

The Look on Their Faces: Transcending Lack in Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*

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Abstract

This essay offers a psychoanalytical reading of Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006) by principally focusing on the discourse of lack. I argue that the visual, structural and thematic composition of the film provides a means to confront the fundamental sense of lack – a central tenant of Lacanian psychoanalysis – at the heart of being. In particular, I contend that Nolan foregrounds lack by using reflexive techniques that call attention to the film's production processes which in turn, highlight the spectator's desire for a sense of (unattainable) unity.

In the past decade there has been a renewed scholarly interest in the work of the French poststructuralist and psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. (see Badiou 2009 [2006]; Shepherdson 2009; Eysers 2012) In particular, several philosophers and academics have sought to engage with the Lacanian concept of the Real and the apparent unknowability of the unconscious through an exploration of the cinematic medium. (see McGowan and Kunkle 2004; McGowan 2012; Jagodzinski 2012; Žižek 2013) This resurgence of interest follows a sustained and damning critique of early Lacanian film theory, perhaps nowhere more evident than in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's *Post-Theory* collection of essays.¹ In their anthology, they sought to challenge the prevailing hegemony of Lacanian film scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s by promoting a cognitivist and empirical alternative.² The continued use of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the fields of contemporary cultural and film studies may seem somewhat surprising then given the apparent dismissal of Lacan's influence during the mid-nineties. However, more recent attempts to engage with Lacan's work have sought to reconsider the apparent misconceptions outlined by cognitive film theory through an engagement with the third register of

existence in Lacan's tripartite model of the unconscious – the Real, or that which lies beyond signification. (Žižek 1989) In addition, there has also been a sustained critical effort to readdress a number of apparent misunderstandings based on Lacan's work focussing in particular on the gaze, desire, fantasy and subjectivity.³ (see Copjec 1989; 1994) Rather than offering a complete departure from the previous incarnations of Lacanian film theory, this essay will attempt to bridge the perceived divide between the earlier efforts made by film theorists who sought to adapt Lacan's work, and more recent applications of Lacanian psychoanalysis within film studies by principally focussing on the discourse of lack.

For Lacan. (1982 [1953]), the fundamental structure of the unconscious is a three-way confluence of what he called the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. According to Clayton Crockett, much of Lacan's earlier psychoanalytic contributions focused on the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic whilst placing a limited amount of importance on the Real. (148) However, Lacan's later work is marked by a distinct change in emphasis as his account of the Real evolves to become a more central part of his theory alongside other concepts such as the gaze, the Thing (*das Ding*), the *objet petit a*, and *jouissance* (enjoyment). In their anthology *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle note that despite Lacan's own movement away from his initial discourse surrounding the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, at the same time many Lacanian film theorists were rather ironically engaged in a systematic appropriation of those earlier elements. (xvii) What follows is a brief overview of early Lacanian film theory which in its very essence emphasised the process of spectator identification understood through the importance of the mirror stage and the register of the Imaginary.

Contrary to the collective use of the term *imaginary*, in Lacanian psychoanalysis the Imaginary does not refer to the realm of fantasy, but rather to how the ego is formed in relation to an Other during the "mirror stage". (*Écrits*, 1) In his concept of the mirror stage, Lacan describes the experience of an infant observing itself for the first time in a mirror or equivalent. (Ibid., 1-6) In this moment, according to Elizabeth Grosz the child (mis)identifies with or (mis)recognises an image of itself as a whole autonomous being and thus begins to acquire a sense of identity through (mis)identification with an external image "independent of the mother". (32) This process of (mis)recognition, Lacan writes, "situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction".

(*Ecrits* 2) In other words, the child is deceived by the illusion of unity which produces an imagined sense of agency. This is followed by a state of “paranoic alienation” as the subject’s apparent wholeness begins to dissolve in opposition to an Other.⁴ (Ibid., 4) What this means is that from the moment the child first experiences itself as a whole, a conflict emerges between the retrospective Imaginary ideal, or “Ideal-I” that the unified self represents and the experience of lack inflicted by the organising structures outside of the self, or what Lacan called the Symbolic. (Ibid., 2)⁵ As such, the child forthwith exists in a state of lack which Lacan refers to as the *manque à être*, or the “want to be”. (II 223) According to Grosz, “[f]rom this time on, lack, gap, splitting will be its mode of being.” She goes on to say that, “[t]his gap will propel it into seeking an identificatory [sic] image of its own stability and permanence (the imaginary), and eventually language (the symbolic) by which it hopes to fill the lack”.⁶ (35) Psychoanalytic film theorists quickly appropriated the idea of lack as being central to being but also to the spectator’s experience of the cinema. (see Baudry 1974; 1975; Metz 1982).

According to a number of early Lacanian film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, the analogy between Lacan’s infant and the cinematic spectator is clear: like the child, the spectator obtains a false sense of mastery relative to the on-screen events which serve as a mirror through which the subject constructs a sense of self as a result of what Metz calls the process of “primary” or “secondary identification”.⁷ (56) Simply put, the analogy comparing the mirror stage to the filmic image is based on the perceptual mastery experienced by the individual when in front of both. In the context of the cinema, the imaginary dimension of the screened image allows the spectator to temporarily overcome the experience of lack through the provision of a complete (imaginary) world in which they are afforded a sense of unmitigated power.⁸ As Metz puts it in *The Imaginary Signifier*, whilst watching a film:

It is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am all-perceiving. All-perceiving as one says all powerful (this is the famous gift of “ubiquity” the film makes its spectator); all-perceiving, too, because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance; absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and a great ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive I, the instance, in other words,

which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film).⁹
(Ibid., 48)

Metz furthers this by adding that “when I say ‘I see’ the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive and it is also what I release since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium.” He continues, “I need only close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet records”. (Ibid., 51) By constituting the spectator as an “all-seeing” subject who is simultaneously both the spectator *and* the producer of the film, the cinema provides the temporary false experience of mastery over the fictional world within the filmic discourse. (Ibid., 53)

