

# MY TOTEM





## The Rubik's Cube as the Ideal Totem: A Philosophical Inquiry into Narrative Agency and Recursive Authorship in Dream-State Semiotics

The concept of a *totem*, as dramatized in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, refers to an epistemic artifact—an object uniquely capable of revealing whether one is situated in waking reality or a dream simulation. The totem functions not by mechanical complexity but by symbolic exclusivity: it is only meaningful to the person who knows its true behavior. Its purpose is to detect the *epistemic fracture* between coherent, causal structure and the fluid, often incoherent logic of the dream-state.

Dreams differ fundamentally from waking reality not because of their content, but because of their *semiotic structure*. In dreams, signs do not consistently refer to stable referents. Causality is unstable, memory unreliable, and agency diminished. The self in a dream is often passive—a *narrative passenger* rather than a *narrative author*. What makes the Rubik's Cube uniquely suited as a totem is that it functions precisely as a recursive proof of *authorship*. It demands more than perception or passive recognition; it demands a structured, iterative act of symbolic construction.

To solve a Rubik's Cube is not merely to execute a memorized algorithm—it is to enact a story. Each move is a verb. Each state is a clause. Each transformation is a continuation of a symbolic sequence governed by internal consistency. The solver must:

1. Observe the current state of the Cube (perceptual decoding),
2. Recognize pattern categories (abstraction and categorization),
3. Recall the correct sequence of actions (narrative memory),
4. Execute them in proper order (temporal coherence),
5. Evaluate the resulting state (recursive feedback loop).

This five-step cycle repeats with each algorithmic application. And crucially, it requires *intentionality* at every stage. You do not solve a cube by accident. You solve it by *writing* a recursive narrative through physical symbols.

This is what makes the Cube an ideal totem: it is a test not of sensory input, but of *narrative agency*. In a dream, while one may see a cube, one cannot reliably *author* the recursive sequence required to solve it. Dream cognition lacks stable recursion, lacks precision memory recall, and often lacks the volitional force required to sustain symbolic logic. The Cube exposes this difference by requiring all three.

The Rubik's Cube, then, is more than a puzzle. It is a narrative proving ground. A recursive device that, when engaged, tests not just your focus, but your *authorship of attention*. In

dreams, the story is often being told *to you*. When solving the Cube, you must be the one telling it. The presence or absence of that agency becomes the litmus test for reality.

From a semiotic perspective, the Cube embodies high-entropy symbolic order. It begins in a state of disorder (scrambled signs), and through structured narrative application, is brought into semantic closure (solved pattern). This mirrors all meaning-making systems: the process of transforming noise into form. The Cube is therefore not just a test of lucidity, but a microcosmic enactment of *the reality-construction process itself*.

As such, I conclude: the Rubik's Cube is not merely a good totem. It is, under logical scrutiny, one of the most rigorous totems imaginable. It tests not only one's awareness of the external world, but one's capacity to impose structure through intentional symbolic recursion—a capacity that collapses in dream-states. It is a semiotic crucible for confirming that *you* are still the author.

And in that recognition, you awaken.

But, then I thought, nope, that too was a great story about how I could solve a puzzle. The real problem was I did not know HOW I was solving or, better yet, willing it. The beginning of the story is not a complete red herring, but stay tuned because we, like Alice, are never really finished with our story...

There's something strange we all seem to overlook. And it's right in front of us. Actually, it *is* us.

We move around all day, making decisions, taking actions, shifting our bodies, speaking words, solving problems—but if you stop and really think about it, *how* do we actually do any of that? I mean, really. You decide to stand up, and then... you do. You want to say something, and somehow the exact words you need come pouring out of your mouth. You don't sit there and program every single muscle or access some manual for speech. You just will it. And it happens.

That's the part we never question. That's the mystery that hides in plain sight.

We've built entire civilizations on top of this ability we barely understand. We act like we're in control, like we're steering the ship, but we're not doing the steering; we're just *watching* it steer, and then we tell ourselves the story that we did that. REMEMBER WALL-E??

But the truth is, we don't know *how* we do anything. We just do it. We pretend we know what's going on because the story keeps flowing, and as long as the story keeps moving forward, we feel like we're the ones writing it.

But we're not. We're just narrating it after the fact.

Now, sure, we can *try* to explain it. We can study neuroscience and motor control and linguistics. We can map muscles and model cognition. But none of that actually gets to the root of it. Because no matter how deep we go, we still can't explain *how* we know what we know, or *how* we move what we move. We just do it. And the story comes later.

And that's the glitch in all this. That's the part of the program that loops in on itself and makes you realize you were never really at the controls—you were just narrating the illusion of control. And yet... somehow, the illusion works.

That's what we miss. That's the part we forget. Every day we walk around in these little vessels, moving them with invisible intent, interacting with objects, people, symbols—manipulating matter with nothing but a thought. And we don't stop to ask how that's even possible. We just accept it and move on.

But to me, that's where the story is. Right there. That mystery.

And maybe that's why I like to play with the Rubik's Cube. It's not about the cube itself—it's about what it represents. It's this tiny, colorful, chaotic-looking thing that demands focus. It requires attention. Engagement. You can't fake it. You have to be *present*. And once you know the story—once you understand the underlying logic—it becomes solvable. Every time. You learn the pattern. You tell yourself the right story, and your hands just move.

And the more you do it, the faster it gets. Solve, scramble, solve again. Over and over. And that might seem repetitive, but it's not. It's grounding. It's a reminder that even chaos has a pattern. That even when something looks unsolvable, it isn't—if you understand the story.

That's all anyone's doing. We're all just trying to solve the puzzles in our lives. We're all looking for that one small piece of control, that one thing that reminds us we can do something—move something—*make sense* of something. And the Rubik's Cube does that for me. It reminds me that I can find order in the noise. That there's a logic underneath, even if I can't always see it right away.

And maybe that's something others should consider too.

Because I really believe this: if you focus long enough—if you look at any process, any situation, any system, and really give it your attention—not just once, but again and again, until you start to see the pattern—then you can solve it. Anyone can. You just have to understand the story behind it.

And that includes *this* story. The one that's been unfolding this whole time. The story of how we move, how we speak, how we know, how we *exist*. The story that no one else has told quite this way—not because it hasn't been felt, but because it hasn't been spoken.

And now that it's been spoken, you can't unsee it.

So maybe it's time to stop trying to explain everything—and start noticing what's always been there:

That we are the puzzle, pretending to solve itself.

And the story we tell about how we solved it?

That's just part of the dream.

But if you know the dream is a story... maybe that's how you wake up.

Or maybe that's how you finally *start living it*.