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Period 5
Summary of the Film

The Prestige is a film about two aspiring magicians that are trying to entertain the world with their tricks. One magician (Alfred Borden), who is obsessed with fame and fortune, is charged with the murder of the other magician (Robert Angier), who wanted only to see the smiles on the faces of his audience.
Summary Continued

Angier wanted to copy the Borden’s trick called the Transported Man, where one person travels in less than a second to another location. Angier contacts Nikola Tesla to build a machine capable of such matters, but finds himself making dopplegangers, or copies, of the himself. With his new technology, Angier thinks that he has outsmarted Borden, but is later confronted and killed by Borden’s twin brother, Fallon, whom he had used in the Transported Man.
**Exact plot**

Angier and Borden work together as plants in a show where Angier’s wife is accidentally killed. The two go their separate ways and begin developing their own shows. Borden and Fallon (Borden’s twin) develop the transporting man. Angier becomes obsessed with understanding the trick at all costs. Angier steals Borden’s notebook and realizes it would take him years to decipher. Angier captures Fallon and gives him back after Borden reveals the method/key – “Tesla.” Angier embarks on a trip to Tesla in order to have him build him a teleporting machine.
Tesla is tipped by Borden of Angier’s goals and Tesla takes him on a wild goose chase. Angier “discovers” the hats and the cats and is convinced the machine works. Angier receives the machine under dubious circumstances. Angier learns that the machine, in fact, does not work and realizes he’s been duped. Angier begins plotting his revenge by staging a limited engagement of the new teleporting man. Borden visits both the show and the backstage removal of the tanks. Borden then goes onstage and then down below where he witnesses Angier’s double drowning.
Plot Diagram

- Staged flashbacks
- Staged flashforwards
- Nonlinearity: 0.39
- Narrative order →

- Beginning
- In medias res
- Middle
- Zigzag
- End
Rising Conflict

The rising conflict between Robert and Alfred reveals contrasting aspects of each man’s personality. Robert is a smooth showman, one whose highest goal is to amaze an audience. Alfred, less concerned with ornate effects, builds his original Transported Man illusion out of two simple doors and a child’s red ball. He believes that a magician has a duty to come up with the most baffling trick possible, one that will puzzle not just the public but other professionals.
Climax

In this movie, we learn that Angier was in fact Lord Caldlow, which can be seen as rising action, who uses the death of his clone, to frame Borden. But, in the climax we learn that Fallon was Borden’s twin brother who’d swap their identities often.
Why is the Name important?

The title, **The Prestige**, is an important aspect to the film as it means the return of or the bringing back of. **It is a good title to the movie because it shows how Borden was able to bring it “back,” even when he died.** Another meaning for *prestige* is *respect*, which is one of the **main themes** within this movie. It also brings our attention to the beginning scene, where Cutter is explaining how a magic trick begins and ends.
Point of View

The point of view in this film is told from both Angier and Borden. The film switches off between the two’s point of view as the two compete to be the better magician. This film is both unrestricted and restricted view because at times we know certain things that Angier and Borden don’t know about each other, while other times, we find out things at the same time the characters find things out. This film is also told in subjective narration because we learn and see things from the different characters’ point of view. We learn about the characters’ personal beliefs, assumptions, opinions, and interpretations.
Robert Angier

An aristocratic **magician** with the stage name "The Great Danton", and a **rival to Borden**. He was found dead in a water tank at the start of the movie, allegedly murdered by Alfred Borden. Originally a companion to Borden, the two developed a rivalry when Borden caused the **death of Angier's wife, Julia**. Angier decided to pay back by trying to be **better than Borden in his magic career**, and resorted to increasingly unpleasant tactics, eventually **stealing Borden's encrypted journal** to find the tricks behind his Transported Man trick.
In a way, he didn't die. The magic trick he was showing when he was "killed", his own version of the Transported Man, works by using a magical machine invented by Nikola Tesla that creates a clone of him in a displaced location, while the original Angier is deliberately drowned. After his supposed murder, the surviving clone "renamed" himself to his real name, Lord Caldlow, having lived under the Robert Angier pseudonym the whole time.
Alfred Borden

A working-class magician with the stage name "The Professor", and a rival to Robert Angier. He was arrested at the start of the movie for allegedly murdering Robert Angier. Their rivalry started when he accidentally caused the death of Angier's wife in a magic trick. When in jail, he received Angier's journal, and began to go through the events that Angier had experienced.
Alfred Borden (Cont.)