In appropriating the Lacanian notion of the Imaginary and the mirror stage, Metz frames his discussion of the cinema around the “play of presence-absence” between the act of perception which takes place in the spatial and temporal present, and the pre-recorded object which by nature is always absent and past. (Ibid., 40) He states that, “[m]ore than the other arts...the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is none the less the only signifier present”. (Ibid., 45) On the basis of the separation between the image and the spectator and also between the presence and absence of the filmed object, the spectator identifies with the technological systems of representation including the omnipotent camera movements and the seamless continuity editing of shots. These elements combine to establish a regime of visibility that reinforces the spectator’s false sense of power. However, this paradigm will only function if the spectator is limited to an unconscious awareness of the cinematic apparatus and as such, continues to maintain a sense of voyeurism and unauthorized scopophilic power.¹⁰ (Ibid., 97) If the spectator becomes consciously aware of the systems of representation that usually operate to conceal the technical-mechanical nature of film production, the illusion of power disintegrates. (Ibid., 57) When this happens, the spectator is reminded that the film is not a window into a private world but rather a product of labour created for mass consumption. This is why, according to Metz the classical narrative “obliterates all traces of enunciation, and masquerades as story” by seeking to minimise the camera’s presence preferring instead that it functions as an absent yet structuring point of view. (Ibid., 91)

Drawing on the work of Baudry and Metz, Noël Carroll argues that the proposed spectator/screen relationship taking place in classical narrative cinema ostensibly relies on the apparent conflation of the screened image with the real world. He writes, “[w]e shall see that there is a general tendency in contemporary film theory to maintain that film spectators are rapt in the illusion that what is represented – the cinematic referents – are really present”. (*Mystifying* 43) Carroll reiterates this point elsewhere by means of an example: “No-one thinks that the Empire State Building is in the screening room during *King Kong*. How could it be?”. (“Conspiracy” 399) However, Carroll’s emphasis on this division between realism and formalism appears somewhat reductive given Metz’s own comments to the contrary. He states, “the audience is not duped by the diegetic illusion, it “knows” that the screen presents no more than a fiction. And yet, it is of vital importance for the correct unfolding of the spectacle that this make-believe be scrupulously respected”. (70) Simply put, the spectator is aware that the film is a fiction but is willing to disavow this truth for the sake of maintaining the cinematic illusion, a sentiment similarly echoed in the final moments of *The Prestige* (2006), a period film centred on the conflict between two competing magicians. In what are perhaps the most important lines of the film and more generally a defining example of Christopher Nolan’s auteurism, Angier (Hugh Jackman) says to his rival, “you never understood why we did this. The audience knows the truth. The world is simple, miserable, solid all the way through. But if you can fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder.” Todd McGowan has also acknowledged the importance of this scene by drawing attention to the spectator’s temporary experience of transcendence caused by the work of art. He notes, “[a]s Angier (and Nolan) conceive it, this is precisely what the deception of the magic act or the work of art does.” He continues, “It lifts us out of the situation in order to create a new present in which we transcend our natural being”. (*The Fictional* 107) Of course, given that *being* is according to Lacan defined by lack, the work of art allows the spectator to experience a feeling that the lack can be temporary filled. (*II* 223) The appeal of the cinema thus depends on an unconscious awareness of the fundamental lack in relation to the mirror image through which subjectivity is obtained.¹¹

French psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller developed a theory of suture to account for the structuring function of the lack to Lacanian psychoanalysis. “Suture”, he writes “names the subject’s relation to the chain of its discourse. One will see that it figures there as the lacking element, in the

form of a placeholder". (41) In essence, suture not only implies the stitching together of Lacan's divided subject akin to the surgical closing of a wound, but also a temporary displacement of the lack at the heart of existence illustrated by Lacan in the allegory of the Fort-Da game.¹² As applied to film, the notion of suture has been appropriated by French theorist and critic Jean-Pierre Oudart in an article originally published in *Cahiers du cinema*. In his article "Cinema and Suture," Oudart's, basic contention is that classical narrative cinema produces a temporary subject-position for the spectator via the arrangement of interlocking shots that negotiate their understanding of a coherent, unified "filmic space". ("Cinema and" 37) This system, as Oudart notes, is primarily composed of the "shot/reverse shot". (Ibid) The first shot in the series implies a space off-screen, behind the camera, "the fourth side, a pure field of absence". (Ibid., 39) The following shot reveals that something occupies that off-screen space.¹³ Thus, according to Oudart the spectator comprehends the organisation of the filmic space and becomes stitched into the film.

Oudart argues that this system of shot/reverse shot evident in classical narrative cinema produces a "pure expanse of *jouissance*" in the subject comparable to that of the child's (mis)identification of itself in the mirror stage. (Ibid., 41) Like the child, the spectator is momentarily absorbed in an instant of illusory (mis)identification when presented with what appears to be a complete or unified image. However, this imaginary relationship with the image is threatened by the spectator's recognition of the film's frame and therefore of off-screen space and crucially of absence in general. For Oudart, the issue of absence, or lack is central to an understanding of the spectator/screen relationship as it represents a threat to the unified filmic space. He writes, "The revelation of this absence is the key moment in the fate of the image, since it introduces the image into the order of the signifier and the cinema into the order of discourse". (Ibid., 42) This is to say that the absence reveals the film as a signifying practice, as a constructed and enunciated operation thus exposing it as a system of signs, symbols and codes. However, since classical narrative cinema generally seeks to avoid soliciting the spectator's attention, the subsequent reverse shot seeks to neutralise the threat of absence by restoring the spectator's imaginary unity with the image.¹⁴ According to Oudart, in this moment "the appearance of a lack perceived as a Some One (the Absent One) is followed by its abolition by someone (or something) placed within the same field". (Ibid., 37) In this way, the organisation of images produces a signifying chain that transcends the spectator's subject-position within the cinema by diverting

attention away from the mechanisms of the film's production processes. Simply put, off-screen space becomes on-screen space and the play between presence and absence is temporarily resolved thus masking the film as a product of industrial capitalism. At this basic level, suture accounts for the way in which the spectator is able to remain focused across conventional edits without losing the narrative, intellectual, or emotional connection with the film.

