

The Borgesian Thought Experiment

The masterful Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges has long fascinated readers of his works with many captivating, metaphysical themes. He deals repeatedly with time, memory, identity, infinity and dreams, among other intrigues. With ease, Borges integrates such themes into his writing, often concluding these works with some unexpected metaphysical result. The particular intrigue I have chosen to investigate in Borges' writing is the subject of the dream and its relation to the common sense definition of reality. Foremost among the multiple questions critics have considered is the one that deals with Borges' personal conceptions, namely: How did Borges personally interpret the difference between dreams and reality? The vast majority of scholars agree that a convincingly thorough answer to this question would shed light on the true meaning of Borges' writing. Nevertheless, despite this initial agreement, there is much discord regarding the actual answer to the question. Multiple competing interpretations exist, and all appear to be well supported with sound textual evidence. Unfortunately, as with almost any interpretive endeavor, each theory has a refutation and each refutation has another, separate refutation.

An elegant solution to this problematic disparity, however, is to regard Borges as a writer of thought experiments. To describe Borgesian writing, I define "thought experiment" in the open sense, as a form of writing that simply presents a situation and intentionally lacks any specific argument by the author. It is a malleable form that allows, and even promotes, a wide spectrum of interpretations. Borges presents some of his fictions, for instance, as ambiguous forays into subjects such as dreams and reality in

order to evoke personally charged responses from the reader. Hence, a wide variety of scholarly interpretation exists.

In order to present this solution in greater detail, however, I must first give a summary of the mainstream interpretations of Borges' writing. After presenting this overview, I will delve into certain examples of the Borgesian thought experiment found in the breadth of his fiction, essays, and poetry. In the last section of the essay, then, I intend to demonstrate present day Borgesian influence, with a focus on director Christopher Nolan's metaphysically intriguing film *Inception*. I argue that his movie in many ways parallels certain fictions of Jorge Luis Borges and that the film adopts the characteristic style of a Borgesian thought experiment.

Schools of Thought

Therefore, returning to the interpretive discord regarding the topic of dreams versus reality, there are essentially three schools of thought that can be classified into the Idealists, the Realists and the Composites. In general, the Idealists and Realists are understood as existing at opposite poles of a line segment. While the Idealists declare that Borges views the world as unreal, the Realists adamantly contend the exact opposite. These diametrically opposed thinkers, however, leave plenty of room for a middle ground, room for the Composites, a group that most nearly expresses my evaluation of the issue. This final group paradoxically maintains that both the Realists and Idealists are correct. By showing that the Realists and Idealists are not mutually exclusive ideologies, the Composites emphasize the surprising uniqueness of Borgesian thought.

I - *The Idealists*

As a simple introduction, this particular mode of interpretation comprises the vast majority of scholarly opinion. In fact, one Realist scholar, Ion Agheana, concedes, “There is virtually no dissension among critics on this subject: Borges does not believe in reality, or rather, unreality is his only reality” (*Prose of J.L.B.*, 79). Generally, Idealist scholarship points to the intellectual influences of Borges, to philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Bishop Berkeley, whose ideas are manifest particularly in Borges’ short fictions. Idealist critic Gene Bell-Villada focuses intensely on the relation between Borges and Schopenhauer, and for good reason. In “Un Ensayo Autobiográfico,” Borges explicitly states, “If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in [Schopenhauer’s] writings” (Bell-Villada, 38). Bell-Villada then highlights important doctrines of Schopenhauer that intrigued Borges, specifically mentioning the concept that the universe ought to be conceived as a “vast, total oneness in which *individuality* is but an illusion” (38). Essentially, if one sees the individual as illusory, then it is not a far jump to define one man as all men, and one man’s experiences as all men’s experiences. The conclusion, therefore, is that there is something unreal and false about calling oneself Borges, or even about trying to define the term “oneself.”

Bell-Villada, however, dangerously understands Borges’ affinity for Schopenhauer’s idealist philosophy as an indication that Borges, too, is an Idealist. Although it is perhaps true that certain notions in Borges’ fiction espouse the ideas of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, one must be cautious when conflating the voice of these

stories with the voice of their author. Bell-Villada fails to take into account other, perhaps more important, writings that would more holistically express the beliefs of Borges. He does not consider essays, such as “La Penúltima Versión de la Realidad,” that Borges wrote specifically about subjects like the reality of this world. His literary scope is too narrow to sufficiently answer questions about Borges’ personal tenets.

