

Žižek and Cinema - IJŽS Vol 1.3**The Violence of Creation in *The Prestige***

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I. A Rivalry of Opposites

Unlike Christopher Nolan's earlier feature *Memento* (1999), the thematic reason for the nonlinear narrative structure of *The Prestige* (2006) is not immediately evident. Set in turn of the century London, the film recounts the story of two rival magicians—Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman)—who seek each other's secrets and punish each other in what becomes an increasingly vicious feud that results in multiple deaths and much unnecessary suffering. Due to their determination to be the better magician and to simultaneously destroy the other, they each lose their wives to tragic deaths and finally die themselves as a direct result of their rivalry. One could easily imagine this story told in a straightforward fashion without significantly altering the experience of it. The film would begin with the young magicians meeting each other and recounting their acts of vengeance successively, rather than beginning with Borden's apparent murder of Angier and concluding with the

actual thing. As it stands, the spectator can, without too much trouble, figure out the fabula (or chronological story) from the complex but not indecipherable syuzhet (or plot), which leads one to believe that the nonlinear narrative exists simply for the sake of the gimmick itself. But the linear account of the fabula would have the effect of eliminating a major contribution to our understanding of time that the film makes.

The standard notion of time conceives it as linear motion forward. Martin Heidegger, for one, defines the everyday conception of time as a succession of instants. He notes, “What is characteristic of the ‘time’ accessible to the vulgar understanding consists, among other things, precisely in the fact that it is a pure succession of nows, without beginning and without end” (1996: 302). Heidegger challenges this common idea of time with his own version of authentic temporality, but *The Prestige* offers its own distinctive conceptualization, which moves in the opposite direction. For Heidegger, authentic temporality concerns itself above all with the future, whereas the film’s notion of time is tied to repetition. According to the logic set forth by *The Prestige*, the idea of time as linear forward motion is the effect of an illusion—or of illusion as such—and it serves to disguise the role that sacrifice or work plays in the process of creation. A genuinely new creation is possible, but the source of this creation is not, as we tend to think, the forward motion of time.

For someone like Gilles Deleuze, who celebrates time for its ability to give birth to the unexpected, the forward movement of time is the key to its philosophical importance. In contrast to Deleuze, *The Prestige* shows that the

source of the new is instead the repetition of sacrifice. Rather than lifting us beyond sacrifice and loss, the genuinely new creation always has the ultimate effect of returning us to the experience of loss. As the film shows, the new exists as a means for finding our way back to the inevitability of loss. The connection between the newness born from artistic creation and the sacrifice that makes that newness possible is most often obscured in the work of art and especially in the cinema. The end product serves as a fetish allowing spectators to disavow loss and to experience a false sense of wholeness. The burden of *The Prestige* lies in exposing it.

Borden and Angier represent the two sides of the magician and the artist. Borden's skill lies in creating the illusion—the magic act itself—and he relishes the life of sacrifice necessary to produce the illusion. Angier, on the other hand, is the showman who knows how to sell a trick to the audience. In contrast to Borden, he cherishes the audience's reaction to the illusion because he sees in this reaction the awareness that something transcendent has occurred, that the illusion has generated an experience of the genuinely new. At one point in the film, Angier considers the audience's lukewarm reception to Borden's "Transported Man" illusion and exclaims, "He's a dreadful magician." His mentor Cutter (Michael Caine) corrects him, "No, he's a wonderful magician. He's a dreadful showman. He doesn't know how to dress it up, how to sell the trick." The rivalry that develops between Borden and Angier is not the typical rivalry. It does not involve two competitors seeking the same object but instead two fundamentally different modes of conceiving magic.¹ Borden sees Angier's

emphasis on spectacle as a betrayal of the art and as a refusal to embrace the sacrifice that the art demands. Angier, as Borden sees it, wants the spectacle without the cost. For his part, Angier views Borden's failure to sell his illusions as an inability to appreciate the creative power of their art. Borden doesn't understand the transcendence that occurs when the magician compels the audience to believe.

The film makes apparent the limitations inhering in both Borden's and Angier's position. In the case of Borden, we see both the direct suffering and the collateral damage that his devotion to artistic sacrifice engenders. The primary illusion of the film itself lies in the nature of Borden's identity, which represents the sacrifice of an individual existence. Borden is not one person but two, a pair of identical twins who alternate being Borden and his mysterious silent friend Fallon. The twins sacrifice their lives as separate individuals just to perform a single magic trick—"The Transported Man." Borden can appear to vanish on one side of the stage and reappear immediately on the other because he is not one person but two. This is a magic act that no one can easily duplicate because a lifetime of sacrificing independent public identities—and an accident of birth—are required for creating the illusion. While it results in an effective and convincing illusion, the arrangement has a steep personal cost. Borden must share the experience of being a husband to his wife Sarah (Rebecca Hall), a father to his daughter Jess (Samantha Mahurin), and a lover to his assistant Olivia Wenscombe (Scarlett Johansson). After Angier shoots off two fingers of one of the twins during a bullet catch illusion, the other twin must submit to having his

fingers cut off in order to sustain their identical look. The original sacrifice of separate lives for the sake of the transported man trick does not suffice, as the illusion continues to demand increasingly costly payments.

