DREAMS, DEPTHS, AND DUAL MEANINGS: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS IN *"INCEPTION"* (2010) FILM

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the symbolism in Christopher Nolan's film Inception (2010) using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. This film is not only viewed as visual entertainment but also as a cultural text that conveys social, ideological, and philosophical meanings. Through qualitative analysis, data were collected from selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements, then interpreted on three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Analysis of seven key scenes reveals several main themes: (1) trauma and eternal uncertainty, represented through the character of Cobb and the spinning totem; (2) the vulnerability of reality, symbolized by the folding city of Paris and the spinning hotel corridor; (3) science and technology as tools for controlling the subconscious, illustrated through Joseph's invention; (4) the subconscious as a space of conflict and resistance, visualized through the snow fortress scene; and (5) family and personal relationships as essential aspects of identity, reflected in Fischer's emotional conflict with his father. These findings show that Inception constructs a semiotic system that reflects the complexity of modern human existence. Through Barthes' framework, this film can be understood as a representation of the tension between reality and illusion, technological domination and individual agency, and memory and desire in contemporary society.

Keywords: semiotics, Roland Barthes, symbols, film, "Inception"

ABSTRAK

Studi ini menganalisis simbolisme dalam film Inception (2010) karya Christopher Nolan menggunakan pendekatan semiotik Roland Barthes. Film ini tidak hanya dipandang sebagai hiburan visual, tetapi juga sebagai teks budaya yang menyampaikan makna sosial, ideologis, dan filosofis. Melalui analisis kualitatif,

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data dikumpulkan dari adegan-adegan terpilih, dialog, dan elemen visual, lalu diinterpretasikan pada tiga tingkatan makna: denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Analisis tujuh adegan kunci mengungkapkan beberapa tema utama: (1) trauma dan ketidakpastian yang abadi, diwakili melalui karakter Cobb dan totem berputar; (2) kerentanan realitas, disimbolkan oleh kota Paris yang melipat dan koridor hotel yang berputar; (3) sains dan teknologi sebagai alat pengendalian atas alam bawah sadar, diilustrasikan melalui penemuan Joseph; (4) alam bawah sadar sebagai ruang konflik dan perlawanan, divisualisasikan melalui adegan benteng salju; dan (5) keluarga dan hubungan pribadi sebagai aspek esensial identitas, tercermin dalam konflik emosional Fischer dengan ayahnya. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa Inception membangun sistem semiotik yang mencerminkan kompleksitas keberadaan manusia modern. Melalui kerangka kerja Barthes, film ini dapat dipahami sebagai representasi ketegangan antara realitas dan ilusi, dominasi teknologi dan agen individu, serta memori dan keinginan dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata kunci: semiotika, Roland Barthes, simbol, film, "Inception"

A. INTRODUCTION

Symbols and signs are part of everyday human life, serving as tools for communication, expression, and understanding. Although symbolism works through suggestion, symbols are not the same as meaning or moral values. Symbols refer to something outside themselves, an object or action that points to an abstract idea. Symbols can take the form of objects, gestures, or situations that represent broader human experiences. Experts have long studied how symbols function to convey complex ideas and preserve cultural continuity.

Ferdinand de Saussure, known as the father of modern linguistics, introduced a dyadic model of signs consisting of signifiers (physical forms such as words or images) and signifieds (the mental concepts associated with them). According to Saussure (1916), the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning it is based on social and cultural conventions rather than natural connections. Therefore, signs acquire their meaning through the linguistic and cultural systems shared by a community.

Building on this foundation, Charles Sanders Peirce proposed a triadic model of signs, which includes the representamen (the sign itself), the object (that which it refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning constructed by the observer). Peirce (1958) classified signs into three categories: icons (which resemble their objects, such as photographs), indices (which have a causal or direct relationship, such as smoke signifying fire), and symbols (which depend on cultural conventions, such as a red cross representing health services). Unlike Saussure, who emphasized the

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arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, Peirce highlighted the process of interpretation as central to the formation of meaning.