Nevertheless, Bell-Villada is only a first degree Idealist, for, unlike others, he does not equate Borges with the more radical idealist philosopher Bishop Berkeley. Bell-Villada specifically notes, “Borges will not go so far as to believe, with Berkeley, that the physical world is one vast illusion” (40). Other critics, however, such as Emir Rodriguez-Monegal openly invite this comparison with Berkeley. Rodriguez-Monegal asserts that Borges in fact, “denies external reality, denies time, denies the individual ego, going even further in all these denials than his acknowledged models: Berkeley, Hume, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche” (136).

To support his claim, this critic points to stories such as “The Circular Ruins,” where a man dreams up another man only to discover that he himself is dreamt. In addition, he cites poems such as “Adam Cast Forth,” where a man questions the existence of the Garden of Eden and wonders if he is the creator of his own miserable fate (Rodriguez-Monegal, 138). According to Rodriguez-Monegal, as indicated by these works, Borges must see the unreality of the external world as a reflection of the unreality of the individual. He in fact proposes that Borges views all people as somehow unreal, in a monstrous sense. The notion that Borges’ fictions are charged with “the very personal forms of his own metaphysical vision, (...) pointing daringly toward his private

mythology” (Rodriguez-Monegal, 139) characterizes Rodriguez-Monegal’s interpretation. Once again, however, this critic has too limited a scope. Like Bell-Villada, he does not consider the instances where Borges speaks in essays and interviews, where Borges speaks arguably in more personally revealing settings. From the Realist perspective, both Rodriguez-Monegal and Bell-Villada ought to examine essays such as “La Nueva Refutación del Tiempo” and “La Penúltima Versión de la Realidad” as documents that would carry as much or more weight in this particular debate.

II - *The Realists*

Admittedly, the Realist side of the debate regarding Borges is sparsely populated. In spite of this reality, however, the Realists should not be ignored, for they tend to consider whole bodies of work that the Idealists generally disregard. In his book *The Prose of Jorge Luis Borges*, the most prominent Realist scholar of Borges’ works, Ion Agheana, contends that Borges is very much the realist. He believes a thorough examination of Borges’ essays necessarily produces such a conclusion. In this book, Agheana begins a chapter on reality with Borges’ introduction to the essay “La Nueva Refutación del Tiempo” where Borges states, “he divisado o presentado una refutación del tiempo, de la que yo mismo descreo” (*Prose of J.L.B.*, 79). Many scholars skeptically gloss over this statement and instead dissect Borges’ attempted refutation of time, a refutation that is entirely idealistic in tone and nature. In contrast, Agheana, asks, “If Borges himself disclaims the irrefutability of his theory, why should we do otherwise?” (*Prose of J.L.B.*, 79). In his *Reasoned Thematic Dictionary of the Prose of*

Jorge Luis Borges, Agheana also points out that the very conclusion of the essay “La Nueva Refutación del Tiempo” contradicts the attempted refutation of time. Borges concludes the essay, rather pitifully but unambiguously, admitting that “El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente soy Borges” (308).

With both the introduction and conclusion of the essay, arguably the most critical sections of the essay, so pointedly aimed against his own idealist argument, how can one not recognize that Borges rejects even his own idealist tendencies? It seems plain that Borges must be a realist, and it is common sense “experience that makes the world real to Borges” (Agheana, *Prose of J.L.B.*, 83). Agheana explains with implicitly Cartesian logic, “If nothing indeed exists, then our perception should not exist either, but Borges, as we have seen, constantly alludes to our perceptual reality” (Agheana, *Prose of J.L.B.*, 82). Therefore, since Borges’ personal experience has demonstrated that our perceptions do exist, reality must exist as well. Whether that reality is absolute or relative to the individual is a different question that the Composites will explore.

