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Fantasy versus Reality: A Twenty-First Century Film Series to Explore How the Absurdity of Alternate Realities Affects the Individual in the Audience

Courtney Wunderwald
University of Montana, Missoula, courtney.wunderwald@umontana.edu

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FANTASY VERSUS REALITY: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FILM SERIES TO

EXPLORE HOW THE ABSURDITY OF ALTERNATE REALITIES AFFECTS THE

INDIVIDUAL IN THE AUDIENCE

By

COURTNEY NICOLE WUNDERWALD

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Approved by:

Dr. Robert Tuck, Faculty Mentor and Assistant Professor of Japanese

Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

Dr. Eliot Graham, Teaching, Research & Mentoring Fellow
Davidson Honors College

Dr. Rachel Gross, Teaching, Research & Mentoring Fellow
Davidson Honors College

ABSTRACT

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Fantasy versus Reality: A Twenty-First Century Film Series to Explore How the Absurdity of Alternate Realities Affects the Individual in the Audience

Faculty Mentors: Dr. Robert Tuck, Dr. Eliot Graham, and Dr. Rachel Gross

The purpose of this study was to understand how film viewers contextualize on-screen alternate realities with their personal perspectives, and if that is accurately represented by scholarly film critique. I then compared my findings with filmmaker interviews, which discuss their reasons for including specific imagery, symbols, and characters to evoke certain emotions or reactions from their audiences. My project aspired to offer a method that might redefine how viewers reflect on films and to open a discussion to gather data from audiences before assuming their reactions in film critique. I was always fascinated by the power of cinema, particularly how absurd scenes stuck in my mind for years afterward and changed my perspectives on life. This project developed as I wanted to discover whether other viewers had similar reactions, or if they interpret the films completely different than I would have analyzed myself. I hosted a three-part film series of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010)*, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), and Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) at the University of Montana in November 2017 and February 2018. Participants who attended the separate events took part in a forty minute discussion immediately after the film, as a form of my qualitative research. The discussion consisted of a set of open-ended questions to determine specific film aspects that were most important to the participants. I hypothesized that the viewers would find the most absurd or grotesque scenes to be most vividly memorable, but to compensate for the alienating nature of the alternate reality, they would subconsciously gravitate toward scenes depicting a positive human exchange or connection by overcoming negative struggles. I based my concept on the logic that the viewer has more firsthand experiences of human relationships rather than absurd dreamscapes and depicted character imaginations.

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Fantasy versus Reality: A Twenty-First Century Film Series to Explore How the Absurdity of Alternate Realities Affects the Individual in the Audience

1. Introduction

As a fan of cinema, I noticed over the years that film analysis and critique would often reference a theoretical audience to explain how viewers *should* feel in particular moments of the film. I began to question if those scholars had actually interviewed or spoken with an audience to see if other viewers did in fact agree with those statements. For example, Drew Winchur uses the phrase "audiences learn" in his analytic article, "Ideology in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*," even though he did not interview or ask audience members about their actual reactions. Other reviews or analyses might state that the audience should feel a certain emotion, be distracted by specific film elements, or will justify character actions. This common film critique weakness of not surveying audience reactions can lead to misguided assumptions by relying on their own individual analysis.

I challenged this weakness of popular and scholarly film critique by hosting a three-part film series tailored to analyze how audiences react to the absurdity of alternate realities presented in twenty-first century films. Using qualitative research methods commonly applied to the social sciences, I facilitated focus group discussions following each film to explore audience reactions. I then compared that data to the audience reactions predicted by other scholarly analysis of these films. I discovered through my study that often the audience responses I received did not match up with what film analysis predicted. This demonstrates the importance of utilizing empirical studies such as interviewing audience members before assuming the specific messages that they receive or do not receive.

I developed my project around my own curiosities regarding cinematic audience studies and if my perceptions of a film were mutually shared experiences. First, I wondered how audiences' responses would vary and if any overall patterns might emerge across the three events. I was also curious to find out if the viewers would fixate on certain scenes or motifs, and how they would voice their responses to the absurd or surreal elements in the films. I specifically wanted to see how audiences related themselves to certain films on a personal level. So, I was eager to hear any personal stories that might have manifested organically in connection to the

films, to ultimately gain a better understanding of how to gauge the level of viewer relatability within these foreign worlds.

Even though each film pushed boundaries of comfort zones on some level, the participants were open-minded and willing to discuss the films. The participants had differing views, but in various ways they expressed gratitude for being able to understand the film from a new point of view via the discussion. During the *Waking Life* event, one participant said taking part in the event discussion had changed her perspective of the film, even though it was her fourth viewing. Another individual expressed the importance of discussion and the desire to experience the film a second time with other people for the purpose of further discussion and variety of others' perspectives on the film. One participant during the *Inception* interview said that "sitting here, I definitely changed as in being more thoughtful and more into the discussion." Therefore, the film events proved successful in opening a platform to share audience members' personal experiences and perspectives (from their dreams, childhoods, fears, etc.) in connection with the films. Evidence of these varying idiosyncratic responses supports the claim that audiences do not have monolithic mass reactions to a movie.

