



Inception

a journey to dreamland

Inception takes audiences on a journey around the world, and guides them through exploring the architecture of the human mind. The central character is Dom Cobb, who has mastered the craft of invading dreams to steal valuable secrets and sell them to the highest bidder.

Wally Pfister, ASC describes *Inception* as “an existential experience” for movie-goers. It’s the cinematographer’s sixth collaboration with Christopher Nolan who wrote the script, directed and produced the film with his wife Emma Thomas. It began with *Memento* in 2000 when Pfister, Nolan and Thomas were in the dawn of their careers. They encored with the production of *Insomnia* in 2002, *Batman Begins* in 2005, *The Prestige* in 2006 and *The Dark Knight* in 2008.

In an interview with Los Angeles Times journalist Geoff Boucher, Nolan said that he has been thinking about the concept for *Inception* since he was 16 years old. “Chris told me about his idea for *Inception* about 10 years ago,” Pfister recalls. “I was blown away when he finally gave me a script to read. It had a lot of emotion packed into it. I told Chris and Emma how powerful and emotional I thought the story was, and asked a few questions about how he saw different characters.”



"After I got that clear in my mind, I read the script a second time, and asked Chris how he wanted the audience to see dream worlds on the screen. He had a clear idea. Chris said that dreams feel real when you're in them. There is an enhanced sense of time. If you have a 10-minute long dream, it can feel like it's going on for an entire day."

In another early conversation, Nolan asked Pfister what he thought about producing *Inception* in 65mm IMAX® format, a technique they used to film scenes in *The Dark Knight*. They also discussed possibilities for using a handheld camera.

"Chris wanted to create the handheld camera aesthetic that we used during the production of *The Prestige*," Pfister says. "It is kind of a loose, raw, running around sort of feeling which visually accents both the feeling of dreams and a sense of place. It didn't surprise Chris when I said that we weren't going to do that with a 65mm camera."

Pfister had seen a compelling presentation by Kees Van Oostrum, ASC and Bill Bennett, ASC several years ago. They showed scenes from projects where they used 65mm film for wide shots with deep depth of field that were seamlessly intercut with dialogue and other close-ups produced in 35mm format. Pfister and Nolan agreed that was the right visual grammar for *Inception*.

They also decided to produce aerial shots looking down on scenes in VistaVision format. Paramount Pictures introduced the VistaVision format during the 1950s. There are eight rather than four sprocket holes in each 35mm frame, and the film runs horizontally through the camera. Pfister explains, "The larger frame enabled us to produce high-resolution aerial images that leap off the screen."

Dreams within dreams

They also decided to explore a new frontier by filming sequences Pfister describes as dreams within dreams, and action scenes in extremely slow-motion with a Photo-Sonics 65mm camera at 1,000 or more frames per second. The Photo-Sonics high-speed camera was introduced during the 1950s. It was designed for research applications, ranging from studying the dynamics of moving parts in machines to documenting the launchings of space vehicles by NASA.

Production manager Jan Foster orchestrated scouting of practical locations in Morocco, France, Japan, the United States, Canada and England. Pfister spent more than a month following in the wake of the location scouts, getting the lay of the land during

pre-production planning. Locations ranged from the Kasbah in Morocco to the interior of an in-flight airplane; city streets in Paris, Tokyo and Los Angeles; a ski slope in Calgary, Canada; an architecture school in London; and that is just a short list.

Sets built on stages at Cardington Studios in England provided a variety of settings, including a hallway that rotated 360 degrees and a tavern that tipped 30 degrees to one side. Pfister credits special effects supervisor Chris Corbould with designing sets which enabled him to shoot physical effects scenes that look natural and feel organic.

Nolan cast Leonardo DiCaprio in the leading role as Cobb. He credits the actor with suggesting "a huge number" of ideas about how to use his character's feelings as a way to pull audiences deeper into the story on an emotional level. Other members of the international cast include Ken Watanabe, Marion Cotillard, Ellen Page, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Cillian Murphy, Tom Berenger and Michael Caine.

Pfister chose KODAK VISION3 500T 5219, KODAK VISION3 250D 5207, and KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 color negative films for his palette. "That combination of films gave us the latitude needed to shoot in every environment that we found or created without compromising," he says.

Pfister generally used a Panaflex Millennium XL camera for dialog and other handheld shots, and an ARRI 235 camera in noisier environments. For instance, he used the ARRI 235 camera to film an exterior scene in Canada while a loud wind was blowing during a storm and snowmobiles and other noisy vehicles were in the area.

Panavision also provided a Panaflex 65mm (PFX System 65) Studio Camera that has a maximum 30-per-second frame rate, and a 65mm HR Spinning Mirror Reflex Camera, which can record up to 72 frames per second.