The unfortunate problem with the Realist thinkers also tends to be the limited scope. The Realists gloss over tendencies toward idealism in Borges’ poetry and fiction because they consider these bodies of work as mere musings of Borges rather than true expressions of his personal beliefs. I argue, however, that to obtain a comprehensive answer necessitates the incorporation of all major areas of Borges’ writings. In my esteem, the most obvious fault, therefore, with both the Realist and Idealist doctrines is their limited scope. Each side selectively chooses facets of Borges to thoroughly

examine, specializing to the point that Borges, as a whole, is ignored, and only Borges the dreamer, or Borges the essayist, etc. becomes relevant to each side's argument.

III - *The Composites*

I characterize this final classification of interpretation as the Composites because this group simply proposes a composition of the theories of the Idealists and the Realists, saying, in short, that both sides are partially correct. Timothy Scott, a Composite thinker, in his essay "Borges and the Reality of the World" recounts part of a lecture, given by Borges, entitled "Poetry." To support his thesis that for Borges, "There is a manner of comprehending the world that understands of both a subjective and an objective reality" (Scott, 248), he quotes the following excerpt:

The Irish pantheist Scotius Erigena said that the Holy Scripture contains an infinite number of meanings, (...) Centuries later, a Spanish Kabbalist said that God wrote the Scriptures for each one of the men of Israel, that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. This is believable if we consider that the author of the Bible and the author of destiny of each one of its readers is the same. (...) I would venture to say that they are both absolutely correct, not only in regard to the Scriptures but to any book worth rereading. (*Seven 76*)

In this lecture, Borges concludes that both the unorthodox views of Scotius Erigena and the Spanish Kabbalist are absolutely correct, in addition to the widespread belief that the Bible only has one true interpretation. As Scott explains, "Reality is both subjective to its perception and objective in its Divine conception" (248). Thus, in so concluding, Borges indicates that reality could be 'created' by man although "this creation will necessarily be imperfect – it will lack the objectivity of a Divine creation" (Scott 248).

Another Composite scholar, Juan Nuño, echoes Scott's logic by speaking of seemingly contradictory yet compatible theories applied to the question of identity. From Borges' short story "El Veinticinco de Agosto, 1983," Nuño quotes the pivotal line "La verdad es que somos dos y somos uno" (Nuño 129). This apparent contradiction, Nuño explains, stems from "la diferencia entre sentirse y ser" (Nuño 129). Feeling is simply not the same as being. Although a human being may claim that at this moment, he is a different person than before, in truth, he only feels that way, since his ontological continuity was never interrupted.

I agree for the most part with these two Composite interpretations, and would in fact combine the two logics to create a composition of the Composites. To me, Borges can assert that reality is both absolutely subjective and objective because he does so through two different lenses: the lens of feeling and the lens of being. For Borges, both are important, valid ways of perceiving the world. Returning to the main subject matter of this paper, then, I would extend this logic by applying it to the realm of the dream. For example, if a man perceives the world as a dream, believing everything is illusory, then that perception really and fully is his 'reality' (just not in the common sense definition of reality) simply because he feels that way. Speaking objectively through the lens of being, though, that man may be wrong to claim that all matter is a hoax because 'illusion' is not the state of this world. Nevertheless, the objectively true state of being of this world makes no difference to that particular man.

I perceive this same Composite logic in both the movie *Inception* and in many of Borges' fictions, particularly the short story "The Other." At the end of the movie,

objectively speaking, the viewer cannot determine beyond a shadow of doubt whether the protagonist Cobb is in a dream or in reality. I contend, however, that this objective distinction is most unimportant, and I believe both Borges and Christopher Nolan would agree with that statement. Both the Realist and the Idealist can exist at the same time and both can be correct. In the end, however, the individual's perception is raised as the most important aspect. As Borges writes in "The Other," "I believe I have discovered the key to it [an encounter between Borges as an old man and Borges as a young writer]. The encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake, and so I am still tormented by the memory" (Borges, *Collected Fictions* 417). Here is the plain coexistence of the dreamer and the realist, explicitly told by Borges. Both versions of Borges in the story extract correct interpretations of the encounter within their own personal spheres, even though objectively speaking, the interpretations seem incompatible. The individual's perception of whether he is dreaming or existing in reality is the only thing that matters.