Others pay the price for Borden's sacrifice as well. Near the beginning of the film, Angier's wife Julia McCullough (Piper Perabo) drowns during the submerged woman illusion seemingly because Borden insisted on tying a more complex knot (the Langford Double) that she could not slip while underwater. He values the art of slipping the more difficult knot more than he values McCullough's safety. Later, Borden's own wife Sarah kills herself out of the desperation that comes from living with two men playing the part of one. Borden's necessarily divided personality renders any sustained relationship with him impossible.

It is not, however, the cost of Borden's devotion to sacrifice with which the film takes issue. Nolan suggests that such sacrifice is necessary for art and that art is worth the steep personal cost that it demands. The real limitation of Borden's position stems from his blindness to what his sacrifice enables. He is so intently focused on the act of sacrifice that he misses the transcendent experience that the magic act creates. He fails to link loss to productivity. His perverse attachment to sacrifice for its own sake limits his capacity for authentic art. He can't see the way that the repetition of sacrifice in art miraculously produces the new.

Borden's inability to recognize the creative power inherent in the magic trick's deception—and in the deception perpetuated by all art—reveals itself

initially in the diary that he constructs in order to deceive Angier. In order to revenge himself on Angier, Borden convinces the latter that he found the secret of the transported man illusion in the United States, where Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) invented a teleportation machine for him. The deception in the diary convinces Angier to travel to Colorado to see Tesla and to pay him to build a similar machine for him. When he finally reads to the end of the coded diary, he discovers the lie, but Tesla nonetheless does invent a teleportation machine for Angier, despite the fact that he had never made one for Borden. Borden's illusion, the artistic deception of the diary, leads to the miracle of teleportation. The lie is a productive one. But Borden himself could never have anticipated this because his concern remains singlemindedly focused on the act of sacrifice as an end in itself.

As Angier is dying at the end of the film, the surviving Borden twin upbraids him for having done "terrible things ... all for nothing." Angier responds by rebuking Borden for his great failure to understand. In what are the most important lines of the film, he 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. Then you got to see something very special. You really don't know. It was the look on their faces." 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 outside of 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 exists.

Earlier in the film, Borden mocks the fact that in Angier's version of the transported man he must hear the applause of the audience under the stage while his double receives the ovation above. But as his dying statement reveals, Angier's desire to see the audience cannot be reduced only to vanity. He sees in the audience's reaction the very reason why one performs magic—its ability to generate a transcendent belief visible in the spectators' look of awe. Even though what audiences see is completely illusory, the act of seeing itself is not, and this is what Angier celebrates in his statement.

The infinite lies not in the nature of being itself but in the power of the look capable of discerning it. This look, however, is not inherent in the make-up of the subject; it does not inhere in human rationality or in the essence of language.

The look that embodies the infinite owes its emergence to the deceptive power of the artistic illusion. The sublimity of art elevates its audience out of their finitude, producing a transcendence that the artists themselves don't experience.² This is why Angier is desperate to see the faces of those he has duped with his illusions.

But despite his insight into what magic creates, Angier is not the perfect magician. The film criticizes his position on art just as vehemently as that of Borden. Angier fails to appreciate the necessary role that sacrifice has in making the art possible. His pursuit of Borden's secret in America derives from his inability to recognize what is obvious to the expert Cutter: the transported man

relies on the existence of a twin. Angier can't accept this because he can't imagine the sacrifice that this version of the illusion would require and seeks a tidier explanation. He believes that magic is the result of a secret or a trick, rather than hard work and incredible sacrifice. He seeks magic on the cheap. This leads Angier to Tesla's teleportation machine, which does produce the genuine miracle for him, but at an incredible cost.

Ironically, Angier's refusal to accept the necessity of sacrifice in magic—his repression of sacrifice—ultimately results in an act that requires a much more horrific sacrifice than does Borden's.³ Performing "The New Transported Man" demands that Angier drown a version of himself during each show in order to erase the evidence of the doubling that occurs during the teleportation. He willingly undergoes this drowning because he knows that a version of himself will survive and because, at his wife Julia's funeral, he heard Cutter recount the story of a sailor who almost drowned and claimed that the experience felt like "going home."⁴ Later, when Cutter realizes the role that drowning plays in the magic act, he confronts Angier, reminding him, "I once told you about a sailor who described drowning to me." Angier responds, "Yes, he said it was like going home." Cutter evinces disgust, proclaiming "I was lying. He said it was agony." After he says this, the film shows Cutter turning and walking away in the dark, making clear his disapprobation. Angier's effort to find an easy path to magic transforms him into a murderer of different versions of himself.⁵

The film absolutely refuses to take a side in the rivalry between Borden and Angier. Nor does it suggest that both are wrong, that the problem lies in

magic itself. It would be more correct to say that the implication of the film is that both are right: magic demands self-sacrifice, as Borden recognizes, but it also creates transcendence, as Angier sees. The solution to the rivalry is not a compromise between the two positions—a little sacrifice and a little transcendence—but the difficult task of thinking the two together. *The Prestige* enjoins us to conceive of the emergence of the new as immanent within the act of sacrifice and the act of sacrifice as immanent within the emergence of the new. To do so is to defy all ruling conceptions of time.

