The Prestige

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The Rundown

Narration begins the film explaining three acts of magic: The Pledge, The Turn, and The Prestige. The movie starts with a magician making himself disappear, but is trapped in a tank of water while someone tries desperately to help him escape. A scene with an old man impressing a little girl with a disappearing bird act also appears. The man is guilty and sentenced to execution. The man is handed the journal of the man he had “killed” and starts reading it.

The magician called “The Great Danton” goes to a laboratory to pay a visit to Tesla, but his assistant said to come back another time. Another magician performs an act with a disappearing bird who reappears later. A little boy in the crowd says he kills the bird and asks where his brother is. It is soon after the performance where the magician throws the bird’s body away.
Later at a magic show, two people who are seemingly picked at random, but are actually magicians named Borden and Angier, and an assistant, named Julia, who is also Angier’s wife. They perform a new trick which involves escaping a box filled with water. Borden ties the knot differently with Julia’s consent, but Angier is opposed. In a later act, Julia is seen struggling to untie the knot that Borden tied and eventually she drowns. At the funeral, Angier yells at Borden asking what knot did he tie, but Borden seems to not know, so they split ways.

Borden discusses with his wife of a magic trick that involves catching a bullet with a gun shooting a blank. When performed, the spectator who volunteered to shoot the blank places a metal object in the gun to act as a bullet. Borden realizes that the spectator is actually Angier, and before he could shoot, Borden’s assistant, Fallon, pushes the gun out of the way. The bullet hits Borden’s hand and Angier exits the premise.
Angier hires an assistant named Olivia for his acts. He performs a version of Borden’s trick which involves making a bird disappear and reappear, but doesn’t kill it unlike Borden. The trick is shown off with a mechanic Cutter created, but Borden sabotages the show by disguising himself and injuring an assistant’s hand with the mechanism.

Angier goes to one of Tesla’s conventions and sees Borden as well. Tesla doesn’t seem to surprise anyone at the convention, but spikes Angier’s interest. He visits Tesla in Colorado and decides to fund Tesla to build him an impossible machine. Borden is seen back in town performing his new trick, “The Transported Man,” in which he seamlessly goes from one side of the stage to another. Angier becomes obsessed with this impossible trick and tries to create his own version. Cutter, who helps Angier with the tricks, suggests that Borden uses a double, and that Angier should do the same.
The Rundown

Borden and Cutter end up finding a perfect double named Brute, who drinks and is a failed actor. Everything goes smoothly for the first couple of performances, with Angier upset at the fact he is not on stage for the prestige. Angier is still obsessed over how Borden does his trick, so he sends her to make her Borden’s assistant. Meanwhile, Angier visits Tesla, but Tesla’s machine doesn’t work properly.

The camera cuts to future events where Brute is talking to a person in the bar, which turns out to be Borden trying to sabotage Angier. In the next acts, Brute is irresponsible with his part and doesn’t perform. Borden then vandalizes one of the shows which results with Angier breaking a leg and Brute being tied up and humiliated in front of the crowd. This brings traction to Borden’s show.
The Rundown

Olivia returns with Borden’s journal but gets mad at Angier for not loving her. Angier finds that the journal is encrypted with a code that only Borden knew, so Angier and Cutter kidnap Fallon in order to blackmail. Borden gives up the code “TESLA” to decrypt the journal. In the meantime, Borden returns to Sarah with Fallon and Olivia to a dinner. Borden is acting very drunk and Sarah is clearly upset.

Angier discovers that the whole journal read that it was a plot by Olivia and Borden to humiliate him. He visits Tesla and threatens to cut off the money because Angier believes Tesla is working with Borden. In a last ditch attempt, Tesla tries the machine on a cat, but nothing works. While leaving the premises, Angier overhears meowing, in which he finds two cats and a lot of top hats. This taught him that the machine duplicates items.
Angier visits a last time to see Tesla’s place has been burnt down. Because Edison’s men were at the hotel, they left in order to preserve their works. Tesla sent the machine to Angier already, where Angier steps inside to see what it would create. He performs the trick to the booker to impress him and open a stage up where he could perform. The trick goes well and the booker gives him the theater. He guides Cutter away so he wouldn’t see how the trick was performed and hires blind stagehands to help with the trick.

