



## Looking for the Secret: Death and Desire in *The Prestige*

Stuart Joy

Southampton Solent University

---

### Abstract

Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this article considers writer/director Christopher Nolan's treatment of trauma in the context of *The Prestige* (2006) by analysing the film's narrative structure and thematic content. I argue that the film communicates trauma through a process of thematic, technical and visual repetition that is linked to the subject of the unconscious that Jacques Lacan (1977) defines as being a 'lack' or gap that emerges in the field of the Other (XI, 211). I also claim that the film exhibits the marks of a traumatic experience which manifest themselves in the spectator's apparent compulsion to repeat and replay the trauma, and thus the film in an attempt to master the subject. Cutter: You wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back.

### To cite as

Joy, S., 2014, 'Looking for the Secret: Death and Desire in *The Prestige*', *PsyArt 18*, pp. 230–248.

---

Cutter: You wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back. (*The Prestige*.)

Following the critical acclaim and box office success of *Batman Begins* (2005), Christopher Nolan returned to a smaller-scale project with *The Prestige* (2006), a period film centred on the rivalry between two competing magicians. The reviews of the film were largely positive, however comparatively speaking *The Prestige* ranks as one of Nolan's lowest entries on the three most high-profile sites that aggregate film reviews from accredited media outlets, including rottentomatoes.com, metacritic.com, and the Movie Review Query Engine.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Only *Following* ranks lower than *The Prestige* however as the film was produced independently I do not consider it to be a fair comparison.

There is a sense that as with the reviews of *Insomnia* (2002), the negative discourse surrounding the film emphasises Nolan's stylistic approach as a contentious issue (see LaSalle 2006; Phillips 2006; Rea 2006). Writing for *Variety* Dennis Harvey (2006) notes that, 'While complicated intrigue might have fascinated in Christopher Priest's novel, it tends to overwhelm Jonathan and Christopher Nolan's adaptation.' He continues, 'clearly, director Nolan is aiming for something else. But the delight in sheer gamesmanship that marked his breakout "Memento" doesn't survive this project's gimmickry'. Elsewhere in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Steven Rea (2006) similarly comments, '[the film] offers three acts of exasperating muddle' and finally Jack Mathews (2006) remarks that, 'by describing the structure of a great trick in a movie about a great trick, *The Prestige* makes a promise it can't keep. Its third act is about as convincing as a photo of a cow jumping over the moon'.

The incredulity towards the narrative complexity of *The Prestige* evident in the reviews discussed in the previous paragraph is perhaps surprising given the critical praise accredited to Nolan's second feature film *Memento* (2000) (see Nesselson 2000; Pevere 2001; Scott 2001; Turan 2001). Whereas reviews of *Memento* praise the complex nature of the narrative because it challenges the viewer to consider the construction of the film as a text rather than simply process the story, negative critiques of *The Prestige* seem to view the alignment of narrative and theme as a contrivance in the film. This notion is supported by Todd McGowan (2012) who states that, 'the spectator can, without too much trouble, figure out the story from the complex but not indecipherable filmic discourse, which leads one to believe that the nonlinear narrative exists simply for the sake of the gimmick itself' (104).<sup>2</sup> This kind of criticism may account for the negative discourse surrounding the film. However rather than a gimmick, the connection between the narrative structure of *The Prestige* and the wider emphasis on narrative within Nolan's auteur persona, positions his creative approach to narrative as being a central unifying feature of his work that is bound to his thematic interests. For instance, referring to the structure of *The Prestige* Dan Jolin (2006) writes:

*You always know where you are with Christopher Nolan, in that it's often hard to know where you are. Or rather when. He's a filmmaker who clearly believes that every story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, only not necessarily in that order...So it's no surprise that the man who brought us a modern noir about a man with short-term memory loss through a brain-straining reverse-chronological structure should present a Victorian murder-mystery tale of such beautiful convolutions that the dizzying struggle to follow it provides half the entertainment (emphasis in original).*

---

<sup>2</sup> Though, for McGowan organising the narrative in a strictly linear fashion would eliminate a major contribution to our understanding of creation that the film makes.

With this comment, Jolin draws specific attention to the director as the central influence in connecting these films. In particular, it is the emphasis on Nolan's complex narratives that seems to unite his body of work within the critical reception of all of his films. This trend can be witnessed in several other reviews of *The Prestige* that similarly highlight structural complexity as a significant stylistic feature that runs through Nolan's wider body of work (see Ide 2006; Schickel 2006; Scott 2006). This implication appears in some form in each of the reviews, suggesting as Ben Walters (2006) does, that *The Prestige* remains not only structurally but also thematically similar to those films that preceded it. He writes, 'Christopher Nolan has established himself as a filmmaker fascinated by the fluid, tricky contingencies of memory, identity, narrative and time: the way we depend on the stories we tell ourselves about who we are.' He goes on to say that, 'selfhood emerges from these films as a rickety trick, an illusion dependent on misdirection and oversight. Apt, then, that the director's latest is a story about magicians'. As a consequence, Nolan's stylistic choices seem necessary in the sense that they represent a continuing effort to explore issues that have dominated his films, rather than as some critics have suggested, being employed as gimmicks or hollow postmodern flourishes. Writing for the *The Village Voice* film critic Scott Foundas (2006) points out that, 'Where most stories that are this narratively sliced and diced leave you wishing they'd simply been laid out from A to Z, you don't long to see Nolan's Möbius strip movies any other way'. He continues:

*His great subject is the randomness of memory and those fragments of things past that jut uncomfortably into our present, whether we're an amnesiac widower chasing his own shadow or the dark knight Bruce Wayne fighting off the specter [sic] of his parents' murder in Batman Begins.*

In both of these reviews, by creating an obvious connection among the films' themes and narrative structures, the reviewer's references to the films' similarities position Nolan as the central organising factor for understanding and enjoying his films. Of particular interest in this last comment is that the reviewer creates a strong connection between the explicit theme of memory and the implicit theme of trauma by aligning both with Nolan's unconventional narrative structures. With this in mind, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis I want to consider Nolan's treatment of trauma in the context of *The Prestige* by analysing the film's narrative structure and thematic content. In particular, I will contend that the film communicates trauma both structurally and stylistically through a process of thematic, technical and visual repetition that is linked to the subject of the unconscious that Jacques Lacan (1977) defines as being a 'lack' or gap that emerges in the field of the Other (XI, 211).

It has been well documented that *Memento* is constructed in a way that seems to interrogate several of the fundamental philosophical theories

surrounding time and various pathologies of trauma (see Thomas 2003; Schmid 2004; Little 2005).<sup>3</sup> However, *The Prestige*, Nolan's fifth and perhaps most critically underrated film has been largely ignored in academic circles despite the film's similar experiments with form and structure.<sup>4</sup> Based on Christopher Priest's novel of the same name, the film is set during the Victorian era and centres on the rivalry between two stage magicians, Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale). From a thematic perspective, the film overtly draws attention to the idea of repetition through the physical doubling that takes place in various forms throughout. For instance, it is revealed that Borden is one of a pair of identical twins who have concealed their duality in order to perform their signature trick: 'The Transported Man,' in which a person disappears into an apparently empty doorway and re-appears instantaneously through another unconnected to the first. Tortured by his inability to decipher Borden's secret, Angier initially uses a man to play his double but ultimately commissions technology from Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) that enables him to clone himself leading to his apparent murder at the hands of Borden.<sup>5</sup>

As with *Following* (1998) and *Memento*, *The Prestige* evokes a fractured chronology featuring a series of flash-backs and flash-forwards. Such conventions reveal Angier's death to be the result of a number of escalating disputes between the two men stemming from a fatal stage accident involving Angier's wife, Julia McCullough (Piper Perabo). Nolan predominantly constructs the discourse of the film around the narrative framing device of two diaries, which demonstrate how each magician constructs his own sense of self apart from, and in relation to the other. In recounting their thoughts and actions, the diaries as a narrative trope permit the repetitions and disjunctures, as well as the numerous flashbacks and flash-forwards that organise the retrospective narration. It is this complex structure that most profoundly supports multiple

---

<sup>3</sup> Several other scholars have critically engaged with *Memento* on a number of levels which has provided an intricate foundation from which to discuss theories of memory and time in relation to the film. For example, Melissa Clarke (2002), Jo Alyson Parker (2004) and Dirian Lyons (2006) focus primarily on the film's depiction of time. More specifically, these authors consider the philosophical principles outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson. In contrast, Peter Thomas (2003) and William G. Little (2005) interpret *Memento* as leading its viewers to experience features of trauma focusing primarily on victimage and violence. Additionally, a collection of essays organised by Andrew Kania (2009) draws together several philosophical themes including narrative and popular cinema, self-consciousness and personal identity in *Memento*.

<sup>4</sup> Only Keith Isenberg's (2007) 'The artful intrigue of magic,' Gagan Bhatnagar's (2009) 'A psychoanalysis of *The Prestige*' and Todd McGowan's (2012) 'The Violence of Creation in *The Prestige*,' exist entirely devoted to an analysis of the film. This chapter is particularly indebted to Todd McGowan who examines *The Prestige* in relation to temporality and art. Specifically, the author considers the use of a non-linear timeline drawing attention to the effect of an illusion serving to disguise the role that sacrifice plays in the process of creation.

<sup>5</sup> Aside from the physical doubling, Angier also possesses a double identity. Early in the film, he tells Julia that he used the name Angier because his family would not accept him being a magician. In reality, he is a wealthy aristocrat who goes by the name of Lord Caldwell.

viewings and yields a comprehensive articulation of how trauma emerges from the film. In particular, as the temporal movements are ultimately fractured and non-linear causing the past to permeate the present, the film articulates the manner in which according to a Freudian understanding of trauma, the traumatic event momentarily blocks the flow of present into future (see Freud 1955 [1920]). More than this though, central to the structural complexity of the film is the emphasis on the repetition of desire and traumatic memory as well as the central lack at the heart of desire, all of which are constituent parts of the traumatic experience according to French poststructuralist and psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan.