He is actually a set of identical twins, Alfred and Freddie sharing Alfred's identity, with the one playing Alfred while the other disguises as Fallon, and the two regularly switch characters between them. No one knows their secret, including their lovers. One of them loved Sarah, the other loved Olivia. Their trick was performed using a double, exactly how Cutter said it was performed.
Main Characters Comparison

Nolan uses Borden and Angier to exhibit the differences among the classes in nineteenth century London. For example, the audiences at Borden’s performances are often raucous because they just want to see the main event and they do not care about the set up. Angier’s audiences ooh and aah at his showmanship and the actual trick is just the cherry on top. Also, Borden is able to learn the Chinese magician’s act because of his poverty.
Main Characters Comparison (Cont.)

Borden can relate to many because he puts all of himself into his craft in order to escape that life of poverty while Angier finds it incredulous at first because he thinks of magic as a hobby, not a livelihood. Nolan also utilizes another rivalry to parallel Borden and Angier’s. Tesla’s rivalry with Edison over electrical current can be compared to that of the magicians.
Minor Characters

John Cutter
An ingenieur who mentors and works with Borden and Angier. He told Angier that Borden was using a double the entire time at the beginning of the movie. He's the one who finds the theatres for Angier to perform at. He also builds the devices, contraptions, and designs for the illusions that Angier performs. Except for Tesla’s.
Minor Characters

Nikola Tesla
The famous real-life inventor worked in America where he helps Angier with his magic. Borden deceived Angier into going to America and pour all of his resources on a nonexistent magical Tesla machine that Borden supposedly used to create his Transported Man trick. Unfortunately for both of them, Tesla did create a magical machine, a machine that can clone things perfectly. He is in a constant battle with Edison as we can see when Tesla’s building gets burned down by Edison’s men.
Minor Characters

Olivia Wenscombe
An assistant to both Angier and Borden. She is hired mainly for her looks, rather than experience. She betrays Angier, in order to help Borden instead. She falls for Borden. One of the Borden twin falls in love with her, while the other falls in love with Sarah.
Minor Characters

Sarah Borden
Sarah was Borden's wife. She has a daughter with Borden. She is driven to suicide, because only one of the Borden twins love her and the other does not. This causes her to be hurt as she can always tell if her husband really means it when he tells her he loves her. Over time, it's suggested that she figures out what's really going on.
Narration, Narrative, Narrator

The film is developing through circular narration, as it flashes forwards, backwards, and in the middle multiple times, giving you selective information. What is interesting about this film is that no particular role has a higher significance than the rest in terms of storytelling. “During the film, the audience hears several individual accounts from the three characters described, all in non-diegetic form."
Having this is clever, as we get to understand the plot from contrasting perspectives, but connecting them all the while to create our own ideas of what is happening; therefore encouraging the story to progress.” In beginning sequence “all at the same time, we are learning the basis of the film plot, but also finding out presumably, the ending.”
Structure of the Film

“The film's structure is predicated on the three part set up of a great magic trick, "The Pledge," "The Turn," and "The Prestige." This is shown in how there are three times they flash between. The Pledge is when there is no voice narrator and is the beginning of the timeline. The Turn is when we watch Angier search for the trick for the Teleported Man and is in the middle of the timeline with his voice over. The Pledge is mostly with Borden in the jail, but as it nears the end it shifts out, and it is at the end of the timeline and has Borden’s voiceover.
Message of this Movie

Throughout the movie, we are displayed with the message that our obsessions can make us blind to the truth that’s reality in front of our very eyes. We see this when Borden’s secrets are right in front of Angier every time. When Cutter tells Angier that he uses a double, Angier disagrees. The same thing happens when Olivia tells Angier that there is makeup and accessories in Borden’s home.
“Are you watching closely?”