2. Literature Review

This phenomenon of assuming an audience's position without interviews can be seen in Drew Winchur's previously mentioned article. He argues that the film is a larger metaphor for corporate capitalist propaganda, based on the ideologies of the protagonist, Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and how he embraces violence, corruption, and deception throughout the film. Here, Winchur draws his conclusions from his own personal reading as a definitive for the mass of viewers who watched *Inception*. Winchur affirms that "audiences learn that corporate violence is normal, and that preventing it is unnecessary--the task of the individual is to create a delusion compelling and narcissistic enough to render that violence invisible" (Winchur, Part III). This statement about action violence may be true in the sense that the film genre leans more towards a science fiction espionage; however, Winchur uses the phrase, "audiences learn," even though he did not interview audience members to see if they did indeed learn this normalization and acceptance of corporate violence. Nonetheless, Winchur argues that the distance between the viewer's reality and the fictional protagonists creates enough space through the dream layers in which the viewer believes the protagonists' justification of excusing his corrupt and deceitful

crimes because he is processing his grief in progression to redemption. Winchur claims that "the viewer is meant to sleep-walk past it all, convinced that the real story lies with Cobb and his own claim to emotional distress" (Winchur, Part II). Because Cobb finds a way through his dreams to execute violence in a justifiable and socially acceptable way, Winchur again assumes the vulnerability and naivety of audience members to blindly accept this perspective, but without proof of conducting audience surveys, interviews, or consulting other audience reactions.

To address this issue in film critique of labeling reactions of a theoretical audience, I crafted my project to use an interdisciplinary range of studies (social sciences, audience studies, psychology, and film studies) to discern audience patterns based on their responses, modeled after David G. Morley's approach to communication and audience studies. As a researcher and professor of the University of London, Morley is a renowned leading figure in British cultural studies applied to media studies. His book section, "Afterword: Electronic Landscapes: Between the Virtual and the Actual" in *Online Territories: Globalisation, Mediated Practice and Social Space* and the interview by Miyase Christensen entitled, "New Media, New Crises, New Theories?" both investigate the question of how people make choices about the media messages they do or do not receive, especially within virtual places. His theory became useful for me to conceptualize how I would integrate multiple fields into my study, as Morley himself believes in utilizing "an interdisciplinary range of theories to explore how people actually respond to a TV programme; and only by this approach to audience studies, furthermore, could [he] develop a theory of the audience's activity" (Jin 124). Even though Morley admits that he did not take interest in the audiences or the television, but rather the concept of cultural power (Jin 127), his theories and practice of combining fields to study audiences still proved applicable to my goal of exploring audience relationships with specific films and realities.

Stuart Hall provides another approach to understanding how directors and actors input their personal messages into the filmmaking or acting, and how audiences receive and interpret them with varied levels of success. As another leading British cultural theorist, Hall explains his theory of Encoding and Decoding messages through four different stages as a type of media communication (Hall). Hall's theory deals with the process of filmmakers, producers, or writers who purposefully develop key words or symbols to "encode" specific messages into their television broadcast or film to manipulate or influence the viewer to "decode" that sign in a certain way, so that "the audience is both the 'source' and the 'receiver' of the television

message" (Hall 509). The success of the construction of encoded and decoded messages is usually based on the knowledge that the viewer assumingly already has about this symbol or repeated word. I applied Hall's theory to my study in cases where my interview subjects either correctly or incorrectly decoded specific messages, in reference to what directors explained in interviews about their intentions for placing encoded symbols and images in their films. Following in Hall's concept, my interviews demonstrated instances in which there were actual gaps of interpretation between the transfers of data by the time it reaches the audience watching a film. Through the various layers of media, from screenwriting to directing to acting and film visuals, some encoded messages will eventually lose data or its impact along the way.

The book, *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*, by Jeffrey Zacks provided yet another way to understanding viewer reactions. As a professor of psychological and brain sciences, and radiology, Zacks conducts laboratory studies to explain the study of film from a cognitive neuroscientific approach to see how the brain and mind relate, especially while watching movies. In this way, Zacks highlights the influence of both emotional ties and imagery as equally important factors in regards to audience studies within film studies. He then studied how movies shape our understanding of the real world (Zacks viii), which connects to my interest in explaining how my interview subjects contextualize the alternate realities on film into their daily lives. Zacks explains various influences of a director's role in fooling the viewer with film tricks and how those film elements can actually trigger memories, certain emotions, or even inspire violence in some historic cases. Zacks proposes the concept of the "mirror rule," which he explains as a subconscious reaction of an individual, who will physically and emotionally imitate the same actions of the characters on screen (Zacks 5-6). Although Zacks does not rely heavily on audience interviews, he instead records and analyzes the audience's physical reactions such as sweating, increased heart rates and breathing, or physical bodily movements while the movie is rolling. In this way, Zacks tracks many instances in which the physical evidence of emotions like sadness or excitement will happen before the audience member actually starts to feel the emotion, again due to the mirror rule (Shariatmadari).

Within the film studies realm, I found a range of interviews with filmmakers and actors as well as film critique to be crucial in situating where my audiences' specific responses and comments lined up with these professional commentaries. The UK webpage for *Inception* includes several opinions and quotes from actors, filmmakers, and the director about specific

aspects of the film that they believe will successfully be received by audiences. I also found the introduction to *Inception's* screenplay, *Inception: Shooting the Script* helpful in understanding how Christopher Nolan conceptualized the layered dream space of the film, and also how he personally interjected his own emotions and fears into the plot. An interview with Richard Linklater and the film's rotoscoping software designer, Bob Sabiston entitled, *The Screen Savers-Richard Linklater on "Waking Life"* became useful in understanding the purpose behind animating his film in such an abstract way and how it would be better received by audiences than live action. I found the interviews entitled, *'Pan's Labyrinth' | Unscripted |Guillermo del Toro, Ivana Baquero* and *Guillermo Del Toro talks "Pan's Labyrinth"* to both be valuable in understanding the origin and purpose of the imagery and creepy creatures in the film and their intended effects for viewers. As for film critique on the specific films, I later refer to Michael J. Blouin's "A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan's *Inception,*" Tanya Jones *Studying Pan's Labyrinth*, and Douglas Mann's article "Buddhists, Existentialists, and Situationists: Waking up in *Waking Life*" to ground a better understanding of how my audience interviews coincided or contrasted these analyses, and what that says about individual interpretation of films.

