary real-time events of workaday practical reality means that imaginative experiences share the three-fold pattern van Gennep identified with rites of passage. Schematically at least, an episode of imagining begins with an uncoupling from the normal flow of events

('separation') and ends, after a transitional 'flight of fancy', with a recoupling ('reincorporation'). To the extent that this transition brings qualitative change which durably transforms the relation to practical reality (by engaging 'distal' spheres of experience beyond ordinary 'proximal' routines), an imaginative experience can be considered a liminal experience.

'Liminal affective technologies' are the various means that have been devised for nourishing and amplifying imaginative processes (and hence generating liminality 1) and linking them to actual processes of psychosocial transformation (liminality 2). We consider art forms like painting, poetry, theatre, music (and so forth) to have achieved relative autonomy from ritual through cultural evolution, and to be liminal affective technologies in their own right *when they are implicated in the transformation of the world of those engaging with them* (Stenner and Greco, 2018). Imagination is nourished and amplified by the imaginers' previous experiences, cultural knowledge and resources, the mastery of specific semiotic codes, but also, by present situations mediated by material and symbolic objects. The cultural experience of enjoying a painting or listening to music, as we shall see in our analysis of *Inception*, is not all about imagination as defined above. On the contrary, what the painting presents – its shapes, textures and colours – are really there for perception, no less than the flow of musical tones. A painting, movie or story can *show us* flying children. In fact, when we are absorbed in these real forms, we are likely to perceive their reality with the enhanced intensity that is afforded by the fact that we are invited, for a moment, to ignore everything else but this circle of paint or this melodic iteration. But precisely because these art forms serve in this way to 'bracket out' the proximal concerns of practical reality, they

potentially afford new experiences of actual realities (not just 'imaginary') we are usually too busy to attend to.

It is this enhanced intensity of *actual* experience in a setting in which the usual demands of practical reality are suspended that in turn nourishes and amplifies imagination and renders it a potent ingredient for creative transformation. More specifically, it is precisely here – in the world created by (or *with*) a painting, a musical piece, a ritual - that we are least obliged to meticulously separate the 'imaginary' from the 'real' and that we are licensed to thrill at the blurring of the 'subjective' and the 'objective'. In the liminal phase of a ritual, those 'passing' are also temporarily exposed to another world, or another layer of material/symbolic reality - that of ancestors, the invisible, the sacred, where the laws of "normal" social life are suspended if not reversed, where dreams are explored for real, where madness is searched for, or communication with other beings is possible, etc. (Nathan, 2007; Obeyesekere, 1990; Stenner, 2017).

We stated in Section 3.2 that rupture *might* but does not automatically occasion liminal transitions. Equally so, even though imagination, rituals, and art in some sense *are* micro-liminal occasions in their own right (liminality 1), they also *might* but *need not* occasion liminal transitions in actual life-courses (liminality 2). Imagination is not *always* triggered during transitions, and neither does it *only* occur during transitions, but can be at play in mundane events such as planning which train to catch. A ritual may bore those involved and be treated purely instrumentally, and a painting, sculpture or musical piece, far from occasioning change, may be used to sacralise entrenched privilege. We are interested, however, precisely in situations where and when the two varieties of liminality combine together and support each other, as illustrated so neatly by Odysseus' tears. There and then,

songs may become symbolic resources that are components in a liminal affective technology that amplifies imagination and triggers, guides and supports liminal experiences of life transition. The troubled experiences of a young person facing an uncertain future, for example, may be supported and 'digested' through their engagement with films, music and other symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006). The combination of the two forms is not merely coincidental. On the one hand, devised liminal experiences, as discussed above, are fertile with precisely the forms of imaginative symbolism that are required if the passivity of mere rupture is to be converted into an active transition to a new personally livable and socially communicable world (*world expansion*). On the other hand, the circumstance of being suspended between worlds in a liminal life-transition can create an intensely rich environment (of contrast, paradoxes and juxtapositions) in which creative experience and expression acquire new vitality. In this way, spontaneous liminal experience is generative of new ritual, art, symbolism and imagination, whilst the latter 'devised' forms generate in turn new modes of spontaneity. Imagination, ritual and art thus *need not* simply distract or amuse us, but *can* re-couple with the flow of a lived form of process and enable its expansion.

Important background to the concept of a liminal affective technology is provided by Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and former art critic, in his *Psychology of art* (1971). This is because Vygotsky understands art as a social technique of emotion, or a "technique of feelings" (p.244). In Vygotsky's theory, works of art are systems of stimuli (combinations of aesthetic symbols) which have their material and semiotic form. These awaken and guide the emotions of the audience, and thanks to their organisation in the structure of the work and the unfolding of the experience they provide, they reorganise and transform these

emotions. The work of art demands 'the union of feeling and imagination' (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 215). For example, a fable or a novel may awake in the reader a complex mixture of emotions and, thanks to the structure of its semiotic composition, distribute these emotions onto conflicting planes, which, as the work of art progresses, may address and solve their conflict. This resolution may, in turn, solve that tension for the reader, whose emotions are in this way re-organised using this 'external' transformative tool, a transformation, Vygotsky called, somewhat misleadingly, "catharsis". It is important to underline that Vygotsky did not consider catharsis on the Freudian model as a mere evacuation of affect, but as transformation or transfiguration. Both the process of fashioning and that of experiencing an artwork, Vygotsky argues, involve 'the creative act of *overcoming* the feeling, resolving it, conquering it. Only when this act has been performed – then and *only then* is art born' (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 248). This transformative power of art-mediated experience thus helps those who encounter art to make new sense of their emotions, especially during 'critical and important stages [of] life' (p.259). This statement can apply to artists themselves (their emotional experiences acquire material symbolic form through the process of creating an art work) and to the audience of the work (reader, viewer, listener, etc., including performer, where relevant). In both cases, through the objectification of feelings into the form of a 'work' via specific arrangements of semiotic elements or symbols – linguistic, musical, etc. - , they are transfigured onto a social plane, making art nothing less than 'the social within us' (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 249). In this way Vygotsky prepares the ground for our consideration of art as a liminal technology, *of* and *for* transition, a technology which works with and upon affectivity (including affects, emotions, passions, sentiments and other feelings).

Hence, if having a cultural experience such as watching a film, reading a novel, engaging with an art piece, can be seen as a variation of a three-fold pattern of individual yet cultural ritual – with its threshold of engaging with the piece (opening a novel lying on the grass, switching on the stereo, becoming silent in a museum,) the actual cultural experience, and the threshold of leaving the art piece (standing up from one's picture house seat, closing a book), then Vygotsky's analysis illuminates the actual liminal experience - that of being absorbed by or dialoguing with the art work (see also Benson, 2001; Dewey, 1934; Freud, 1959; Segal, 1991; Tisseron, 1994; Winnicott, 2001).