Both Saussure and Peirce laid the foundations for later semioticians, including Roland Barthes, who expanded semiotic theory into the realms of culture and media. Barthes (1972) proposed a two-level system of meaning: denotation (the literal or direct meaning of a sign) and connotation (the cultural, ideological, or emotional meaning derived from it). Barthes emphasized that connotation often reflects deeper social myths, collective beliefs that shape how people interpret the world. In this way, Barthes moved semiotics from linguistic analysis to cultural and ideological analysis, showing how signs in media, literature, and film encode values and power relations.

As a form of visual narrative, film provides a rich field for semiotic analysis. Like literature, film uses characters, objects, settings, and actions as symbolic representations of broader social and psychological issues. However, film has a unique advantage in that it combines visual, auditory, and temporal elements, making symbolic messages more direct and multidimensional. According to Klarer (2004), film functions as a medium of communication that unites artistic, sociocultural, and intellectual dimensions. Through the interaction between images and sound, film can critique social reality, express emotional depth, and reveal ideological tensions in ways that other literary forms cannot.

By applying Barthes' semiotic framework to film, researchers can reveal how visual symbols construct layers of meaning beyond the narrative itself. The analysis of symbols in Christopher Nolan's film Inception (2010) focuses on how objects, spaces, and actions, such as spinning totems, dream architecture, and snow forts that function as signs that represent the psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions of human life. Through this study, researchers aim to deepen understanding of how semiotic analysis can interpret modern cinematic texts and reveal the complex interactions between reality, ideology, and imagination.

B.   LITERATURE REVIEW
1.   Film as Literary Works

Films can be considered works of literature because they present stories through visual media, using audio, characters, and narration to convey meaning. Many films are adaptations of novels, thus bridging the worlds of literature and cinema. As a medium of communication, films not only serve as entertainment but also as a means of learning and conveying social, cultural, and scientific messages (Klarer, 2004). Technological developments have advanced films in form, theme, and narrative technique, enabling them to represent reality, express imagination, and play a vital role in modern life. In addition, film functions as a semiotic system, where meaning is generated through a combination of visual, verbal, and auditory codes. Visual codes (including color, lighting, image composition, costumes, body

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movements) and movements convey symbolic messages that guide the audience's interpretation. Verbal codes (dialogue, monologue, written text, or voice-over narration) provide linguistic structure and cultural context, while auditory codes (music, sound effects, and silence) trigger emotional and psychological responses that enrich meaning.

According to Roland Barthes (1977), each image functions as a sign that carries denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural or ideological) meanings. In film, these signs come together to create what Barthes calls a "second-level signifying system," in which cinematic elements not only depict reality but also encode values, myths, and ideologies. Similarly, Christian Metz (1974) describes film as a "language without codes," meaning that even though it does not have grammatical rules like spoken language, film still communicates through a recognizable system of signs such as scenes, sequences, and editing. Through the interaction of these codes, film constructs a layered discourse that allows viewers to interpret meanings far beyond the surface narrative. Therefore, film can be understood as a complex semiotic system that integrates sound, images, and language to convey both explicit stories and implicit cultural meanings. This semiotic perspective positions film not only as a work of art, but as a cultural product text structure that reflects, shapes, and critiques the reality of modern human experience.

2. Semiotics

Semiotics comes from the Greek word semeion, which means "sign". Ferdinand de Saussure defined semiotics as the study of signs in communication systems, consisting of signifiers (physical forms) and signifiers (concepts/meanings). The relationship between the two is arbitrary because it is determined by social conventions (Saussure, 1983; Sobur, 2009). Charles Sanders Peirce added three categories of signs: icons (direct resemblance), indices (causal relationships), and symbols (cultural conventions) (Peirce, 1931). The semiotic approach allows the analysis of signs in language, mass media, and even popular culture. In films or commercials, for example, semiotics helps to reveal how visual and verbal elements construct certain meanings, values, and ideologies (Chandler, 2007). Thus, semiotics is not only a tool for understanding signs, but also the process of generating, forming, and receiving meaning in society.