Figure 4



Figure 5



I will now take a rudimentary example from *The Prestige* in order to illustrate this concept. The scene begins with a shot of Angier's feet as the sound of a bouncing ball approaches (Shot 1/Figure 4). The auditory and visual information are subsequently aligned as the ball, which is associated

with his rival throughout the film, emerges from the bottom of the frame. The spectator takes a moment to consider the possible connection between the ball and its unidentified owner before realising that they have become aware of the film's framing by imagining the unseen space, and in turn the identity of the person that they cannot see, both of which are absent and hidden by the camera. It is in this moment that the spectator is alerted to the meaning(s) of the filmed event and in turn, the limitations of the enframed image. This produces the effect of anxiety in the spectator as they experience the "haunting presence" of the Absent One within the unseen, hidden space in relation to the image. (Ibid., 41) Daniel Dayan offers a particularly clear overview of this process in "The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema." He writes:

When the viewer discovers the frame - the first step in reading the film - the triumph of his former *possession* of the image fades out. The viewer discovers that the camera is hiding things, and therefore distrusts it and the frame itself which he now understands to be arbitrary. He wonders why the frame is what it is. This radically transforms his mode of participation - the unreal space between characters and/or objects is no longer perceived as pleasurable. It is now the space which separates the camera from the characters. The latter have lost their quality of presence. The spectator discovers that his possession of space was only partial, illusory. He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the gaze of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent. (29 emphasis in original)

Continuing my analysis, the subsequent reverse-shot reveals what is absent (the Absent One) which in this case is the imagined space and the approaching assailant (Shot 2/Figure 5). This shot provides the suture that closes the gap with the previous shot through what Oudart refers to as "the abolition of the Absent One and its resurrection in someone". ("Cinema and" 37) In other words, the reverse shot showing the previously unseen space and the character neutralises the potential threat to the security and coherence of the filmic space and as such, the unity of the diegetic world is continuously stressed at the expense of the effacement of film as a formative construction.¹⁵

According to David Bordwell, Oudart's argument is suggestive for reasons that are inadvertently foregrounded in his account of suture such as the question of agency – that is, who is staging the events and for whom? (111) Bordwell contradicts several other accounts of suture by suggesting that Oudart does not consider the Absent One to be a diegetic character that is momentarily hidden from view.¹⁶ Instead, Bordwell suggests that Oudart believes it is the author or narrator who can be identified with the Absent One. (Ibid) In particular, Bordwell emphasises the implied off-screen “*field or zone*” highlighted during the first shot as a register of the author's absent yet structuring presence. (Ibid emphasis in original) Specifically, whilst the off-screen presence is constructed by the viewer, it must be first implied by the author. What this means is that whilst the system of suture intrinsically functions to mask the mechanisms of film production, it simultaneously cannot help but point towards the role of a phantom creator whose presence is continually felt albeit at the level of the filmic space. However, a director can *overtly* call attention to the system of suture and therefore their own creative presence by, for instance, “slowing the rhythm of shot/reverse shot cutting”, displaying the “oblique camera angle” or the complete denial of the reverse shot. (Ibid) In doing so, they disrupt the process and draw attention to the artificial nature of what is presented thus producing in the spectator an active engagement with the text.

In *The Prestige*, Nolan's thematic focus on magic permits a broader examination of the artist's role within the process of creation through the analogy of the magician and the illusion. According to Todd McGowan, the narrative of the film foregrounds the relationship between the magician and the audience as an analogous parallel to the director and the spectators of the film itself. (*The Fictional* 118) He writes, “Nolan's exploration of magic in *The Prestige* is also an exploration of cinema....Like the magic act, the film creates through sacrifice and then hides the sacrifice – the labor [sic] that goes into making the film”. However, McGowan also goes on to state that “[w]hile cinema hides the sacrifice of labor [sic], it also creates transcendence through its fiction. But Nolan's film seeks to connect the moment of transcendence with the necessity of sacrifice”. (Ibid., 113) For McGowan, what is significant about *The Prestige* is that unlike other mainstream films, the role of sacrifice in the process of creation is not marginalised at the expense of the effacement of film as a formative construction. Even more than this, McGowan contends that Nolan seems to desire that the sacrifice be acknowledged as being essential to a *whole* transcendental experience otherwise inaccessible. However, McGowan later

reminds us that whilst film can *attempt* to expose the cinematic illusion, it ultimately cannot succeed as it will always remain part of the forgery that it documents. (Ibid., 117) How then, can film attempt to articulate the sacrifice involved in the process of creation? McGowan offers one possible answer that resides in an understanding of the film's patterns of shot-to-shot editing. He writes:

The film must deceive the spectator in a way that draws attention to the deception – not to deconstruct it or debunk it, but rather to reveal what it produces. Through editing, the chief tool of deception that the cinema offers, Nolan creates the illusion that a truth exists beyond what appears on the screen. He does this most often by cutting from a scene before the action concludes. The cut allows the spectator to think that the conclusion follows evidently from what has already transpired – that the elided events would not significantly change our impression of the scene – but this is entirely deceptive.¹⁷ (Ibid., 117)

For example, during Borden's first performance of his signature trick: "The Transported Man", in which a person disappears into an empty doorway and re-appears instantaneously through another unconnected to the first, Nolan deliberately conceals the trick's final conclusion. The scene begins with a shot of Borden on-stage (Figure 5) followed by a reverse shot taken from behind his body which highlights a disguised Angier arriving at the show.