Borden gets into an argument with Sarah, who says he only loves her half the time. Sarah asks if he loved her now, and he declines. Sarah then hangs herself in the attic. Later, Angier starts performing the trick in front of audiences, one of them including Borden. When the trick goes smoothly, Borden is shocked. Fallon goes to see what was happening after the show. All that was given was a large tank filled with water. Borden tells Fallon that both of them are done and that Angier has won.
The Rundown

When watching Angier’s show, Borden becomes curious and sneaks around backstage. When the trick is performed, Angier drops into the tank and the tank locks itself. Borden, who is concerned, tries to break him out. The screaming of Borden alerts Cutter who accuses him of drowning Angier. Borden is then found guilty of drowning Angier. Cutter receives a message that Mr. Caldlow had bought all the items.

Borden is visited with his daughter Jess by Mr. Caldlow, who turns out to be Angier. Cutter visits Mr. Caldlow and feels betrayed when he finds out that Angier had hid from him and lied. Borden is visited by Fallon, who tells him what happened with him and Caldlow. He also apologizes for hurting Sarah, and is dragged away to be executed.
When leaving the transporting machine in a dark tunnel, Cutter tries to teach Angier that it was not the correct way. A cloaked man walks in later. The cloaked man shoots Angier and reveals himself to be Borden. Angier realizes this was not the Alfred Borden he always knew, but he had a twin brother named Freddy.

Both Bordens switched off being “Borden” and “Fallon.” Both Bordens had the identities down, one loving Sarah and the other loving Olivia, and even cutting off fingers to replicate the gun wound. Cutter reunites Borden with his daughter Jess, while Angier’s body is laid down to burn with the tanks of all his past duplicates.
Form and Content

The reason why the movie is told through journals is because by guiding the viewer through time, they can grasp the motives of the characters, as well as explaining why Borden is in jail. Throughout the movie there is a lot of suspense which is due to the form, since by not telling the story explicitly, the reader has to do some thinking themselves as to the reason why one aspect leads to the other.
Hidden Easter Eggs

- In the scene where one of the Bordens gets hanged his last words are “abracadabra” which is a comment to us, the audience, because he is performing the turn of his magic trick, death making him disappear and his brother reappearing later for the prestige.
- Angier’s and Borden’s stage doubles are both killed the same way as their wifes.
- When Sarah’s nephew catches how the bird trick is done it foreshadows the final reveal that Borden has a twin brother, who is his double.
Title

The title, “The Prestige” is said numerous times throughout the film. The significance of the title is that it is the name of the third/final step of a magic trick. “The prestige” of the magic trick in the film is highly desired between both protagonists, which is why the name of the film is so important. It not only states the central topic of the film, but it exposes the motive between both protagonists, which is their desire to find the other magician’s “prestige”.
Opening Credits

The opening credits of the film shows the floor of a forest covered in top hats. This is foreshadowing for what would be shown later in the movie, which is the duplication machine created by Nikola Tesla being used on Angier’s hat. Along with the image of the hats is the title “The Prestige”, which is important since the duplication of the hats IS “the prestige”.
Diegetic and Non-diegetic elements

Diegetic - Most of the film is diegetic since every word is either being said by someone, or being read by someone. There is rarely diegetic music playing, since there are very little radio devices which play music in the film.

Non-diegetic - The music is non-diegetic for the most part, as the characters don't listen to music, especially with all the traveling and the magic going on.
Subplots and Subtext

There are multiple subplots in The Prestige.

- One of the subplots is introduced when Tesla is mentioned, bringing to surface the possibility of real magic, making the audience wonder about other experiments that could have happened.

- Tesla and Edison perfectly mirroring Angier and Borden’s “arms race”. Edison can be seen sabotaging Tesla’s machines after his breakthrough in electricity.
- The apparent affair of the twins and their lovers. Borden, a persona two brothers have to fight for, both love a different woman. Borden 1 fell in love with Sarah, and Borden 2 who fell in love with Olivia. The love affair supports Angier’s cause to get revenge, as well as Borden’s want to provide for their lovers.

- Angier’s drunk double is a subplot since we don’t know what happened to him. All we know is that he is a failed actor that was used in order for Angier’s (failed) Transporting Man clone.