II. A Call to Sacrifice

Nolan constructs the syuzhet of the film in the way that he does in order to emphasize the connection between the illusion that the magic act produces and the sacrifice that goes into creating that illusion. One of the chief effects of magic—and of cinema—is its tendency to focus audience attention on the result. If the illusionist (the magician or the film director) performs the art well, the audience pays attention to what appears either on the stage or the screen rather than to the work occurring outside of the audience's vision, the work that goes into constructing the illusion. Many Marxist theorists of the cinema have contended that the tendency to hide work bespeaks this art form's irrevocably ideological nature. Just like capitalism itself hides the fact that labor rather than exchange is the source of value by realizing profit in the act of exchange, so the cinema obscures the work necessary to produce a film by its mode of presentation, which includes no actual human beings but only images of them. In the theater,

at least the spectator can see the actors sweat and the stagehands move props around, but the cinema masks even this minimal degree of attunement to the labor behind the illusion.⁶

Since the cinematic medium cannot directly convey the sacrifice that goes into creating the illusion, filmmakers who want to draw attention to it must find another route. In *The Prestige*, Nolan chooses to include an indication of the sacrifice within the filmic image—as a part of the illusion that hints at what the illusion obscures. That is, the film depicts sacrifice as a remainder that exceeds and stains the cinematic illusion, thereby skewing the spectator's relationship to it. The opening shot of *The Prestige* tracks along a clearing in a woods where multiple black top hats lie strewn across the ground. The penultimate shot of the film repeats this image, followed by a shot of the theater basement where Angier has stored his drowned doubles that Tesla's teleportation machine has produced. The final shot moves slowly to a stop on Angier's body upright in the water tank.

The repetition of the shot depicting the hats reveals the work and sacrifice that went into the construction of the magical teleportation device. While building the machine, Nikola Tesla experimented many times with Angier's top hat, and because he did not recognize that the machine produced a duplicate in addition to teleporting, he remained unaware of the growing pile of hats outside his laboratory. The excess hats are the waste product that creation necessarily produces, but most works of art—and especially films—try to draw the spectator's attention from this waste, to obscure it through the fascinating power

of the cinematic illusion. But Nolan opts instead to emphasize it by using the image of the hats as the beginning and ending point of the narrative.

But the film doesn't stop with the image of the hat as the leftover of the production process. By depicting the drowned body of one of Angier's doubles in the final shot, Nolan reveals the human cost that creating illusions entails. Angier himself is a waste product of the creative process, and this represents the cost of creation. By concluding with the image of Angier's body, the film partakes in Walter Benjamin's critique of the notion of progress and attempts to embody the position he extols as an alternative, that of the historical materialist. According to Benjamin, the historical materialist views great creations or "cultural treasures" ... with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (2003: 391-392). Benjamin rejects progress because he recognizes that it is a storm "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (2003: 392). The cost of the triumphs of history militates against the consideration of them as progressive. One must instead pay attention to what has been left behind—like the drowned body of Angier's double.

But the film doesn't conclude as it does in order to inveigh against magic or the artistic process in general. This would be completely hypocritical within the cinematic medium, and it would also indicate a failure to grasp the miraculous

nature of artistic creation. Even as it points out the horrible sacrifice inherent in creation, *The Prestige* suggests that magic or art or any act of creation is worth the cost. Not only is the film a call for the recognition of sacrifice and loss as integral to the process of creation; it also enjoins the spectator to participate in this process through sacrifice.

The film's appreciation for the sacrifice that magic requires becomes apparent in an early sequence where Cutter sends Borden and Angier to watch Chung Ling Soo (Chao Li Si) perform and to learn from him. During his show, Chung Ling causes a large fishbowl to appear on a table in front of him, and this trick stumps Angier. But Borden quickly figures it out. From a distance, Borden and Angier watch a decrepit Chung Ling hobble to a carriage with assistance from those around him. Seeing this display of near helplessness, Borden proclaims, "This is the trick. This is the performance.... This is why no one can detect his method. Total devotion to his art. A lot of self-sacrifice, you know." By playing the part of a frail old man who can't walk properly, Chung Ling is able to hold a large fishbowl under his robe without anyone noticing. His shuffling walk appears as his normal gait rather than as the result of the fishbowl held between his legs. Only the sacrifice of a life of normal walking, something few would be willing to give up, allows Chung Ling to perpetuate the illusion during his show. But the film nonetheless nods its approval.