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



The subsequent shot/reverse shot exchange confirms the filmic space with Angier on the one side staring rightward (Shot 1/Figure 6) immediately followed by an eye-line match representing his perspective of Borden's performance (Shot 2/Figure 7).¹⁸ Of particular interest, though, are the closing shots of this sequence in which the final shot of Borden's act (Shot 3/Figure 8) precedes a sudden cut to a different member of the audience known to Angier as Cutter (Michael Caine).¹⁹ In this final shot of Cutter (Shot 4/Figure 9), the traditional shot/reverse shot dynamic is ruptured as the spectator is denied the subsequent reverse shot of the trick's finale implied by Cutter's glance off-screen. The decision to omit the trick's prestige performs two primary functions. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that by doing so the spectator does not witness the physical double that the trick produces (as a later extended repetition of the

sequence reveals).²⁰ However, more importantly, the decision to deny the spectator a visual representation of the final act confronts their natural awareness of the traditional shot/reverse pattern of editing thus foregrounding the author as a creative source. In this regard, Borden's first performance of "The Transported Man" is particularly significant as unlike other examples where Nolan cuts from a scene prior to its formal conclusion, in this instance the spectator is clearly aware of what is deliberately absent and as such, is *overtly* alerted to the system of suture and in turn, the cinematic apparatus.

Figure 8



Figure 9



Nolan has said that what interests him about the medium of film is the prospect of character subjectivity. He notes, "Film, it seems to me, is this fantastic medium for drawing the audience into somebody else's point of view, more so than books, in a funny sort of way". (Kaufman, 2014) Elsewhere on the DVD commentary for *Insomnia* (2002) he also remarks,

“A big part of my interest in filmmaking is an interest in showing the audience a story through a character’s point of view. It’s interesting to try and do that and maintain a relatively natural look”.²¹ As a general rule, in *The Prestige* the anchor of axis or 180-degree line is principally focused around Angier and the eye-lines are largely consistent with his position (see Figure 7). It is perhaps surprising, then, given this apparent emphasis that we are provided with a momentary glimpse of Cutter in the previous sequence when a cut to Angier’s reaction would have been more logical given the prior shot/reverse shot dynamic. As it stands, the glimpse of Cutter seemingly functions to simply engineer the subsequent discussion that takes place between the Angier and Cutter in the next scene. In their book, *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages* David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson suggest that such a decision to repeat the same camera setup with a different character functions to combine narrative coherence and production efficiency.²² They write:

Nolan’s stylistic choices [...] are tidily traditional in their efforts to create clarity and their quiet channeling of narrative information. And as in the old studio days, those choices answer to two pressures: favouring narrative coherence and comprehension on the one hand, and favouring production efficiency on the other. It’s cheaper and easier to repeat camera setups when you can. (27)

Certainly, in this instance the sequence’s aesthetic construction serves to further the narrative by principally negating the necessity for superfluous exposition, which would in this instance involve the visualisation of an altogether separate performance in order to facilitate the subsequent conversation between Angier and Cutter. However, if the glimpse of Cutter merely functions to enable the following exchange between the two men, then it is worth questioning why Cutter is shown at all when an addition of a piece of dialogue would have performed the same function. The reason for this line of examination is that Cutter’s placement at what appears to be on first viewing the same performance not only ruptures the previous shot/reverse shot setup but also complicates the narrative flow when it is revealed that he is in fact watching an altogether separate performance.²³ Such a subtle manipulation of time and space may in most cases go unnoticed as in general, for realistic purposes, a filmmaker will maintain adequate spatial and temporal orientation to provide continuity across different shots. However, in this instance the decision to include Cutter’s appearance in the audience not only foregrounds the system of suture

through denial but also the discrepancy between the visual and auditory display of information thus highlighting the author as the central creative source. In essence, the diegetic sound of the ball bouncing across two distinct spatiotemporal dimensions combined with Cutter's look directed off-screen constitutes not only a denial of the frame as a limit but also a breach in linear time demonstrating Nolan's authorial position as the creator of meaning.

By not only precluding the operation of suture, but by also denying the logic that would enable it, at times Nolan provides a means to confront the fundamental sense of lack – a central tenant of Lacanian psychoanalysis – at the heart of being. Specifically, if we consider that suture provides a sense of (false) unity, albeit temporarily, the lack inherent in the subject then a rupture in the suturing process foregrounds the lack, resulting in an active engagement with the text. This type of spectatorship is largely incompatible with classical narrative cinema which aims to convince the spectator of the legitimacy of certain subjectivities by continually stressing their consumption, and passive acceptance of the traditional hierarchical structure of Western societies.²⁴ However, Nolan does not simply expose the suturing process in the manner of an avant-garde filmmaker such as Chantal Akerman or Jean-Luc Godard.²⁵ Whereas their reflexive techniques are designed to distance the spectator from the diegetic action and therefore generate a sense of self-awareness, Nolan opts instead to challenge the classical mode of spectatorship by invoking reflexive techniques to involve the spectator in a re-consideration of the relationship between the film and the viewer. For an appropriate example, consider the opening sequence from *The Prestige* which offers us an insight into the director's approach.

The film opens on a vista of black top hats scattered in a glade as Borden's accompanying voiceover poses the question, "Are you watching closely?" before an immediate cut to black. This brazen challenge confronts the viewer with what appears to be an open acknowledgement of the cinematic apparatus. The question posed seems to be directed towards the audience as opposed to anyone within the diegesis as there is no-one else in the frame for the disembodied voice to address.²⁶ And yet, the supporting evidence that would suggest this is a reflexive moment in which the constructedness and illusory quality of the narrative is overtly highlighted, is seemingly masked by its brevity and ambiguous position as part of a diegetic credit sequence.²⁷ What I mean by this is that given the duration of the opening shot and the context in which it is presented, it is potentially easy for the

spectator to miss the scene entirely or view it differently from the rest of the film due to the explicit fusion of fiction, commerce and industry. Therefore, whilst the scene ostensibly detracts from the fictional integrity of the work, it does so in a way that can be accounted for given the relative self-contained nature of the sequence. This seemingly irreconcilable difference between on the one hand, an awareness of the true nature of the cinematic reality which is hidden in the text, and on the other, the general cognitive and perceptual processes used to understand the image continues in the following scene.

