The Shaping of Reality through Sensory and Community Epistemologies

in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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In Christopher Noland’s 2010 science fiction thriller *Inception*, Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is hired to use special technology to enter in the dreams of energy mogul Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy) and plant an idea in his mind. Cobb and his team of thieves must make an extravagant plan to enter through multiple levels of Fischer’s sleeping subconscious in order to influence Fischer to come to the conclusion that he must break up his late father’s energy conglomerate. Cobb leads Fischer through layers of dreams represented by a large New York-like city, an elegant hotel, and a snowy fortress high in a nondescript mountain range where Fischer meets a memory of his father in a hospital bed, making him conclude what Cobb wanted. The mission is successful; the thieves accomplish “inception.” Noland’s film explored how ideas are created and how that affects a person’s reality.

Long before Noland played with people’s dreams, William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* looked at the artificial inception of an idea—albeit through a less science-fictional means. Shakespeare understood that ideas are powerful things; they shape how we perceive reality, and perceptions of reality can be rooted in both the senses and in the personal witness of others. The higher senses (sight and hearing) (Lockerd 16) combine with individual testimonies to shape our discerned world. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare plays with the manipulation of sensory and community epistemology, for better or for worse, to show how ideas influence people’s actions and create a sense of communal unity.
Much Ado About Nothing can be broken into two intertwined plots, each focusing on one of the two aforementioned perceptions of reality. The first plot, following the relationship of Claudio and Hero, looks at how the sense of sight influences our sensory epistemology and shapes our perceptions of reality. As Rachel Nin points out in her article “They Have Verified Unjust Things: The Reliability of the Senses in Much Ado About Nothing,” the foundation of “Claudio and Hero's entire relationship is based on evidence of the eyes,” (Nin 45). In the first scene of the play, Claudio confides in Benedick, admitting his love for Hero saying, “In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on,” (1.1). Up to this point in the play, there is no evidence that Claudio and Hero have even spoken, so Claudio is professing his love based only on what he has seen of Hero. As we will quickly see, basing any knowledge on a single sense creates an easy opportunity for one’s sensory epistemology to be corrupted. It is through the sense of sight that Claudio “noted” and fell in love with Hero, and it would be through sight that he would be fooled into believing that she was disloyal.

The major conflict of the first plot comes when Don John tricks Claudio into believing that Hero was unfaithful to him with Borachio. Don John leads Claudio to where Borachio is being handsy with Margaret dressed as Hero. With his own eyes and ears, Claudio is witness to “Hero’s” unfaithfulness. When he tells Claudio, “follow me, I will show you enough; and when you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly,” (3.2) Don John makes appeals to the senses of sight and hearing, which are powerful appeals. We generally believe we can trust our senses. What we see is what we see. What we hear is what we hear. It is with the different parts of our bodies—ears, eyes, nose, hands—that we begin to build a sense of truth and knowledge
because empirical evidence anchors us in the physical world. Perceived events and ideas in that physical world create a sensory epistemology that shapes our perceived realities.

Don John takes advantage of Claudio’s trust in the perceived realities shaped by his sensory epistemology. He goads Claudio saying, "If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know," (3.2). Knowing that Claudio, like most people, relies heavily on his senses, Don John puts a question of doubt in Claudio’s heart and mind. One cannot possibly know something completely if he or she does not trust his or her own senses. Don John’s confidence gives “the impression that Don John knows what he is talking about. His messages are often of this type—they lure their hearers with the promise of directness and certainty in a world of uncertainty and obliqueness,” (Dawson 214). But it is not just his confidence that helps Don John complete his mischievous treachery against Hero and Claudio; it is his ability to take advantage of the fallibility of the sight and hearing of Claudio. Don John puts him into a position where the villain is able to control how much Claudio sees and hears in order to make his appeal to the higher senses more credible.

At the end of his appeal to the senses when Don John says, “proceed accordingly,” he implies that Claudio act based on his newly-formed, empirically-gained sensory epistemology. Just as John suggests, we generally extrapolate from one perception specific implications and then base our future actions on those implications. Claudio perceived an unfaithful Hero. He took that perception, interpreted it under the poisonous influence of Don John, and decided his actions would be to publicly shame Hero for deceiving him. And though he should have been warier of Don John, one shouldn’t give Claudio a hard time for believing what he thought he saw
and heard. For there were others there with him. They saw and heard the same thing, strengthening Claudio’s perception with their own personal, empirically derived testimonies. Their personal witnesses strengthened the perceptions of reality through the collaboration of shared experiences, through a discourse of ideas. As St. Thomas Aquinas says in his *Summa Theologica*, “the human intellects obtain their perfection in the knowledge of truth by a kind of movement and discursive intellectual operation; that is to say, as they advance from one known thing to another,” (Aquinas 3). They came to a perfection of knowledge, or a completeness in shared realities, because they verified together the witnessed events by telling each other their side of the story.