Conceptual tools now in place, we will apply an old pragmatist method to further explore the role of arts *as* and *in* liminal experiences: we assess the value of our concepts by examining what they actually allow one to see and to do (James, 1904b, 1904a). To this end, we examine the film *Inception* (Nolan, 2010), which precisely thematises the movement betwixt and between art and life, dream/fiction and reality. We will use the film as case study, which enables us to exemplify our theoretical perspective by showing how transitions, liminality and imagination are drawn upon and guided at multiple levels by way of this artwork.

4. *Inception,* A TALE OF (MORE THAN) TWO LIMINALITIES

Inception is a star-studded film written and directed by Christopher Nolan (2010) and completed after a lengthy (ten year) phase of preparation (Capps, 2010). A box office success, the film explores the imagination / reality interface and is a fundamental reflection on the liminal zones between waking and dream, perception and imagination. To avoid 'spoiling' the film, we recommend readers to view it before continuing with our article. Before presenting our analysis, we provide a selective summary.

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4.1 A SHORT SUMMARY

The film is highly complex. It is accessible on a surface level as a heist-style action thriller featuring a gang of corporate spies, led by Dom Cobb (*Leonardo DiCaprio*). Their mission is to prevent a wealthy businessman called Robert Fischer (*Cillian Murphy*) from taking over the multi-national energy corporation built by his dying father, Maurice (*Pete Postlethwaite*). This mission is funded by Mr Saito (*Ken Watanabe*), whose business would profit from the break-up of the Fischer Morrow Corporation. The spy plot of stealing and manipulating sensitive information from Robert Fischer takes the viewer through vehicle chases, gunfights, explosions and other exciting Hollywood action.

The novelty of Cobb's method of espionage is that he enters the dreams of his 'subjects' to steal their secrets. Most of the action, therefore, takes place in dream space/time. This improbable criminal practice (called 'extraction') is made possible thanks to a new dream-sharing technology (PASIV) that has been developed by the military under the scientific guidance of Cobb's father in law, Dr Stephen Miles (*Michael Caine*). PASIV (Portable Automated Somnacin IntraVenous) enables the creation of the very 'architecture' of a dream. The spy can then enter as a character into a shared dream and 'extract' a relevant secret from a targeted 'subject'. The core mission depicted in the movie in fact involves more than the stealing of hidden thoughts ('extraction'), it involves using the dream technology to *implant* new thoughts ('inception'). Cobb's brief is to incept Fischer Junior with the thought that his father would not have wished him to 'follow in his footsteps', but to be creative and forge his own original career path. This outcome of introducing such a rupture would be to dismantle the monopoly status of his father's corporation.

Creating the conditions for the implanted idea to 'take hold' is a delicate and complicated process. The idea, for instance, must be *simple* ('I will build my own career path'), it must be *emotionally resonant* (with a preference for positive over negative affect), and it must be *deeply* implanted. To meet these conditions a recursive triple-layered dream – a dream within a dream within a dream – is required. With each successive and deeper dream level, the strength and plausibility of the implanted idea is reinforced and emotionally enhanced.

Beyond this first – and complex enough – plot, the film presents us with two other framing narratives which add to the film's tension and dynamism.

The second narrative follows Cobb who is unable to return to the USA, since he is accused of having killed his wife, Mal (*Marion Cotillard*). Cobb thus lives in exile, wandering between vaguely specified locations in which he meets fellow spies and conducts his criminal activities. Mr Saito takes advantage of Cobb's desire to return home to his two young and motherless children by proposing that if Cobb takes on this assignment, he will arrange for the murder charges to be dropped. Cobb accepts, and thus the plot comes to hang on the co-occurrence of two improbable possibilities, each of which demands a *leap of faith*: Cobb achieving successful inception of Fischer and Saito achieving immunity for Cobb in return.

The third narrative concerns Cobb's relationship to Mal and supplies an additional mission improbable, more emotional in nature. This underlies the others and deepens the narrative tension. It becomes evident that Mal, the daughter of Dr Miles, inventor of PASIV, collaborated in PASIV enabled dream exploration. Cobb and Mal had gone so deeply into dream worlds that they entered a forth level of unconstructed dream space called *limbo.* They had been trapped there for such a long time (the equivalent of 50 years which, in limbo, can pass in just hours of normal waking time) that they had constructed a dream

version of their real life in which Mal had lost any sense that it was not real, and hence any desire to return. Cobb first attempted inception to motivate Mal to return. He incepted the idea that their world was not real, but a dream from which they could wake up only by dying (escape from limbo requires 'death'). The inception indeed 'changed her mind', and both were precipitated back to reality after prostrating themselves in front of an oncoming freight train. But on return to surface reality, the incepted idea remained active, so that despite finally living wide-awake with their real children, Mal remained convinced that this was not reality, and that to get home, their death was again necessary. In a gruelling flashback scene, Mal leaps to her real death from their building, having failed to persuade Cobb – who knew they were in reality - to accompany her. The distraught Cobb responds by memorialising Mal in his dreams, thus himself facing the dilemma of whether to live a permanent dream with his Mal projections, or - by executing Saito's plan - to return home to real life without her. Furthermore, his dream projection of Mal is out of his conscious control, and 'she' begins to haunt and sabotage his professional dream expeditions. To succeed in Saito's mission, and to escape permanent liminality, he must resolve his deep regrets concerning Mal.