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan offers an account of repetition that emerges primarily from Sigmund Freud's writings in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955 [1920]), namely that of the 'repetition compulsion' (Wiederholungszwang) and the case study of Fort-Da (Freud 19). According to Freud, the 'compulsion to repeat' constitutes a formative moment in working through trauma (ibid., 24). Subject to a traumatic event, Freud argued that an individual repeatedly returns to the traumatic experience in an attempt to retroactively master the event (ibid., 37). Such repetition, he argued, is a result of the subject's inability to locate the trauma as either reconciled with the present or put into the past as part of a coherent narrative (ibid., 19). Freud's central example of traumatic repetition compulsion is the Fort-Da game invented by his grandson (ibid., 14-5). The game involves the child repeatedly throwing a wooden reel on a string over the edge of his cot and subsequently retrieving it accompanied by the sounds 'o-o-o-o' ('fort'/gone) and 'da' (there). In his observations on the Fort-Da game, Freud suggests that the child's compulsion to repeat is a re-enactment of the trauma associated with the departure of the mother and his attempt to come to terms with her absence (ibid., 15). By repeatedly staging the trauma, Freud contends that the child transforms a passive experience into an active game thereby achieving a sense of mastery over the emotions attached to the event (ibid.). However, what Lacan proposes deviates from the Freudian interpretation of the Fort-Da game insofar as he suggests that, 'the exercise with this object refers to an alienation, and not to some supposed mastery' (XI, 239). According to Lacan, the mother is not reducible to the wooden reel. Rather, the reel functions as a mark of alienation or a 'symbol of lack', what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (the object-cause of our desire) (ibid., 103).<sup>6</sup> He notes:

*This reel is not the mother reduced to a little ball...it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained...To this object we will later give the name it bears in the Lacanian algebra - the petit a* (ibid., 62 emphasis in original).

---

<sup>6</sup> From this point onward the term *objet petit a* will be referred to as *objet a*.

It is important to emphasize here that the wooden reel functions not only as a signifier for the loss of the mother but more broadly as an indicator of the metonymic function of the objet a. In this context, the game is significant not only in terms of what is lost, but also because of the emergence of the subject's desire within a system of substitutions and binary oppositions (presence/absence) that are rooted in a linguistic reality.<sup>7</sup>

According to Lacan, the repeated urge to return to the earlier period of oneness with the mother in order to overcome lack and to become whole produces in the subject the essence of desire. Lacan (1977b) argues that desire is subsequently maintained by the continuous displacement from object to object at the level of the unconscious, or as Lacan writes 'desire is a metonymy' (*Ecrits* 439 emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> However, in accordance with Lacan's theory of desire every object is an insufficient substitute for the wholeness of being that the subject seeks. As Lacan (1988) puts it, 'This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but the lack of being whereby being exists. This lack is beyond anything which can represent it' (*II*, 223). The subject, in other words is destined to repeatedly acquire a series of objects even though, or rather because these objects mask the subject's inherent inability to recapture a sense of oneness. To re-iterate, what is desired is a return to a state of oneness to which no object can be equated and so such objects are to be considered the objet a. In the register of desire, it is the failure of the objet a to bridge the gap that separates the subject from desire that propels the continuous search for new objects that in turn, betrays the essence of desire which is to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> Or, to put it in yet another way: 'the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other' (*Ecrits* 525). In this way, the objet a represents a significant symbolic equivalent to the structural organisation of traumatic memories, a notion underlined by Thomas Brennan (2010) who notes that, 'Above all, the logic of the objet a parallels that of trauma.' He continues, 'precisely because the objet a or the trauma may point back to something forgotten in the past, the possibility remains that both the objet a and the trauma can reappear in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Whether following Freud's reading of the game as a substitute for the absence of the mother or Lacan's reading of the game as the child's entry into language, the appearance and disappearance of the wooden reel recalls the fundamental structure and characteristics of the traumatic experience.

<sup>8</sup> At this stage it is important to acknowledge that even though Lacan often describes lack in terms that seem to invoke a material object, he contends that desire cannot be derived from an object choosing instead to emphasise the importance of objects as symbols, symptoms and signifiers. As he explains, it is an 'object that is nowhere articulated, it is a lost object, but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost' (*VII*, 58). For Lacan, there are no objects of desire instead it is precisely because desire cannot be fulfilled that desire remains.

<sup>9</sup> In his later work, Lacan (1977) develops Freud's concept of the drive. Whereas desire operates according to the logic of displacement and dissatisfaction, the drive is organised in relation to a system of idealisation whereby desire is invested in a particular object. However, it is important to note that the underlying condition in both instances is that a subject aspires to wholeness.

present' (16). What this means is that as an expression of the lack inherent in human beings, the logic of the objet a bears a direct correlation to the experience of trauma, that is to say, it is impossible for the subject to assimilate and thus subject to continual repetition.

Returning now to *The Prestige*, at an abstract level the film is governed by a Lacanian understanding of the repetition of desire and object loss linked to traumatic memories. For instance, near the beginning of the film Angier's wife, a magician's assistant, drowns during a performance because Borden apparently insisted on tying a more complex knot that she could not escape while underwater. In terms of the film's narrative trajectory, it is Julia's death and specifically the manner of her death that acts as the initial catalyst for the rivalry between the two men. However, more than this she represents the traumatic centre of the film as the narrative is constructed around her constitutive absence. Within the matrix of desire, Julia is initially positioned as the object in desire as opposed to the object of desire ("Desire" 28 emphasis added). The distinction is important as the object in desire is constituted as an objet a by its placement within the structure of desire whereas the object of desire acts to compensate for the initial separation from the mother. According to a Lacanian reading, it is not until Julia dies that she becomes an object of desire and takes on value for the subject when she is impossibly unobtainable. What I mean by this is that it is only through her death that Julia ceases to be an object that exists for Angier only in or through the construct of desire itself. In a similar vein, Lacan's essay on *Hamlet* refers to the death of Ophelia as the moment where she is 'reintegrated' as an object of desire, 'won back here at the price of mourning and death' (ibid., 24).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in *The Prestige* the course of events that brings Angier's rivalry with Borden to a climax can be read along similar lines insofar as it is possible to account for all of Angier's acts on the basis of the trauma, and subsequent loss associated with the death of his wife and her reconstitution in grief as an objet a.<sup>11</sup>

