



Liquid Modernity, Simulation and the City: The Cinematic Construction of Cities in Inception

Akışkan Modernite, Simülasyon ve Kent: Inception'da Şehirlerin Sinematik İnşası

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cinematic construction of urban space through Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* (2010) with a multi-layered analysis in the context of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production, and Marc Augé's "non-place space" approach. In the film, the cities built on dream planes are positioned as aesthetic backgrounds and representations of the individual's unconscious processes, social memory, identity construction and multifaceted relationships with the ideological structure. The urban textures designed by the character Ariadne are evaluated as simulacrum structures in line with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. While Bauman's theory of liquid modernity provides a theoretical basis for the discontinuity, loss of belonging and identity dissolution observed in urban images, Lefebvre's theory of space allows the analysis of cities in the film at the perceived, designed and lived spatial levels. Augé's "non-place spaces" concept explains the anonymous and temporary nature of dream cities, which are disconnected from historical, social, and cultural contexts. *Inception* reveals that city representations are visual elements and multi-layered narrative areas where the relationships established by the individual with the psychological, social and ideological structure are reproduced on a cinematic level. In this context, the study offers a theoretical intersection between the disciplines of architecture, cinema, communication, and sociology, and it suggests new areas of research on the potential effects of digital architecture and virtual reality technologies on future cinematic city representations.

Keywords: Cinema and the City, Simulation Theory, Liquid Modernity, Production of Space, Collective Memory

Öz

Bu çalışma, Christopher Nolan'ın *Inception* (2010) filmi üzerinden kent mekânının sinematik inşasını; Jean Baudrillard'ın simülasyon kuramı, Zygmunt Bauman'ın akışkan modernite kavramı, Henri Lefebvre'in mekân üretimi teorisi ve Marc Augé'nin "yer olmayan mekân" yaklaşımı bağlamında çok katmanlı bir analizle ele almaktadır. Filmde rüya düzlemlerinde inşa edilen şehirler yalnızca estetik arka planlar olarak değil; bireyin bilinçdışı süreçleri, toplumsal hafızası, kimlik inşası ve ideolojik yapı ile kurduğu çok yönlü ilişkilerin temsili olarak konumlandırılmaktadır. Ariadne karakteri tarafından tasarlanan kent dokuları, Baudrillard'ın hipergerçeklik kavramı doğrultusunda simülakr yapılar olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bauman'ın akışkan modernite kuramı, kent imgelerinde gözlemlenen süreksizlik, aidiyet kaybı ve kimlik çözümlerine teorik bir zemin sunarken; Lefebvre'in mekân kuramı, filmdeki şehirleri algılanan, tasarlanan ve yaşanan mekân düzeylerinde çözümlemeye olanak tanımaktadır. Augé'nin "yer olmayan mekânlar" kavramı ise rüya şehirlerinin tarihsel, sosyal ve kültürel bağlamdan kopuk, anonim ve geçici niteliğini açıklayıcı bir araç olarak kullanılmaktadır. *Inception*, kent temsillerinin yalnızca görsel bir öge değil, aynı zamanda bireyin psikolojik, toplumsal ve ideolojik yapı ile kurduğu ilişkilerin sinematik düzlemde yeniden üretildiği çok katmanlı anlatı alanları olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, mimarlık, sinema, iletişim ve sosyoloji disiplinleri arasında kuramsal bir kesişim noktası sunmakta; dijital mimarlık ve sanal gerçeklik teknolojilerinin gelecekteki sinematik kent temsilleri üzerindeki potansiyel etkilerine yönelik yeni araştırma alanları önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinema ve Kent, Simülasyon Kuramı, Akışkan Modernite, Mekân Üretimi, Kolektif Bellek

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of city and urbanisation play a critical role in understanding social structure and cultural dynamics. The city is a physical and living space where social, economic and cultural interactions are concentrated (UN-Habitat, 2020). Urbanisation refers to population movements from rural to urban areas and the sociocultural transformations in this process (World Bank, 2025). The urbanisation process developed in parallel with industrialisation. Industrialisation led to the centralisation of production processes and labour movement towards cities. This situation has radically changed cities' demographic structure and spatial organisation (Our World in Data, 2023). Urbanisation is a process of physical growth in which social relations, values, and norms are reshaped (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Urbanisation refers to individuals adopting urban lifestyles and adapting to urban culture. This process involves individuals adapting to the social and cultural norms of the city and using urban spaces and services effectively. Urbanisation involves both spatial displacement and the development of a sense of identity and belonging (Clark, 2020).

Urban culture is a set of shared values, norms and practices that emerge from various interactions brought about by urban life. This culture is shaped by the city's history, demographic structure, economic activities and social dynamics. Urban culture deeply affects individuals' daily life practices, communication styles and social relations (UN-Habitat, 2020). When urbanisation and urbanisation processes are examined from the perspective of communication sciences, issues such as how urban spaces and communities are represented, how urban identities are constructed and how urban experiences are shared come to the fore. Media and cinema, in particular, play an important role in representing cities and urban life. Cinema shapes the audience's perception of the city and their relationship with the city by presenting urban spaces and experiences in a visual and auditory form (UN-Habitat, 2020).

In this context, Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* (2010) is a striking example of how cities are represented as physical spaces and structures constructed in the subconscious, constantly transforming and intertwined with the individual's psychological processes. In the film, urban designs are shaped by the subconscious dynamics of the characters and reveal the relationship between architecture, dreams and memory. This study will use qualitative research methods such as discourse and spatial analysis to analyse the meaning production processes of urban spaces in the movie *Inception* and how the cinematic narrative reconstructs urban identity. The discourse analysis method will examine how urban spaces are constructed in the film, about which themes they are presented, and the psychological effects of cities on individuals. Spatial analysis aims to understand how the city images in the film are designed and conveyed to the audience. Thus, it will be revealed how urban space in cinema functions as a part of the character's psychological and existential journeys beyond merely a decorative element.