In short, *Inception* is a paradigmatic case study to approach our topic because it invites us to reflect upon liminality under three aspects:

The first concerns the liminal transitions experienced by the characters as part of the 'content' of the film. The plot treatment depicts interconnected liminal transition experiences at three 'scales': micro, minor, and major (following Bakhtin's [1984, p. 447] usage of the 'minor/major' distinction). As will be discussed in section 5.2, the dynamism of the film is also attributable to its operation at a fourth, *meta*, scale. At the 'micro' scale, the film engages deeply with dream experiences. These can be considered as micro-liminal

transitions in that dreams evidently involve a suspension of the usual modes of perception, logic and symbolism typical of daily life (Stenner, 2017). Dreams occur at the 'limits' of waking consciousness during the sleep which regularly punctuates daily life. Via the use of PASIV, however, dreams that would otherwise be 'spontaneous' come to be 'devised'. The film in fact multiplies the dream world into four successively deeper levels (with the first dream being level 1, the dream within, level 2, and the dream within a dream within a dream, level 3) and the filmic representation of these dream worlds will be unpacked in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. At the 'minor' scale, the film deals with the specific life transitions of the characters. We have seen that – like Odysseus stuck in Calypso's cave – Cobb begins the film with a permanently liminal 'exiled pariah' status and undergoes an intensive transformation leading (or not…) to the recovery of his citizenship and family. In addition, Fischer Junior, Saito and Ariadne each also 'go through' their own specific liminal journeys. These 'micro' and 'minor' liminal transitions are in turn nested within broader, societally significant, transitions that we call 'major'. The most obvious is the endeavour to break the monopoly of the Fischer Morrow global energy corporation by incepting a rupture in its continuity. At the climax of the film these transitions at different scales are brought together in a confluence that occurs precisely during the passage of a flight between two continents, itself symbolising the transition of a flight of imagination or leap of faith.

The second aspect of liminality addressed by the film is the theme of artfully *devising* liminal experiences by deploying some form of liminal affective technology. PASIV is such a technology for conjuring and manipulating liminal experience in order to facilitate and navigate significant transformations. For this reason, as we shall see in Section 5.1, the film

provides a profound reflection on the nature of art (and film in particular) as a 'technique of feelings' (Vygotsky, 1971, p.244).

Finally, as well as reflecting on liminal affective technologies as part of its plot, the film must itself be seen as a liminal affective technology which, as it were, *operates an inception upon its viewers*. At this final, reflexive level, the film 'incepts' a feeling for the volatility of the distinction between imagination and reality, and a certain value associated with its ultimate undecidability. Through this inception, the film thus helps its viewer to reflect upon their own contemporary situation of permanent liminality and de-realization. In Section 5.2 we will further suggest that this theme may be a core 'meta scale' concern of art as such. We will now detail how these various transformations operate, beginning with a specific focus on the dreaming experiences.

4.2 Dreaming recreated as devised liminal experience

The film presents us with a team of people creating dreams as devised liminal experiences, and transforming dreams through various techniques in order to generate ruptures and transitions in the lives of the dreamers. Here, we highlight the devices used in this liminal affective technology to create, enter and leave dreams and, to channel specific transformations. In addition, we draw attention to a parallel at play between the collective dream technology featured in the content of the film, and film itself as a directly comparable liminal affective technology (itself a complex 'dispositive', involving a specific apparatus and a team of specialists).

First, the PASIV machine plays a role that is comparable to the physical apparatus needed by film makers. This technology has to be used in specific conditions. The targeted 'subject' and Cobb's team must be sleeping in the same place at the same time (hence the convenience of

a train or plane), their arms connected to the PASIV machine by tubes through which they receive the drug that sustains dream time (just as film goers must sit together in a movie theatre).

Second, much as film making requires a specialist team including Director, Producer, actors, script writers and researchers, the dream world itself must be constructed in advance on the basis of intensive collaborative research. Cobb assembles a spy team including: Arthur (*Joseph Gordon-Levitt*) who acts as researcher and project manager; Eames (*Tom Hardy*) who specialises in forgery and identity theft in order to learn about the unconscious patterns of the dreamer; Yusuf (*Dileep Rao*) a pharmacist whose role is to prepare the sedative appropriate for the length of the required dreams; and Ariadne (*Ellen Page*), a brilliant student of Dr Stephen Miles, trained to act as the dream architect who creates the décor of the dreams, including the dream space and time which frames the script of the basic dream plot. It is within that crafted architecture, thanks to cues collected by Eames and the drugs selected by Yusuf, that the dreaming subject will unconsciously 'project' the actors, figures, actions and events that populate the dream décor and hence form its substance.

Third, the inception team must have specific expertise for handling the details and contingencies involved in inducing a dream. For example, Cobb has learned that if he designs a fortress or a safe-room or a bank-vault into a dream, the subject is likely to unconsciously project their secrets into these safe spaces, making it easier to spy out the hidden information. The dream design thus lures unconscious desires into an expression that is visible to the spy, thus functioning somewhat like a virtual Rorschach. Care must be taken with such manipulations because when the dreaming subject unconsciously suspects the operations of an alien agency within their dream, the dream characters projected by the

subject can collectively and aggressively 'turn' on the intruder, 'defending' their secrets like so many lymphocytes attacking an infection. There are, therefore, dangers within the shared dreams: interfering with the dream increases the likelihood that the spy will be killed by the subject's projections. Death within a dream is not real death, however, but it does typically mean that the spy will exit the dream.

Fourth, if dreams are devised by this liminal affective technology, then there must be ways out - in this case, either to the level described as "reality", or to the previous level of dream. The main way a spy may exit the subject's dream is by receiving a 'kick' or some other wake-up shock to their sleeping body. This is typically administered by another member of the spy team who is not sleeping, and the actual shock of the kick will then reverberate in some form in the dream (as a fall, for instance). However, if entering the dream is quite easy with the use of PASIV, leaving it may be more difficult. For example, strong sedatives are required if the sleepers are to descend three dream levels. This makes waking the dreamers with a 'kick' more difficult, requiring strong measures such as plunging the sleeping body into a bath of cold water (this might be expressed at the lower dream level as a sudden flood, which destroys the dreamscape and wakes the sleeper). Furthermore, a kick at the level of reality will not wake a dreamer at levels 2 or 3. Rather, a kick at level 1 must be engineered to 'wake' those at level 2, and those at level 3 can transition to level 2 only following a kick at that level. If dreamers from level 3 are to transit smoothly back to waking reality, the kick at the surface must be coordinated with those at levels 1 and 2. During the mission this coordination is achieved by means of Edith Piaf's famous recording of '*Je ne regrette rien*'. Since Yusuf's drug leaves hearing intact during the dream states, this song reverberates at all levels, serving as a prompt for dreamers at levels 1 and 2 to synchronise their kicks. A final

quite serious complication is that the strength of the sedative prevents those who are killed in their dreams from automatically waking. Instead, dream death can lead – perhaps permanently – to limbo.

Finally, given the experiential difficulty of discriminating between dream and reality, especially in multi-dream scenario, the spies need an additional technical resource called a "totem". For example, Cobb had received from Mal a small metal spinning top that serves as his totem: if the spinning top continues to spin indefinitely, this informs Cobb that he is still dreaming.