Overall, there seemed to be a lack of social scientific or psychological studies which pertained specifically to interviewing and conducting experiments on how audiences react to watching particular films. I hope then, that my study might provide insight to that missing area of research.

3. Methods

A. The Films

I chose three differing film genres (sci-fi action/adventure, fantasy war drama, and animated philosophical documentary) that were all linked with the commonality of being foregrounded in the unconventional, dream-like, or alternate realities in some manner. The logic behind these pairings was to gauge at what point audience members find the experimental film elements too disorienting, which might alienate them from emotional ties with plots and characters. The first film of my honors project, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), takes place within the construct of the human mind and shared dream world. Next, Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) follows the protagonist in his existential exploration of consciousness while

he is stuck in a dream, and the viewer experiences philosophical dialogues in abstract animations. Finally, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) depicts a dark fairy tale for adults, highlighting the coping mechanisms of war by using grotesque creatures and a bizarre plot through the eyes of a child.

B. Site & Participants

The participants of this study were from the University of Montana, a medium-sized university in the Western United States. The first viewing participants of *Inception* consisted of four undergraduate students, ranging in age from twenty-one to twenty-three, and one faculty member. For this group, I had previously advertised to specific honors courses and posted event flyers around the honors college, but all the participants who attended had heard from word of mouth. For *Pan's Labyrinth*, the focus group consisted of four undergraduate students from the ages of eighteen to twenty-three. Lastly, four undergraduates from ages twenty-one to twenty-three made up the *Waking Life* audience. Overall, the focus groups consistently had similar dynamics of age and university student status.

C. Data Collection

I created a set of open-ended questions for my discussion, which were designed to see how the participants authentically related themselves to the film based on the answers they gave. I chose these specific three movies to have overlapping themes with alternate realties in order to use the same control group of discussion questions to compare reactions for their different genres and content. All of those who attended the film signed consent forms (approved by IRB) before the discussion to be interviewed and recorded on my iPhone via Voice Memos to transcribe afterward. The discussion for *Inception* lasted 48 minutes, *Pan's Labyrinth* was 41 minutes, and *Waking Life* took 47 minutes.

D. Data Analysis

After I transcribed the dialogue, I analyzed the responses multiple times through different critical lenses. First, I highlighted important sections of the discussions based on themes. The second time, I color-coded the responses based on my original research questions. Finally, I

compared the two transcribed copies to verify any overlap between themes and my research questions to solidify my conclusions.

I. Limitations

The small number of participants at each event most likely allowed them to feel comfortable expressing their personal reflections on the films, which contributed to the quality and thoughtfulness of their comments. However, the limitations of having small groups for each event include the lack of ability to survey a larger number of people, different age groups, etc. It is equally important to note that my participants were a college educated population by definition, which may have increased the sophisticated level of their responses. This may call into question whether or not the setting of an interview might have influenced these focus groups to be more attentive and observant of subtle details such as plot and character analysis.

4. Findings

After analyzing the data from my participants, I discovered five overall patterns in relation to how viewers connect with experimental films set in fantasy worlds. First, there seemed to be a point in which viewers suspended or detached emotions from the more disorienting qualities of the film. It did not prove to be a negative reflection because I found, secondly, that the more confusion of sequence or ambiguity left the audience more likely to have the desire to rewatch it or experience those absurdly disorienting qualities again. I discovered concrete examples of decoding encoded messages, both successfully and unsuccessfully by audience members and film analysis. There seemed to be a recurring pattern of audiences admitting their fears through the platform of fear in each of the three events. Lastly, I noticed that participants readily accepted the fantasies and fictional characters on screen as if they were nonfictional people. The language that the participants used highlighted the way that viewers held characters responsible for their actions as if they were real people, exemplifying the idea of "willing suspension of disbelief." Throughout all of these subsections, this study and these claims demonstrated the overall unpredictability and variability of viewer responses, which creates issues when relying on one universal theme defined by one individual interpretation of a film.

A. Emotional Ties versus Visual Appeal

In my overall study, I found there was a point in which viewers started to focus less on the plot and characters, and more on the visual imagery because of the level of absurdity. Viewers seemed primarily pulled by emotions and characters' decisions (as in *Inception* and *Pan's Labyrinth*), but as the films got more experimental (*Waking Life*), there seemed to be less focus on pathos, and more discussion on the confusion. *Waking Life*'s visuals were disorienting enough to create a significant amount of distance from the viewer to make them less likely to have emotional ties to the scenes.