CINEMA AND THE CITY

The city is a settlement unit that contains the richest expressions of civilisations and can reproduce them in new forms. Urban life is shaped by these elements, from commercial relations to social transformations, from urbanism to performing arts and other cultural forms, down to the minor details of daily life. It constantly reproduces itself in different forms (Öztürk, 2007).

Cinema and the city are two important areas of cultural production that are both carriers and representatives of social change. Although cities have experienced many transformations throughout history, one of the most radical began with the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century.

Industrialisation has radically transformed not only the modes of production but also people's daily lives, relationships with space, and social ties (Soja, 2010; Hall & Barrett, 2012).

In this process, cities became densely populated, multi-layered social structures that received migration from rural areas. Migration movements have restructured spatial organisations and made the urban-rural distinction clearer. This accelerated progress of urbanisation has also paved the way for the emergence of modern social lifestyles and cultural norms (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Cities are no longer places to live; they have also become areas where identity, belonging and socialisation are constructed (Graham & Marvin, 2022).

Urbanisation refers to the reactions to this structural transformation at the individual level. Individuals' adaptation to urban lifestyles, use of public spaces, access to urban services and development of urban identity are part of this process (Tzaninis, 2020). Especially with the advances in digitalisation and communication technologies, urban life is transforming from a spatial to a network-based social experience (Vanolo, 2016).

One of the most effective areas that reflects the cultural dimension of this transformation is cinema. Cinema processes the urban space as a stage and an active narrative element. The representation of urban experiences in cinema reshapes the relationship between the audience and the city. Through cinema, the city becomes an aestheticised, coded and sometimes ideologically reconstructed area (Clarke, 2021). In this context, cinema is both the archive of modern urban culture and its symbolic expression.

The Industrial Revolution caused radical changes in cities' economic, social, political and cultural structures. This transformation, along with the change in production methods, led to the migration of people to cities and the reshaping of the social structure (Süalp, 2004). Space, one of the fundamental building blocks of cinema, turns into a narrative element that deepens the visual and auditory narrative and often carries the story. As an image-based art form, cinema relies heavily on the actions of characters and the physical environments in which these actions take place (Bruno, 2022). In this context, space in cinema is not just a background but an active narrative component that reflects the character's identity, mood, and social context.

Due to the interactive nature of the visual arts, the use of architectural elements in cinema has gradually moved to a more aesthetic and conceptual level. Especially in contemporary cinema, buildings and urban areas are positioned as "characters" and contribute to the spirit of the narrative (Penz & Thomas, 2017). This approach shows that the interdisciplinary interaction between architecture and cinema is not limited to physical representations but includes space's emotional and ideological dimensions (Frampton, 2020).

The selection and arrangement of film locations is not only an aesthetic decision but also an important structural choice that determines the sociocultural dimensions of the narrative. City streets, apartments, abandoned buildings or iconic public spaces provide historical context to the story by reflecting a particular period's political, economic or cultural background (Higbee & Lim, 2021). In this respect, the cinema space ceases to be a stage where reality is reproduced, offering the audience a gateway to an alternative world.

In cinema, space is closely related to time as an element that determines the spirit of the narrative. The film constructs space and time according to its internal rhythm; for this reason, time and space in cinema are not an exact reflection of the real world. This situation offers the audience an alternative time-space experience and draws them into the narrative (Mroz, 2021). Reconstructing the space increases the cinema's sensory impact and strengthens the narrative's credibility.

Space in cinema is a multidimensional representation area that contains aesthetic, narrative and emotional layers. Its relationship with architecture allows cinema to develop a visual and spatial language of expression. Especially with digitalisation, space design and representation have reached more flexible, layered and hyperreal dimensions, thus offering new perceptual experiences to the audience (Holl, 2023).

The representation of cities in cinema is related to the reflection of space as a physical area and how this area is produced ideologically, politically and culturally. Henri Lefebvre's theory of "The Production of Space" (1991) argues that space is not only a physical entity but is also produced by social practices, economic systems and ideological processes. In this context, cinema not only presents urban space as a background; it also shapes how the space is experienced, by whom it is used, and within which social power dynamics it gains meaning (Soja, 1996).

Edward Soja's "Thirdspace" Theory provides an important framework for understanding how cinema represents cities. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a social product and should be examined in three different but interrelated dimensions:

1. Perceived Space: The daily life practices and the concrete reality of physical space.
2. Conceived Space: Space mentally designed and represented by planners, architects and managers.
3. Lived Space: The space that individuals give meaning to through their experiences, symbols and images (Lefebvre, 1991).

Lefebvre's trilogy shows that space is not only a physical entity but is also produced by social practices, economic systems and ideological processes (Lefebvre, 1991). From this perspective, cinema uses urban spaces as a background and shapes how these spaces are experienced, who uses them, and within which social dynamics they gain meaning. The consistent portrayal of certain city areas as dangerous or safe in a film can affect the viewer's perception of that place and their social judgments.