Altogether, then, dreams are presented as complex devised liminal experiences, entered, exited and transformed by an expert team with complementary skills, experience, and a series of technical devices. In Section 5 we will pick up on how these artefactual dreams provide an analogy with art forms, and especially, films. First, we must briefly describe the filmic representation of the three dream levels and 'limbo', including how these are nested one within another.

4.3 Liminal transformations between dream levels

Each dream level is built as a world of its own with its own temporality, and its own materialisation of space. In the transitions between any two dream worlds, the rules of the first must therefore be suspended and replaced with those of the second. The first level is represented as an international urban centre, with offices, taxis, speed, and rain. The world is grey, cold, shiny, uniform and yet unnerving. Much of this first level is filmed as a road-chase on city streets, because it turns out that Fischer has a well-defended unconscious. The inception team, including the abducted young Fischer, are in a minibus that is chased at speed by other vehicles. There is therefore an appearance of constant movement, with fast

acceleration, screeching breaks, swerves and gun shots, filmed close up. The moving minibus is also the place where the team start the dream that brings them to the next level. The wake-up kick is the fall of the minibus into a river.

The second level of dream takes place inside a luxurious hotel. The atmosphere is golden, dark and velvety, creating a comparatively calm and comforting atmosphere of in-door leisure. Here, in all trust, Cobb convinces Fischer to dream with him to access the safe in which he will find his father's will; they thus use a PASIV in the dream to go to the next level. The kick out of this dream sequence is the fall of a hotel elevator.

The third level takes place in high snowy mountains. The main action is an armed-ski race with snow-trucks and intense gunfire and explosions. Wearing snow-camouflage, Cobb and Fischer eventually reach a concrete building containing Fischer's father on his death-bed next to his iron safe. Despite the fast moving ski-chases, the vast white of the mountainous backdrop and the sense of distance created by long-range shots of the moving actors creates a distant atmosphere of primal, meaningless aggression. The kick is the explosion of the building.

The final level of limbo is represented as a world where time and space are infinitely labile and inexistent. Next to the ever-coming waves of a sandy beach, a town half in ruin, half being created, devoid of any signs of life, is constantly rising and collapsing, being created and then annihilated, much like the waves upon the beach. Limbo is depicted in beiges and rusty tones, and the place feels like a nightmarish ghost town. Cobb can enter this place through a worn-out elevator, and since no kick seems to function (besides, perhaps, the echoes of the song "*Je ne regrette rien*" that resonate all the way down the dream levels), it is necessary to die a violent death in order to leave limbo.

In summary, each dream level is a self-enclosed, self-referential world, enabling a specific experience, and there are techniques to enter and leave each one, although, ultimately, each exists in simultaneity with the rest. Each dream world is nested within the one above it, like a matryoshka or Russian Doll, and each thus somehow participates in a shared world beyond the multiplicity. Each successive level is 'deeper' than its predecessor, with limbo being the deepest of all, and hence the furthest from surface reality. This simultaneity is filmically expressed by the fact that the same kick takes new shape at each level. For example, the fall of the bus at level one *is* the fall of the elevator at level two: the core proprioceptive experience is the same, but is modified by the constraints of each specific world. Great complexity is lent to the film by virtue of the fact that the inception – the core act of the film - must necessarily function across these worlds. The inception is 'cross-liminal' in that it must be contrived to perform transformations, not just betwixt and between, but across and beyond levels.

This is how the cross-liminal inception functions. At the most superficial level of the first dream (car-chase), the plan is to 'incept' into Fischer Junior's subconscious mind a basic uncertainty as to his father's intent for him: perhaps there is another legal will, kept in a safe, which stipulates that Fischer Morrow be broken up? Perhaps criminals are trying to break the safe? To achieve this, Robert is kidnapped along with his father's right-hand-man (Peter), both being interrogated, to extract the combination number of Maurice's safe and to steal the second will. At the deeper level of the second dream (hotel world), the plan is to further embed this same idea by complicating and deepening the motives at play. The plan is now for Robert to be cleverly led to believe that Peter is behind the theft. The latter confesses and expresses benign motives: that he doesn't want to see Fischer Morrow broken

up, and that Maurice's second will is an unfair insult or 'taunt' to Robert ('He's telling you that you aren't worthy of his achievements').

A daring aspect of the plan is for Cobb to reveal to Robert that he is dreaming, but to reassure him: Cobb thus acts as protector. Robert is then persuaded to help discover Peter's real motives (and those of his father) by luring him into the third level dream. The idea introduced in this third dream world, and that Robert learns at his father Maurice's deathbed, is that his father was indeed disappointed. But the nature of the disappointment is the opposite of what he had expected: Maurice did not want Robert to be more like him, but: 'I was disappointed... that you tried'. At this moment, the utterance is still ambivalent; yet just before he passes, the father will open the safe to reveal both the will and a small handmade child's toy: a colourful pinwheel made by Robert as a child and, so it will seem, treasured by his father. At this moment, the viewer can observe that the whole meaning of the father-son encounter changes emotional valence and meaning for Robert: if the father is disappointed, this is because he wanted his son to pursue his own course, rather than follow his father. It is this key experience, which touches the affective, infantile core of young Fischer, that is designed to have performative effects which carry back though the layers of dreams, into Robert's adult consciousness. In sum, through this triple inception, the idea implanted at each dream level will receive deepened motivational support from the next layer down. The three levels will then operate in unison as the unconscious of the wide-awake subject who, once back in the real world, will be misled into feeling the deep-seated authenticity of the incepted 'idea'. If all goes to plan, Robert will then act accordingly, and Fischer Morrow will be broken up. The success of the inception is suggested as, when waking

up from his induced sleep when landing, eyes still full of dreams, a flicker of a smile crosses young Fischer's face, as if a sudden idea had entered his mind.

In summary, following the inception, the liminal affective technology of PASIV will have enabled Cobb's team to: a) devise and open up a shared liminal occasion within the dream of their subject, b) use that micro liminal occasion to manipulate affectivity in a way that, c) provokes a series of minor becomings or biographical transitions that in turn, d) feed into major changes concerning the fate of a global corporation. The multi-levelled micro-liminality of the dreams thus participates in the minor-liminality of the life-course transitions which participate in the major-liminality associated with the arrangement between Cobb and Saito to destroy the monopoly of Fischer Morrow. All three liminal transformations are achieved during the plane trip, despite several complications in the dream action (Saito had been shot in level 1, and had to be recovered from limbo by Cobb). The core emotional drama of the film, however, is carried by the problem of the resolution of Cobb's pariah status: will he be able to return home? It seems so: Cobb passes security at the airport and returns home to meet his estranged children in a scene of family idyll. But, just as all seems resolved, the film ends in ambiguity: just before joining his children in the garden, Cobb spins his totem on the table, and moves on. Christopher Nolan shows the top spinning, but does not let the viewer know whether or not it stops. We are thus brought to what Vygotsky (1971) called a 'catastrophe', in which we are left wondering if Cobb has really returned home to his children, or if he is lost in one of the many layers of dreams – lost in liminality.