Some actors predict that audience members will become emotionally attached to a film, whereas another director believes that the striking, horrific imagery is more effective to evoke a more powerful audience reaction to film. The *Inception* production notes entitled, "About the Production," "About the Cast," and "About the Filmmakers" not only describe the ideas and concepts behind making the film, but also include direct commentaries from Christopher Nolan, the producer, the actors, etc.. Many of those involved in *Inception* predicted how they expected audiences would react based on their own experiences of playing a role in the actual filmmaking process. For example, Ellen Page, the actress who plays Ariadne, said the film was, "so conceptually original and so incredibly moving, with a powerful emotional spine that one can really connect to," ("*Inception*: "About the Production…"). Drew Winchur also notes that Leonardo DiCaprio as an actor wanted the emotional draw of his character to be the binding thread for all the complex dream layers. Winchur appears influenced by DiCaprio's commentary as Winchur further argues that Cobb's psychological pain drives the plot's force, especially as the characters and development continue deeper into his dreams and subconscious. My audience participants inadvertently challenged these actors' and critic's opinions by contrastingly feeling disconnected to the film because of a lack of character development and overall emotion.

I hypothesized that the *Pan's Labyrinth* audience would choose to focus on the disturbing moments such as the Captain's visceral violence or the saggy-skinned Pale Man who sees through eyeballs in his hands. In preparation for the *Pan's Labyrinth* event, I read that Guillermo del Toro strongly believed in the power of horror films because "there is no other [genre] that generates images that stay embedded in your mind so strongly" (Jones 22). My original hypothesis about imagery in *Pan's Labyrinth* was partially correct, but for reasons that I did not anticipate. The Pale Man was remembered for 1) his creepy, horrific appearance, but also for 2)

the annoyed feeling that the scene gave viewers because the protagonist chose to disobey warnings and rules, which awakened the Pale Man creature. Half the participants focused on the visually disturbing quality, while the other half focused on the morality in the scene. Since Ofelia disobeyed the Faun's explicit instructions, this actually *caused* the Pale Man scene, and the focus shifted to how the situation evoked a feeling of annoyance for them. Secondly, the other scenes mentioned displayed evidence of violence (the end where Ofelia dies from a gunshot, the Captain pretends to slit his throat in the mirror), but they did not choose the actual actions of the Captain beating a man to death in the face with a bottle, the torture scenes, the initial moment of seeing a leg being sawed off, nor Mercedes slowly slashing the Captain's cheek open with a knife. The participants did not fixate on or specifically mention any of these visually violent scenes. The fact that the gore was *not* especially shocking to the viewers could be explained by a cultural desensitization or normalization toward watching violence within cinema. Alternatively, perhaps the audience members did not focus on these scenes because they brought about too much discomfort. Later on, someone described Ofelia's magical storybook that draws the "bloody uterus…into a full splat of blood." The participant did not bring up the scene for the disgust factor, but rather for the confusion of the sequence of events. This result could also be explained by the audience members' level of sophistication by being able to look past the gore in order to analyze the logistical and creative elements of the film. Either way, these two instances challenge Guillermo del Toro's notion of remembering horrific imagery primarily, which shows how viewers will likely decide most memorable scenes based off of their individual backgrounds instead of what the director intended.

In comparison, *Inception* viewers could have chosen scenes heavily laid with a variety of human emotions packed into one, but instead tended to choose scenes in which they had to decode certain emotions specific to their individual perspectives on life. For instance, participants never addressed or discussed the penultimate scene in which Ariadne and Cobb are in the limbo dreamscape trying to save Robert Fischer from death, but Mal stabs Cobb out of anger repeatedly until Ariadne shoots Mal, and then Mal dies in Cobb's arms. I thought this scene's intense depiction of pent up frustration, deceit, sadness, and grief, and Cobb's triumph of finally accepting his wife's death would have been the first scene discussed. Instead, the *Inception* participants chose an approximately equal number of scenes with solely visual appeal of special effects (three scenes) to contrast the scenes with emotional ties (four scenes). When

asked openly what scene stuck in the participants' minds most, the participants all focused on completely different scenes of the films for various reasons; there were no two repeating scenes for this question (unlike *Pan's Labyrinth's* previously mentioned Pale Man scene). Unlike *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Waking Life*, participants also chose multiple scenes with purely technological and cinematic creativity, such as the falling vehicle used to physically measure warped time for the viewer as a reference point in the dream world. In addition, the bursting food stalls and the scene in which Ariadne flips the Parisian buildings upside down on each other in her dream were favorites among these participants, who attributed these special effects' role in the movie as flaunting the "wow" factor of the technology to keep the dream world lighthearted and engaging for the audience. All of these *Inception* "wow" factors functioned in the film as actively demonstrating the rules of the dream world, instead of the viewer solely receiving the exposition via dialogue. Meanwhile, *Waking Life* participants agreed that the abstract cartoon drawings made the philosophical concepts much more palatable and understandable in terms of engaging the viewer with illustrations.

Originally, I thought that audiences would mostly have shared experiences of focusing on the most disturbing scenes, either for violence or visual depictions of emotion. However, the somewhat unexpected results of the interviews showed that my hypotheses were only true about half the time. The other fifty percent of viewers had unpredictable, varied responses because they chose to focus on different film elements.