Nevertheless, for all my personal speculation and interest in the topic, the fact remains that no single view can be comprehensively proven as the correct interpretation. Due to this difficulty, therefore, I repeatedly return to the thought experiment as a solution. I believe Borges intentionally and effectively adopts this rhetorical mode of expression in all areas of his writing. He explores metaphysical themes, sometimes taking them *ad absurdum*, in order to stimulate a response in the reader. To support my claim, in the areas of fiction, essay, and poetry, I will now present various representative works of Borges that most clearly demonstrate his use of the thought experiment.

Ficción - *El Milagro Secreto*

Before delving into the discussion of the various interpretive possibilities of the short fiction “El Milagro Secreto,” I will give a brief summary of events in the story to set the scene. The fiction opens with the protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, dreaming “on the night of March 14, 1939, in an apartment on Prague’s Zeltnergasse.” Hladik had been dreaming of a very long, perhaps even infinite, game of chess when the Nazi army rolling into Prague interrupted his sleep. A few days later, on the nineteenth, the Jewish author, Hladik, is arrested, jailed, charged with being a Jewish activist, and subsequently sentenced to death by firing squad with “the date set for March 29, at 9:00 A.M.”

Terrified and imprisoned on the last night before his execution, Hladik pleads to God to somehow grant him one more year so that he may finish his three-act drama entitled *The Enemies*. Hladik then slips into a dream where he finds God in a single letter on a singular page in the vast Clementine Library. This fortuitous discovery leads God to pronounce, “*The time for your labor has been granted.*” As Hladik steps in front of the firing squad the following morning, as the order to fire is given, the physical universe halts. Initially, Hladik is overwhelmed and paralyzed with confusion, but he soon comes to understand that “God had performed for him a secret miracle: the German bullet would kill him, at the determined hour, but in Hladik’s mind a year would pass between the order to fire and the discharge of the rifles.” Thus, it comes to be that Hladik, in his mind, completes and revises *The Enemies*, and upon finishing the last epithet of the play,

he begins a scream as the “fourfold volley” fells him (Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 157-162).

The beautifully intriguing literary truth of this story is that it is specific and detailed enough to evoke the feel of something real, yet ambiguous enough to leave the reader with inconclusive material. This characteristic ambiguity of Borges, I argue, gives “The Secret Miracle” the potential to be interpreted equally well from purely Idealist, Realist or Composite viewpoints.

Perhaps most farfetched of the three is actually the Realist interpretation. Nevertheless, even this interpretation has more than considerable grounding in the text. Circumstantial details build up throughout the story to create the possibility that the whole year of granted time is simply another one of Hladik’s dreams, or “a vivid hallucination dominating his last moments, a case of the imagination heightened by the onset of death” (Bell-Villada 89). From the opening moment, Borges chooses to portray Hladik as a dreamer through the vivid description of his dream of a chess game played between two illustrious, rival families. The dream sequence continues with Hladik’s thoughts in prison, where he postulates, “to foresee any particular detail is in fact to prevent its happening” (Borges, *Fictions*, 158). Following this logic, he therefore dreams a thousand and one or more deaths in a vain attempt to foil his inevitable execution. Another oneiric detail is in the play, *The Enemies*, that he so desperately wants to finish writing, a play which portrays an idealist, dreamlike situation with the circularity of time (i.e. time never passing) as the dominant theme. Furthermore, Hladik’s literary interest in the writings of Boehme, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and Fludd represents yet again an affinity for

the mystical realm of the dream (Bell-Villada 90). As Bell-Villada eloquently concludes, therefore, “Given these literary tastes, his oneiric preoccupations, and his own tendency to dream, it would be an entirely logical inference to construe his year long respite as only the very last in a series of personal fantasies” (90). It is clear that such a conclusion has potential to simply eliminate the intrusion of idealism into reality. In this interpretation, the dream world remains entirely separate from the real world, and the silent year that is supposedly granted to Hladik never actually occurs. Any ideal situation exists solely in the dream and has no substantive effect on the facts of reality. Hladik still dies at the gunpoints of the firing squad.