Production began with several days of shooting scenes in Tokyo and moved on to London for a couple of months. The cast and crew moved from England to France, where they filmed scenes in Paris for about a week. Next, they travelled to Morocco for around two weeks and then Los Angeles for a couple of months. Production was completed with about two weeks of shooting in Calgary.

"Cory Geryak, my regular gaffer, and focus puller, Bob Hall, were with us in all six countries. That was important," Pfister emphasizes. "I have long-standing collaborative relationships with both of them. Filmmaking is a team game."

Pfister estimates that about half of the film, including most action sequences, were shot with a handheld camera with only occasional use of a Steadicam. He generally worked with a single camera. The exceptions to that rule were large action scenes when a second camera was used for additional coverage.

Pfister used a 65mm camera to film scenes establishing settings on the streets of Morocco, Paris and other locations, and also shooting some scenes on stages. A Photo-Sonics camera was used to film slow-motion elements of dream scenes, including a fireball racing up an elevator shaft following an explosion, and a van falling off a bridge where time seems to almost be standing still.

"Chris and (editor) Lee Smith intercut footage of different things happening with the slow-motion footage of the van falling," Pfister says. "It's a way of showing the audience how much is happening in this brief period when they are inside of the dream."

He describes a dream sequence where Cobb and another character are seated inside a bar. Cobb is explaining that they are inside a dream, where things aren't always what they seem to be. As he says those words, the set tips 30 degrees to one side.

"Glasses and other loose things slide off the bar and tables," Pfister says. "As Cobb stands up, explaining how he can control things inside of dreams, the light in the bar starts changing. Chris and I had discussed creating a dramatic lighting effect by going from one extreme look to another one. I suggested that we create a late sunset look outside the window, and have it kind of disappear and turn into a dark, cloudy day."

"We had a huge bank of lights outside the window with two different set-ups. We used a 20K with double CTS filters to create a very warm, orange color light that we dimmed to an overcast look, which was slightly bluer and much softer. The light on the faces of the characters was also changing. It was Chris' way of telling the audience that they are inside of a dream while Cobb was deciding what secrets he wanted to steal."

In another dream scene, a fight takes place in zero gravity in a hotel hallway that begins to rotate until it completes a 360-degree turn. Two men were on the floor fighting. Then, they were fighting on the wall, the ceiling, and on the other wall.

Pfister observes that Nolan was drawing on memories of classic films, including one where Fred Astaire danced on the walls (*Royal Wedding*), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* where Stanley Kubrick directed scenes that took place in a zero gravity environment.

"Everybody was surprised when they saw how unbelievably dramatic it was while we were watching dailies," Pfister says. "There were surprises when unexpected things happened, or as Conrad Hall (ASC) called them, 'happy accidents,' which we captured on film."

Technicolor in London processed the negative and provided dailies for scenes shot in England and Morocco. The company's Hollywood facility processed the negative and provided dailies

for scenes produced in Los Angeles and Calgary. Imagica Corp. and LPC, respectively, provided film processing and dailies services in Japan and France.

Nolan and Pfister watched dailies together each day with members of the cast and crew. All dailies were projected on film. "Chris and I believe that watching dailies together the way audiences will experience the film is an important part of the creative process," Pfister explains.

The exception was while they were shooting in Morocco, and the film was being processed and printed in London. In that situation, they got daily reports by phone.

Boucher quotes Page summing up her feelings about *Inception*, "It's fantasy, but instead of feeling like some strange, surreal world it feels honest. ... There is a tangible realism, even when it gets crazy, and somehow that makes the jeopardy feel more real. ... The emotional spine of the story is there too, which is the key to his (Chris Nolan's) movies. There's the big scale, but the sincerity isn't left behind. The story is complicated, but never confusing."

Warner Bros. has *Inception* scheduled for worldwide release in July in both IMAX and 35mm film formats. Nolan and Pfister timed the large format release at DKP 70MM Inc., an IMAX facility located in Santa Monica, California. "I have worked on approximately 250 IMAX projects, and have seen many amazing films," says president David Keighley. "I can testify that *Inception* is a totally immersive experience that will pull audiences into the world of dreams."

1 Leonardo DiCaprio as Cobb in a scene from the film. (Photo Melissa Moseley)

2 (L-R) Director Christopher Nolan and cinematographer Wally Pfister, ASC on the set of Warner Bros. Pictures' and Legendary Pictures' sci-fi action film *Inception*, a Warner Bros. Pictures release. (Photo Melissa Moseley)

3 Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays Arthur in Warner Bros. Pictures' and Legendary Pictures' sci-fi action film *Inception*, a Warner Bros. Pictures release. (Photo Stephen Vaughan)