As we have seen with Claudio’s example, perceptions of reality can also be shaped by what people tell us. The second half of the split plot in *Much Ado About Nothing* deals with Beatrice and Benedick’s love-hate relationship—that ultimately drops the hate—because of the influence of the (false) testimonies of their friends. While the plot revolving around Claudio and Hero focused mostly on sight, this second plot focuses more intently on hearing, the sense through which we engage with discursive reasoning (Lockerd 220). Shakespeare, of course, gives the higher sense of hearing the same treatment as he does sight. Beatrice and Benedick gain information through hearing, but because they are eavesdropping, they do not have the complete context of the information, leading them to “interpreting, re-interpreting, or misinterpreting what has been seen or heard,” (Dawson 212). Don Pedro uses the fallibility of the sense of hearing to his advantage to set love traps for Beatrice and Benedick.
Don Pedro takes upon himself the challenge of making Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. He does so by having each of them separately overhear the supporting characters talk about how each of the pair loves the other. Benedick believes the testimonies of Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio because “they have the truth of this from Hero,” (2.3) who is a reliable source as Beatrice’s confidant. Although the other characters are lying, and since they portray themselves as reliable sources, their testimonies of the information as truth plants the idea of romance in the hearts of the two potential lovers. With enough people claiming an idea is true, it is as if the combined determination of the group wills their beliefs into reality. That force of the cumulative testimonies of the supporting characters creates a community epistemology that overcomes even the feelings of the very people they were making the false claims about.

When Benedick and Beatrice realize they have been manipulated, they recognize that they initially had no feelings for each other, but once the idea of one loving the other entered both their minds, they each began to entertain the possibility of love such that their “own hands [went] against [their] hearts,” (5.4). Their hands, in this case, representing what their minds believed versus what their hearts believed. This could mean that Benedick and Beatrice were living two perceptions of truth simultaneously: one dictated by the mind, the other by the heart. The truth dictated by the mind, though, had physical manifestations in the writing of poetry and Benedick’s willingness to challenge Claudio. Why did the mind’s truth overpower the heart’s? The mind’s truth was influenced by the will of the community, which gave it extra strength and support. But the mind’s truth also meant a possible romance benefiting both individuals involved.
Though you could speculate that romance was always the subconscious desires of Beatrice and Benedick, the pair went against their own outwardly expressed intentions and the empirical evidence of their own experiences interacting with each other because of the pressures felt by what those around them said was true. For example, at the end of Act 2 Scene 3—after Benedick starts to entertain the idea of loving Beatrice and Beatrice has called him to dinner—Benedick laughs stating, “Hah! ‘Against my will, I am sent to bid you come in to dinner.’ There’s a double meaning in that. ‘I took no more pains for those thanks than you took pains to thank me’: that’s as much as to say any pains that I take for you is as easy as thanks,” (2.3).

Benedick here is quick to start changing Beatrice’s words to fit his newly gained perception of her. He has allowed himself to easily cave under the pressures of the community epistemology (the idea that Beatrice loves him) and allows this new epistemology to then twist his own sensory experiences (Beatrice’s being mean and snarky while calling him to dinner) to fit the community epistemology.

In order to completely fit with the community epistemology, Benedick and Beatrice had to deceive themselves. Once they started to entertain the possibility of romance, the pair allowed the seeds of deception to be planted in their minds. In contrast to Don John’s deception of Claudio, though, the deception of Benedick and Beatrice is a positive, constructive deception that would “draw together two people who [would] nourish each other and society itself,” (Henze 188). There was more riding on the union of Benedick and Beatrice than merely their happiness; it represented further strengthening of the political ties between Aragon and Messina. The false pretenses of love Don Pedro and Leonato create to draw their targets together is a
scaffolding that supports the structure of the community epistemology until enough of the pieces were solidly in place for it to support itself. Once the self-deceptions of love in the minds and hearts of Beatrice and Benedick transformed into true love, the artificial support of false gossip given by Don Pedro and his co-conspirators could be torn away, leaving the relationship that would more tightly tie together the two nations. As was seen with Benedick’s willingness to quickly rationalize Beatrice’s snarky behavior as flirtation when calling him to dinner, there is a degree of self-interest in the acceptance of epistemologies.