The sequence begins as Cutter appears to be narrating the three constitutive parts of every magic trick to a young girl, whom we later identify as being Borden's daughter.²⁸ Although the passage is rather lengthy, it is worth including in its entirety as part of what follows is derived from a linguistic analysis of the language used within it. He says:

Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called "The Pledge". The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows *you* this object. Perhaps he asks *you* to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course it probably isn't. The second act is called "The Turn". The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now *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. But you wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; *you* have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call "The Prestige".
(emphasis added)

During this monologue, Nolan intersperses several shots of Borden watching Angier's version of "The Transported Man", which when combined within the context of the narration prompts the spectator to perceive a fundamental link between the two separate events.²⁹ At the end of his narration, Cutter is revealed to be speaking to a courtroom in a third sequence which had, up to this point, remained hidden from the spectator. Throughout the sequence, it would be natural to assume that the spectator's presence is openly acknowledged due to a combination of the actor's direct look at the camera (Figure 10) and several explicit references in the narration to an implied spectator as "you."³⁰ The omniscient style of

editing that privileges a number of spatiotemporal layers and Cutter's voice as the bearer of knowledge also seems to indicate a distinct awareness of a spectator whose presence is not only implied but explicitly addressed.³¹ However, by concealing the third diegetic space Nolan succeeds in manipulating the conventional expectations associated with voice-over narration by linking the non-diegetic and the diegetic world by means of a dialogue sound bridge.³² Specifically, it is the transition to a piece of synchronous dialogue that neutralises the threat posed by the voice-over narration, which precisely because of its non-diegetic status insinuates the spectator's presence.³³ In other words, the shift on the soundtrack from voice-over to off-screen dialogue, or what Mary Ann Doane calls "voice-off" dialogue, reaffirms the aesthetic structures of the cinematic apparatus that are traditionally organised around the heterogeneity of the cinema as a disavowal of the spectator's presence. (34)

Figure 10



Whilst all filmmakers anticipate the spectator's gaze or presence given that they have created the film for the purpose of being seen, such an acknowledgement within the diegesis would inevitably expose the relationship between the spectator and the screen as one of an overt denial of the cinematic imaginary.³⁴ The disclosure that Cutter's narration is not *directly* intended for the spectator alongside a revised understanding of the voice-over as voice-off dialogue combines to re-establish the illusion of unity that is central to the cinematic apparatus. In short, despite the temporary absence of the actor on-screen, the movement between voice-off dialogue and synchronous on-screen dialogue is experienced as a reassertion of the diegetic space and thus, the film world. As Doane argues, "The voice-off

deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional word which the camera does not register.” She continues, “In its own way, it accounts for lost space”. (Ibid., 40) Kaja Silverman points out that although voice-off dialogue could be considered to be a challenge to the centrality of the image, by introducing the “threat of absence” it commonly supports the unity of the cinematic text by “carving out a space beyond the frame of one shot for the next to recover”. (*The Acoustic* 48) Thus, in much the same way that the process of suture produces a coherent visual filmic space, the emphasis on diegetic speech in classical narrative cinema also contributes to the illusion of reality. The combination of sound and editing in the opening sequence from *The Prestige* illustrates as much via the *impression* of reality that is constituted and sustained by the temporal arrangement of individual images combined with the auditory supply of information. However, the crucial point remains that whilst the overall construction of this sequence conceals the methods of cinematic production, it does so in such a way that highlights the reflexive strategies that Nolan employs to complicate what would otherwise be a straightforward reading if it were organised in line with the principles of classical narrative cinema. What this opening sequence amounts to then is an indication of Nolan’s central filmmaking project which accounts for the complex bond between the spectator and the diegetic world by refusing to deny the sacrifice involved in the process of creation. In this example, it is Nolan’s willingness to address the spectator both directly and indirectly that poses a threat to the fictional integrity of the work. At the same time, Nolan chooses to do so in a way that requires the spectator to become an active participant in the construction of the film text, thus furthering their investment in the significance of the images on the screen. What Nolan is emphasising then is a revised perspective on the nature of art that acknowledges the value of sacrifice as a path to a more transcendent experience.

At a basic level, Nolan constructs the discourse of *The Prestige* in a way that emphasises an elemental connection between the magician and the artist. In the magician’s performance, making objects or people disappear and reappear produces irreparable gaps in existence. These acts remind us of our infinite fallibility and capacity for escapist transcendence beyond the realms of human knowledge and traditional explanation. Similarly, the essence of a work of art is imbued with the capability of mitigating the subject’s experience of being by transcending the limited and finite material world. The idea of art as transcendent is encapsulated by Angier’s belief that works

of art can generate a transcendent belief evident in the spectator's look. This notion is supported by McGowan. He says:

Angier recognizes that there are no naturally occurring miracles, that there is no transcendence in the given world. The world is banal and mundane; it offers us nothing to believe in. But the work of art introduces a cut into this mundane world and suggests that something exists beyond it. Through the deception that they create, magic and art break through the solidity of the world and allow audiences to see a fissure where none naturally exist. Without the lie, without the magician's conjuring trick, we would remain stuck in the monotony of being. (*The Fictional* 106-107)