According to Soja (1996), space is not only a physical (first space) and perceived (second space) structure but also a production loaded with symbolic and ideological meanings. Cinema visually depicts urban areas and gives them historical, political and cultural meaning. The presentation of Paris as a romantic city or the depiction of Istanbul as an exotic synthesis of East and West shows that these cities are ideological spaces produced through cinema (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Edward Soja develops Lefebvre's theory of space and introduces the concept of "Third Space". According to Soja, space should be examined in three dimensions:

1. First Space: The physical and material dimension of space.
2. Second Space: The mental and conceptual dimension of space.
3. Third Space: The space that transcends both the physical and mental dimensions of space and is experienced and lived.

Beyond physical and mental space, the Third Space represents the intersection of social relations, cultural practices, and individual experiences. Cinema is a powerful tool in creating this Third Space because, beyond simply showing urban spaces, films attribute specific meanings to them and shape how the audience experiences that space. Presenting Paris as a romantic city in a film affects the audience's perception of Paris and reinforces the cultural image of the city. At this point, it is seen that space in cinema is not only a physical representation but is also reproduced in ideological,

cultural and aesthetic contexts. For this very reason, Baudrillard's theory of simulation provides a functional theoretical framework for understanding how space is constructed in the context of cinema.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation provides an important theoretical framework for analysing historical city representations in cinema. Baudrillard (1994) states that in modern societies, reality is gradually disappearing and being replaced by simulacra; at the end of this process, a universe he calls "hyperreality" is formed. Hyperreality is a simulation layer that replaces reality; in this phase, where images reign with their reality, there is no longer a "reality" to which representations refer (Baudrillard, 1994). In this context, representations of historical cities in cinema can no longer be considered faithful reflections of reality but simulations reproduced with specific aesthetic and ideological strategies.

According to Baudrillard, simulation is a representation that is not real, even though it has all the superficial signs of reality. Simulacrum, on the other hand, is an appearance that has no reference but is nevertheless perceived as real (Baudrillard, 1994). In light of these concepts, the representation of cities such as Istanbul, Paris or New York in cinema emerges in a spatial context and as imaginative productions loaded with cultural codes. As Baudrillard stated in his work *America* (1988), modern cities have become images that are no longer lived in but represented and consumed. Here, the city emerges as a collection of signs constructed through the media rather than its physical existence. In this sense, cinema provides space and produces the consumer society's symbolic capital. His work *The Consumer Society* (Baudrillard, 1998) emphasises that objects are no longer consumed according to their functions but their symbolic and indicative values. In this context, cities become areas of "hyperreal" experience (Baudrillard, 1998). Specific narrative and aesthetic concerns often shape representations of historical cities in cinema. The identification of Paris with romanticism, New York with cosmopolitanism, and Istanbul with mystical Eastern imagery is a cinematic production of hyperreal representations. In this process, the physical and cultural layers of the city are selected and structured, and a new, fake, but effective city image is created in the collective unconscious of the viewer. These images provide a visual background and transform the audience's perception of space, history and identity. This situation also coincides with the process of replacing meaning with image, as expressed by Baudrillard in his work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993).

Baudrillard's theories of simulacrum and hyperreality reveal that historical city representations in cinema turn into representations that replace reality rather than reflect it. In this context, cinema should be considered as a narrative tool and a powerful production area that reconstructs urban reality and transforms it on an aesthetic, ideological, and cultural level (Baudrillard, 1994; 1998).

Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation (1994) provides an important conceptual tool for understanding how cities are reproduced in cinema by being detached from reality. Cinema can construct cities as aestheticised, idealised, or dangerous spaces independent of reality. While *The Tourist* (2010) presents Venice as a fascinating, romantic and mysterious city, *Children of Men* (2006) portrays London as a dystopian, chaotic and fragmented place. This shows that cinema reconstructs urban areas according to their physical realities and in a way that serves the narrative (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2003).

While Baudrillard's simulation concept explains the separation of space from reality and its transformation into representation in cinema, Henri Lefebvre's theory of space offers a complementary perspective to understand the ideological processes within which these representations are produced. The idea that space is not only a representation but also an ideological

and social construction process reveals that political meanings should be sought beyond spatial aesthetics in cinema examples.

Cinema goes beyond using space as a mere narrative background and becomes a tool to reinforce or challenge certain ideologies. As Henri Lefebvre argued in his work *The Production of Space* (1991), the production of space is directly linked to social inequalities. In this context, cinema plays an important role in the ideological production of space, and the representation of urban spaces reflects social relations, ideologies and historical contexts.

In Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), urban space is presented in a structure emphasising class differences. In the film, the working class lives underground in dark, cramped spaces while the elite rules in giant skyscrapers. This depiction shows that space is not only a living space but also an element reinforcing class distinctions. As David Harvey points out in his work "The Condition of Postmodernity" (2003), this use of space reveals the spatial reflections of social inequalities.

Similarly, the dystopian future structure of Los Angeles in Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" (1982) is another example of how urban spaces reflect social inequalities. In the film, the high-tech elite lives in skyscrapers, while the lower classes and marginalised groups live in chaotic and dangerous areas at street level. This spatial distinction reveals how social hierarchy is constructed and maintained through space. As stated in Aydın Çam's work titled "Cinematical Spaces and Analysis of Cinematic Spaces" (2016), cinematic spaces come into being by bringing physical and/or experienced spaces to the screen or the screen through the mediation of cinema art. These spaces also include the economic, political, cultural, social, ideological, class and gender elements experienced by the cinematic subject. Therefore, cinematic spaces shape the viewer's perception of space by creating a new "reality" and reinforcing or questioning certain ideologies. The representation of cities in cinema shows that space is not only a physical entity but also a reflection of social relations, ideologies and historical contexts. Cinema not only visually presents urban spaces but also shapes the way these spaces are perceived, determining how the image of the city is constructed. Cinema not only visually presents urban spaces but also shapes the way these spaces are perceived, determining how the image of the city is constructed. In this context, the space-creating power of cinema offers an important perspective that contributes to urban studies.