A more standard reading of the story would be to simply accept the miracle as Borges seems to present it. “The Secret Miracle” reads as a story with precise and exact details, a style which allows the reader to more readily believe and accept the wondrous event at the end of the story as another part of reality. As Bell-Villada indicates, “The date of entry of the Nazis is accurate, their accusations [toward Hladik] typical. The Prague landmarks alluded to by Borges are all authentic” (91). Even the general reactions and mannerisms of characters in the story are convincingly genuine. Hladik’s utter terror and desperate hopes in prison are not surprising in the least. This fact, combined with the way the soldiers act in anticipation of the execution, how “the soldiers’ eyes avoided [Hladik’s] own” (Borges, *Fictions*, 161), lends an eerily realistic aura to the matter. Given the realistic setting, it is entirely rational to view this miraculous silent year as simply “the logical culmination of a reality turned completely monstrous, inhumanly bizarre [by the Nazis]” (Bell-Villada 91). The story represents an

Idealist Borges, therefore, in the sense that it portrays the world as a projection of the mind. Through a dream experience in the corridors of the Clementine, Hladik obtains the real world capacity to stop time, to make one solitary second last a full year.

At this point, however, enters the Composite viewpoint, which concedes that indeed, in the mind of Jaromir Hladik, time ceased and the second was prolonged into a year. Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that “Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9:02 A.M” (Borges, *Fictions*, 162) and not a single soul other than himself would ever know that *The Enemies* was completed. There are two coincident “realities,” therefore. There exists the individual realm of Jaromir Hladik, wherein the idealistic, dreamlike stoppage of time truly occurs, and the objective state of being of the world, wherein Hladik truly dies without ever completing his tri-partite play.

Thus, each of the three major schools of interpretive thought can just as convincingly lay claim to this particular fiction. The formal style that the fiction is written in, and the fact that “the action is told exclusively from Hladik’s point of view” (Bell-Villada 90) combine to create a wonderfully ambiguous yet detailed short fiction. The resulting potential array of responses regarding the work therefore reflects the success of the Borgesian thought experiment in achieving its main purpose.

Ensayo - *La Nueva Refutación del Tiempo*

This essay of Borges is a very interesting document because there are actually two versions of it that Borges deliberately compiled together instead of replacing the old one with the edited new version. The first one was written in 1944 and the latter one was

written in 1946. While the actual arguments repudiating the existence of time in each version are essentially parallel, the conclusions are divergent. In the body of each argument, Borges begins by introducing the general philosophy of idealism using quotes from Bishop Berkeley and Arthur Schopenhauer. In addition to the already refuted concepts of matter (Berkeley) and spirit (Hume), he then proposes to extend idealism still further by negating time. Citing the potential, even probable, existence of two moments of time that are in fact identical, Borges demonstrates that this is an occurrence the standard timeline cannot allow. He therefore asks, “¿No basta *un solo término repetido* para desbaratar y confundir la historia del mundo, para denunciar que no hay tal historia?” (Borges, *Prosa Completa*, 299). The conclusion of each version, however, is undoubtedly where they differ the most. The first version ends ambiguously with the refutation of time remaining a question openly unresolved. More specifically, Borges’ glimpse of the potential refutation of time “queda pues en anécdota emocional” (Borges, *Prosa Completa*, 294). The refutation remains in the realm of feeling. In the second version, however, Borges definitively concludes the essay, yet not in the expected manner. Despite his laborious and erudite attempt at thinking within the bounds of idealism, Borges simply backs down, admitting, “El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente soy Borges” (*Prosa Completa*, 301).

Thus, in some part of this essay, each school of thought is once again represented. The main body of each version of the essay represents a clear nod toward the Idealist Borges since he does indeed present a proof of the negation of time. Whether or not the proof is plausible or possible is beside the point. Nevertheless, the Realist Borges finds a

place as well in the conclusion of the second version, where Borges states that he, as an individual is real, and the world, as a whole, is real. Lastly, the conclusion of the first version most clearly indicates a Composite understanding in the sense that Borges only puts faith in his argument on an emotional level, the level of feeling. Unconvinced that his argument holds as an objectively true thing on the level of being, Borges then leaves that side of the argument unresolved. He allows for the possibility, though, that the emotional argument could be correct without being objectively true through the lens of being.