As a work of fiction, *The Prestige* allows us to bear witness to the dialectical relationship between the act of sacrifice and the experience of transcendence that emerges from the artist's creation. In this way, the film explores cinema's transcendent capacity to temporarily liberate the spectator from the experience of lack inherent in being. However, it should be noted that just as for Lacan, the sense of lack can never be filled, so the film ultimately also fails to offer the sense of (false) wholeness that the subject desires. This being said, unlike classical narrative cinema the filmmaker's motive is not to perpetuate the continued cloaking of the cinematic apparatus in order to provide such unity, but rather to generate a more active awareness on the part of the spectator, one which involves acknowledging the lack inherent in being. As such, the experience of watching the film is deliberately saturated with lack as it continually calls attention to its own production processes. Given that the spectator is aware, on some level, that the images on the screen are constructed and controlled by an absent yet structuring presence, if the author becomes increasingly visible, as is the case with *The Prestige*, the viewing subject cannot help but re-consider their own relationship to the cinematic image. However, providing that Nolan's use of reflexive strategies continues to effectively draw the spectator into the film rather than distance them from the text, he is able to continually reiterate the value of the connection between the act of creation and the act of sacrifice. McGowan comments that:

Nolan always shows the cost of this transcendence, a cost that Hollywood most often takes great pains to hide. By submitting to the artistic fiction, we enter into a beyond, but it is a beyond that always brings us back to the repetition of sacrifice. The new that

emerges through deception is not what we have lost but our loss itself. (Ibid., 122)

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the film's closing narration, a partial repeat of Cutter's opening monologue that reminds the audience they will not discover the real secret of the film. He says, "Now 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."³⁵ Not only does this statement point towards the impossibility of narrative closure thus affirming the overall structure of lack that supports the film's construction, it also reveals the fundamental deception of cinema that the film highlights. Specifically, cinema deceives its spectators by tempting them to "enter into a beyond" - a beyond that exists because of their investment in the images onscreen - that accounts for their willingness to debate the nature the images in all their minutiae on blogs, web forums, and in academic volumes. (Ibid) For example, in classical narrative cinema the viewer perceives the diegetic world in such a way that allows them to reconcile the gaps between the real world and the filmed events by seeking an imaginary conclusion which satisfies the need for a persuasive and comprehensible narrative. In doing so, the film thus provides a (false) sense of wholeness. Such investment in *The Prestige* will inevitably lead viewers to speculate about the ending in a manner that points towards the existence of a truth that extends beyond what is presented onscreen.³⁶ However, as the film expressly seeks to undermine the traditional focus on the screen opting instead to highlight the work that goes into constructing the fiction, such (false) wholeness is unobtainable. By the same token, this is why, according to McGowan those who merely disregard the film on the basis of their ability to decipher the simplicity behind Borden's illusion are inherently misguided. He comments, "one of the chief complaints of the film was that they [viewers] saw the end coming from very early on." He states, "But trying to figure out a film like *The Prestige* indicates precisely the kind of investment in the idea of truth that the film works to overturn. Those who solve the film's riddle simultaneously miss the film's point". (Ibid., 199) To put it another way, dismissing the film because of the apparent rudimentary nature of its plot is to do so at the expense of the labour involved in the process of its creation. Rather than hide the techniques that call attention to the cinematic apparatus, the film foregrounds its own narrative and visual composition through reflexive strategies that expose the sacrifice. In doing so, it is the discerning viewer who is able to transcend the relative prosaic of everyday life through an enriched experience of the work of art which

encapsulates both the spectacle of the story and a recognition of the sacrifice integral to the process. As such, *The Prestige* makes clear that the film's source of meaning is derived from the overall narration, not in the end towards which we are always arriving.

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Notes

¹ See also Thomas Doherty's *After Theory* (1990), Paul Bové's *In the Wake of Theory* (1992), Martin McQuillan's *Post Theory* (1999) and Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003).

² For a further discussion of the debate between Theory and post-Theory see Matthew Flisfeder. (67-95)

³ Lacanian theory was particularly relevant to screen theorists during the 1970s and 1980s who drew upon his work in order to develop new conceptions of film ideology and spectatorship. French theorists such as Jean-Pierre Oudart (1969), Jean-Louis Baudry (1974; 1975), Jean-Louis Commolli (1980) and Christian Metz (1982) alongside British theorists writing for *Screen* including Peter Wollen (1972), Laura Mulvey (1975), Colin McCabe (1976) and Stephen Heath (1976; 1977/78) are central to the development of a psychoanalytic theory of film rooted in Lacan's re-reading of Freud.

⁴ According to Dylan Evans Lacan draws a distinction between the "little other" and "the big Other" that would remain central throughout the rest of his work. (132) According to Evans, "The little other is the other who but a reflection and projection of the Ego. He is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image". (Ibid., 132-133) In contrast, the big Other transcends the specular image because it cannot be assimilated through identification.

(Ibid., 133) It is therefore inscribed into the Symbolic with language and the law, “The other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject”. (Ibid)

⁵ Lacan’s account of the Symbolic order primarily refers to the social and linguistic realm according to the law of the father, also designated as the “name of the father”. (XI 230) Accordingly, the notion of the Symbolic constitutes the subject’s relations to itself, culture and wider social and family networks. (Ibid) From a Lacanian perspective, it is the subject’s acquisition of language which involves the passage from the Imaginary order to the Symbolic that provides the means for individuation and identity or, as Lacan puts it, “it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject”. (Ibid., 7)

⁶ For Lacan, the individual is subject to a permanent and irreversible lack that can be traced to the physical birth in terms of the separation from the mother, as well as the child’s symbolic birth into language and culture. (*Ecrits* 2) As a consequence, the child remains divided or split as a result of the trauma that occurs during 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.

⁷ According to Metz, primary identification principally refers to the spectator’s identification with the apparatus, specifically the camera and projector. Secondary identification on the other hand refers to the on-screen characters. (96)

⁸ The notion of the mirror can perhaps be best understood then as a metaphor for how the ego forms from that which is reflected back to them in society and culture including media such as film.