Through acts like Chung Ling's sacrifice, the magician creates a transcendence that otherwise would not exist. As Borden concludes his explanation of the trick to Angier, he says, "It's the only way to escape—all this."

While he says this, the film shows him hit his fist against the dirty brick edifice next to him, thereby giving his statement a referent. Self-sacrifice allows Chung Ling and his spectators to escape the misery of existence in turn of the century London, to experience the limitations of this world as limitations that one might transcend. *The Prestige* is a panegyric to Chung Ling and the other magicians who suffer in order to illuminate this transcendence.

One should always be wary in the face of calls for sacrifice, especially in the epoch of Christianity. Christian ideology has at its foundation the conceit of self-sacrifice performed in order to garner eternal life. What made Protestantism so conducive to the birth of capitalism were precisely the sacrificial demands that it placed on believers. As Max Weber notes in his classic analysis, “labor came to be considered in itself the end of life, as ordained by God” (1992: 159). Though Protestantism disbelieved in the power of works for attaining salvation, it nonetheless championed work itself as the path to grace. One can take this critique of sacrifice even further: self-sacrifice is the central pillar of not just Christian ideology but all forms of ideology. Ideology as such works to justify the sacrifice of enjoyment that the subject makes in order to invest itself in the social order and in the identity underwritten by that order. Far from being an ethical or authentic act, this sacrifice represents the subject’s first betrayal of itself—its original sin.

And yet, taking several recent films as his point of departure, Slavoj Žižek theorizes the act of self-sacrifice as the ultimate political gesture that allows the subject to break its libidinal attachment to the ruling order. He argues,

When we are subjected to a power mechanism, this subjection is always and by definition sustained by some libidinal investment: the subjection itself generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own. This subjection is embodied in a network of “material” bodily practices, and, for this reason, we cannot get rid of our subjection through a merely intellectual reflection. Our liberation has to be *staged* in some kind of bodily performance, and, furthermore, this performance *has* to be of an apparently “masochistic” nature; it *has* to stage the painful process of hitting back at oneself. (2004: 183-184)⁷

Rather than ensconcing one within the power of ideology, the act of self-sacrifice, as Žižek conceives it, frees one from that power insofar as it breaks the subject's fantasmatic investment in ideology.

Self-sacrifice functions ideologically when it is tied to the promise of a recovered wholeness for the subject. In the terms of Christian ideology, this wholeness can be found in the afterlife. For fascist ideology, it exists in the complete identification with the Fatherland. An emancipatory self-sacrifice, in contrast, works to shatter image of wholeness. It targets the source of the illusion of wholeness in order to indicate that there is an opening to a beyond within the seeming closed whole. Self-sacrifice that shatters the image of wholeness provides the basis for what Eric Santner calls “the experience of miracle that persists into modernity” (2005: 88). The modern miracle allows us to suspend the “peculiar topological knot—the outlaw dimension internal to law—that serves to sustain the symbolic function of sovereignty” (2005: 103). The sacrifice of one's libidinal attachment to symbolic authority allows one to bypass that authority and reveal its limits.

Žižek sees the sacrificial act at work in films such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994), *Ransom* (Ron Howard, 1996) and

The Usual Suspects (Bryan Singer, 1995), and one could imagine him extending this analysis to *The Prestige*. But the latter film explicitly links self-sacrifice to artistic creation in a way that the other films don't. Here, the magic act has a clear creative power. By causing an object to disappear and then reappear, magic, like all art, attests to the existence of a hole in the world, a gap in the structure of signification. It momentarily renders visible a point of non-sense within the world of sense, and it allows the spectator to leave the world of sense behind. The magician's sacrifice is the key to an existence beyond the limits of the symbolic law.

III. The Temporality of Capitalism

The critical analysis that *The Prestige* provides is not confined to just magic or cinema. Though it focuses on the sacrifice that goes into the production of artistic illusion, the film actually intervenes on the larger question of creation itself. According to the film, a miracle occurs in every act of creation: something emerges out of nothing; an effect is produced that transcends its cause; we receive more value in the created object than we put into creating it. Creation in this sense is the lifeblood of capitalism. Though capitalism on the one hand creates a world without transcendent miracles in which "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx and Engels, 1998: 38-39), on the other hand it depends on the miraculous creation of value for its daily sustenance. The appropriation of surplus labor produces more

value in the commodity than the capitalist puts into it, and this miracle provides the basis for the capitalist's profit. But despite the central role that surplus labor plays in the creation of value, those who are exchanging commodities don't recognize this role. *The Prestige* works to illuminate it.