B. Audiences Respond to the Element of Confusion and Ambiguity

This project has demonstrated that for the most part, experimental film does not disorient viewers as much as some critics and I personally might have thought. One way of normalizing an unworldly experience is for viewers to compare their new cinematic experiences with films they have previously seen before. In all three interviews, a participant compared the film at hand with other movies or television series to try to better understand and reflect on the success of an alternate reality. This consistent film comparison by audiences suggests their higher visual literacy from being a more experienced viewer. Even viewers can still find comparisons between experimental films with something they have already seen or experienced, which makes the cinematic experience of a fantasy or virtual world less alienating. During *Inception*, one participant said that "*Donnie Darko* makes me feel a sense of fate for myself and [*Inception*]

doesn't do the same thing. It doesn't make me question where I'm at in my reality." This comparison, which references a movie with a seemingly equivalent subconscious world mixed with reality as *Inception*, illustrates that this individual is somewhat familiar with placing themselves into on-screen in alternate realities. At this point, another individual said that *Truman Show* produced more personal reflection than *Inception*. A *Pan's Labyrinth* participant said, "I saw a lot of comparing themes and makeup like *Labyrinth* with David Bowie as well as the structure of the entire story itself" as a way of drawing from exposure to other fantastical fictions told from a child protagonist. One *Waking Life* viewer made a comparison by saying, "*Game of Thrones* as an example that things are way more complicated than right and wrong. But that goes to constitute that it goes as deep as to our understanding of our existence and that complexity." He made this comparison as a way of labeling *Waking Life*'s overload content of diverse philosophies: morals are not just black and white, but can be grey with complexities of the real world. In all these cases, comparisons can provide a useful context for the viewer to ground themselves into a new alternate reality. By comparing to other films, the viewer generally does not feel as though watching a new experimental film is an alienating experience.

It seems that the *Inception* audience did not have *enough* confusion or uncertainty with regard to the alternate world, unlike the other two films. During *Inception*, one of the subjects said that the filmmakers "didn't give you some heavy explanation of how this is happening… [it's] easy to understand" and that "everything was linked and made sense." Nolan admits to consciously establishing rules of the dream world, much like the actual occurrences while humans sleep and dream (such as the "kick" or the feeling of falling in a dream to wake up, for example). Consequently, Nolan rationalized that utilizing Ariadne's character as the new learner of the dream world would be equivalent to the viewers' experience, making the rules of the dream dimension more relatable. The viewer could see similar boundaries, limits, and freedoms that they have presumably experienced in their own personal dreams, as Christopher Nolan had himself. Pairing these readings of the film can act as proof for a successful understanding of the dream world, which actually seems to adhere to Christopher Nolan's intent for including explicit, but simple rules of shared dreaming. However, one viewer said, "My problem was that it feels too believable…I feel like real dreams don't make sense that often." The film apparently did not make these audience members question their reality outside of the cinematic experience or give them the desire to pursue another viewing. Perhaps this lack of desire to rewatch the film stems

from the plot, which allowed for the characters to have a fallback plan of physically waking back up to reality, so the certainty of the temporality of the dreamscape did not hold as much investment or concern with the viewer, compared to the other two films in this study.

After *Pan's Labyrinth*, the participants' initial thoughts expressed their confusion, which caused questions, contemplation, and interpretations (even to the extent of Celtic lore to explain Faun's existence). Much of the confusion or ambiguity derived from the film's final scene from Captain Vidal's perspective, devoid of fantasy characters. Given this open-ended conclusion, the participants chose to interpret the ending as either neutral, sad, or happy. One participant agreed that the film left them in a confused state, giving them an overall neutral feeling towards the film. Another viewer "classified [*Pan's Labyrinth*] as a tragedy with a spin of her possibly going to her father." In this instance, this particular viewer's conclusion focused more on the pathos behind the tragedy of Ofelia's death scene. The other participants debated if her fantasy ending as the true princess of the underworld was in fact true, and even if she did die, one participant felt optimistic that Ofelia felt happy, whether or not she imagined or made up the entire fantastical plot of the film. For example, one noticed that in Ofelia's reality, two fairies were eaten by the Pale Man, but then in her kingdom after death the Faun is shown releasing all three fairies. The detail of the number of fairies suggested that Ofelia's projection of being crowned as princess in the fantasy world was actually her entering the land of the dead. In summation, the participants found this thought provoking, open-ended conclusion of the film satisfying.

All three films conclude in ambiguity as to whether the protagonists actually remain in reality or the fantasy world. To better understand how this ending might affect the audience, media and film studies scholar Tanya Jones explains in *Studying Pan's Labyrinth* how *Pan's Labyrinth's* "structuring and organization [of the narrative] functions to create meaning and generate a particular response from the audience" (Jones 11). This alludes to the tragic, but indefinite end of *Pan's Labyrinth*, which is also the opening scene of the film. Jones calls this type of storytelling a "narrative structure [that] can be read as retrospective" (Jones 11) because the end's revelation is shown also as the opening. These three films of my project all utilize this retrospective narrative framework. This film technique, told from the flashbacks of the protagonists' perspectives, creates ambiguous endings of the films. A union with their families from the past backstory of the protagonists defines their driving force to make decisions in both *Inception* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. The *Waking Life* protagonist simply desires to stop dreaming, but

the end scene where he floats into the night sky represents the continuation of his cycle. The opening scene of *Pan's Labyrinth* rewinds a close-up of Ofelia's nosebleed and bloodied hand as she breathes rapidly. The end reveals that she is dying from a gunshot wound from her step-father, Captain Vidal. Ofelia's unsettling, realistic murder allows her to possibly profit from a more peaceful conclusion in the fantasy world, where she is reunited with her family. In *Inception*, the wobbling spin top in the closing scene creates doubt as to which reality Cobb actually sees his children in. Nonetheless, Cobb reuniting with his family is a much more dependably optimistic tone whether or not he is still dreaming. It appears that the element of *Pan's Labyrinth*'s two polar opposite possible endings was more satisfying in terms of wanting to rewatch the film than knowing that Cobb in *Inception* was somehow reunited with his family definitively and not having the option of imagining the conclusion beyond the final scene.