According to Lacan (1982 [1953]), the fundamental structure of the unconscious is a tripartite confluence of what he called the *Imaginary*, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Aside from the phonetic links between the names Julia and Ophelia, in both narratives the women die as a result of drowning.

<sup>11</sup> I will return to Julia's death later but for now it is important to note that it is Angier's initial desire to discover whether Borden knew which knot he tied before Julia's death and the subsequent envy he experiences upon witnessing Borden's relationship with his own wife Sarah (Rebecca Hall) that motivates his obsession. He remarks, "I saw happiness, happiness that should have been mine". In spite of the obsessive nature of his desire, Angier is largely out of touch with actual desire at the level of the unconscious. What I mean by this is that it is Angier's fixation on discovering the secret to Borden's 'transported man' that highlights the extent of his displaced desire for Julia. This is aptly demonstrated when he is confronted by his assistant (Scarlett Johansson) who openly draws attention to his denial. She comments, 'it won't bring your wife back' to which Angier retorts, "I don't care about my wife, I care about his secret."

*Symbolic and the Real*.<sup>12</sup> Although each dimension is distinct, none can exist or function without the others and as such, the three dimensions are united in the equivalent of a ‘Borromean knot’ to determine the subject’s relationship within the broader context of human development (XX, 112).<sup>13</sup> However, following the work of Slavoj Žižek (1989; 1999) and Joan Copjec (1989; 1994), whose combined work draws heavily on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, the remainder of this article will focus primarily on the Real, that is, on the unrepresentable gaps in the Symbolic as the intrusive return of repressed trauma.<sup>14</sup> Before moving on to a more detailed reading of *The Prestige*, it will be useful before proceeding to establish an understanding of the Real, one that will be valuable for analysing the narrative structure and formal devices of *The Prestige*.

According to Žižek (1989), the Real is perhaps best understood as that which lies beyond the subject’s comprehension of reality and therefore remains outside of language - a ‘hard kernel resisting symbolization [sic]’ that is nevertheless synonymous with the unconscious and the subject’s desire (161). This evaluation of the Real corresponds to Lacan’s own discussion where he describes the Real as ‘impossible’ because it exists outside of the established order of representation, or rather that which is beyond the Symbolic and the Imaginary (XI, 167). It is this resistance to symbolisation that lends the Real its traumatic quality and leads Lacan to provide a structural account of trauma that is predicated on an ‘encounter with the Real’ that paradoxically does not take place (ibid., 55).<sup>15</sup> He notes:

The encounter [with the real] in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter – first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma (ibid).

Elsewhere Lacan refers to the Real as, ‘the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*’ (II, 164 emphasis in original). In this passage, the point where ‘words cease and all categories fail’

---

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed overview of each of these terms see Dylan Evans’ *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1996).

<sup>13</sup> In *Seminar XX*, Lacan offers the useful analogy of the Borromean knot as a visual representation of the interconnected relationship between the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. The knot consists of a group of three interlinked rings that are joined in such a way that if one is cut, all three become separated, he states: ‘the Borromean knot is the best metaphor of the fact that we proceed only on the basis of the One’ (XX, 128).

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the remainder of this work, the Real will be designated a capital ‘R’ in order to distinguish it from ‘reality.’

<sup>15</sup> Lacan refers to the relationship between the Real and repetition through the Aristotelian terms ‘tuché’ and ‘automaton’, redefining them respectively as an ‘encounter with the real’ and ‘the network of signifiers’ (XI, 52)



responds to Lacan's articulation of the Real as that which is unrepresentable, an encounter that is simultaneously 'a *missed* encounter' which expresses itself in the subject's compulsion to repeat (*Ecrits* 55 emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> In *The Return of the Real* Hal Foster (1996) discusses repetition by drawing on Lacan's definition of trauma as a (missed)encounter noting that, 'repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition' (132 emphasis in original). In this context, the (missed)encounter is continually repeated as both a defence against the traumatic event and an invocation of it. However, due to the nature of the Real as that which always resists symbolisation, such action can only invoke the Real by illustrating its inherent unrepresentability (*ibid*). As a consequence, the traumatic Real circles around the *objet a*, a focal point around which a process of displacement and substitution is enacted to compensate for the fundamental lost object, or primary lack associated with the separation from the mother.