3. Roland Barthes' Theory

Roland Barthes developed a two-level semiotic theory of meaning: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (additional meaning influenced by ideology, culture, and social context) (Barthes, 1972). He emphasized that signs are never fixed, but are shaped by cultural constructs. This layered process in the formation

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of meaning produces what Barthes calls "myths," secondary communication systems that represent dominant social values and legitimize certain ideologies.

Barthes also identified five main codes in texts: (1) hermeneutic, which constructs puzzles or mysteries, (2) proairetic, which organizes sequences of actions, (3) semantic, which creates connotative meaning for characters, objects, or settings, (4) symbolic, which develops binary oppositions and deeper symbolic structures, and (5) cultural, which refers to shared or institutional knowledge (Barthes, 1977). These concepts serve as valuable analytical tools for analyzing how texts, films, and other media produce meaning that transcends their literal form. Barthes' model is particularly well-suited to film analysis because cinema operates through multiple layers of meaning. A film conveys meaning not only through language and dialogue, but also through visual and auditory signs such as lighting, color, sound, setting, and gestures. All of these can be read on the denotative and connotative levels. His framework allows researchers to explore how visual images become cultural symbols and how cinematic signs contribute to the formation of ideologies and myths.

Furthermore, Barthes' approach bridges linguistic semiotics and cultural analysis, making it ideal for revealing how films reflect and reproduce social values. By applying Barthes' model, films such as *"Inception"* (2010) can be analyzed not only as narratives about dreams and reality, but also as cultural texts that encode themes of control, trauma, and human desire within their symbolic systems. This makes Barthes' semiotics an effective method for uncovering the hidden meanings embedded in cinematic representations.

C.   METHODS
1.   Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the use of symbols in Christopher Nolan's film Inception (2010) based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it allows for the exploration of complex, non-numerical data, such as visual images, character behavior, and dialogue (Creswell, 2012).

The research procedure consisted of several key stages. First, data were collected by watching the film repeatedly and documenting scenes that displayed potential symbolic meanings. The criteria for selecting scenes include: (1) the presence of recurring visual motifs or objects (e.g., spinning tops, mirrors, or staircases), (2) moments that reveal significant character emotions or psychological conflicts, and (3) scenes that contribute to the film's main themes of reality, memory, and control. These criteria ensure that the selected scenes contain narrative and symbolic meaning. Second, the selected data were analyzed descriptively using Barthes' three levels of meaning. At the denotative level, each scene was evaluated based on its literal content, such as what was visually displayed or explicitly stated.

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At the connotative level, the focus shifts to the cultural and emotional associations that arise from visual, verbal, or auditory elements, such as lighting, camera angles, gestures, and voice intonation. Finally, at the mythical level, the analysis explores how these signs and connotations collectively construct broader ideological meanings or social values (such as humanity's obsession with control, the illusion of freedom, or the vulnerability of consciousness). Third, the findings are interpreted to identify the relationships between symbols, recurring themes, and ideological messages embedded in the film. The systematic application of Barthes' semiotic framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Inception constructs layered meanings that reflect both individual psychology and collective cultural myths (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2.   Data and Data Sources

This study uses qualitative data in the form of film scenes, dialogue, and visual elements that represent symbols.

Primary Source: The film "Inception" (2010), including visuals, dialogues, and scenes.

Secondary Sources: Literature on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and relevant previous studies.

These sources provide insight into how symbols reflect cultural and ideological contexts.

3.   Research Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the primary tool (Bogdan & Biklen, 1976), acting as the designer, data collector, analyst, and interpreter throughout the study.

D.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A semiotic analysis of Christopher Nolan's film *"Inception"* (2010) using Roland Barthes' model can be seen in seven key scenes.