Between the three films, audiences found *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Waking Life* to be confusing at times, whereas *Inception* was said to be more straightforward and easy to follow. However, confusion is not necessarily negative because it is possible that just enough confusion could be a driving force for an audience's desire to rewatch a film. Because of this element of confusion, viewers were skeptical enough to question the validity of certain moments (i.e. calling the yellow shirted man's dialogue "absolute nonsense" in *Waking Life*, observing possible inaccuracies in *Pan's Labyrinth*'s plot sequence, questioning the math of time in *Inception*). With the feeling of informational overload, along with the consistently abstract visual style of *Waking Life,* the participants expressed the need to reflect and further digest the information after the film had ended. For the most part, the audience accepted the absurd moments such as the man lighting himself on fire in *Waking Life* with the reasoning that the film embodies "dream logic," in which confusion and illogical actions should take place. In conclusion, viewers seemed more positively responsive to films with more confusing or ambiguous endings that left more interpretations of the conclusion up to the viewer to decide or decode themselves.

C. Viewers and Critics Decode Film Messages

Often, individualistic readings of a scene can lead to decoding film messages into a singular interpretation, which is personal to that particular viewer. To explain a reason why two parties of viewers might decode the same message in distinctly different manners, David Morley believes that "media don't have direct effects on their audiences" but rather "particular people, in

particular contexts, perceive the relevance (or irrelevance) of specific media technologies for their lives, and how they then choose to use those technologies or ignore them, or indeed 'bend' them in some way, to a purpose for which they were not intended" (Jin 128). At the intersection of culture studies and audience studies, Morley argues that an individual's personal background has a considerable factor "as partly explaining why this person, in this particular position, will tend to be affected (or not affected) by this particular media, or how they will tend to interpret some particular media programme" (Jin 133). At the point that both viewers and critics might bend a message to fit their environment or personal life, the message is out of the filmmaker's control, and in turn becomes a possible idiosyncratic interpretation. Morley says that "people *do* make choices, and do make their own interpretations of material provided to them by the media, whether we are talking about the mass media of broadcasting or the micromobile media of today's world" (Jin 128). This concept of individualized media interpretations corresponds with Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding theory and how messages encoded by producers or directors could be misconstrued and unintentionally decoded into a different meaning by the viewer, based on that individual's unpredictable background and prior knowledge (Hall).

As a specific example of how individuals will decode the same message through two different logic patterns, one of my participants cited the *Inception* scene when Cobb visits the chemist's basement in Mombasa, appearing like a "drug den" of people addicted to dreams, similar to the reading offered by Michael J. Blouin in his article, "A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*." Both parties decoded the scene to be a message about the problem of addiction through the visuals of IV's filled with sleeping sedation and the aesthetic of the dark basement filled with cots of dreaming people. However, the viewer and critic's decodings derived from completely opposite intentions. The fact that the viewer kept calling it a "drug den" (a phrase never used in the film) shows how this individual interpreted or decoded a scene to directly deal with the harsh realism of our world's drug problem. This participant equated the scene as being "really sad," and the "most powerful" scene because people deliberately chose to stop living life to instead live in a fantasy through addiction. Blouin's article explores how the strong themes of corporate espionage in *Inception* reflect the economic struggle between Japan's "soft power" and the USA's capitalist structure, represented by Saito and Dom's relationship via business negotiations in dreamscapes. Blouin defines part of the element of "soft power" in Nolan's film when Cobb "has fallen victim to the addiction that

he has been spreading across the globe… like the victims in the Mombasa basement," where Cobb is unable to differentiate whether he is in reality or a dream. Even though my audience participants decoded this basement scene as a humanistic representation that evoked sadness, Blouin suggests the scene functions as a parallel metaphor to his argument that the film is international capitalist propaganda and reflects how Americans are addicted to being consumers. My participants decoded the scene as a suggestion to sympathize with the harshness of drug addiction while a critic decoded the visual implications of the scene into an impassive and dehumanized interpretation about capitalism. This again, displays the unpredictability of decoding certain messages in a medium like film.

  Waking Life also exemplified this phenomenon of what Morley refers to as viewers "bending" encoded messages – that is, interpreting scenes or images differently from what the creators intended. These participants commented and agreed that the philosophies displayed in *Waking Life* were "very Western civilization oriented" with Christian and Western philosophy being the most present in the film. However, my focus group never caught on to the references and concepts from Eastern philosophy. Douglas Mann demonstrated in "Buddhists, Existentialists, and Situationists: Waking up in *Waking Life*," nineteen out of the thirty-four scenes (55.8%) are derived from Asian philosophy. He creates a scene-by-scene list with descriptions of the thirty-four scenes and defines twelve instances of Buddhism, five cases of Taoism, and seven examples of Indian Vedanta, all encompassed in *Waking Life*. He introduces his argument and explains the film's title by saying, "in ancient Eastern philosophy–the Indian Vedanta philosophy of the Upanishads, Taoism, and Buddhism–the key to waking up is enlightenment and a correct understanding of the relation of the self to the external world" (Mann 15). Mann also explains how the philosophy of existentialism played a major role in various scenes with the idea of waking up, becoming aware of personal freedoms, and creating individual lives and selves. My audience brought up the scene of the couple's pillow talk about collective memory and "telepathic sharing of lives," but never explicitly recognized them as Taoist, Tibetan Buddhist, or Vedanta philosophies (Mann 17). Audience members discussed this scene multiple times. However, despite these discussions, the participants still agreed that the film was mainly Western. This illustrates that these viewers frequently missed these subtle philosophical references. Mann's analytic article on *Waking Life* defines and categorizes the myriad of differing philosophic scenes, but most viewers may not be able to decode the origin of