Returning once more to *The Prestige* in an effort to unite the threads of repetition, desire and trauma that I have discussed so far, I want to reconsider the death of Angier's wife as the central constitutive loss that forms the basis for an understanding of trauma in the film. I have already identified how Julia functions as an *objet a* around which Angier's desire circulates and in doing so I have also drawn attention to that way in which the *objet a* can be aligned with the experience of trauma. However, an extension of this reading presents us with a deeper understanding of the structural mechanics of trauma that can be witnessed in the film's narrative that points to a dynamic whereby trauma is continually repeated. The key to understanding this relationship resides in comprehending the centrality of the water tank within the context of the narrative. In the film, the continued repetition of events associated with the tank function as a structural signpost that frames the narrative timeline in relation to trauma theory by enacting a discourse of repetition.<sup>17</sup>

From a Lacanian perspective, because the principle traumatic experience in the diegesis of the film is grounded in the repetition of an impossible encounter with the Real, in this instance death, the formal repetition of the (missed)encounter inches us closer to the original site of the subject's trauma

---

<sup>16</sup> By way of example, consider for a moment the loss of a loved one. Like trauma, the death cannot be symbolised, only signified through expressions of grief and shock. As such, the encounter with death is a (missed)encounter which, for this reason, has to be confronted again and again in grief. As Richard Armstrong (2012), notes in *Mourning Films*, 'it is not difficult to read death as an aspect of the Real, our profoundest fear yet impossible to speak. And like the Real, grief, the consequence of death for those left behind, lacks sense or meaning.' He continues, 'we struggle to mediate grief through a symbolic system which for Lacan is already inadequate to the expression of human desire. So grief manifest itself in affects, which are too inexpressible, too uncontainable, too awful for verbal articulation' (11).

<sup>17</sup> Beginning with the opening sequence and concluding with the final sequence there are seven overt visual references to the performance during which Julia dies placed throughout the film as well as numerous indirect references.

which is that of birth, or separation from the mother.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Angier's repeated suicide at the climax of each performance of 'The Real Transported Man' signals not only a repetition of the traumatic event (Julia's death) but also a symbolic movement towards a return to *the womb* enacted through drowning in the glass box. Julia's death is also significant in the broader context of the film as it bridges the psychoanalytic connection between women, water and the unconscious.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the scene embodies the primal experience of an intrauterine space by drawing the viewer into an aquatic mode of perception composed of muted sounds inferentially consistent with the experience of being submerged underwater.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, immediately following Julia's death we witness a scene where Angier painfully attempts to relieve the traumatic incident through a deliberately staged re-enactment that foreshadows his own apparent fate as "the man in box". In this sequence, he attempts to simulate her death by submerging his own head in water. Once again, cushioned underwater sounds accompany the non-diegetic score, however fleeting images of Julia's body also appear on-screen intermittently demonstrating both the symbolic re-enactment of the trauma as well as the repetition of the memory attached to it.

Within the diegesis of the film, if Angier's primary trauma is his inability to accept the death of his wife, what then is the spectator's relationship to this traumatic event? As viewers, we not only bear witness to Angier's trauma but also to the pattern of repetition that according to Lacan, figures among the after-effects of trauma. Referring back to the previous sequence, the past that is represented by Julia's death intrudes on the present by means of an aural bridge that connects her onstage death with Angier's subsequent re-enactment.<sup>21</sup> Of significance here are the momentary glimpses of Julia's struggle which are intercut with Angier's symbolic attempt to repeat the act. Not only do these shots make the connection between the symbolic and psychological repetition of the trauma explicit, they also function to highlight

---

<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere Lacan submits that the experience of trauma first occurs during childbirth when the infant moves from a state of perfect harmony and union with the mother into an agonizing state of separation as it is expelled from the womb. This Lacanian view of early development recalls Otto Rank's (1924) theory of birth trauma. According to Lacan, this trauma and an experience that occurs later in the developmental cycle during the 'mirror stage', registers a permanent and irreversible lack that can be traced to the physical birth in terms of the separation between mother and child, as well as the symbolic birth into language and culture (*XI*, 2). Lacan proposes that this trauma constitutes the primary basis for subsequent anxieties experienced later in life (*Family*, 70).

<sup>19</sup> This association has been discussed by psychologist Erich Neumann (92) and Otto Rank (*Myth* 55-8) who presents a series of dreams about birth that tend to be accompanied by water imagery.

<sup>20</sup> Notably Julia's attempt to voice her distress is muted in a way that positions the experience as being beyond language and located firmly in the Real.

<sup>21</sup> According to Roy M. Prendergast (1992), an aural bridge is a piece of music that links two scenes separated by both time and space creating an 'aural seam' as one scene transitions to another (276).

the role of time in understanding a structural account of trauma. Specifically, the first shot that follows Julia's death shows her apparently lifeless body floating in the tank (Figure 1). This shot ruptures the narrative timeline by returning us momentarily to the preceding events and is further complicated by a series of subsequent shots that either directly contradicts the linear framework put forth in the previous scene, or provides new material and points of view.<sup>22</sup> Of particular note is the last image in this sequence which shows Julia struggling underwater (Figure 2). This brief shot is seen considerably earlier during her death pointing towards a deliberate conflation of time as a series of linear instants. As such, this sequence and more generally the narrative taken as a whole, exhibits the characteristics of trauma in which the past is continuously repeated anachronistically in the present. This notion is aptly summarised by Todd McGowan (115) who describes the pattern of repetition as that which disrupts linear time as it erupts into the present and compels the subject to repeat the past. He remarks:

*Time is not moving toward a different future that might free us from loss but returning us back to the experience of loss. Rather than being a movement forward, it is a movement of return. The temporality of the subject is the temporality of the repetition of a fiction, which circulates around a traumatic kernel rather than proceeding in a linear fashion toward the future or toward an ultimate truth. Time provides a venue for this repetition, from which there is no respite.*

In the context of *The Prestige*, such repetition disrupts the linear progression of the narrative thereby problematizing the structure and illustrating the nature of trauma. The provision of multiple narrators adds further complications to the narrative as it addresses compound layers of time and space. Simply put, the film is composed of two primary interwoven narrative threads: Angier is reading Borden's notebook in the diegetic past, and Borden reads Angier's diary in the diegetic present. However, such simplification of the structure fails to address a third plot thread that bookends the film involving the disappearance and reappearance of a caged bird accompanied by Cutter's (Michael Caine) structural breakdown of a magic trick. This scene not only functions as an appropriate allegory for the presence of the physical doubles in the film but also acts as a structural outline of the plot that sheds light on the relationship between the trick and trauma.

As many commentators have noted, by aligning the structure of the narrative with the deconstruction of a magic trick, Nolan successfully provides a useful

---

<sup>22</sup> Other examples include an extension of the first shot that bridges the two separate scenes as well as the initial shot of Julia attempting to voice Robert's name which is presented from a different angle during the re-enactment.

analogy for the relationship between the film director and the magician (see Romney 2006; Schikel 2006).<sup>23</sup> However, more than this the structural parallel to magic tricks employed in the film offers a cinematic representation of the trick as a metaphor for trauma. This notion is acknowledged by Rachel Joseph (2011) who argues that the magic trick mirrors the traumatic experience, both onstage and onscreen as it always entails both an unbearable excess and a missed event. Referring to the opening scene of the film she writes:

*The magic trick requires an act by the magician that exceeds what audiences can or want to perceive. The smashed bird hidden from sight operates as this invisible excess, the unseen remainder. A voiceover before the film's beginning makes the stakes explicit: "Are you watching closely?" Perhaps in response to the traumatic nature of the trick, the question should be "Do you want to watch closely?" ...Performed onstage, the magician's sleight-of-hand remains invisible but occurs in plain sight, enacting the traumatic core of performance (2).*

At this point, we can return to Lacan's understanding of trauma in order to see how the trick represents a (missed)encounter with the traumatic Real. In magic, the success of the trick depends principally on two factors: the skill of the magician, and the spectator's inability to see, or perhaps their unconscious aversion to, the true nature of the trick. In *The Prestige*, the truth that the trick conceals is an encounter with the Real, an encounter that, as I have already noted, paradoxically cannot take place. Simply put, the audience both sees and fails to see the trick due to a cognitive barrier between the method and the effect. As Cutter puts it, "you're looking for the secret...but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled." It is the secret then, 'the invisible excess of the magician's performance' that most clearly represents the objet a. It is through both seeing and failing to see that they remove the threat that the truth of the illusion poses, that of an encounter with the Real, and yet also generates the necessary (missed)encounter with the Real (ibid., 10).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> As part of the special features available on the film's DVD, Nolan explicitly refers to the connection between the magician and the film director by stressing his desire for viewers to be aware of the metafilmic dimension. He states: "The Prestige is very much about film-making [...] It's also intended to suggest [...] how the film itself is spooling its narrative out to the audience. We want people really to be aware of the effect the film is having on them as it's unfolding before their eyes" (Nolan 0:17-0:42).

<sup>24</sup> The magic trick's structure of presence/absence/return can also be connected to Lacan's description of the process of repetition and its links to the trauma of disappearance and return embodied by the Fort-Da game. As was noted earlier, the significance of this game in which the child simulates its mother's disappearance and reappearance is derived from the difference or opposition between two signifiers (presence/absence) and the graphic representation of loss, or lack that separates them in the form of the slash or hyphen.

From a technical perspective, it can be considered that the use of repetition employed by Nolan through the shot-by-shot structure of the film highlights a visual regularity that emphasises various forms of repetition compulsions. Whether the form is static (framing) or dynamic (camera movements), the deliberate repetition of a series of shots and framing creates a visual rhythm that suggests a sustained endeavour to extend the notion of doubling beyond the thematic content of the film. A particularly noticeable example of this trend occurs during scenes where we learn the origins of Borden and Angier's relationship as well as the primary reason for their subsequent rivalry. In the first example, the two men sit separated by a few rows in a theatre in order to conceal their involvement in the on-stage performance.<sup>25</sup> The introduction of Borden presents a medium-shot framing him in profile facing right (Figure 3). The camera tracks rightwards to show Angier sat in another row (Figure 4).

This camera setup and movement is repeated and varied throughout the course of the film, most explicitly during the ensuing performance in which Angier's wife is accidentally killed. In this instance, the framing and movement are duplicated but the two men have now switched places (Figure 5). For David Bordwell (2013), Nolan's stylistic choices here respond to both narrative cohesion and comprehension by subtly sustaining the film's general theme. He comments, 'At this point, not only are the two men linked, but they replace one another. You could say that this variant quietly affirms the film's overall dynamic of substitution (doubles, twins, clones)' (23).<sup>26</sup> Even more than this though, the continued repetition of the angle congruent with the onlooker staring rightward off-screen, at a performance seen at several other points in the film, provides *The Prestige* with a certain structural stability. As each repetition occurs, it reminds us of the previous iteration and in doing so provides a subtle link back to the central traumatic event of the film.