Data 1

In the opening scene, when Cobb is stranded on the beach and brought before the elderly Saito, the denotative meaning depicts a weak and helpless figure. Connotatively, the beach and waves symbolize memories that come and go, while Cobb's limp body shows psychological exhaustion due to past trauma. Trauma in films is often depicted as something inevitable that always comes back to haunt the protagonist (Çelik, 2024). At the mythical level, trauma is positioned as something that cannot be erased, always present to haunt humans.

Table 1. Cobb on the beach signication

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1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Cobb was stranded weak, then taken to old Saito	Beach, waves, Cobb's powerless body	
3. Sign **I. SIGNIFIER**		**II. SIGNIFIED**
The beach and waves symbolize memories that return repeatedly. Cobb's exhausted body shows he is deeply weary, both physically and mentally		Trauma is always there and cannot be erased
III. SIGN Trauma		

Data 2

In the scene where Paris collapses, the city is visually portrayed as defying the laws of gravity, symbolizing the manipulation of physical space within a dream. This moment occurs during a conversation between Cobb and Ariadne about the dangers of constructing dreams based on personal memories. The dialogue excerpt below supports this interpretation:

COBB: "Because building dreams out of your own memories is the surest way to lose your grip on what's real and what's a dream."
ARIADNE: "Did that happen to you?" (Inception, 2010, 00:32:25–00:32:35).

This exchange reveals Cobb's awareness of the fragile line separating reality from illusion, directly preceding the scene in which the city folds upon itself (see Figure 1). Denotatively, the scene depicts the physical world bending and collapsing, violating natural laws. Connotatively, it emphasizes the flexibility of reality and the instability of human perception within dreams. The myth that emerges is that reality is not an absolute entity, but a social, cultural, and psychological construct, aligning with Barthes' (1994) view that cultural signs are continually open to reinterpretation and reconstruction.

Table 2. Paris Collapses Signification

1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Paris city folds and breaks against gravity	City breaking against natural laws	
3. Sign **I. SIGNIFIER**		**II. SIGNIFIED**
The city of Paris folds upward, with buildings and streets defying gravity		Reality is not absolute. What we perceive as real is often only a matter of collective agreement
III. SIGN		

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Data 3

The totem of the first spinning top spun by Cobb symbolizes existential doubt. Denotation describes the spinning top as a tool for testing dreams or reality, while connotation emphasizes the symbol of uncertainty. In myth, the spinning top tells the story of the search for absolute certainty, even though life is always filled with ambiguity. The totem, as a sign of doubt, represents the human need for certainty, even though life is always filled with ambiguity (Barthes, 1972; Ratliff, 2012). This is emphasized in the final spinning top scene, when the camera focuses on the spinning top without providing a definite answer. The connotation of this scene emphasizes the theme of ambiguity, while the myth that is constructed is that human life is fundamentally filled with eternal uncertainty.

Table 3. Totem (Spinning Top) signification

1. Signifier Spinning top keeps spinning	2. Signified Small object to test dream or reality	
3. Sign **I. SIGNIFIER** The spinning top symbolizes doubt, whether he is dreaming or awake		**II. SIGNIFIED** Humans always seek certainty, yet life is full of ambiguity (uncertainty)
III. SIGN Uncertainty		

Data 4

Yusuf's sedative potion depicts humanity's attempt to control dreams. This connotation is the domination of science over the subconscious, while the myth emphasizes that science is seen as an absolute tool capable of conquering even the most personal experiences. The potion used by Yusuf confirms the modern myth about the power of science to control even the most personal experiences (Detweiler, 2010).