That one sentence placed at the beginning of the film could mean so many things. One, as we already realize that the initial shot is from the ending, it can be taken personally in that the audience needs to pay close attention if they wish to know what happened. Two, it may be indicating that it’s going to be a significant, repeated quote in the plot, which again will become clear at the end. Three, it’s possible it could be both of those combined; and four, it could be to throw the audience off.
Important Quote from Angier

“Would I be the man in the box or the prestige?”

“You never understood, why we did this. The audience knows the truth: the world is simple. It's miserable, solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder, and then you... then you got to see something really special... you really don't know?... it was... it was the look on their faces...”
Important Quotes from Borden

“Are you watching closely?”

“They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up... you'll be nothing to them.”

“The secret impresses no one. The trick you use it for is everything.”
**Moral Premise**

The movie examines how virtues such as **passion for excellence** and **self-sacrifice** can become horrific Faustian examples of **destructive obsession**. Self-sacrifice is often considered a virtue when that sacrifice is for another's good. But **self-sacrifice is also what obsessive people do for something that they selfishly want but don't need.**
Moral Premise (Cont.)

One example of self-sacrifice is living a half life. Borden was living a double life with his twin brother and vice-versa. When Angier and Borden went to watch the Chinese magician, they both realized his trick. After the show, they went out to see his devotion to his crippleness. Borden respects it which shows a hint that he uses a double and Angier says that he doesn’t respect it and can’t live like that which never has him suspecting Borden of using a double this whole time.
Title Sequence

When the credits are immediately introduced, they slowly and silently come onto the screen. They are white with a black background, which may suggest mystery....the film is all to do with magic and illusions which are clearly linked to the topic of mystery...there is now a shot of many top hats on the ground of a forest.
Title Sequence (Cont.)

This symbolises the stereotypical magician but also foreshadows the strange level of mystery in the film. The viewer then gets introduced to some narration... By having his voice, it makes the viewer listen carefully to what he’s saying...he’s explaining exactly what the film is about and what the meaning of the title is. As the narration and slow music continues, Angier is presented on stage. He is dressed smartly and seems to be controlling the impressively large crowd with his showmanship and illusions.
The combination of the spotlight and the mid-shot really brings the importance of Angier’s character... The scene then proceeds backstage, to where Borden seems to be sneaking around. The camera then swaps back to Angier where it catches a shot of himself, his glamorous assistant and an electric current which seems to be roaring behind them... it shows the control Angier’s character has and the jaw dropping type of magic he can produce.
This is then followed by **Borden sneaking around** and a close up shot of a **peculiar looking man**. A flicker of electricity lights up the man’s eyes which seem to have nothing but the white of the sclera. This again, is very mysterious. From this to the ‘ball’ of electricity that seems to be used as a prop, **this opening scene contains very strange and out of the ordinary content**. The mood of the scene quickly changes when you suddenly see **Angier drowning**.
The high angled aerial shot of him makes him look weak and in a vulnerable position. Borden character is confused but clearly knows the drowning man. The scene then unexpectedly fades before you can see what the outcome is. This is a good technique because it will leave the viewer curious as to what happened.
Borden’s entire life is a magic trick with the 3 important parts
1. The Pitch
   a. Borden reveals his magic trick to the audience. He shows everyone everything about himself, trying to see if they can guess his tricks
2. The Turn
   a. Borden gets arrested for “killing” Angier
3. The Prestige
   a. Everyone thinks Borden is dead, but is “brought back” by his twin brother, just like the bird was after it was caught in the cage.
Subplots & Subtexts (Cont.)

While the Tesla subplot doesn’t seem necessary at first, it’s important because of its contribution to the film’s religious subtext. Tesla has the ability to do things that magicians must pretend to achieve. When Angier introduces his reworked “Transported Man” to Ackerman, the promoter tells the magician to “Disguise it. Give them enough reason to doubt it.” If Tesla is able to create such a stunning machine, why would a higher power be necessary? Angier behaves like a man with no belief in a higher power.
He was a man who had seen up close what Tesla was capable of, but he simply took the device and went on his way. The realization that Tesla’s machine works should give Angier doubts about the ultimate consequence of his actions, but that doesn’t stop him from committing awful acts. The only time he hints at having any fear is when he asks “Would I be the man in the box or the prestige?”
Metaphor

The film enjoys playing with metaphors and the birdcage illusion is the most prominent example, given the frequency of its appearance and the way it mirrors at least two crucial plot points. The first time we see it performed is right at the beginning of the film; Michael Caine’s magic engineer Cutter is performing it for a little girl.
Metaphor (Cont.)