In *The Prestige* the plot is cunningly constructed in such a manner that conceals certain information until well-orchestrated revelations occur. As such, the spectator is subject to a highly controlled narrative emphasising the selective nature of the visual and acoustic narration presented. In the film, the spectator's incomplete access to the narrative is constantly stressed, though he or she remains largely blind to its size and importance. This is re-iterated by Ann Heilman (2009-2010) who suggests that, 'Nolan plays with our blindness in the face of the insights we are given early on about how Borden and Angier's tricks might work' (22). She points to Cutter's insistence that Borden's act must rely on a double, and also the secret of Chung Ling Soo (Chao-Li Chi), another prominent magician whose act similarly relies on a permanent

---

<sup>25</sup> David Bordwell (2013) provides a detailed breakdown of this sequence in his collection of blog posts titled, *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages*.

<sup>26</sup> Thematic parallels are also exhibited elsewhere in the film in the form of other relationships such as that of Nikola Tesla's (David Bowie) and Thomas Edison whose own professional rivalry mirrors that of the magicians. Equally, the deaths of the magicians' wives are reflected in the magicians' own deaths, Julia by drowning, Sarah by hanging.

deception which must also be maintained in his private life (ibid., 22-3). For Heilman, these examples are just a few of the many cloaked references to the film's final conclusion that upon repeated viewings become increasingly overt. In this way, the story and the plot requires that the spectator enact a form of repetition by re-examining the text in an attempt to reconcile the events presented. However, because the film ends with Cutter's voiceover announcing that the spectator will not discover the real secret of the trick, and thus the film, Nolan succeeds in withholding the gratification associated with narrative closure.<sup>27</sup> It is this desire for a coherent narrative resolution that once again points to the constituent parts of the traumatic experience as in vain the spectator seeks out the lost object, the cause of desire, and yet it repeatedly eludes them time and time again revealing the underlying lack at the heart of existence.

Returning to the introduction of this article, the negative critical reviews of *The Prestige* have frequently focused upon the intricate narrative structure as a contentious issue. For many commentators, Nolan's decision to interweave multiple layers of time represents the overindulgence in an unnecessary gimmick. However, such claims fail to address the fundamental structure of trauma and the artistic role that it plays in the film. Not only are the mechanics of trauma enacted through a process of thematic, technical and visual repetition as part of the diegesis, the narrative also demands that repeated viewings occur in order to potentially comprehend the film's ambiguities, possibilities and contradictions. This act of repeated viewing which occurs in line with the ultimate goal of understanding the complex narrative allows the spectator to experience trauma vicariously through a process of non-diegetic repetition. What I mean by this is that a return to the text offers an opportunity to re-experience the past in the hope of attaining some sense of mastery. Of course, by intentionally constructing a deliberately ambiguous ending, Nolan ultimately retains complete authorial control and as a consequence guarantees that the narrative and thus the trauma remain unresolved, a testament to the endless nature of trauma itself.

In this article, I have emphasized the structural, visual and thematic qualities of *The Prestige* in order to argue that the circularity of the film, the overarching fragmentation of the narrative, and the inability to achieve a sense of closure in the experience of watching the film, reflects the structural mechanisms of trauma. In particular, I have placed an emphasis on a psychoanalytic understanding of repetition as being central to a critical analysis of Nolan's translation of trauma by arguing that it is through repetition that one reveals the presence of trauma. In the film, trauma is communicated on a thematic level through the textual operations that function to repeat central motifs, visual metaphors and signifiers that continually emphasize loss or

---

<sup>27</sup> Other mysteries including the scientific powers of electricity harnessed by the machine created by Tesla remain unresolved.

rather a lack. By invoking Lacan’s conception of the traumatic Real, I have also been able to analyse *The Prestige* from a structural standpoint. I have argued that not only is the film principally organised around a central traumatic event that functions as a ‘symbol of lack’, but also that the overarching structure of the film, that of a magic trick, represents a multifaceted and more powerful conception of cinematic trauma, one that I continue to argue largely corresponds to a psychoanalytic understanding of trauma.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 1



Figure 2

---

<sup>28</sup> Special thanks to Dr Jacqueline Furby, Dr Julia Moszkowicz, Sophie Cross as well as Professor Camelia Elias and the anonymous reviewers of *PsyArt* for their suggestions that helped improve this essay.