Table 4. Yusuf Sedative (Potion)

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1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Special potion to enter layered dreams	Artificial chemical liquid	
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER Yusuf presents a sedative formula to keep multilayered dreams stable		II. SIGNIFIED Science is believed to be capable of controlling everything, even the human subconscious
III. SIGN Science		

Data 5

In the battle scene at the snowy fortress, the literal meaning depicts a dramatic confrontation in a cold landscape. The figurative meaning of this scene shows how frozen and closed off Fischer's subconscious is. The myth that emerges is the image of the human mind as a battlefield. Implementing an idea requires strategy and conquest, just like a military operation (Sinha, 2017).

Table 5. Fortress Battle

1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Battle in Fischer's snowy fortress dream	Cold landscape, heavy weapons	
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER A massive battle takes place in a snowy fortress		II. SIGNIFIED The human mind is like a battlefield. To influence someone, strategies are required just like in military operations
III. SIGN Mind		

Data 6

The limbo scene, where the city created by Cobb and Mal is destroyed, reflects the idea that man-made utopias will not last long (Kiss, 2010). Connotatively, this scene symbolizes the collapse of the artificial world and memories. On a mythical level, the film emphasizes that man-made realities will never last because they are always defeated by reality.

Table 6. Limbo Signification

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1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Cobb & Mal's built city crumbles	Grand buildings collapsing	
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER The city built by Cobb and Mal collapses and sinks into the sea		II SIGNIFIED A perfect world created by humans will never last long. Reality is always stronger than illusion
III. SIGN Fragility		

Data 7

Finally, in the scene between Fischer and his father, the denotation depicts amoment of emotional separation. This scene reflects the universal need for symbolic approval from parental figures in the formation of individual identity (Engel & Wildfeuer, 2015). The connotation presents the symbol of a child's approval and acceptance. On a mythical level, this film reproduces the universal father-child relationship as a search for identity, legitimacy, and individual independence.

Table 7. Fischer and His Father Signification

1. Signifier	2. Signified	
Fischer speaks with his dying father	Emotional father-son dialogue	
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER Fischer meets his dying father and feels liberated		II. SIGNIFIED The father–child relationship is a universal myth about the search for acceptance and identity
III. SIGN Identity		

A semiotic analysis of the film *"Inception"* (2010) using Roland Barthes' model shows that this film functions not only as visual entertainment, but also as a cultural text that conveys ideas about trauma, control, and human uncertainty. By applying Barthes' (1972) three levels of meaning (denotation, connotation, and myth), each scene reveals how the signs in the film construct complex meanings about the modern human experience.

The first scene, in which Cobb is stranded on a beach and meets the elderly Saito, depicts trauma as the dominant force that shapes human identity. Denotatively, Cobb appears weak and confused. Connotatively, the beach and waves reflect recurring memories that continue to haunt him. This aligns with

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Barthes' (1972) idea that signs evoke layered meanings influenced by culture and psychology. At the mythical level, this scene reinforces the universal idea that trauma is inevitable and continues to influence human consciousness (Çelik, 2024).

The second scene, Paris Folding, shows how reality can be constructed and deconstructed. When Ariadne asks Cobb, and he said, "Because building a dream from your own memories is the surest way to lose your grip on what is real and what is dream." (Inception, 2010, 00:32:25–00:32:35). The city folds in on itself, visually defying the laws of physics. Denotatively, this represents the collapse of physical space. Connotatively, it reflects the instability of perception. At the mythical level, it aligns with Barthes' (1994) argument that cultural meaning is fluid and constantly reinterpreted, much like the dream world inhabited by Cobb.

The third scene, featuring Yusuf's sedative concoction, depicts the intersection of science and control. Denotatively, it shows the use of chemical compounds that enable layered dreams. Connotatively, it represents humanity's attempt to master the subconscious through technology. On a mythical level, it represents what Barthes (1972) identified as the "modern myth"—the belief that science has absolute power over nature and the mind (Detweiler, 2010).

The fourth scene, the battle in the snowy fortress, depicts the human mind as a contested space. Denotatively, it is a physical confrontation in a cold, militaristic landscape. Connotatively, it reflects the conflict in Fischer's subconscious, where ideas must be implanted through resistance. At the mythical level, it aligns with Barthes' view that culture often normalizes the struggle for power as an inevitable reality (Sinha, 2017).