5. Art as liminal experiencing

So far we have argued that the film *Inception* depicts liminal experiencing at multiple levels. Characters take seriously the possibility of exploring non-real worlds, worlds of conjoint

fabulation, created with great imagination, technical skill, and knowledge of self and others. They explore dreams built like complex art performances, a form of living art, highly dynamic and evolving according to the participation of all involved. These experiences are liminal, because they have thresholds to separate them from what is admitted as "reality", and techniques to enter, exit and orient oneself within and between various distinct worlds. They also are liminal, because they are fundamentally transformative. Through his descent into Fischer's dreams, Cobb addresses his impossible grief and gives himself the chance of returning to his family; Fischer Junior, deep in dreams, explores his relation to his dead father and transforms his position in the company he inherited from that of follower to that of authentic creator. But as an art work affording a cultural experience, *Inception* is not just *about* liminal experiencing; it also proposes a potentially transformative liminal experience to its audience. This is what we now need to address, drawing on the lessons of *Inception* itself.

5.1 Dream architecture in *Inception* as UR paradigm for art

We follow here Vygotsky's idea that a film, as any work of art, can be considered as a social technique of emotion, whereby the art work's semiotic composition, brought to life by the emotion and imagination of the audience, can transform the person. The film is thus well suited to function as a liminal affective technology, not by *prescribing* any experience, *but by offering and scaffolding a complex suggestion*, actualised differently by each viewer. This theoretical proposition (of the active role of the historically located viewer in the construction of the art experience) is in fact vividly illustrated in *Inception* by way of the contrast between dream architecture and dreaming subject noted in our summary. During

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her training as architect, Cobb informs Ariadne that the subject's brain is continually and simultaneously *creating* and *perceiving* the world, but that the creative element is rarely noticed. Consider the following transcribed extract:

> COBB: [the brain] creates and perceives a world simultaneously. So well that you don't feel your brain doing the creating. That's why we can short-circuit the process...
> ARIADNE: How?
> COBB: By taking over the creating part.
> *Cobb draws a straight line between the two arrows.*
> COBB: This is where you come in. You build the world of the dream. We take the subject into that dream, and let him fill it with his subconscious. (Transcribed by the authors from the film *Inception* (Nolan, 2010)).

What we take to be reality, whether we are dreaming or awake, is always a combination of perception and conception, data and creata, and the gap between the two involves an imaginative leap of faith. This creative leap is, as we shall see in Section 5.2, thoroughly ambivalent in that it has the potential to be both constructively positive and destructively negative. Ariadne's role as dream architect is to operate in the 'leap' across this gap in order to shape and facilitate the creative process that feeds perception of reality. Cobb draws Ariadne a diagram like the one in figure 1 below, in which the upper curved arrow represents perception, the lower arrow represents creation, and the line between them represents the liminal threshold at which the dream architect makes their intervention:

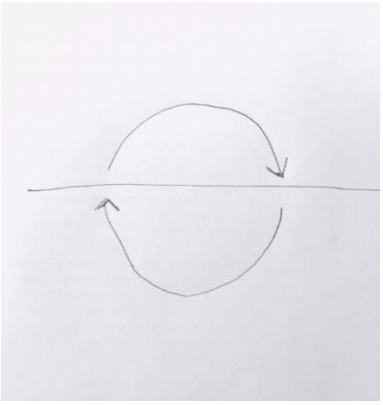

FIGURE 1 : Approximation of Cobb's diagram for Ariadne

The dream architect thus creates the infrastructure of a dream, the 'empty' world, but that architecture works only in so far as the dreaming subject populates it with their projections, lending it living meaning. Christopher Nolan is here providing us with a generally applicable sociocultural psychology analysis of art experience. In this model, whether they are a film director, a novelist, a painter, a sculptor, a musician or whatever else, the artist is always a *dream architect* in the fashion of Ariadne: the formed material they create is a *complex suggestion* to be completed or renewed by the appreciative recipient.

It is significant that Nolan selects dreaming as a kind of Ur-paradigm of art. In principle, dreams are worlds-within-worlds that are radically private: they can be experienced only by the dreamer who in turn produces them, albeit in a manner that is in turn singularly inaccessible, sometimes even to the 'same' subject when awake. Dreams cannot be objectified into an external form observable by a third party, and cannot function in a direct way as a complex suggestion to others. Paintings, novels, plays, sculptures and musical performances, by contrast, are well described as 'public' objectifications, and yet *what* they externalise and hence make available as experiencable suggestions to others is something that shares much in common with dreams. An art work is its own singular 'world', for example, and its process of production can be utterly opaque, even to the artist, and is often compared to dream states like 'reverie' and 'flow'. Likewise, the audience of the art work finds themselves drawn into an unusual and dream-like mode of being (this is most obvious with cinema, where the dream like space of a dark room with 'silver screen' is regularly commented upon). However, Nolan here presents us with dreams that are indeed both created like an art work (devised by an architect, etc.), and accessible to an observer (since

PASIV allows a dream to be experienced by more than one person): the architect constructs the dream world, and the liminal dream experience is shared by those united by the PASIV equipment. This means that, for the time of the dream, the dreamed reality is objectified and shareable. The dream is not, however, objectified into an enduring material form like a painting, a sculpture or a building. Rather, Nolan's crafted dreams are *live* like a live musical performance (the dream, like the music, does not survive beyond its experiencing) and *improvised* like a piece of jazz. As the proposed dream evolves with the dreamer's own contribution, the circular schema drawn by Cobb could rightly be completed into a spiral unfolding in time, where the creation is affected by the user. It is through this insistence upon the active role of the (indeterminate) dreamer / viewer / experiencer - who is a necessary condition for an artwork to live through being shared in a co-creation - that Nolan provides us with a fundamental or 'Ur' paradigm for understanding the arts.