Urban landscapes give the audience an idea of how the city looked throughout its historical period. Throughout the film, the audience can read the physical and social situation of a city or even a country, together with the architectural elements that make up these landscapes, urban spaces such as streets and avenues, the pattern of events experienced in these spaces, and the characters in the film.

Methodology

1. Research Approach

This study was designed to examine how urban spaces are represented in the cinematic narrative of the film *Inception* (2010) and the processes by which these representations reconstruct urban identity. The research is based on a qualitative research approach. The reason for choosing this qualitative approach is that the urban spaces featured in the film should be considered not merely as visual backdrops but as cultural indicators that produce multilayered meanings and discourses. In this context, the study used discourse analysis and spatial analysis methods together to examine the film's spatial representations at both narrative and aesthetic levels.

2. Data Source

The main data source of the research is the movie *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan. The film was examined scene by scene and especially the sequences where urban space was intensely represented were selected. Scenes were taken as the unit of analysis; each scene was evaluated in terms of the urban imagery it contained, character-space relationships and cinematographic choices.

3. Discourse Analysis

One of the main methods used in the study is discourse analysis. Through this method, the discourses in which the urban spaces in the film are constructed, in what thematic contexts they are presented and how they relate to the psychological processes of the characters are analysed. During the analysis process:

- The dialogues, visual narration and narrative structure of the film were evaluated as a whole,
- The metaphors and ideological frameworks that stand out in the representation of urban spaces have been identified,

In this way, it has been revealed that urban space is not only a physical ground but also a discursive element that shapes the existential journeys of individuals.

4. Spatial Analysis

The second method used in the research is spatial analysis. This type of analysis aims to evaluate the aesthetic, architectural and narrative dimensions of the urban images produced in the film. The following elements were taken into account in the spatial analysis:

- Architectural arrangements and stage design of urban images,
- The contribution of places to the psychological journeys of the characters,
- The function of space between the layers of dream and reality,
- The urban experience created in the perception of the viewer.

Thanks to this method, it has been revealed that the urban spaces in the film are not merely decorative elements; they function as an active narrative element that reflects the characters' internal conflicts, unconscious processes and existential questions.

5. Methodological Contribution

By using these two methods together, the representation of urban space in the movie *Inception* was analyzed in a multidimensional manner. While discourse analysis analyzed the meanings of space in cultural and ideological contexts, spatial analysis revealed the visual-aesthetic designs of these spaces and their functions in the narrative. Thus, the study offers a methodological contribution to both the film studies literature and communication studies that examine the relationship between city and identity.

ANALYSIS

Perception of the City and Spatial Structure: City Design in *Inception*

Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* is an important work that deeply examines the relationship between cinema and architecture in visualising cities created in the subconscious. The film uses the concept of a dream within a dream, taking the audience on a journey through multi-layered and complex spaces. In this study, the perception of the city and how the spatial fiction is designed in the movie *Inception* will be discussed. Cinema and architecture are two disciplines that feed each other in the design and perception of space. Cinema does not use architectural spaces merely as a background; it also makes these spaces an active part of the narrative. Space construction and interaction is one of the building blocks that unite the disciplines of architecture and cinema.

Inception's scenes set in dream worlds brought surreal and surrealistic spatial designs to cinema. In the film, the dream spaces designed by the architect character Ariadne appear as structures where the rules of physics are bent, perspectives change, and boundaries become unclear. This shows the deep relationship between cinema and architecture. In the film, cities created in the subconscious reflect the characters' mental states and the story's theme. These cities contain familiar and foreign elements, creating a sense of *déjà vu* in the viewer. Designing spaces in this way strengthens the audience's connection with the film and deepens the narrative.

The film examines the design and architectural fiction of cities created in the subconscious from a cinematic perspective, with the concept of a dream within a dream. In the film, the construction of dream spaces is shaped by architectural principles and urban design elements, providing the viewer with an experience that questions the boundaries between reality and imagination. In the film, the character Ariadne, the "architect," is tasked with designing the physical environments of dream worlds. These designs go beyond the physical and social rules of the real world and give the viewer clues about how dystopian city designs can be created. The labyrinthine cities designed by Ariadne create a dystopian atmosphere with complex and distorted structures.

Inception uses architectural paradoxes in the design of its dream spaces. Infinitely circular structures, especially those such as the Penrose staircase, challenge the boundaries of space and the viewer's perception of reality. Such paradoxical structures demonstrate how architectural principles can be stretched and reinterpreted in constructing dream spaces. The dream spaces in the film were designed from a surrealist perspective. Elements such as buildings folding in on themselves and violating the laws of physics present a surrealist interpretation of urban spaces. This approach shows the deep relationship between architecture and cinema.

Such cinematic interventions are not merely aesthetic fiction but also representations through which reality is reconstructed and questioned. At this point, Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory provides a strong theoretical basis for analysing the layers of meaning underlying spatial manipulations in examples of surrealist cinema. Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory argues that the boundaries between reality and simulation have blurred in modern societies, and simulacra (copies that replace the real) have become dominant (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard states that, especially in today's media and cultural systems, representations are no longer based on reality but on other representations; as a result, the perception of reality collapses and is replaced by hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1998).