To conclude, then, it seems Borges deliberately confuses the reader with these contradicting aspects of intermingled idealism and realism, forcing the reader to critically think about the issues involved and make his own decision on the matter. John Sturrock, a Borges scholar, speaks in his book *Paper Tigers* of this dual essay, saying, “it is characteristic of Borges that he should have written, in his time, not one but two ‘refutations’ of time; they are not identical and their separate existence, as two particulars, refutes the hypothetical eternity they each propose” (30). Since one cannot accept everything Borges says without contradicting oneself, this selective process performed by the reader is a necessary result of the Borgesian thought experiment.

Poesía - *Arte Poética*

The last major category of literary interest regarding Borges is his poetry. For this section, I chose to examine the poem entitled “*Arte Poética*” due to its thematic adherence to the subjects of dreams, reality, idealism and time. The poem is brief, yet

packed with meaning. It begins with a variation of the classical dictum of Heraclitus: “Mirar el río hecho de tiempo y agua / Y recordar que el tiempo es otro río. / Saber que nos perdemos como el río / Y que los rostros pasan como el agua” (Borges, *Obra Poética*, 217). Portrayed in these four lines is the sentiment that our individuality is illusory and ephemeral, constantly morphing like the river of time. When Borges writes, “Sentir que la vigilia es otro sueño” (*Obra Poética*, 217) in the subsequent line, he reiterates this feeling in a more succinct way. At times one feels that the world is somehow unreal and made of the stuff of dreams, an undoubtedly Idealistic notion. Still, to be thorough, there is room for a Composite understanding, which necessarily implies a Realist conception as well. Once again, the difference between feeling and being manifests itself, since this Idealist theory is but a feeling, and perhaps not a true reflection of the objectively true state of things.

A few stanzas later, however, comes a more important, pivotal line in the understanding of not only this poem but also the purpose of art as a whole for Borges. He describes that “El arte debe ser como ese espejo / Que nos revela nuestra propia cara” (Borges, *Obra Poética*, 218). If art should be like a mirror that reveals to us our own face, then it almost goes without saying that the purpose of Borges’ art is to let the reader find himself in each poem, essay, or fiction. Here is the crux of the Borgesian thought experiment, the true objective of his philosophically charged writing compacted into two quick lines of poetry. There is no absolutely clear argument toward any particular philosophy in Borges’ body of work because he believes that ultimately each individual’s perception of art ought to be the determining factor.

Film - *Inception*

Although for a long time the art of Jorge Luis Borges has been under-appreciated, in recent years it has begun to receive more recognition, even working its way up into Hollywood blockbuster films. The most recent and well-known example of Borgesian influence is Christopher Nolan's movie *Inception*. In an interview with a writer from the *New York Times*, Nolan specifically mentions the works of Borges as a significant artistic influence:

Q: So who do you read in preparation to make a movie like this? Freud? Philip K. Dick?

A: Probably Borges. I'd like to think this is a movie he might enjoy. [*laughs*] It sounds like a highfalutin reference in some ways, but the truth is, he took these incredibly bizarre philosophical concepts – like a guy facing a firing squad who wants more time to finish a story in his head, and he's granted more time by time slowing down, as the bullet travels between the gun and him... (Itzkoff)

The particular story he references is none other than “El Milagro Secreto,” perhaps Borges' most successful example of the artful thought experiment. Indeed, *Inception* draws many ideas from this short fiction, even adopting the ambiguous yet surprisingly detailed format of the story. Due to the striking parallels between the two and the admitted Borgesian influence on Nolan, I argue that the purpose of the film is exactly that of the Borgesian thought experiment. Art, for Christopher Nolan, as for Borges, is about evoking a passionate individual response.