In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx claims that it is not so much capitalist ideology as the very capitalist relations of production themselves that have the effect of obscuring how value is created. Because capitalists realize their profit at the moment of exchange, exchange seems to generate value. The act of exchange appears to be the site of a miracle in which one receives more for one's product than one has invested in it. But Marx's radical discovery—and the essence of his thought—lies in seeing exchange as but the realization of a value created beforehand through labor. The capitalist's profit is the realization of the surplus value that the worker, not the capitalist, creates. As Marx puts it, "Profit, as we are originally faced with it, is thus the same thing as surplus-value, save in a mystified form, though one that necessarily arises from the capitalist mode of production.... The excess value or surplus-value realized with the sale of the commodity thus appears to the capitalist as an excess of its sale price over its value, instead of an excess of its value over its cost price, so that the surplus-value concealed in the commodity is not simply realized by its sale, but actually derives from the sale itself" (1981: 127-128). The intrinsic priority placed on exchange for making a profit within capitalist relations of production necessarily blinds the individual capitalist to the real source of that profit, which is the surplus value created by the worker who produced the commodity.

The great contribution of Marx on this question stems from his ability to see the deception of capitalism as a deception written into its very structure rather than as the product of conscious manipulation. One can escape conscious manipulation through the vigilance of consciousness-raising, but one cannot escape a structural deception so easily. As a result, Marx insists, “In a social order dominated by capitalist production, even the non-capitalist producer is dominated by capitalist ways of thinking” (1981: 130). The act of participating in capitalist exchange—what no one within capitalist society can avoid—creates a blindness to surplus labor as the source of value. When he involves himself in exchange, even Marx himself, despite his theoretical insights into the process, succumbs to this illusion in practice.

But *The Prestige* pushes Marx’s structural critique one step further. The problem of the erasure of labor does not derive solely from the priority on the act of exchange within capitalist relations of production. It has a more fundamental basis in a conception of time as a linear movement forward that Marx himself shares. Our collective blindness to labor as the source of value owes its intransigence to the predominance of this conception of time. Even though many 20th century thinkers reject the idea of progress, they nonetheless accept the concept of time as linear forward movement. Though they each critique the mechanical chronology of the clock, thinkers as different as Bergson, Heidegger, and Deleuze all theorize time as a forward motion, which they see as the source of its fecundity. Temporality, as opposed to stasis, allows for the new to arise. But when we seek the new in the possibilities of the unforeseen future, as these

theorists do, we end up succumbing to the structure that blinds us to labor as the source of value.

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 death drive, which circulates around a traumatic kernel rather than proceeding in a linear fashion toward the future. Time provides a venue for this drive's repetition, from which there is no possible respite.

Only those attuned to this conception of time will be able to see the commodity for what it is: a signifier of the worker's sacrifice. The exchange of commodities is the exchange of different degrees of sacrifice, and one can only recognize this after having shed the promise of a different future, which constitutes the essence of the commodity's appeal for both the capitalist and the consumer. Capitalist society functions only insofar as we collectively believe in the idea of temporality that provides the basis for the commodity. To exist in the temporality of repetition and loss is to leave the commodity's appeal behind.

IV. The Lying Diary

Though art has the power to reveal the truth of sacrifice and loss to us, to break the hold of the commodity over us, it can only reveal this truth through a fiction. Only an illusion can break the hold of an illusory conception of time. The sacrifice at the base of magic and art is made for the purposes of creating an illusion that deceives spectators. Deception thus acts as the basis for an

authentic conception of temporality as repetition. This is the case not just for the magic performed within the film's narrative but for the film's narrative structure itself. Artistic deception is the vehicle through which Christopher Nolan establishes an alternative temporality in the film.

The device through which Nolan shifts the time period in the film is often (though not exclusively) the diaries of Borden and Angier. The narrative moves as either Borden or Angier reads the other's diary. The use of the diary as a vehicle for temporal shifts has the effect of emphasizing the mediated—and thus deceptive—nature of the events depicted in the film. The film never simply lays its cards on the table: even when it appears to do so, it does so for the sake of furthering its deception. This is especially true in the use of the diary as means for moving in time within the narrative.

Diaries often appear in novels and films as representations of the inner consciousness of a character. When we read someone else's diary, we have the sense that we are accessing a private arena of this person's life, an arena not visible to the public at large. What makes reading a diary compelling—and leads people to sneak a look at the diaries of those close to them—is that the diary form seems to be a repository of truth. In contrast to speaking in public or even writing a letter, there is no motivation to lie in one's diary since the only audience is oneself. By using the diary as a narrative device, a fictional work like a film or a novel can insinuate its truthfulness and, to some extent, obscure its fictionality.⁸ The use of the diary in *The Prestige*, however, operates in the other direction.