- Subtext can also be seen in the tricks performed by both of the magicians, we can explicitly see what they’re doing, but create our own subtext of the trick to fool ourselves, because “you want to be fooled”.

Subplots and Subtext Continued
Causal, spatial, and temporal duration

A causal moment in The Prestige is when Angier sees Borden do the Transported Man trick for the very first time. This triggers Angier to try and figure out how Borden does the trick, leading him on a perilous journey which would result in the destruction of both of their lives in order to fully manifest themselves into their act.

There are many spatial moments in the film, such as when Angier was meeting with Tesla in Colorado, Borden was still in London doing his trick. By spacing out the two characters, the audience is able to focus on one protagonist at a time. It also should be known that Borden no longer knows what Angier is up to when Angier goes to Colorado, which triggers a change in knowledge for the viewer, as they now know more than Borden.

A primary driving force in the film is the temporal duration. The story is told through the reading of journals. The basic form of the film is exposed with temporal duration, with Borden reading Angier’s journal, which transports the reader to the past, where Angier would be reading Borden's journal, which would transport him further to the past.
Change of knowledge

Both protagonists know something that the other doesn’t. Both magicians have their own prestige, though the prestige that the viewer follows is Angier’s. It is not until the end of the film where we, as well as Angier, find out Borden's secret.

The depth is obtained from the subjective perspective that the audience is viewing. Sometimes you view things from Borden’s perspective, getting an idea of what each character is feeling. For example, after Borden witnessed Angier’s “Real Transporting Man” trick, he was distraught, yelling at Fallon/his twin about him unable to be successful anymore.

The range of knowledge is obtained through the perspective of Angier, since the audience sees that Angier went to Colorado to meet Tesla, as well as sending his assistant Olivia to spy on Borden and how the trick really works. We also see a slight amount of Sarah's perspective when she looks around Borden's office, eventually killing herself.
Meanings

Emotional - Much of the film makes the audience experience curiosity throughout the use of lighting and mystery. The secret of both magicians having a breakthrough magic trick and the battle to uncover each other’s magic trick or yet surpass it, is also a way to make the audience curious.

Referential - The audience knows that The Prestige is between two magicians, who presumably hate each other, and fight for popularity, fame, and personal vendettas.

Explicit - The explicit meaning of the film is in order to have a good act as a magician you need to get your hands dirty.

Implicit - The implied meaning of the film is seen through the theme, and that what happens to people who feud over obsessive things such as a better trick will usually end in the defeat of both parties.

Symptomatic - The film connects with real life since humans now tend to be obsessed over things, which is parallel in nature to the situation between Angier and Borden. The film also alludes to the real life competition between Edison and Tesla.
Is it a Good Story?

Unified Plot - The plot for The Prestige is unified, since both Angier’s and Borden’s storylines both affect each other.

Externally Observable Truth - The theme of the film being obsession can relate to us, since us humans naturally want to know what we don’t know.

Suspenseful Action - The entire film has suspense, and raises questions for the audience. “Who is who? What is Borden’s trick? What’s the secret?”

Simple and Complex - At face value, it appears that it’s just two magicians that hate each other. In reality, there is a deeper message and meaning behind their fierce rivalry.

Handles Emotional Material with Restraint - When seeing how Borden’s family was destroyed, and how Angier’s heart was crushed, it’s evident that the emotion in the film is handled with care and focus. The main plot that the viewers follow is between the magicians, but what lies in the life of the magicians is also seen by the audience.
Theme

The theme that The Prestige conveys is the idea of obsession. Because Angier did not know how Borden did his Transporting Man trick, he became so obsessed with finding out how Borden did it and doing it better himself. This would lead a fierce rivalry between the two, and how both parties lost in the end. Angier lost his life and Borden lost his trick, his wife, and two fingers (each).
Motifs

Disguises are a motif because Borden and Angier constantly use disguise through the movie to sabotage each other acts and it is later known that the Bordens use a disguise to hide that they are twins. Another motif in the film is the sound of electricity as it is used to emphasize the importance of Tesla’s invention. Lastly another motif is bird cages as it represents that the protagonists are trapped and controlled by their obsessions.
Narrative, Narration, Narrator

The narrative follows a man named Robert Angier, and his mission to find the secret to the best trick he’s ever seen and will ever do. This journey will lead to his and his enemy’s demise.