those messages while watching the film. This instance exemplifies Hall's theory that an audience might simply not receive certain messages to decode or choose to interpret them according to their own personal values or backgrounds. Both my audience and Mann believe that they have correct analysis, based on what their own previous knowledge before watching the film. Because viewers tend to read into films to coincide somehow with their personal experiences or knowledge, it does not mean that one interpretation is wrong from another, but rather that various paths to decoding messages are inevitable.

D. Recurring Pattern of Fear

The idea of film used as a sort of therapeutic way to express and relieve human fear was one discovery that I did not even anticipate or hypothesize as being a trend before conducting my study. This discovery could have been overlooked by assuming how the audiences would have reacted. During my research, the trend of expressing fears surfaced as a natural reaction from both viewers and actual filmmakers as well. An interview between Christopher Nolan and his brother, Jonathan, establishes his reasons behind making a film about dreams and the deeper emotional ties below the surface of his elaborate heist film. In developing his ideas and concepts for *Inception* for over ten years prior to making the film, Nolan acknowledges the juxtaposition of the corporate espionage heist becoming more emotional with its universal human experience of the simple theme of dreams (Nolan 10). Nolan intended the film to be more relatable and emotional by changing the antagonist to be Cobb's wife, Mal, for a more tumultuous relationship. The vehicle of film noir allowed Nolan to take his and others' fears and worries in real life and "extrapolate them into that universe" of *Inception* (Nolan 11). So, in looking at how he crafted his alternate reality, it stems from the simplest aspects of human nature itself, in this case, being fear. These deeply encoded messages of fear still resonated with the participants in my film discussion, but with differing interpretations. It does seem as though Nolan partly succeeded in encoding his fears for audiences to receive on some level.

Despite these three films being so utterly different, a thematic pattern of viewers admitting fears (e.g. using keywords such as "scary," "scared," "afraid," or "fear") organically came into conversation within each discussion. Because of watching *Inception*, participants expressed fear of losing themselves to their subconscious someday, not having death as an escape, or never waking up (as the character, Saito, experienced in limbo). A different *Inception*

participant brought up a childhood fear and said, "When I was a kid, my brother would try to scare me by telling me my whole life was a dream, so I feel that fear" of questioning reality presented in the film. In correlation with the *Waking Life* scene with the couple in bed who suggest the idea that we are all dead looking back on our lives as they happen, it brought out a participant's fear of the unknowns of what actually happens to humans after death, even if this scene was explained in abstract visuals. After *Pan's Labyrinth*, viewers compared their childhood experiences of playing around in nature with that of Ofelia's similar imagination. In conversation, one viewer began admitting his childhood fears by saying that "I was actually afraid to go to the creek. It was a scary place honestly," even though the creek and neighboring woods was location to imagine games to play for him and his friends during childhood. Another participant explained their imaginative experience in nature as a child, "I'd wander, my mom actually got really scared one time, but I was just up in the trees." A third member of the discussion was skeptical that the girl's imagination would create the Faun character to yell at her because she felt that "As a kid, you're kind of afraid of [anger or yelling]." In my three interviews, it seems that without the viewers knowing it they become open to film as a platform to address and expel their personal fears, even in films that are not designated horror genres. Through a more psychoanalytic lens, this recurring pattern of expressing fear might present a more general observation that audience members are likely to superimpose their backgrounds and memories onto a film while viewing it, which could actually be a healthy exercise to work through personal emotions or memories.

E.   Accepting Fantasy as Part of Daily Life in Reality

These in-depth discussions formulated yet another recurring theme: the concept of fantasy seems to be an accepted part of our daily reality, whether it be through dreams, childhood memories, or even as a way to understand cinematic entertainment. One participant made the statement about *Waking Life* that "all humans can kind of relate [to the film] because we all dream." This acceptance of inherent imagination as part of our human nature allows us to experience the possibility of alternate realities in film. Morley explains the realm of electronic landscapes (or otherwise known as media communications and television) and its effect on the user or audience. He explains that "for an increasing number of people, the virtual is perhaps now best seen as a more or less banal overlay on their material lives, rather than some separate

realm of wonder" (Morley 274). With this mentality, it is also possible that a sophisticated audience might have been exposed to enough film that eventually the surprise factor or sense of wonder may be desensitized as well. Even though his article focuses on the virtual world of technology and televised news rather than cinema, Morley's use of audience studies within the virtual spaces can still apply to the messages broadcasted in cinema.

To demonstrate how my interviewees subconsciously accepted fictional reality, I noticed that they discussed the characters as if they are real, living beings by saying statements such as "[Ofelia is] a great storyteller…she's very imaginative of tragic and happy." The participants addressed Ofelia, Captain Vidal, and other characters as being responsible for their own actions, much like a living person would be discussed. This instance, was a great example of "willing suspension of disbelief," which means that the participants continuously displayed a willingness to immerse themselves into the surreal films and set aside their instincts for realism and logic, so that they could enjoy the film. Even after the participants established that the Faun may only be part of Ofelia's imagination, one participant related to the Faun's character most, and the participants still debated his crucial role as a character and motives for manipulating Ofelia for his own self-interest. It appears viewers still hold characters accountable for their attributes, decision making, and morality even if these characters are purely fantastical creations.