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



## References

- Armstrong, R. *Mourning Films: A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2012. Print.
- Batman Begins*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA: Warner Bros. 2005. Film.
- Bhatnagar, G. “A Psychoanalysis of The Prestige” *International Review of Psychiatry*. 21.3 (2009): 276-7. Print.
- Boothby, R. *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Bordwell, D. *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages*. Madison, Wisconsin: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2013. Print.
- Brennan, T. *Trauma, Transcendence, and Trust: Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot Thinking Loss*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Clarke, M. “The Space-Time Image: the case of Bergson, Deleuze, and Memento” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. 16. 3 (2002): 167-181. Print.
- Copjec, J. “The orthopsychic subject: film theory and the reception of Lacan” *October*. 49.12 (1989): 53-71. Print.
- . *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1994. Print.
- Evans, D. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London, Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Following*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA: Momentum Pictures. 1998. Film.
- Foster, H. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996. Print.
- Foundas, S. “That Old Black Magic” *www.villagevoice.com* 10 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 23 Feb. 2012.
- Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Standard Edition, vol. 18. London: Hogarth, 1955 [1920]. 7-64. Print.
- Grosz, E. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Harvey, D. “Review: The Prestige” *www.variety.com* 13 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 19 May. 2013.
- Heilmann, A. “Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in Affinity, The Prestige and The Illusionist” *Neo-Victorian Studies*. 2.2 (Winter 2009-2010): 18-42. Print.
- Ide, W. “The Prestige” *www.timesonline.co.uk* 2006. Web. Accessed 21 Feb. 2009.
- Isenberg, K. “The Artful Intrigue of Magic” *PsycCRITIQUES*. 52.47 (2007): No Pagination Specified. Print.
- Insomnia*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA: Buena Vista International. 2002. Film.
- Jolin, D. “The Prestige” *www.empire.co.uk* 2006. Web. Accessed 19 May. 2013.
- Joseph, R. “Disappearing in Plain Sight: The Magic Trick and the Missed Event” *Octopus: A Visual Studies Journal*. 5 (2011): 1-14. Print.
- Kania, A. ed. *Memento: Philosophers on Film*. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Lacan, J. *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual*. Trans. C. Gallagher. 1938. Unpublished. Web. Accessed 19 May. 2013.
- . “Le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le réel” *Bulletin de l'Association freudienne* 1. (1982 [1953]): 4-13. Print.
- . *Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. J. A. Miller. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977. Print.
- . *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. A. Sheridan. London: Tavistock Publications, 1977b. Print.

- . “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet” *Yale French Studies*, Nos. 55–56 (1977c): 11–52. Print.
- . *Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. J. A. Miller. Trans. S. Tomaselli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988 [1978]. Print.
- . *Book: VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.-A. Miller. Trans. D. Porter. New York: W.W Norton & Company, Inc. 1992 [1986]. Print
- . *Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore, 1972–1973*. Ed. J.-A. Miller. Trans. B . Fink. New York: W.W Norton, 1998 [1975]. Print.
- Lasalle, M. “Now you see it -- but who cares?” *www.sfgate.com* 20 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2012.
- Little, W. G. “Surviving Memento” *Narrative*. 13.1 (2005): 67–83. Print.
- Lyons, D. “Vengeance, The Powers of the False, and the Time-Image in Christopher Nolan’s Memento” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*. 2.1 (2006): 127–135. Print.
- Mathews, J. “Big Tricks Pack Little Treat” *www.nydailynews.com* 20 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2012.
- McGowan, T. *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012. Print.
- Memento*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA: Pathé Distribution Ltd. 2000. Film.
- Nesselson, L. “Memento: Review” *www.variety.com* 14 Sept. 2000. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2012.
- Neumann, E. *The Great Mother an Analysis of the Archetype*. 2nd ed. Trans. R. Manheim. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1963. Print.
- Parker, J. A. “Remembering the Future Memento: the Reverse of Time’s Arrow and the Defects of Memory” *Kronoscope*. 4.2 (2004): 239–257. Print.
- Pevere, G. “Memento: Review” *www.thestar.com* 2000. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2006.
- Phillips, M. “Review for 'The Prestige'” Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2012.
- Prendergast, R.M., *Film Music: A Neglected Art*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992. Print.
- Rank, O. *The Trauma of Birth*. Leipzig: Inter. Psycho. Verlag, 1924. Print.
- . *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth*. 2nd ed. Trans. by Gregory C. Richter and E. James Lieberman. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press. 2004 [1922]. Print.
- Rea, S. “‘The Prestige’ is not so much magic as it is a truly mixed-up mystery” *www.philly.com* 20 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2012.
- Romney, J. “The Prestige (12A)” *www.independent.co.uk* 12 Nov. 2006. Web. Accessed 12 Mar. 2013.
- Schickel, R. “That Old-Fashioned Magic on the Big Screen” *www.time.com* 20 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 05 Jan. 2014.
- Schmid, T. *Narrative memory and the impact of trauma on individuals with reference to one short sequence rom “Memento”*. Santa Cruz, CA: GRIN Verlag, 2004. Print.
- Scott, A.O. “Backward Reel the Grisly Memories” *www.nytimes.com* 16 Mar. 2001. Web. Accessed 22 Jun. 2011.

- . “Two Rival Magicians, and Each Wants the Other to Go Poof” *www.nytimes.com* 20 Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed 05 Jan. 2014.
- The Prestige*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA: Warner Bros. 2006. Film.
- Thomas, P. “Victimage and Violence: Memento and Trauma Theory” *Screen*. 44.2 (2003): 200-207. Print.
- Turan, K. 2001. “Backward Unreels the Thriller” *www.latimes.com* 16 Mar. 2001. Web. Accessed 22 Mar. 2009.
- Walters, B. “The Prestige” *www.timeout.com* 7 Nov. 2006. Web. Accessed 4 Aug. 2010.
- Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. Print.
- . “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan” *The Žižek Reader*. Eds. E. Wright and E. Wright. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. 9-11. Print.