To go one step further, it must be remembered that each viewer reacts to an art work not only with his or her unique experience, but as having an experience located in a specific sociocultural context. For Vygotsky, each 'generation, each viewer has his own Hamlet' (Vygotsky, 1971, p.40). As Bakhtin (1996, p.253) put it, each audience *re-creates* and *renews* the 'text' making it resonate with their own real-life time-space. For the same reason, each generation must also invent its own art works, responsive to and expressive of its times. From this observation we can better understand the sense in which *Inception* is radically historically specific, and not just because it is a high-tech film using special effects that are still cutting edge today. The film expresses, amongst other things, a contemporary *questioning of 'reality'* common to an internet generation steeped in computer games and image manipulation within the abstracted virtual flows of global and digitalised techno-

scientific capitalism. It expresses a mediatised world in which supposedly 'private' experiences are routinely commodified and publicised and in which privacy scandals and identity theft are regular news items. It shares this specificity with numerous other contemporary art works that were produced along with the progress of media and technology during the last century, from *La Jetée* (Marker, 1962)*, Stalker* (Tarkovsly, 1972), *Benny's video*, (Haneke, 1992), *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) and *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998) to *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-2018). Inception is thus addressed to a generation of viewers knowing about cinema, new technologies (absolutely absent from the film itself), videogames and virtual worlds. Yet it is also addressed to a generation of viewers that may remember the world before virtual realities, as the use of Edith Piaf's song "*Je ne regrette rien*" suggests (not least because Marion Cotillard sang that very song whilst acting the part of Edith Piaf in *La môme* [Dahan, 2007]). As Ur-liminal experience, then, *Inception* invites us to reflect about other art works that offer comparable experiences, in other sociocultural contexts (a comparison of the final scene with that from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* yields another example of this).

5.2 Art, to radically question the reality/fiction distinction.

And yet, historical specificity notwithstanding, art in general, and *Inception* in particular also operates at a much deeper and, as it were, slower level: a level to which a quality of enduring value appears to cling. It is this level that we have called the *meta* scale, first because it embodies metaphysical meanings, and second because it encompasses the major and minor worlds of action, supplying artistic rhythm and melody by repeating and embracing them within its broader 'mythical' world of meaning (Bakhtin, 1984, p.446-447). Caution is needed here, since big words like 'eternal', 'timeless' and 'universal' – which litter

the history of aesthetics - can be dangerously misleading and reductionist. It is for this reason that, taking inspiration from Nolan's dream levels, we suggest that art operates on different planes and scales, each with a different temporality and depth, and exploits the tensions and resonances that can be created between these planes. In the following section we turn to the deepest, slowest scale. When discussing historical specificity above, we suggested something distinctively modern, or even post-modern, about Nolan's theme of questioning the distinction between reality and fiction. Without denying this specificity, we also recognise that a certain *questioning of reality* has been a core theme for the entirety of modern literature, and indeed art more generally (see Cassirer, 1925; Szakolczai, 2016a) . This theme puts *Inception* in resonance with a much more general current in human cultural experience, but does so by encompassing rather than denying the plane at which historical specificity is at issue. For example, this theme of questioning reality dominates the concerns of the three great Renaissance innovators: Cervantes (whose *Don Quixote* fails to distinguish reality from fiction), Rabelais (whose Friar John is notable precisely for *not* being 'torn and divided betwixt reality and appearance') and Shakespeare (who explored the reality / fiction contrast through many devices, most notably *Hamlet's* 'play within a play' device, itself invoked by Nolan's rendering of a 'dream within a dream' and, as we have seen, preceded by Homer's 'song within a song'). In the remainder of this section we travel even further back to some ancient stories that resonate directly with the meta plane at play in *Inception.*

First, Nolan has Ariadne draw a labyrinth to test her abilities, directly referencing the mythical Ariadne, daughter of King Minos and Pasifae. Ariadne helped Theseus escape her father's underground labyrinth by giving him a ball of thread to fasten at the maze's entrance and unravel as he descended its twists and turns. She also gave him a sword to kill

the Minotaur, a monstrously liminal product of her mother's union with a bull. Poseidon had authorised Minos's crown by sending a white bull from the sea for sacrifice. Minos killed a lesser animal instead, leading Poseidon to punish him by having Pasifae fall in love with a bull. Continuing this trail of troubles, Minos installed the Minotaur in the labyrinth, constructed by Daedalus, to punish Athens for the loss of his son during the Athenean games. On a regular basis, the Minotaur killed seven female and seven male youth shipped on demand from Athens. Important differences notwithstanding, a systematic set of parallels can thus be made explicit, starting with the identity of the two Ariadnes:

1) Ariadne = Ariadne

2) Dom Cobb = Theseus

3) Dr Stephen Miles = Daedelus (original architect of the labyrinth)

4) Subconscious dream architecture = underground labyrinth

5) 'Kick' devices, synchronising techniques, and totems = Ariadne's thread (devices used to return to the surface)

In Ancient Greece a journey to the underworld was called a *katabasis*[2]. In book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, Odysseus voyages to the entrance of the underworld, and in Virgil's Aeneid, Aeneas actually enters it. We thus have the depiction of a liminal experience of dangerous passage complete with hazards and the risk of never returning. In each of these cases, the underworld is fundamentally associated with death, but it also has dream/nightmare-like qualities, being not just radically unfamiliar, but also populated by

[2] Book 11 of the *Odyssey* is also called the *Nekyia* since Odysseus consults the shade of Teiresias about how to get back from his *katabasis* to the underworld. A *nekyia* is a rite which conjures ghosts in order to speak to them about the future. Both concepts are fundamental to Jung's analytic psychology, where *katabasis* is a process for restoring lost psychological unity.

extraordinary creatures, features, and events, and organised by laws of its own, which violate those of nature. The challenge of descent to and return from the underworld symbolises, not just an escape from death, but the more fundamental theme of death and re-birth as basic to nature's boundless creativity. We are not here re-iterating the morbid perspective whereby death is at the root of all art, but neither are we denying its profound significance, both as a paradigm case of a real liminal event that challenges human meaning-making and imagination, and, consequently, as a symbol for all kinds of other ruptures and transformations. Ariadne's thread, like the golden bough of Aeneas, is not simply a device enabling escape from the depths, but a symbolic vehicle of re-creation, connecting and enabling re-birth in the face of 'death', on all kinds of levels. These levels include the emotional relationship to death (both metaphorical and real) of characters, authors and audience alike (and, indeed, also the ongoing re-creation of the 'dead' text of an art work by new audiences).

Once again, then, we see that in presenting a new variant on *katabasis*, Nolan confronts us with an issue at the very source of human culture and of the creative practice of the arts. To better grasp the relation of death/re-birth to the social psychology of these art works we turn briefly to a second ancient source: the myth of Orpheus.