For the most part, the participants did not phrase sentences with the director or filmmakers as the subjects who controlled these characters. Even though every person at each event understands the basics of how a film is made, the viewer chooses to disregard that distance between the creation of the fiction and the final product that the viewer experiences. For example, within the same statement, a participant mentioned *Pan's Labyrinth* as being a quality film because Guillermo del Toro made it, but Ofelia, the fictional character, is the active, responsible storyteller, not del Toro. From this participant's point of view, "*she* comes up with this beautiful story." It seemed there was an understood, collective agreement between the viewers to accept this fantasy as being an accountable reality. By removing responsibility away from the creators, it allows the audience members to sympathize more with characters on screen. Even the cartoon of the elderly lady in *Waking Life* evoked the response that she "seemed a bit depressed." The way that the participants explained scenarios, it was evident that the viewers still sympathize or empathize with beings of these alternate realities. In this way, the viewers allow themselves to be more vulnerable and immersed in this fantasy world or dreamscape, even

though they are aware it is a story made up by filmmakers. The viewers choose to ignore this true ownership of character and plot responsibility while analyzing and responding to the film, making it easier for viewers to immerse themselves in whatever world they may be watching. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that viewers for the most part were more accepting of far-fetched realities than I was originally expected.

5. Further Questions

After reflecting on the overall patterns I discovered through the discussions, I would ask more specific questions as to how viewers interpreted certain symbols or motifs that the director put into the film for an intended purpose. I also think it would also be worth asking if viewers agreed or disagreed with specific film critique readings. I wonder then if certain age groups or generations might agree or disagree more strongly with what critics have said audiences would respond to in these specific films since, as Morley and Hall suggest, audiences' responses are not a monolithic experience. I would be curious to continue the study with differing genres and varying films, especially films set in only one dimension of normal reality like we experience every day to see which patterns still exist outside of the link of alternate reality movies or to receive a completely new set of findings.

Furthermore, this study complicates the common practice of individual film analysis without empirical data. Do film critics who rely on imagining a theoretical collective audience falsely decode a film's messages into their own personal interpretations, or is the critic's role to illuminate the director's encoded messages without adhering false meanings to the film? In considering this lack of direct relation between audiences and critics, individual analysis without empirical evidence might opt to explain how viewers of a universal mass audience *should* react.

6. Conclusions

Having utilized the perspectives of interdisciplinary fields, I hope my study has provided a fresh analysis of audience and film studies alike. When looking at the intended or expected reactions from audiences, audiences' actual reactions show that people read too much into messages and project themselves onto the film, even without them realizing it. Therefore, audiences are more likely to connect to films than we might expect. Films have proven to be infinitely interpretable as viewers naturally tend to latch on to the individualistic or narrow

experience as opposed to regurgitating universal themes. Viewers make the film experience personal as they bring in their own individual experience, background, and memories, which makes audience reactions extremely unpredictable, and therefore, seems questionable to assume the mass audience's reaction.

Furthermore, film creators and critics represent a narrow group of people who cannot always understand the mass of individuals representing an audience with widely different backgrounds and perspectives. In the majority of cases, the general audience or those who view the films most remain voiceless in the academic realm. After completing this study, there seems to be no universality among films nor any guarantee of how people will react, contrary to what these filmmakers and critics may think. Once these films are released, it becomes difficult or nearly impossible to control this type of art because the reactions are so variable.

7. Appendix

A. Research Questions

Before even planning the film series, I developed my project around the following questions:

1. How do audience responses vary in each film and over all three discussions?
2. What elements of the film do they mention and focus on?
3. How do audiences respond to the absurd or surreal elements in film?
4. How do they connect personally with the film, settings or characters?

B. Participant Interview Protocol

I. Introduction to Film Events

Thank you so much all of you for coming. As many of you know, I'm working on my honors capstone project, to host a three-part film series. For those of you tonight who would like to stay afterward for the discussion to help with my research, I am curious how you react and relate to this alternate reality within the setting of the human mind. Are there any questions?

For this discussion, I will have to record audio for research and accuracy purposes, so these consent forms are to get your permission for the recording. Your personal identity will not be in my final paper and the audio will also be erased then. Legally the university wants you to keep a copy of this form, so please take two papers if you would like your own copy.

To address confidentiality within the discussion, I personally promise to keep comments and opinions confidential. I do want to hear your personal connections, postive or negative, if you would like to share them with the group. However, this right to confidentiality is limited in that I cannot completely control what other people know about you if that knowledge is based on your public speech.

This will be about a half hour discussion. I'm also interested in any negative feedback you might have on the movie, so I would love to hear your responses either way.

II. Discussion Questions (during event interviews)

1. After just watching this movie, how do you feel right now? How do you feel about the ending?
2. What is the scene that sticks in your mind most? And can you explain why?
3. What would you say is the biggest moral dilemma to you in this movie?
4. How do you personally relate to the imagined fantasy/dream world in this movie? Does this movie seem similar to your imagination from childhood/dreams or does it seem far-fetched?
5. How do you connect or relate to one of the characters or their environments? What connects you to the movie?
6. Are there any parts of the movie that made you think differently or view your own life in a new perspective?
7. For those watching it a second or multiple time, has your perspective changed since the first time you saw it? What makes you want to see this film again or never again?

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