Rather than permitting the diary to validate the veracity of the filmic illusion, *The Prestige* as a fiction works to impugn the truthfulness of the diary as such. The only type of diary that the film envisions is a diary written for the purpose of deception or frustration. Borden composes his encoded diary in order to send Angier on a fruitless voyage to America in search of a non-existent teleportation machine that the diary—until its final page—claims Tesla has made for Borden. In a similar vein, Angier creates his diary with Borden in mind, leading up to the final secret of the device that Tesla actually made for him and then not revealing it. The diary form, as the film conceives it, is nothing but a mode of seducing the other with the allure of a private moment of nonfiction. The nonfiction form of the diary simply makes it a more effective fiction in relation to the audience.⁹

The prominent position given to the deceptive diary in controlling the movement of the narrative in *The Prestige* underlines the spectator's sentiment that one is never outside the illusion. Even when it discloses its own fictionality, the film never speaks directly to the spectator. Every shot is mediated through a fictionalized diary or some other fiction-producing device, even the shot that depicts someone reading a diary. The truth of the film occurs through its fictionality, not in spite of it.¹⁰

The problem with making a film like *The Prestige* that reveals the nature of cinematic deception is that the film itself necessarily partakes of this same deception. It cannot simply remain a commentary on cinematic deception. As Orson Welles demonstrates in his late masterpiece *F for Fake* (1974), there is no

external position from which a filmmaker could expose the cinematic illusion. Welles's film tells the story of famous incidents of forgery and deception, but in turn deceives the spectator, even using claims about its truthfulness to do so. Even though *F for Fake* reveals its artifice on different occasions, it ultimately can't avoid being a part of the process of forgery that it documents. Every film—perhaps especially the documentary film—duplicates its audience with an illusion. The absence of a position from which to speak the truth about illusion becomes apparent in *The Prestige*. Just as Lacan insists that “there is no meta-language,” the film insists that there is no meta-cinema (1966-1967: session of 23 November 1966).

As a result, the film must deceive the spectator in a way that draws attention to the deception, not in order to deconstruct or debunk it, but in order 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. In each case, further revelations (which become visible only later) occur as the scene plays out, and these revelations completely change its significance.

The first great deception of the film occurs very early (though very late in terms of the actual chronology of events), when Borden goes beneath the stage during Angier's “New Transported Man” show and watches Angier appear to

drown. Nolan shows intersperses shots of Borden watching the trick from the audience and going below stage with shots of Cutter demonstrating a magic trick to Jess, while on the audio track Cutter is explaining the three parts of a magic trick to a court, which is trying Borden for Angier's murder. The film reveals one deception in this sequence right away: Cutter appears to be describing the magic act to Jess while performing a trick for her, but in fact he is speaking to the court, which is not visible until the end of his description. But the more important deception occurs as a result of the cut from Borden standing outside the tank where Angier is drowning. We don't see Borden struggle to free Angier from the tank, which would have had the effect of bringing his guilt into doubt. And at the same time, we don't see the double of Angier appear, which furthers the belief that Borden is guilty of Angier's murder.

Two subsequent deceptions in the film work also rely on the misleading cut. When Angier sends Olivia to spy on Borden, Borden asks her if she is being truthful with him. After he asks, an extended shot of Olivia shows her saying nothing, indicating a tacit affirmation. But we later see what occurs in the next seconds and learn that the cut occurred before she reveals the truth of her mission to Borden, expresses her disdain for Angier for sending her to Borden, and pledges her loyalty to Borden. The withholding of this information allows the spectator to believe in the integrity of Borden's diary, which Olivia claims to have stolen for Angier but which Borden told her to give to him. The film also cuts away after Angier tests the teleportation machine for the first time, so that we don't see him shoot the double that it creates (as a later repetition of the scene

reveals). In all these cases, the misleading cut prompts the spectator to make an assumption that ultimately turns out to be false. By using editing to create wrong assumptions, Nolan performs his version of magic, revealing that the relationship between the magicians and the spectators within the film corresponds to that between the director and the spectators of the film itself.

The primary deception of the film involves the secret behind Borden's transported man illusion. Until the montage sequence at the end of the film, the spectator never sees the secret revealed, though there are numerous hints at the solution placed throughout.¹¹ During a final montage sequence at the end of the film, Nolan lays the secret bare. As Borden explains the trick to the dying Angier, the spectator sees a flashback depicting the twins together changing identities between Borden and Fallon. We also see the one twin cut off the other's fingers in order to sustain their identical appearance. These revelations would appear to distance the film from the magic trick, which loses all its power at the moment of the revelation.¹² But even though the secret of Borden's illusion is the primary deception within the film's narrative, it does not represent the film's magic.

The fundamental deception of the cinema as such—the magic or art of the medium—consists not in the deception that spectators might figure out or not, like the existence of twins in *The Prestige*. This is the kind of deception operative in films like M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or *Unbreakable* (2000). A Shyamalan film relies on a deception about the nature of the world that it presents and challenges the spectator to figure out the puzzle. The key to *The Sixth Sense* is that the apparent hero of the film, Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), is

already dead as the events of the film take place, and the key to *Unbreakable* is that the frail and seemingly harmless Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson) is actually a murderous super-villain. In these cases, the deception is internal to the filmic narrative, but there is also a deception inherent in the cinematic form itself, which is the deception that *The Prestige* emphasizes.