The fifth scene, the destruction of the city in Limbo, reflects the destruction of artificial reality. Denotatively, the city built by Cobb and Mal collapses into the sea. Connotatively, this scene represents the vulnerability of human ambition and illusion. The myth that emerges is in line with Barthes' concept of myth as ideology, the idea that human-made perfection is temporary and ultimately defeated by reality (Kiss, 2010).

The sixth scene, between Fischer and his dying father, represents emotional reconciliation and identity formation. Denotatively, this scene depicts a moment of parting. Connotatively, it symbolizes forgiveness and acceptance. At the mythical level, the father-son relationship reflects the universal search for validation and belonging within the social hierarchy (Engel & Wildfeuer, 2015). This is in line with Barthes' (1972) assertion that cultural texts reproduce family and moral values as natural truths.

Finally, the spinning top (totem) serves as the main symbol of uncertainty in the film. Denotatively, this top is an object used to distinguish dreams from reality. Connotatively, it symbolizes doubt and confusion. At the mythical level, the spinning top's endless rotation illustrates Barthes' (1972) claim that meaning is never final but constantly deferred. This is in line with Saussure's idea of the

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arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, as well as Peirce's triadic concept of interpretation, both of which emphasize that meaning is shaped by cultural agreement rather than objective truth.

In summary, the seven scenes analyzed show that *"Inception"* constructs a modern myth about the vulnerability of human reality. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the film's signs of trauma, science, control, and uncertainty convey a broader ideological meaning about modern life. Thus, *"Inception"* can be read as a representation of the modern human condition: living between reality and illusion, between technological control and inner freedom, and between the demands of the past and the expectations of the future. Through layers of signs analyzed using Roland Barthes ' semiotics, the film not only entertains but also invites reflection on the nature of humanity and reality itself.

E. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes *"Inception"* (2010) using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on ten key scenes interpreted through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the film transcends its surface narrative of dream-based espionage and instead conveys profound reflections on human existence, trauma, technology, and relational identity.

The recurring themes of trauma and the ambiguity of reality form the emotional and philosophical core of the story. Cobb's inability to escape his past and the perpetually spinning totem both illustrate the instability of human certainty. The film thus constructs a semiotic narrative where reality itself becomes constantly shifting, never absolute.

The representation of reality as fragile and constructed is further emphasized through visual metaphors such as the Paris Folding and the Rotating Hotel Hallway. These scenes exemplify Barthes' (1972) notion that meaning is culturally produced and never fixed, reminding viewers that what appears stable in life can easily collapse once its ideological foundations are questioned.

In the portrayal of science and technology, the film positions modern innovation as both empowering and perilous. Yusuf's sedative and dream-sharing devices symbolize humanity's growing ambition to dominate even the subconscious. Yet, as Barthes argues, such myths of progress often conceal deeper anxieties about control and dehumanization.

The depiction of the subconscious as a battlefield, particularly in the Limbo scenes, reinforces the idea that the human psyche is layered with conflict, defense, and vulnerability. Similarly, family relationships, especially Fischer's encounter with his father, highlight how identity is constructed through emotional validation and symbolic approval, reflecting the cultural myth of familial authority.

Overall, *"Inception"* constructs a grand narrative of the modern human condition, one defined by uncertainty, memory, and the quest for meaning amid

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blurred boundaries between illusion and truth. Through Barthes' semiotics, the film can be understood as a cultural text that not only entertains but also critiques the postmodern pursuit of control and perfection.

The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of how cinematic symbols operate as cultural codes that reflect collective anxieties and desires. By interpreting Inception through Barthes' framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of film as a medium of ideological expression. Future studies may expand this analysis by integrating multimodal or intertextual approaches, examining how semiotic structures in contemporary cinema continue to evolve alongside social and technological change.

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