In this context, the film's relationship between reality and simulation is strikingly reflected through urban spaces constructed with layers of dreams within dreams. According to Baudrillard (1993a), simulation is an appearance that has all the data of reality but has now broken its connection. Simulacra, on the other hand, are structures that are not based on any original reality but are perceived as "real". In this context, the depiction of Istanbul in a film may be reconstructed with specific ideological and aesthetic codes rather than reflecting the historical and cultural reality of the

city. In this case, the image of Istanbul presented to the audience becomes a simulacrum that replaces reality (Baudrillard, 1983). As Baudrillard emphasised in his work *America* (1988), modern cities have no longer become inhabited spaces but experienced images. He particularly points out that in the cinematic presentations of American cities, hyperaesthetic images rather than reality are in circulation. In this sense, the city becomes a consumed visual object (Baudrillard, 1988).

Representations of historical cities in cinema similarly produce a nostalgic, dramatised or aestheticised version of the past rather than a reproduction of reality. This points to a world where superficial signs now replace meaning and symbolism, as Baudrillard (1993b) argues in his work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Here, even the representation of concepts such as death loses its reality and becomes an object of spectacle, just like in the cinematic representations of historical cities.

In the film, characters consciously create dream worlds and construct multi-layered urban spaces in these dreams. The architect character Ariadne designs dream spaces, which function as simulacra of reality, transcending physical laws.

In the film, the boundaries between dreams and reality are constantly questioned. In particular, the spinning top symbol that Cobb uses to understand whether he is in the real world or a dream causes the audience to question their perception of reality. This situation parallels Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, as the dream spaces in the film are so convincing that they replace reality and cause the characters to become detached from reality. The urban spaces constructed in *Inception* embody Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum. These spaces are designed as replicas of real cities, but they go beyond physical and logical rules because they are in a dream world. Architectural paradoxes such as cities folding in on themselves or endless staircases are characteristic of these simulacra.

However, these cinematic spaces are more than just aesthetic simulacra; they also carry layers of meaning that are constructed socially and mentally. At this point, Baudrillard's theory of simulation, which progresses through representation and copying, can be complemented by Lefebvre's social and experiential approach to the production of space. At this point, Baudrillard's theory of simulation, which progresses through representation and copying, can be complemented by Lefebvre's social and experiential approach to the production of space. Therefore, the imaginary spaces in films such as "*Inception*" can be read through visual architectural games and how individuals perceive and experience that space. Therefore, the imaginary spaces in films such as "*Inception*" can be read through visual architectural games and how individuals perceive and experience that space.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production analyses how space is produced and shaped through social relations and practices. This theory treats space not as a static entity but as a dynamic and constantly reproduced process. Lefebvre examines the production of space in three dimensions: perceived space (spatial practices), designed space (representations of space) and lived space (representational spaces). The movie *Inception* provides a rich example for analysing the social and psychological codes of cities created in dream worlds. The movie *Inception* provides a rich example for analysing the social and psychological codes of cities created in dream worlds. The dream spaces in the film are shaped in line with the characters' daily life practices and experiences. The dream cities designed by Ariadne, in particular, reflect real-world urban forms and functions. These spaces are shaped by the social relations and cultural norms in the subconscious of the characters. Dream spaces are consciously designed by the architect and serve a specific purpose. These designs are strategically planned and constructed to accomplish the missions in the film. This conscious design of space coincides with Lefebvre's concept of designed space. The characters' interaction with their

dream spaces is shaped by their personal experiences, emotions, and psychological states. In particular, Cobb's memories with his wife Mal in the dream world reveal the emotional and symbolic dimension of the place. These experiences exemplify Lefebvre's concept of lived space.

Postmodern Cities and Inception: A Reading of Hypermodernism

The film draws attention with its dream-world city designs that parallel postmodern cities' chaotic structures and ever-changing identities. In this section, a reading of the urban spaces in the movie *Inception* will be made from the perspective of hypermodernism. Postmodern cities are defined by fragmented and constantly transforming structures lacking a clear centre. These cities have a heterogeneous structure that combines different cultural and architectural elements. Hypermodernism, on the other hand, is an advanced stage of modernism and refers to a social situation where technology and consumer culture dominate, and speed and transience are at the forefront. In this context, hypermodern cities are characterised by constantly renewing architectural structures, intensive use of technology and a fast pace of life.

In the movie *Inception*, characters consciously construct dream worlds. These dream spaces go beyond real-world urban forms and appear as structures where the rules of physics bend, perspectives change, and boundaries become unclear. In particular, the labyrinthine cities designed by Ariadne reflect the chaotic nature of postmodern cities with their complex and distorted structures. This shows how deep the relationship between cinema and architecture is. The dream spaces in the film bear the characteristics of hypermodernism. These constantly changing and transforming spaces create a feeling of uncertainty and alienation in the viewer. These constantly changing and transforming spaces create a feeling of uncertainty and alienation in the viewer. In this context, *Inception* reveals the effects of hypermodernism on urban spaces with a cinematic narrative. Such structures are not only the product of aesthetic fiction but also representations that reflect the sociological transformation of contemporary societies. These ambiguous, temporary and transforming space depictions in cinema can also be considered as a visual expression of the identity, orientation and belonging problems that individuals face in the modern world.

In this context, Zygmunt Bauman's concept of Liquid Modernity provides an important theoretical background for making sense of the spatial fluidity in films such as *Inception*. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of Liquid Modernity provides an important sociological framework that emphasises that modern societies are shaped by constant change and uncertainty. Bauman (2000) argues that individuals and spaces have taken on a flexible and fluid structure that lacks continuity, moving away from modernity's rigid, fixed and norm-based structure. While in the early days of modernity, society was structured within the framework of specific rules, boundaries and social roles, in today's liquid modern world, individuals and cities are constantly moving and changing.