Cinema deceives its spectators by inducing them to invest themselves in the significance of what they see on the screen. The point is not that spectators take the screen events for real events but that they believe in the depth and coherence of the world they see. This belief leads spectators to assume that there is something to figure out in the film, that each film—especially the puzzle film—has a secret truth that the spectator can access. According to this belief, there are events happening in the filmic world beyond what we see on the screen. Borden really is a pair of twins; Angier really drowned his doubles produced by the teleportation machine; and so on. The cinematic deception produces spectator fascination, which is nothing but the spectator's investment in the significance and worldliness of the images on the screen.

Because the film ends with Cutter's dramatic voiceover proclaiming that the spectator will not discover the real secret of the film, many spectators and critics have speculated about another hidden layer to the film. Cutter 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 work it out. You want to be fooled." To work out the solution to the cinematic deception is to break the illusion that it creates, and this would destroy the enjoyment that cinema provides, which is

why spectators “want to be fooled,” as Cutter puts it. The very act of searching for the film’s real secret betrays the extent to which one has already been duped by the fundamental cinematic illusion.

But the alternative does not consist in not allowing oneself to be duped. To insist on not allowing oneself to be duped—to be cynical about all artistic creations—is to remain wholly ensconced within a deeper deception. As Lacan points out, “the non-dupes are two times duped” (1973-1974: session of 11 December 1973). The artistic illusion carries the spectator to a truth that would otherwise be inaccessible, and those who see through this illusion never recognize the truth that it opens up. It is the truth of the infinite nature of the subject’s power: the subject has the ability to transcend the world that conditions it, but it can only achieve this transcendence with the help of the magic contained in an artistic illusion, a magic produced through profound sacrifice.

V. The End Matters

Many directors create narratives that deflect attention away from the end result and onto the process that produces that result. This occurs most obviously in films that break from a chronological narration, such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or *Pulp Fiction* (1994), both of which place emphasis on the decisions that lead to narrative’s denouement rather than that denouement itself. But it also takes place in films that adhere to chronology, like Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) or Spike Lee’s *25th Hour* (2002), in which the ending serves almost as an afterthought.

According to the logic elaborated in *The Prestige*, the end remains crucial. Near the end of the film, Cutter makes this clear as he is explaining the process of magic to Jess. He tells her (in a way that echoes the film's opening), "Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary. The second act is called the turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it into something extraordinary. But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back." By emphasizing the necessity of the object's return, Cutter gives voice to the film's central idea: neither magic nor cinema is reducible to its end product, but this end product is nonetheless essential. In other words, the film does not ask us to dismiss the significance of the illusion in the name of the sacrifice and work that go into creating it.

This is the path taken by many avant-garde films. Jean-Luc Godard's *Prénom: Carmen* (1983), for instance, relentlessly exposes the artifice of cinematic illusionism as it takes the spectator behind the scenes of the making of a film. *The Prestige*, in contrast, allows us to see the dialectical relation between the work and the illusion in both magic and the cinema. The film creates an illusion that returns us to the sacrifice rather than repressing it. What the film thereby shows is that the spectacle of the illusion does not just require past sacrifice in order to come about; it also leads one back down the path of sacrifice and loss.

The narrative structure of *The Prestige* challenges the obfuscatory power of the cinematic medium by juxtaposing sacrifice and spectacle, but it does so in

order to celebrate both rather than to condemn either one. At the same time, it calls for a change in our relation to both sacrifice and artistic spectacle. Rather than seeing sacrifice as a burden to be avoided, we might instead recognize within it the beauty of the work of art, and rather than viewing art as an escape from suffering, we might recognize it as the path to a more profound experience of sacrifice. Moving in this direction requires abandoning the hope that one day one could move beyond the necessity of sacrifice. It involves a new way of looking at the suffering involved with labor.

Marx, who was the first to fully understand the connection between sacrifice and creation, offers a hint at what this changed perception might look like at the end of volume 3 of *Capital* in the famous discussion distinguishing the realm of freedom from the realm of necessity. He first insists on the absolute distinction between these two realms, and then he goes on to say that “the true realm of freedom” allows for “the development of human powers as an end in itself” (1981: 959). In this realm, rather than working for the sake of survival or external necessity, one would sacrifice purely for the sake of creation. This act of sacrifice would no longer point toward the future but would instead provide its own internal justification. In this sense, it would represent the realization of nature of all sacrifice.

We are not moving forward in time, traveling from sacrifice toward a bliss that would be its reward. Each of these experiences leads back to the other, as the subject follows the path of the death drive. This is what the narrative temporality that Christopher Nolan constructs in *The Prestige* attempts to show.

The film offers a way of seeing beyond the illusion of time itself, beyond the idea that tomorrow might offer a viable solution to the suffering and loss of today. And yet, at the same time, it demonstrates that sacrifice inaugurates a transcendent space otherwise inaccessible. *The Prestige* reveals a beyond but forces us to recognize that we are already there.

¹ Most rivalry occurs on the level of the ego. I view the other as a rival because I see in this other a mirror-image of myself—an alter-ego. The rival is too similar, and there is only enough space for one of us. The rivalry between Borden and Angier occurs on the level of the real and concerns how each locates his enjoyment. Whereas the ego rivals locate their enjoyment in the same place (which generates the rivalry), Borden and Angier locate it at different points in the artistic process.