The narration is given through the cameras, with cuts to each of the respective character’s perspectives, telling their side of the story and what they’re saying.

The narrator for the majority of the film is Angier, since the story is told primarily through his journals.
Character’s motivation is Bordens and Angier’s obsession with one another and always trying to be the better magician no matter the sacrifice. They perform an arms race of magic tricks, competing to have the better and more fascinating magic trick, but at the same time trying to figure out how the other person does it. The filmmaker is also motivated to use camera techniques like freeze frame to build suspense to the prestige of a magic trick or serious scene.
Characterization

Robert Angier is round because he goes from Borden’s friend to his enemy after “Borden” tied a difficult knot on his wife’s hands, leading to her death. Angier is the protagonist.

Alfred Borden is flat because he serves as Angier’s enemy. He loves his wife Sarah and his daughter Jess. He is committed to being a better magician than Angier.

Freddy Borden is flat because he plays as Alfred’s double. He usually doesn’t fight with Alfred, and consistently shows no love to Sarah, and ruins her and Alfred’s relationship. Freddy is also committed to his role as Alfred’s double.
Characterization Cont.

Cutter is flat because he is consistently Angier’s right-hand man, and is the guy behind the scenes for Angier’s performances.

Sarah is flat because she is Alfred Borden’s wife, and is the loving force that prevents him from fully committing to his act.

Olivia is flat because she is Freddy Borden’s love interest, and is the straw that broke the camel’s back in terms of the stability of both the trick and their respective lives.
Point of view

The film is first told through a subjective point of view, during the time both Angier and Borden are reading each other’s journals to try and understand their secrets. A perfect example of a subjective shot is near the end of the movie, where Angier calls out to cutter, then from the dark we see a ball bounce out and Angier is shot. The film is also shown using both a visionary and realistic perspective, making the audience wonder how the magic trick was performed but also proving its authenticity in points of the film.
4 V’s

Voyeuristic - Much of the movie is following what certain characters are doing. There are scenes that are following Angier, Borden, Cutter, and even Sarah. The audience is constantly seeing what a character is doing.

Visceral - Through the hanging body of Sarah, the severing of two of Borden’s fingers, the scene of Angier killing his clone, the viewer always has a feeling. Whether it be suspense through the obviousness of what Borden is up to, or the sickening nature of seeing the cruel things these men have to do in order to live up their “act”.

4 V’s cont.

Vicarious - The viewer witnesses the sabotage of a colleague and the eyes of Sarah crying because she’s betrayed, which allows them to feel for the characters and gain awareness to what they are doing to the people surrounding them.

Verisimilitude - The film takes place in Edwardian London, and since most don’t know what it was like back then, people can see the realism. Aside from the cloning situation, the possibility of twins banking in on a “transporting” man trick is very possible, as well as a machine that can miraculously and quickly free a dove inside.
Important scenes

In the scene of Angier’s wife funeral, Angier asks Borden what knot did he tie which was the reason Angier’s wife couldn’t escape and drown and Borden says he doesn’t know and the reason why he actually doesn’t know because it wasn’t him who tied the knot it was his twin brother that tied the knot which killed Angier’s wife. As in the end of the movie it is revealed to us that the twin brothers would switch off being each other.

The double date where Borden(Freddy) and Olivia join Sarah having dinner and Olivia calls Borden “freddy” where Sarah believes the Borden that is there is Alfred. Sarah says she can tell when Borden actually loves her and when he doesn’t. At the dinner she could tell Borden didn’t really love her because Freddy was Borden at the time and it is actually Alfred who loves Sarah but Alfred was playing Fallon that night.

Freddy Borden reveals that he is the one going to die as when Fallon meets Borden at the jail Freddy Borden apologizes to Fallon saying he is sorry about Sarah and tosses the red ball to Fallon which will later resolve the ending revealing that Alfred Borden loved Sarah and Freddy Borden loved Olivia.
Settings

The setting is in London, UK during the late 19th century. The movie also switches into some notable places like Colorado, multiple theaters in London, and a prison that holds one of the 2 Bordens (Freddy Borden).
“He came in to demand an answer, and I told him the truth. That I have fought with myself over that night, one half of me swearing blind that I tied a simple slipknot, the other half convinced that I tied the Langford double. I can never know for sure.”

“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.”

“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"