The basic structure of *Inception* revolves around the idea that dreams can be induced by a machine and infiltrated by multiple people who consequently occupy the same dream space or the same dream within a dream, etc. Dreaming, in a sense also

slows down one's perception of time, similar to the way time slows down in "El Milagro Secreto." Each subsequent dream level feels twenty times longer than the one above, meaning "Five minutes in the real world gives you an hour in the dream" (Nolan 28:54). Because the dreams are incredibly vivid, however, one can easily lose track of all reality, an unnerving possibility of which the characters in the movie are constantly aware. Since "Building a dream from your memory is the easiest way to lose your grasp on what's real and what is a dream" (Nolan 33:07), the dream architect, who designs the dream spaces, must strike a balance between real world details and general forms, a balance that reflects the film's stylistic interplay between the ambiguous and specific. More practically, though, the solution to keeping track of reality is to always carry around a totem, a potentially heavy, small object, that "no one else can know the weight or balance of" (Nolan 34:08). Due to the singularity of the object, one simply needs to examine the totem to determine whether one is in a dream or reality. The protagonist, Dom Cobb, uses a sleek, metal spinning top as his totem. It never ceases spinning in the dream state, although it eventually topples in reality.

Without going into too much more laborious detail about the movie, Cobb's foremost desire throughout the movie is simply to find a way home to his two little children. Having been accused of murdering his wife, Cobb lives in exile, constantly avoiding various corporations and police forces. However, a particularly powerful executive named Saito offers him a way home if he can perform a very specific dream infiltration. Upon emerging at last, near the end of the movie, from a dream within a dream within a dream, Cobb accomplishes the task that allows him to return home with a

cleared name. Therefore, finally, he arrives at his house to see his children playing in the backyard, a vision that has been repeated throughout the film. Although he never sees the faces of his children in any of his previous visions of this moment, now he at last sees their smiling faces. The general emotional conclusion is that Cobb's catharsis in this moment is a reflection of his complete return to reality. However, just before embracing his children, Cobb had spun his totem on the dining table. As the scene of loving embrace continues, the camera pans out to show the tiny metal top still precariously spinning as if it could either continue to spin or suddenly topple.

This tantalizing result is intentionally ambiguous, and the potential conclusions drawn are logically quite divided and varied. If the top continues to spin, then that means Cobb remains in the dream state, and has in fact been in the dream state for the entirety of the movie. Such an interpretation of the movie easily translates to the Idealist ideology where all matter, all common sense reality, is simply illusory. Then the final situation becomes just one of multiple illusory worlds, and the only difference is that Cobb's final world is the one he chooses to define as his personal "reality." If the top spirals and falls down, though, the subsequent interpretation would be a testimony to the Realists, to absolute truth and the salvation of one true reality. All of Cobb's difficulty in fighting his way home would be justified and completed by his return to one, unique reality. A Composite explanation would of course involve both of the previous philosophies. For the Composite, Cobb remains in a dream world (i.e. the top keeps spinning) even though he believes and feels he has returned to reality. Cobb accepts the dream as his "reality"

and this is absolutely correct within his private sphere. However, the simultaneous truth, through the lens of being, is that he has not actually returned to the real world.

El Fin

Thus, the modern film *Inception* fits seamlessly into the scholarly discussion of dreams and reality that has already been applied to Borges. Christopher Nolan designs the movie with a structure and style that directly parallels the Borgesian thought experiment. Understanding Nolan's movie then as a thought experiment nicely solves the problematic attempt to extract a single correct interpretation, just as it does for the writings of Borges. It is important to note, however that this lack of specific philosophical argument does not void either the film or writing of meaning. Rather, this understanding lends their works a higher intent, a purpose reflecting the Borgesian idea that Art ought to act as a mirror which reveals the spectator's own ideas. After all, first and foremost, both Borges and Nolan are artists rather than philosophers. As Borges says in an interview, "I have used the philosophers' ideas for my own private literary purposes, but I don't think that I'm a thinker... I am merely a man of letters" (Dutton). In this sense, therefore, both Borges and Nolan are wildly successful in their genre of the artistic thought experiment, and the proof is in the vast spectrum of responses each has evoked in their audiences. Each man is able to tap into age-old curiosities and the subject matter of religions such as Buddhism wherein "all knowledge and life are fictitious" (Agheana, *Dictionary*, 52). Each artist is able to take a philosophical subject like the reality of this world and convert it into a palpable, living concept in the mind of the reader or viewer.

In Borges' and Nolan's works, the combination of style and form therefore creates successfully enrapturing thought experiments that carry potentially limitless insights and interpretations.

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