² Heidegger gives art—and especially poetry—a privileged place in shaping the world in which humanity dwells, but he emphasizes the finite nature of the world that it opens up. Far from enabling an access to transcendence, art for Heidegger renders visible the limitations that make it possible to dwell in the world. As he puts it in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” “art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical” (1975: 78).

³ To borrow Herbert Marcuse’s terminology from *Eros and Civilization* for other ends, one might say that Angier’s inability to recognize necessary sacrifice leads him into surplus sacrifice. Just as Marcuse sees that a certain amount of repression is necessary for human society, *The Prestige* contends that a certain amount of sacrifice is necessary for art. The attempt to eliminate the necessary sacrifice inevitably produces the surplus in addition to the necessary.

⁴ The willingness to sacrifice a version of oneself due to the existence of a clone is also prevalent among the pursuers of Adam Gibson (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in Roger Spottiswoode’s *The 6th Day* (2000). According to the logic of this film, what separates the ethical hero Gibson from his ruthless pursuers is the willingness to sacrifice one’s clone. The villains trying to kill Gibson find the sacrifice of a version of themselves a painful inconvenience, but they accept it as part of their work as henchmen for cloning mastermind Michael Drucker (Tony Goldwyn), who is the film’s villain. In contrast, when he is confronted with the existence of a clone who has taken his place, Gibson ends up conspiring with the clone to battle Drucker rather than killing it.

⁵ Angier is also effectively the murderer of one of the Borden twins. He frames Borden for his own murder by arranging for Borden to be discovered outside the water tank containing his drowned double and by not reappearing himself during the show when Borden goes below stage to examine the illusion.

⁶ Bertolt Brecht praises bad acting in the bourgeois theater because he believes that it draws attention to the otherwise disguised labor that produces the play. But bad acting in the cinema doesn’t have the same salutary effect. Unlike the theater, the illusionism in the cinema is so powerful that even bad acting can’t break it in any substantive way.

⁷ In the *Fragile Absolute*, Žižek offers another formulation of this same dynamic: “in a situation of forced choice, the subject makes the ‘crazy’ impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself. This act, far from amounting to a case of impotent aggressivity turned against oneself, rather changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself: by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains the space of free action. Is not such a radical gesture of ‘striking at oneself’ constitutive of subjectivity as such?” (2000: 150).

⁸ Even a writer like Kierkegaard, who is constantly playing with truth and fictionality in his writing through layers of pseudonyms, uses the diary form in *Either/Or* to suggest access

to the truth of a specific form of consciousness—that of the seducer. “The Diary of a Seducer” reveals the truth about deception rather than immersing the reader in deception in order to reveal it.

⁹ The film’s presentation of the diary form renders evident what the form intrinsically masks: the diary lies just as much or more than any other art form. The seeming truthfulness of the diary form stems from the absence of an explicit audience, but without an audience, no one would write anything. The actual audience for the diary is the ego ideal that the diarist imagines looking on and measuring the words. Because it is hidden, the ego ideal, as the implicit audience, has the effect of making the diary form *more* deceptive than other arts, not less so.

¹⁰ The film shows in a precise way why, as Lacan suggests, truth must have the structure of a fiction. What this means undergoes a dramatic reversal during the course of Lacan’s career. In his first seminar, he claims that every lie includes a covert appeal to truth: “For the one who speaks deception itself requires from the beginning the support of the truth that must be dissembled, and, as it unfolds, it presupposes a veritable deepening of the truth to which, if one can put it this way, it replies” (1988: 263). According to this formulation, truth has a structural priority over deception, even if deception appears first chronologically. But later, Lacan comes to see deception as the foundation for truth. By *Seminar XXI*, entitled *Les non-dupes errent*, the lie no longer contains an appeal to truth but creates the ground on which truth can take root. As he puts it, “The truth is founded only ... on the supposition of the false: it is contradiction. It is founded only on the no” (1974: session of 15 January 1974).

¹¹ In fact, there are enough hints about Borden’s secret that many spectators who pride themselves on figuring out the riddle to puzzle films such as *The Prestige* were disappointed with the obviousness of the solution. One of the chief complaints of the film’s spectators was that they saw the end coming from very early on. But trying to figure out a film like *The Prestige* indicates precisely the kind of investment in the idea of a solution—and the corresponding conception of temporality focused on the future—that the film works to overturn. Those who solve the film’s riddle simultaneously miss the film’s point.

¹² In response to a recognition of the secret to the magical illusion, spectators experience either horror or disappointment. The film shows both responses. A young boy who figures out that a magician has killed the bird that he causes to disappear breaks out in tears, and even the reappearance of the bird cannot comfort him because he knows the truth. In contrast, when Borden reveals the secret of the bullet catch to Sarah, she loses her some of her appreciation for the art. She says to him, “Once you know, it’s actually very obvious.”

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