Although Nolan does not make explicit reference to him,[3] the mythical Orpheus is considered the spiritual figurehead of the arts, and his story can be well taken as a potent and originary symbolisation of the nature and function of the arts as affective technologies

[3] Arguably, Orpheus had already been evoked by the Wachowskis in *The Matrix* (1999). *The Matrix* is an important genre-precedent for *Inception,* and leading characters are named Morpheus (an allusion to Gaiman's *Sandman* comics) and Oracle (suggesting the Orphic Oracle?). It also delivers a fundamental questioning of 'reality' through an adventure plot which plunges the characters into the labyrinthine depths of a virtual universe created, as shown in the sequels, by a master digital technician known as the *Architect.*

(Stenner and Weber, 2018). Orpheus is acclaimed the first poet, and his mother was Calliope, chief amongst Muses. It is important that, in the beginning, his singing and lyre playing charm all, not just his beloved Euridice, but even the rocks, rivers, trees and beasts of the wilderness. His song thus suffuses and integrates the world in its entirety, giving meaning and integrity to its diverse elements (note how the resonances of Edith Piaf's song *Je ne regrette rien* likewise integrate the diverse dream worlds of *Inception*). This harmonious unity is shattered, however, when Euridice is bitten by a viper on the very day of their wedding. Like Cobb, Orpheus descends to the underworld in the hope of resurrecting his dead wife. He undertakes the treacherous downwards voyage after charming Hades into agreeing her release on just one condition: on his ascent, Orpheus must not look back at Euridice until both reach the surface. Near the threshold, Orpheus can not resist looking back to check Euridice is really there. She is lost forever, leaving Orpheus to a lonely existence singing to the rocks and rivers until torn limb from limb by a band of Maenads, and entombed at the foot of Olympus.

Examining the social psychology of the Orpheus myth lends new clarity to the myth of *Theseus* and in turn to *Inception*, which partakes in both. The psychology is disarmingly simple, and can be roughly unfolded as follows: Art participates in lending coherent meaning to the world in its complex and changing diversity (the 'worlding' effect of the original Orphic song). That unity of coherent meaning, however, can be easily shattered by certain events (with the death of a beloved serving as a kind of paradigm event). The rupturing of a world's coherence throws its inhabitants into an affectively intense spontaneous liminal experience in which the past is no longer and the future is not yet. Since no new sense of coherence has yet replaced the old, there is a felt danger of never escaping this experience, of perishing or

of being trapped permanently in limbo, and this can be experienced as a shock of de-realisation which drains life of meaning (best expressed by Shakespeare's Hamlet). The liminal experience, however, comes to appear as a world of its own, albeit a world subject to different rules and laws, a word imaginatively symbolised using the chronotope of a dark underworld. The subsequent successful passage through this liminal experience necessarily requires the discovery of new insights and the creation of new meaning, which must somehow be returned to the surface of the 'not yet actualised' future. This 'surface' is an actualised world with a newly constituted unity of meaning (threaded-through with art), capable once again of supporting the practical rationality of the world of ordinary daily life. Artistic creation meets the exigency to create new meaning and gives original form to the new insights before they can be surfaced in a manner available to this ordinary rationality.

Art, in the nutshell provided by Orpheus and developed by *Inception*, provides meaning to a life challenged by rupture/death and it does so by finding in rupture/death something like the birth of new life, or a new phase of life, or a new idea. To the extent that *Inception* resonates with the myths of Orpheus and Ariadne, and with such works as *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet* and *Pantagruel*, it too flows within this deeper and slower movement of art, a movement that brings it into proximity with myth and religion. Through the mediation of art, the rupture here symbolised by death does not permanently deprive the world of its meaning and sense of reality, but rather supplies the world nourished by it with a new, wider, and even joyful meaning (as when Rabelais' Gargantua does not know whether to cry at the death of his wife during childbirth or laugh with joy at his new son Pantagruel).

5.3 LABYRINTH, LIMINALITIES, AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THRESHOLDS

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From classical myths to *Inception* and other contemporary fiction, the fascination for liminal, fabulated worlds created and explored is never far from a depiction of their dangers. In effect, to imagine that art really brings new 'life' to the 'dead' is to court great confusion. The problem is succinctly illustrated to us when Orpheus looks back and discovers that Euridice is not in fact there behind him. She was there, she is gone… was she there?... is she gone? If an art work gives her an enduring existence, then it does so in a form, made possible by imagination, that differs from her flesh and blood existence. That form can illuminate and enrich that living existence, but should not be confused with it. Hence in Orpheus's backwards glance we find the crux of what we earlier called the *questioning of reality*, and with it the problematic of confusing reality with imagination / fiction / appearance. The earlier noted centrality of this theme at the origins of modern literature with Cervantes, Rabelais and Shakespeare is explained by the fact that artists can hardly avoid grappling with this problem, since – literature being a liminal affective technology (Stenner & Greco, 2018) - they specialise in creating fictional worlds designed to stir emotions. As father of the arts with a muse for his mother, Orpheus thus symbolises how art effects this transfiguration of living emotions, by which these very emotions continue to live despite having perished, as it were. His dismemberment at the hands of the Maenads expresses the disintegration of the world in face of rupture, and the need for constant renewal, given constant perishing. His entombment by Mount Olympus expresses his abiding relationship to religion, which always risks mistaking its imaginings for truth and sublimating them into an unquestionable sacred transcendent.

What the artist salvages from the 'underground' and carefully externalises in material form to be felt by others is something between a feeling and an idea. Cobb vividly describes an

idea as a most resilient and contagious 'parasite' and *Inception* is preoccupied from beginning to end with the notion of an *idea.* But at issue is a concrete, living*,* and affectively charged *feeling-idea,* and the film addresses the problem that this very feeling-idea may deceive us and may not be our own. Mal kills herself because she is possessed by the feeling-idea that her world is not real. And yet that 'de-realising' idea was not her own, but artfully incepted into her by Cobb. Why did Cobb betray her thus? Because after years in limbo Mal had come to prefer dream to reality, or had forgotten – perhaps by 'deliberately' ignoring the information provided by her totem - the importance of telling the difference.