In particular, individuals' identity formation processes, social status and spatial affiliation are shaped in a constant fluidity and transience. This situation manifests itself in the spatial structures of cities, as in every area of social life. In the context of Bauman's understanding of liquid modernity, cities cease to be stable and permanent spaces and exhibit an appearance that is constantly changing, flexible and open to temporary uses. This transformation of urban areas causes individuals to lose their sense of belonging and enter a process of alienation within cities. In today's cities, the commercialisation of public spaces, physical changes brought about by urban transformation projects, and rapidly changing socio-economic structures cause the relationship between the individual and the space increasingly fragile. According to Bauman, the modern individual no longer finds himself in a fixed urban texture but in a space constantly changing and losing meaning (Bauman, 2000).

In this context, in postmodern cinema narratives, cities are represented as physical spaces and transitional areas where individuals rebuild or lose their identities. Urban spaces, in particular, function as areas where the existential concerns of the modern individual are reflected and the feeling of disbelonging and alienation is depicted on a spatial level. Cinema has developed a narrative form in which urban spaces are treated not only as a background but also as an active element that is directly related to the inner worlds of the characters. While the city's structure becomes an element that symbolically reflects the transformation processes experienced by the characters, the uncertainty and disorder brought by liquid modernity also manifest as spatial discontinuity and instability in cinema (Bauman, 2000; Augé, 1995).

Another concept directly associated with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity is Marc Augé's (1995) concept of "Non-Places". Augé argues that as a result of the rapid changes brought about by the globalisation process, the number of areas where individuals lose their sense of belonging, become anonymous and have a temporary existence has increased. Continuous transit areas such as airports, shopping malls, hotels, and subways function as spaces that make it difficult for individuals to connect to the space and even de-identify them. In cinema narratives, the city is constructed through such non-place spaces, and the lack of belonging experienced by individuals is presented in parallel with the variability of physical space.

In particular, postmodern cinema and dystopian narratives stand out as the genres that best reflect Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. Liquid modernity is used in cinema as a narrative technique that reflects characters' internal and physical journeys, as fixed identities and permanent spaces give way to constantly changing and uncertain forms.

Bauman's concept of liquid modernity explains the change in the physical structure of cities and helps to understand how the individual's spatial experience is transformed. Today's cities have become gigantic structures disconnected from traditional community relations and cause individuals to feel lonely, lost and unbelonging. Rather than being integrated into the city, the modern individual is constantly lost in it and loses his sense of belonging due to constantly changing social dynamics (Bauman, 2000). This situation is also explained through cinema, and it is emphasised that cities do not only undergo physical change but also affect the psychological world of the individual.

The film provides a powerful metaphor for how urban life becomes a simulation and how individuals become lost in this environment. When considered in the context of Baudrillard's (1994) concept of simulacra and simulation, the city spaces presented in the film have become detached from physical reality and have become a purely mental construction. In the film, the characters are forced to question the validity of the spatial structures they find themselves in, constantly going back and forth between reality and dreams. This situation parallels postmodern theories that argue that modern cities have become hyperreal simulations, causing individuals to lose their sense of belonging (Baudrillard, 1994). When evaluated within Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity, Inception cities are represented as dynamic areas that constantly change and lead individuals into identity confusion, rather than having a permanent structure. In the film, the spaces built by the architect Ariadne function as a physical urban structure and a mental prison. In this context, modern cities are becoming structures that do not support the individual's identity construction but instead direct it and cause it to be uncertain (Bauman, 2000).

This narrative, which can also be associated with Marc Augé's (1995) concept of non-places, shows that cities have become anonymous, temporary and disorienting structures rather than providing a place of belonging for individuals. The difficulty that the characters have in finding their way to the dream city in the film is not only due to the variability of the physical space but also to the effect of

urban life on the individual. This situation is a powerful metaphor that shows how individuals in today's modern cities are lost in the face of constantly changing spatial structures and have difficulty rebuilding their identities.

The movie *Inception* emphasises that cities are not just physical structures, but spaces shaped by individuals' subconscious memories and intertwined with collective memory. The cities that the characters create in their dreams in the film are not merely consciously constructed spaces; on the contrary, they function as memory spaces shaped by individuals' past experiences, memories, and subconscious images. In the context of the concept of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argues that places are elements that support individual memories and ensure the continuity of social memory. In this context, the cities in *Inception* are the physical form of individuals' memories.

In the film, the cities Dom Cobb builds in his dream world are spatial reflections of the memories he shared with his wife, Mal, in the past. In particular, the "limbo" area in the film is shown as a city that remains hidden in Cobb's subconscious and becomes a collective memory area over time. This situation can be associated with Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of memory spaces. Nora explains how the past is integrated into physical spaces, emphasising that memory has both an individual and a spatial and cultural dimension. The city depictions in *Inception* can be considered as spatial manifestations of the characters' traumas and memories they want to forget.

The impact of cities on collective memory can also be explained by Augé's (1995) concept of non-places. The cities constructed in the film are temporary spaces that exist only in the memories of individuals, detached from a specific historical and social context. Cobb's loss in his dream world and his relationship with the urban spaces he constructs provide a powerful metaphor for the difficulty individuals have in developing a sense of belonging in modern cities and their inability to connect with their past. As Augé points out, the spatial uncertainty experienced by individuals in modern cities is depicted in *Inception* through the blurring of the boundary between dream and reality.

