There may not be a hotter name in Hollywood right now than Christopher Nolan. The writer/director has an unbroken string of critical and financial successes with movies that are universally praised for their vision and uniqueness. Nolan burst on the scene in 2000 with the inventive “Memento”, followed up with “Insomnia” (maybe his least known film…I highly recommend it), then became known to everyone with “Batman Begins”, “The Prestige” and “The Dark Knight”.

Even as he was filming “Memento”, Nolan was working on the concepts that would become his latest film, “Inception”. The work he put in to create this unbelievable world of intermingling fantasy and reality was well worth it, as I feel we have our first film of the year that is a lock for one of the ten Best Picture nominees.

My first word of warning when talking about a film that will be very hard to describe in much detail without spoilers: Don’t come in late. One thing I love about Nolan’s scripts is that he has no problem challenging the intellect of the audience, and will not dumb things down for masses. Consequently, he does not pull an M. Night Shyamalan by spending a third of the movie just explaining things. You are brought immediately into the world in which someone can “connect” to another person’s dreams, and in doing so, steal information (Extraction) from them.

The best of these is Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), a man being pursued by US authorities, ticked off industrialists, and demons in his own mind. As you might imagine, industrial espionage would be a lucrative field for people with this talent. Cobb may be paid well, but the price he has paid for his “gift” has been much higher.

He has a chance to make things right when a former adversary, a billionaire named Saito (Ken Watanabe), offers him a way to get his life back. If Cobb is able to do something normally considered impossible, the placing (or Inception) of an idea into the mind of a competitor, Saito will make it so that Cobb is no longer hunted, and free to go back to his young children in the states.

This turns the movie into somewhat of a heist movie, with Cobb assembling his team to assist in getting into the mind of the son and heir (Cillian Murphy) of the recently departed rival of Saito. Key to this is a gifted architectural student named Ariadne (Ellen Page). Nolan plays it smart here by using Cobb’s tutorials of dream sharing to Ariadne as a way to instruct the audience on the rules of this world…without dragging the picture down. In fact, it is during these tutorials where we see some of the most incredible visuals.

Another sign of Nolan’s cleverness: It is not a coincidence that Nolan chose the name Ariadne, as it was that character in Greek Mythology who led Theseus out of the labyrinth of the Minotaur. The “architect” in this world needs to design mazes in order to protect the dream “invaders”, so what an appropriate name for the character.

The cast for this film is outstanding. DiCaprio may find himself with another Oscar nomination for the layers of depth he is able to bring to Cobb. What impressed me most is how DiCaprio was able to play another lead character in a mind bender film with the character constantly fighting off his own problems (following “Shutter Island”), and have it be a completely different performance. Once again, Leo shows that he is one of the best actors working today.

He is assisted by so many other great actors. Ellen Page finally gets to play someone outside of high school, and she handles it well as the one who becomes The Voice of Reason for the group. Even though the film very often becomes almost a James Bond level action flick, she fits in well throughout, without Nolan cheapening it by trying to make her an action hero.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt also shows why so many people have marked him as one of the best actors under 30. He plays Arthur, Cobb's right hand man, and the business-first counterbalance to Cobb's impulsive natures. Tom Hardy and Dileep Rao play a forgerer and a chemist, two skills needed for the elaborate caper they are running. The cast is finally rounded out by the great Michael Caine as Cobb's father-in-law, the man who got Cobb started on his destiny, and Marion Cotillard as Cobb's wife Mal; the woman who holds the key to all of Cobb's secrets. There is not a weak performer in the bunch.

As mentioned, the visuals are stunning. But they are only compliments to the real star of this film, which is the incredibly complex script. Nolan delivers the most intelligent script I have seen in years, perhaps even smarter than "The Departed". You must stay focused to keep up, but you will be rewarded if you do. There were no "cheats" that I saw in this film, although I look forward to a second (or third) viewing to exam it more closely. I am very sure it will stand up to closer scrutiny, unlike Scorsese's "Shutter Island", which relied strictly on a last minute "twist" which basically ruined a second viewing for me.

No last minute bait-and-switches or out of left field rule changes on this one…as opposed to the sci-fi curve ball seen at the end of Nolan's "The Prestige"…which is why I didn't like that movie. No, you simply get deeper and deeper into this remarkable universe that Nolan has created. And unlike the very good television series "Lost", Nolan never falls in the trap the "Lost" writers laid for themselves often during its run; writing themselves into a corner and then either trying to change the rules late in the game, or else by just acting as if the earlier lack of logic simply didn't happen (or didn't matter).

We have been spoon fed so much mindless entertainment in the last several months, so much so that my brain felt as if it perhaps needed to shake off the rust to stay with this film.

It wasn't really that difficult, however. When you get treated like an adult by the filmmaker, you quickly find yourself totally buying into his vision and his story.

This story is remarkable. Given that almost everything else this year has been remakes, sequels, retreads, TV and game adaptations and "franchise" films, finding a totally unique and original story is such a relief. It is even better that it is a film that I feel will become a classis. It is definitely the best film of 2010 so far.

## My Rating – Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)