Given Benedick’s example of easy self-deception, it would appear that although individuals can push back against types of epistemologies, they sometimes choose to give into a new epistemology because it benefits them in some way. Hence, Benedick gives into the community epistemology because it means that Beatrice loves him, which he sees as a positive benefit to himself. If you get enough people to say something is true, it might very well become so, especially if it benefits each individual in the group in some way. The most basic principle of economics is that people act in self-interest. A community is strengthened when the all the self-interests of all the members of that community complement each other. When enough individuals see self-interested benefits in adopting the same idea as truth, they share the same perception of reality. A community is then created, giving further incentive for people to adopt the same perceived reality so they feel like they belong.

It is natural for people to want to belong, so when a shared perceived reality begins to form a community, it is out of desire to build unity. At the end of Much Ado About Nothing, all the characters’ realities come together in accordance with the exoneration of Hero and the
romantic submission of Benedick and Beatrice. Representing this unity of epistemology, we have the union in marriage of each couple the two plots revolve around. At this moment, Benedick states, “We are friends. Let’s have a dance,” (5.4) giving a physical representation or metaphor of their reality’s unity and rediscovered community. When people dance together, they come into harmony, an accordance of perceived truth. The movements of their bodies match the rhythm of the music. The play moves beyond the focus of the higher senses to include the movement of entire body in dance.

This dance at the end of the play re-enforces Shakespeare’s critique of the higher senses. While you do hear and listen to music, the rhythm, what creates unity across people dancing, is felt. But rhythm is not felt in the same general way as we feel with the sense of touch. It is an internal feeling that one must intuit and adapt to. The problems in Much Ado about Nothing that are created through the misinterpretation of the higher senses are “resolved by characters who base their actions on their intuition and faith,” (Nin 47) both feelings that cannot be verified by empirical investigation. The first character whose actions help resolve Hero and Claudio’s conflict is Beatrice. Beatrice, having been Hero’s bedfellow for twelve months (4.1), has built an intuitive sense of Hero’s character. Beatrice has a knowledge of Hero built on a relationship of trust that could not be explained with any concrete facts. The other force in proving the innocence of Hero is the Friar, who uses the sense of sight in tandem with his intuitive understanding; the Friar uses “his eyes to make ‘observations,’ but in judging them he relies upon his ‘age’—his wide experience—and his ‘divinity’—his theological study, which gives him a contemplative wisdom,” (Lockerd 228-9). The Friar’s contemplative wisdom allows him to
question and overcome the false information his higher senses might provide him due to their weaknesses. It is the same ability the Friar has developed to set aside the higher senses and rely on intuitive experience that helps dancers follow the rhythm and be perfectly synchronized in their routines.

The dancers in this metaphor for a united community could be considered an interpretive community. The music and the rhythm would be the interpretations of that community. While there is some freedom within the bounds of the music, members must first be able to feel the beat before they can smoothly join the rest of the dancers. Everyone must first have a similar sense of beliefs (music). Everyone’s movements must combine with the rest of the group. But consider what would happen if different musicians came in and started to compete with the original band. Some of the dancers might choose to start dancing to the new song. There would be chaos on the dance floor. Different beliefs could split a community and create a chaotic environment for everyone. The different perceptions of Hero’s fidelity caused a rift and conflict between the characters in the play, and thus, the dance at the end was a perfect way to embody the triumph over their differences.

As many a Shakespearian comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing* ends on a happy note and leaves its audience something to think about. With our realities of truth being shaped by the senses, by other people’s personal witness testimonies, and by the communities we belong to, it brings up the question, in what part of the “self” does truth reside? Do we perceive truth with our mind and intellect, our heart and soul, or our body and faculties? Is truth something that is deduced, felt, or experienced? Perhaps rhetorical questions like these aren’t very useful because
our perceptions of reality are created with a combination of all three areas. But by isolating each area, maybe we can better understand how each is influenced and shaped so that we can avoid falling into group think, being too easily influenced by the interpretive communities in which we live our lives. We should be careful not to allow ourselves to make poor decisions because of a perceived personal benefit. Once we begin to recognize how our realities are being influenced and motivated, we can start to judge the moral value of every belief, and once we begin to recognize the bad parts of our realities, we can change them for the better.
Work Cited