Additionally, Bauman's concept of liquid modernity provides an important theoretical framework to explain the constantly changing and reshaping structure of the cities in the film. According to Bauman, modern cities are no longer fixed structures where individuals can maintain their relationships with the past; they are turning into fluid, constantly changing spaces where individuals have difficulty constructing their identities. In *Inception*, Cobb's disorientation in the ever-changing city demonstrates how both individual and collective memory can become discontinuous and fragile. At this point, the question of how individuals maintain their ties with the past in fluid and uncertain spaces becomes important. Because in the modern world, where fixed and permanent spaces have disappeared, the areas where memory can be housed must be structured differently. At this point, Pierre Nora's concept of "memory sites" offers a complementary theoretical approach to understanding how individual and social memory is preserved in new spatial forms.

Dream spaces can also be considered a contemporary and cinematic counterpart to these memory spaces. These spaces are not only constructed visually, but they also carry traces of the past mentally and emotionally. Pierre Nora's theory of memory sites (*les lieux de mémoire*) provides an important framework for making sense of the relationship that individuals and societies establish with the past. According to Nora (1989), memory spaces can be thought of not only as physically existing places but also as symbols, rituals, texts and even imagined spaces that structure a society's collective memory. In this context, the cities created by the characters in the dream world of *Inception* (2010) can be considered not only as mental constructions but also as spaces where individual and collective memory is embodied. In the film, it is seen that the cities designed in dreams are structures that feed on the memories of individuals and shape their memories. These cities allow characters to maintain

their ties to the past by being constructed mentally in situations where the past cannot be reproduced in the physical world. In this context, a strong parallel can be established between Nora's concept of memory spaces and the function of the cities created in the film.

Nora (1989) states that traditional societies maintain their memories through space, rituals and physical objects; however, modernity has transformed this fixed memory structure. In the modern world, collective memory is increasingly being replaced by an archived, coded and fragmented narrative of the past. In the movie *Inception*, this transformation is observed in the dream spaces that the characters construct in their minds. Dom Cobb's dream cities, in particular, represent his longing for the past and his desire to recreate memories in physical form. Cobb's constant re-creation of memories from his past with his wife Mal transforms these cities into a place of memory, revealing his relationship with the collective memory through cinematic narrative language.

The cities designed in the dream world in the film refer not only to the memories of individuals but also to the collective memory. The city of Paris that Cobb built in his dreams shows how the city takes shape in his memory, independent of its physical existence. Paris becomes a cinematic equivalent of a memory space, nourished by Cobb's past experiences, the events he experiences, and the images he carries in his subconscious. Nora (1989) emphasises that memory sites are generally associated with historical contexts and are carriers of social memory. In this context, the cities that Cobb created in his dream world can be considered not only as an extension of personal memory but also as a reflection of the effect of collective memory on the individual.

Places of memory function as elements that shape individuals' identities and determine their ties to the past. In this context, the cities Cobb creates as places of memory in *Inception* can be considered elements that form the fundamental building blocks of his identity. Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity suggests that modern cities offer fewer and fewer fixed reference points for individuals, leading to an identity crisis in individuals. In the film, the cities Cobb creates are similarly constantly changing and lack a fixed spatial context. Dream spaces' constant change and transformation contribute to discussions on how cities shape collective memory and integrate with individuals' identities.

In addition, Augé's (1995) concept of non-places suggests that modern cities offer spaces that anonymise and de-identify individuals rather than creating a sense of belonging. The dream cities in *Inception* function as temporary spaces that symbolise the characters' identity crisis and the uncertainty between reality and the subconscious. Cobb's inability to maintain his sense of belonging in the cities he created in his dreams reveals his detachment from reality and his dependence on his own past.

Cobb's Paris-based dream cities reveal how space operates in the dream world not only as a function but also as a visualised form of subconscious processes. When evaluated within the framework of Freud's (1917) theory of the subconscious and repressed memories, Cobb's Paris can be read as a mental space created by him to remember his traumatic past and to relive the feeling of guilt that he could not resolve in his subconscious through a spatial structure. Although Paris, where Cobb lives with Mal, is designed as a romantic and nostalgic place, it contains one of the most significant burdens in his subconscious: guilt. The Paris scene, where Cobb tries to return Mal to the real world, but he wants to stay in the dream world, can be considered a metaphor reflecting Cobb's internal conflicts. This individual and psychological analysis shows that internal dynamics and external socio-economic conditions shape space. In this film, where space is used as a representation of both the subconscious and the social order, the interaction between the inner world of the individual and

capitalist structures is striking. At this point, David Harvey's neoliberal urbanisation theory comes into play.

Because, like Freud's repressed individual memory, Harvey's neoliberal cities are the product of repressed, directed and controlled spatial experiences. The dream cities that Cobb created bear not only the traces of his personal past but also reflect capital-driven structures that transform the relationship between individuals and space on a global scale. David Harvey is one of the important theorists who analyse urban transformation in the context of neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberal urbanisation is shaped by the process of spatial reorganisation of capital, and cities cease to be merely places where people live and become economic instruments that direct capital flows. In this context, the cities in the movie *Inception* (2010) can be considered as physical structures and symbolic areas that show the effects of the capitalist system on the individual. The design of dream cities in the film and the guidance of individuals in these cities are among the important elements reflecting the spatial and psychological dimensions of neoliberal urbanisation.