⁹ It should be noted that Metz accounts purely for the fictional film.

¹⁰ A useful comparison is Ronald Langacker’s analogy of a pair of glasses which are examined at arm’s length to account for adjustments in perception between the perceiver and the perceived. He says, “[the glasses] function solely and prominently as the object of perception and not at all as part of the perceptual apparatus itself”. The glasses, however, used to examine another object then, “function exclusively as part of the subject of perception – they are one component of the perceiving apparatus, but are not themselves perceived”. (316) Similarly, whilst in the cinema, the spectator is aware of the presence of the frame but through the systems of representation, the immediate perceptual environment fades from consciousness. We can conclude then that one measure of a film’s success derives from the spectator’s willingness to embrace the fictional reality at the expense of a conscious awareness of the process that produces the events on the screen.

¹¹ Various contemporary theories of spectatorship developed from the apparatus theory have similarly argued that the spectator does not mistake the fictional impression of reality for an actual reality, but rather actively adopts a position of conscious disavowal. (see Allen 1995; Currie 1996). Richard Allen’s description of “projective illusion” which implies that the spectator voluntarily invests belief in the reality presented despite an awareness of the fictitious nature of the text is particularly insightful in this regard. Whilst watching a film, he argues: You do not mistake a staged event for actuality...rather, you lose awareness of the fact that you are seeing a film, that is, watching a recorded event that is staged before the camera. Instead of looking “from the outside” upon something staged in this world, you perceive the events of the film directly or “from within.” You perceive a fully realized though fictional world that has all the perceptual immediacy of our own; you experience the film as a projective illusion. When you imagine that you look upon the events of the film “from within,” the frame of the image circumscribes the limits of your visual field rather than signalling to you that what you see is the projection of a recorded image...In projective

illusion, the spectator occupies the perceptual point of view of the camera upon the events of the film. (107)

¹² For Kaja Silverman, the way in which Miller describes suture is reminiscent of the Fort-Da game outlined by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955 [1920]). (*The Subject of* 200) For Freud, the Fort-Da game represents the child attempt to overcome its mother's disappearance and reappearance by repeatedly throwing a wooden reel on a string over the edge of his cot and subsequently retrieving it.

¹³ The system of suture has been extensively criticised by film historian Barry Salt (1976) in his article "Film Style and Technology in the Forties" and by other theorists such as William Rothman (1975), David Bordwell (1985), Noel Carroll (1988) and George Butte (2008). However, the combined weight of these academic criticisms has not damaged suture as a concept substantially but rather expanded its definition to encompass a broader range of applications. For example, whilst respectfully acknowledging the criticisms of Salt and Rothman, in two important essays Stephen Heath (1976; 1981) has revised the concept of suture, arguing that it cannot be merely reduced to the central function of the shot/reverse shot. Instead, he contends that the process of suture can be extended to the effect of cutting in general by describing the process as the continual oscillation between presence and absence. He states, "In its process, its framings, its cuts, its intermittences, the film ceaselessly poses an absence, a lack, which is ceaselessly bound up in and into the relation of the subject, is, as it were, ceaselessly recaptured *for* the film". ("Notes on" 13 emphasis in original) The process of suturing the spectator to the text still remains principally focused on embracing the illusory nature of the images presented. However, for Heath suture rests upon the flow and unity of the images within the broader context of new and unique structural and stylistic techniques. For example, in his analysis of a sequence from *News from Home* (Akerman, 1977) Heath suggests that whilst the closing montage lacks the distinctive look of ownership ascribed to previous versions of suture, the combination of "image, voice, noise, duration, rhythm" provide the moment of reconciliation with the diegesis. (Ibid., 99)

¹⁴ This being said, in accordance with Lacan's notion that lack is central to being and so subject to constant deferral, similarly the spectator cannot fully resolve the play between presence and absence on-screen because the new image, while suturing one gap, repeatedly creates a new one. Thus for Oudart, a sense of loss is permanently inscribed into the nature of the image.

¹⁵ Daniel Dayan, after Oudart, explains how suture serves to nullify the spectator's experience of film as a material object by constructing them as an integrated subject. He writes, "when I occupy the place of the subject, the codes which led me to occupy this place become invisible to me. The signifiers of the presence of the subject disappear from my consciousness because they are signifiers of my presence". (112) It is this capacity to produce a coherent filmic space through the relationship of various gazes (the spectator's directed at the screen, the cameras at the characters, and the characters' at each other) that establishes a foundational framework for suture in cinema.

¹⁶ For example Edward Branigan suggests that, "The Absent One seems to be conceived as a diegetic *character* who is temporarily out of sight but who has been put into an unseen space by a spectator's imagination (unconscious)?". (137)

¹⁷ The film contains a number of examples where Nolan cuts away from a scene before the action concludes only to return to it later to reveal the remaining portion of the scene. For instance, Nolan cuts away after Angier tests the teleportation machine for the first time, during Olivia's (Scarlett Johansson) confession to Borden and during the film's opening montage of Angier's death and Cutter's description of the three stages of a magic trick (the

pledge, the turn, and the prestige). However, crucially all of these sequences can be viewed as being self-contained as the spectator is unaware of the remaining part of the sequence until it is revealed later in the film.

¹⁸ This sequence analysis offered here is drastically simplified as it is somewhat complicated by a flash forward to a series of shots of Angier at home recalling Alfred's illusion. However given that that the flash forward consists of a single shot framed with Angier looking rightward off screen as he recalls the trick in memory, it can be considered to be an effective stand in for scenes set in the present where his look is not visible as part of the shot/reverse shot continuum. However, for the purposes of the following analysis I want to focus specifically on the omission of the magic trick's final act.

¹⁹ The central positioning of the final shot of Borden's performance returns us to the opening image of the sequence whereby the camera is an invisible-observer only now placed in closer proximity to the stage.