In his grief, Cobb, in turn, becomes possessed by a variant of the same feeling-idea: namely the idea that Mal's idea was in fact his idea. He guiltily regrets that he had incepted the de-realising idea into Mal in order, perversely, that she might come back to reality. This idea, in turn, threatens to trap Cobb in permanent limbo, as he sets about keeping her 'alive' in his dreams. Cobb warns Ariadne never to create architecture from real memories, because this dangerously blurs the distinction between dream and reality, and yet he deliberately sets about creating dream architecture based on his memories of Mal, knowingly putting himself at risk. He houses her memory in a descending series of dream worlds, each also memorialising one of his profound regrets (*regrette rien*?). Like Orpheus with Euridice, Cobb cannot let Mal go, and so he too risks sliding into the permanent limbo, the river of forgetfulness, the Lethe, in which dream is mistaken for reality, and the hope for new life is forsaken. It is not just Mal and Cobb who experience this slow sliding into limbo, but also Saito, upon whose capacity to 'wake up' depends Cobb's eventual homecoming. Nolan also neatly expresses this theme with a scene in a dark back room of Yusuf's pharmacy, resembling an opium den, in which a sickly looking group of people - inter-connected via the

PASIV equipment - sleep in cots for four hours a day (equivalent to 40 hours in 'dream time'). 'They come here every day to sleep?', asks Eames. 'They come to be woken up', is the reply: 'the dream has become their reality'. PASIV, it seems, becomes an addiction. First 'it becomes the only way you can dream', and then dream and reality exchange places. Exactly this same risk of forsaking the possibility of 'return'/transition to a new world and instead falling into a limbo of forgetfulness following a rupture is symbolised by the lotus eaters in Book 9 of Homer's epic. But for Odysseus' famed wileyness, the lotus eaters would have enticed his companions into a permanently drugged idyll of transient stasis.

This feeling-idea of de-realisation, and of the troubled distinction between reality and dream, and its consequence, can thus be grasped as a meta level theme whose manifold tensions are core to the functioning of the film. But it is also the feeling-idea that Christopher Nolan incepts, by means of the affective technology of the film, into his audience. From the start, filmic devices are used to throw the viewer into confusion concerning the 'reality' of what they are viewing, and at the end, with the totem still spinning, the viewer is led quite deliberately to the disturbing insight that the difference between reality and dream / appearance / fiction remains unsettled, an open question, a matter of trust and judgement. This in turn raises the question of whether Nolan, via the film, is manipulating us for motives of his own (as Fischer is manipulated by the criminal gang, paid by Saito), for pure entertainment, or whether he too is seeking genuine insight into himself and his craft: trickster or artist? Sophist or philosopher? These very possibilities are held in tension throughout the film, and used to deliver insight after insight about questions of trust, betrayal, regret and the significance of 'leaps of faith'.

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6. Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed to consider the centrality of fiction, imagination and art for human experience, and hence, for psychology and the social sciences. Rather than begin with an ontological commitment to objective fact as distinct from subjective fancy we examined how this very tension operates as a core dynamic within our experience of the film. In so doing, we followed the road taken by many - film watchers, novel-readers, game-players and even art creators or critics - and yet discussed by only a few psychologists, including Vygotsky, Freud and Dewey: we entered into the world created by an artist, here, a film-maker, Christopher Nolan. Treating the film *Inception* as an Ur-example to reflect on the art experience, we examined it as a social technique of emotions, a careful means to generate liminal experiences by means of dynamic tensions between the true and the fictional, the spontaneous and the devised. Built around a powerful *mise en abyme*, *Inception* presents us with characters that use a variety of techniques to generate powerfully transformative liminal experiences, where what a person experiences in an artfully crafted dream – a complex guided imagination – deeply transforms, at times in unexpected ways, her 'normal', experiences of reality. Yet the film also instils doubt: for these characters, is 'reality' really so different from dreams? Are they not constantly waking from one dream into yet another? In so doing, the film puts our experience as viewers – or, perhaps as human beings - into question: are we so sure that our 'reality' is that much more real than our dream, imagination and experiences of art? Are we not more vitally engaged, affectively moved, durably transformed by these 'artificial' experiences? Is not each of the spheres of experience in which we live, with its own texture, temporality, emotional and perceptual features, a world of its own, one of the many through which we move, only accidentally having the impression of overlap with other spheres? And what if our reality were just one

of the many worlds in which we live, only a world temporarily shared and stabilised? If we came to that realisation, then the film succeeded in its inception, for, this is what the film maker intended to convey:

> I feel that, over time, we started to view reality as the poor cousin to our dreams, in a sense ... I want to make the case to you that our dreams, our virtual realities, these abstractions that we enjoy and surround ourselves with, they are subsets of reality (Christopher Nolan, quoted in Child, 2015).

However our ambition was to reflect beyond that particular film. Using *Inception* as a paradigmatic case study, we tried to show the guiding power of cultural experiences, the fact that these experiences are guided by artefacts such as art works – serving as liminal affective technologies – but made alive by a unique person, in a very specific sociocultural context. In addition, reflecting diachronically, we saw that the very experience of moving through liminalities, engaging in imagination without knowing the transformational outcome, or indeed if such an outcome will ever emerge, has been long thematised in the history of our literature and storytelling. In this paper, we have thus started to outline a grammar for understanding how transformative art and its imaginative experience can be devised and regulated: these experiences are planned ahead (the architect), shared, equipped with entry and exit techniques (Ariadne, the string, the kick), and guided by symbolic steering and navigation resources (the totem). Experiences of art, imagination or fabulation are thus complex, patterned, crafted cultural experiences.

As we emerge from the cave of this double reading, we address psychology with a

backwards call: should psychology itself not question its old reality/fiction divide, with its implicit normativity of the real, and give a more central role to powerful transformative experience? Starting with new, more powerful assumptions, should it not strive to account for the conditions under which we enter, explore, and are transformed through art and imagination? Are not many of our 'real' experiences not simply pale copies of these more powerful ones? What are their safeguards and dangers?

Questioning our basic assumptions on the subject / object divide is not an invitation to madness, or to renounce science, or an abdication to post-truth parlance. On the contrary: during times in which ancient fears take the shape of political discourses, where media stir and manipulate emotion, and confuse it with information, where political figures question the status of truth itself, it becomes vital to take seriously the power of imagination. For many decades, key authors in psychology – Freud, Moscovici, Festinger – have deeply and perhaps correctly mistrusted the destructive power of the gullible imagination; imagination was dangerous because it could blind masses, stir crowds, ignite destruction and cause annihilation. Close as that danger is today, nevertheless dismissing imagination is not a solution: we believe we have to learn to live with it and master it. Our proposition is thus to continue to identify the conditions under which art and imagination can lead to enhancing and transformative experiences, not an escape or avoidance, but a way to contribute to whatever we consider our socially and materially shared reality. Perhaps a rightly nourished and guided imagination is the only way to build a new world and to move out of the permanent liminality of our millennium crises.

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