Harvey (1989) states that the production of space in capitalist societies is shaped entirely within the framework of economic and political relations. In order to sustain accumulation processes, capital must constantly turn to new areas and commodify and transform urban space. The design process of cities in *Inception* follows a similar logic. However, individuals' subconscious shapes the spaces in dreams, how these cities are organised, and their control mechanisms are determined entirely by an external force. The way Cobb and his team consciously construct spaces within their dreams to achieve their desired outcome can be directly linked to the spatial manipulation processes of neoliberal urbanisation. In the dream layers created to implant an idea into Fischer's subconscious, the urban space becomes not just a background but an element that directs individuals and controls their actions. This situation overlaps with Harvey's (2005) concept of the neoliberal city, as neoliberal urbanisation also creates spatial structures that direct the movements of individuals and seek to optimise capital flows. The fact that the cities in the film are constantly open to change and are reshaped depending on dream layers represents the spatial instability of neoliberal cities and the dynamic nature of capital.

Harvey (2000) emphasises that one of the most significant impacts of neoliberal cities on individuals is the loss of freedom and individual alienation. In the capitalist system, cities cease to be places where individuals can move freely and establish social relations; on the contrary, they become structures where economic and political forces limit individuals' movement areas and shape individual preferences in line with market mechanisms. At this point, how the cities in *Inception* are constructed is similar to the nature of neoliberal cities.

In the film, although the characters appear to move freely within the dream, in fact these cities are thoroughly organised, controlled and manipulated by an external force. Although Cobb's memories shape the city of Paris he created in his mind, these places symbolise his dependence on his past and his feeling of being lost. In the dream world where Cobb lives with his wife, Mal, the city's physical boundaries are directly linked to the character's psychological state. At this point, it is possible to draw a parallel between the spatial control mechanism created by neoliberal cities over individuals and Cobb's own mind. Harvey (1989) argues that neoliberal cities do not promise individual freedom but rather that the capital order develops spatial mechanisms to keep individuals within a specific framework. In *Inception*, the cities that Cobb builds in his mind, although they are his escape, eventually turn into places that imprison him. This is an important narrative element representing the alienating effect of neoliberal cities on individuals.

The neoliberal urbanisation process is also related to the transformation of urban space into an object of consumption (Harvey, 2005). The capitalist system evaluates cities not only as liveable spaces but also as economic commodities. This situation can also be associated with Baudrillard's (1994) simulation theory because modern cities are increasingly becoming hyperrealized, that is, simulated spaces. The dream cities in *Inception* reflect exactly this situation.

In the film, building dream cities follows a logic similar to urban planning processes in the real world; however, these cities do not physically exist and are the product of a completely mental simulation. The cities Cobb creates in his mind are places that manipulate his perception of reality and are among the elements that make it difficult for the characters to understand that they are dreaming. In this context, neoliberal cities have also become simulations because today's cities are increasingly becoming consumption centres and urban spaces are shaped to serve market dynamics rather than the needs of individuals (Harvey, 2005). The cities in *Inception*, although created by the memories and subconscious of individuals, are presented as structures that direct, control, and imprison them within the simulation.

CONCLUSION

This study analyses cinematic representations of urban space through Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* (2010) in a multidimensional manner, within the framework of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production, and Marc Augé's approach to non-place spaces. The city structures in the film, built within a dream, function not only as aesthetic decoration or narrative background but also as intensely symbolic areas that depict individuals' relationships with memory, identity, psychological boundaries, and ideological codes. The cities created in dream layers in Nolan's film are shaped by the mental design of the architect character Ariadne and are filled with structures that feed on individuals' subconscious and symbolise collective memory. These cities, in parallel with Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum, become hyperreal images that replace real cities but are presented as more real than reality in a sense. Therefore, as a reflection of the modern individual's relationship with the city, the film creates emotionally charged, traumatic and nostalgic city images that have lost their connection with reality.

Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity reveals that the city representations in the film overlap with fundamental themes such as uncertainty, lack of continuity and identity dispersion. The liquid modern individual cannot belong to a place and cannot provide continuity and consistency in his connection with space. The characters in *Inception* are depicted as losing their bearings in dream spaces, far from a sense of belonging, in a state of consciousness where the concepts of time and space are dispersed. This situation cinematographically reveals the existential tensions that the individual is exposed to in cinematic representations of the modern urban experience and the experience of alienation from urban space.

Within the framework of Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production, the dream cities in the film are analysed as hybrid structures that carry each of the dimensions of perceived, designed and lived space. Places are physical structures and areas of meaning produced by the individual's psychology, traumas and subconscious dynamics. In this sense, the film proves that cinema is a field of expression that both represents and transforms space.

Linked to Marc Augé's theory of non-places, the dream cities in *Inception* function as anonymised and temporary structures, detached from a fixed historical, social, and cultural context. In these cities, the individual has a temporary existence; space represents the individual's loss in his inner world rather than providing reference points for identity construction. In this narrative, where the

city ceases to be a fixed identity or memory transmitter and becomes a mental reflection that coincides with the individual's inner world, cinema also functions as a memory technology.

The film *Inception* offers a rich reading area regarding the cinematic representation of urban space; this representation is a visual depiction and a process in which social, psychological and ideological codes are reproduced. The city images in the film reveal how postmodern cinema narratives can be nourished by narrative mechanisms of space, identity, memory and beyond reality; thus, it provides a multi-faceted analysis ground that nourishes interdisciplinary dialogue between cinema studies, architecture, sociology and communication sciences. Future studies can expand the horizons of this study by examining the effects of digital architecture, artificial intelligence-designed cinematic city images, or virtual reality technologies on spatial representations in cinema.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest between themselves and/or any third parties or institutions regarding this work.

Ethics Committee Approval

This study does not require ethics committee approval. A signed declaration confirming this has been submitted with the manuscript.

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