²⁰ During the film's climax it is revealed that Borden is one of a pair of identical twins who have concealed their duality in order to perform the trick.

²¹ *Insomnia* UK DVD commentary 00:05:33

²² This particular comment is written in relation to Bordwell and Thompson's analysis of the opening sequence where a similar pattern of repeated shots and set ups occur.

²³ The placement of Cutter on screen right in a position where Angier was similarly sat at the start of the sequence, combined with the diegetic sound of the ball bouncing continuously across two separate shots, indicates a causality that reflects a linear set of events placing Cutter at the same performance (see Figures 6 & 9). However, Angier's enquiry as to whether the audience applauded after the trick, remarked upon in the subsequent scene, indicates a distinct time difference between the two performances.

²⁴ According to Kaja Silverman, the Israeli theoretician Daniel Dayan was the first writer on film to attempt to apply the suture argument within the context of "ideological coercion". (*The Subject of 215*) For Dayan, suture functions to persuade the viewer to accept certain images as an accurate reflection of their subjectivity.

²⁵ In general, avant-garde cinema or to use the phrase coined by Peter Wollen in his essay on *Le Vent d'est* (1970), "counter cinema" is characterised by an opposition to commercial, mainstream cinema as well as a commitment to radical politics and formal experimentation. Along these lines, "counter cinema" is defined according to two principle goals. The first is to promote a position of critical awareness and thereby reveal to spectator the inherent illusionism of the cinematic apparatus. The second is to involve the audience member in a political struggle by making them conscious of his interpellation by standard cinematic institutions. (Wheatley 35)

²⁶ In her article "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," Mary Ann Doane discusses the use of voice in cinematic presentation remarking that the voiceover's position within the dynamic of the cinematic apparatus is complicated by the voyeurism inherent in the construction of the cinematic image. According to Doane, the voiceover and the interior monologue "speak more or less *directly* to the spectator". (43 emphasis in original) If this is the case, the voiceover presupposes a spectator who is actively acknowledged as part of an on-going dialogue between the spectator and screen. However, this notion is difficult to reconcile with the underlying principle of the cinematic apparatus that desires the deliberate disavowal of the fiction presented.

²⁷ If we agree that one of the principle aims of classical narrative cinema is to divert attention away from the work necessary to produce it, then the use of title sequences in feature films are somewhat paradoxical. Whilst most films attempt to mask the necessary extra-diegetic

level by intercutting it with shots of the diegetic world, the on-screen words and images continue to highlight the fictiveness of the narrative thus rupturing the desired suture. An additional complication is suggested by Lesley Stern who has highlighted the problems associated with establishing the *accepted* beginning of a film due to the difficulties aroused by the vague distinctions between a pre-credit sequence, a diegetic credit sequence and an autonomous non-diegetic segment. (128-9) In this instance, the title sequence can be considered a cross between the latter two variations as whilst it contains diegetic material it is also autonomous insofar as the dialogue and visual information are not repeated later in their current form.

²⁸ Of course this claim in itself is rather misleading as the notion of narrating the trick to an individual who is present in the frame at the time of the narration represents a contradiction of the linear timeframe given that voice-over narration is invariably considered to be experience recollected resulting in a temporal disjuncture between the sound and image

²⁹ For example, when Cutter's narration mentions "a man," the camera picks out Alfred in the crowd.

³⁰ According to Karen Hollinger, there is a documented history detailing the role of voice-over narration in cinema. She remarks, "voice-over narration has a long cinematic history, much of which is associated with its use for granting power and authority to a single perspective and for implicating the spectator strongly in that perspective". (131)

³¹ By virtue of its construction the voice-over cannot help but invokes the formal property of the medium.

³² In this example, an unknown character begins a line of questioning about Angier's death whilst images of him drowning continue to occur on-screen before fading to black.

³³ The problematic paradigm of the (active) cognitive mechanisms used in the processing of voice-over narration and the (passive) voyeuristic pleasure desired as part of classical narrative cinema can be overcome by reconfiguring Cutter's voice-over narration as "voice-off". (Doane, 34) Unlike a voice-over narration, which often belongs to a disembodied voice outside of the diegetic space, the *voice-off* is a temporarily off-screen voice. For Mary Anne Doane, the voice-off can be defined as spoken dialogue which emanates from a spatial dimension that exists beyond what is presented on-screen. In contrast to the voice-over, the voice-off speaks not over the image, but rather from its margins. In Doane's analysis, "He/she is "just over there," just beyond the frameline, in a space which "exists" but which the camera does not choose to show". (Ibid., 37) *The Prestige* establishes this space through the combination of synchronized sound in conjunction with editing and other cinematic conventions that manufacture a sense of *vraisemblance* regarding the diegetic space.

³⁴ Todd McGowan points out that even the filmmaker who produces a film just for her/himself nonetheless posits the "nonexistent spectator in the making of the film". (*The Impossible* 226) He compares the filmmaker to a diarist whose decision to render their inner thoughts into an exterior format necessitates a structure of communication that betrays the notion that the author writes only for her/himself. He writes, "If one were simply making a film for oneself or writing for oneself, there would be no need for the detour through a form that others are able to comprehend. This detour testifies to the presence of the public at the heart of the most private production". (Ibid)

³⁵ Erin Hill Parks points out that the repeated monologue also functions to add another level of interaction between the director and the audience, "with Nolan, through the characters, speaking to the audience about the structure of the film". ("Discourses" 81)

³⁶ It is possible to position Nolan's enigmatic endings as an overt indication of the director's authorial position (see Hill-Parks, "Identity" 7) but it is perhaps more beneficial to associate

it with a range of strategies already noted that point towards the creation of a sustained reality whilst simultaneously denying the spectator access to it. For this reason, audiences continue to speculate about the final moments of *Inception* to determine whether or not the top falls or whether, in *Memento*, Leonard's wife was intentionally or accidentally murdered.