It intercuts with moments from a climactic sequence in the movie where Angier performs his own remarkable illusion. Caine’s voice over explains the three acts of a magic trick – the pledge, the turn and the prestige – that the simultaneously unfolding performances serve to visually illustrate.
Metaphor (Cont.)

It’s only when we get to the respective finales that the illusions seemingly deviate: Cutter’s bird is made to successfully reappear, delighting the little girl, but Angier seemingly falls to his doom into a water tank, and begins to drown. It’s a deliberately confusing way to start the film. At this point, the secret to performing the birdcage trick has yet to be revealed, and the nature of Angier’s illusion is several reels away.
Metaphor (Cont.)

Starved of this information and context, the audience’s most logical assumption would be that they are being shown two contrasting illusions: one that is executed successfully, and one that has gone tragically (or nefariously) wrong. However, upon a second viewing, armed with the aforementioned knowledge, it becomes blindingly obvious: both performances are essentially the same.
Sound

A sustained musical chord links a shot of Angier looking out of his coach with a shot of him already striding along the ground. **There are many sound bridges as well.** At the close of one performance, we hear Borden saying, “He’s complacent, he’s predictable,” and this comment carries us to the next scene, in which he continues to complain about the magician who employs the two men. Robert is musing on a name for his act, and we hear him ask, “How about the New Transported Man?” as crowds arrive to see that new show.
The Two Journals

One man reads the other man’s diary, which will lead us into or out of a flashback. In itself, the diary device is quite familiar, but *The Prestige* gives it a special emphasis by embedding one diary within another. In the past timeline, Angier acquired Alfred’s notebook, and as he deciphered it, Angier recorded his reactions and memories in his own diary during his trip to Colorado. Angier’s diary, which comments on Alfred’s journal, is later read by Alfred in his cell during his trial.
The Two Journals (Cont.)

This plot pattern sounds complex, but in fact the embedded diaries help keep us oriented in time, guiding us from present to past and back again. Again, sound plays a crucial role in acclimating us to the device. We hear the diarist’s voice as the reader scans the lines, and this anchors us in two time frames simultaneously. Above all, it is Robert’s diary voice-over that helps shift among time frames.
Symbols

The Coded Journal- Borden’s secretly coded diary which winds up in Angier’s hand is symbolic of the rivalry between the two. In the first place, it is an actual mechanism designed to give one the upper hand while creating for the other the illusion that it is he who has outwitted the other. More importantly, however, is how the diary represents both the negative and positive consequences of such intense rivalries: on the negative spectrum, Angier had been led on a wild goose chase which earned him none of the knowledge he was seeking, but is ultimately a net positive because it leads him to Tesla.
Symbols (Cont.)

Water- Water is used subversively in the film as a symbol of death. The associations with water and death are made palpably clear at the beginning and end: first with the death of Angier’s wife due to the wrong knot in water tank escape. And then, of course, at the end when the grim reality of the price to be paid for Angier’s transported man trick becomes clear.
The Birdcage - The birdcage trick is **not just fancy foreshadowing** that hints at the way both magicians pull off their grand illusions, it is also a **symbol of how each man is trapped by their own self-destruction ambition**. Both Angier and Borden are **trapped in the cages of their trickery** and both must **willingly sacrifice other lives** in order to keep the cage from collapsing in upon themselves.
Symbols (Cont.)

The Hats- The film cryptically opens with images of a bunch of tops on the ground in what appears to be a forest. No context is given. One must know the full meaning behind the hats, including how they created and how they got where they are—before their symbolic value can fully appreciated. The hats are symbol of the real magic in the world around us that goes unnoticed everyday because it is magic performed without showmanship.
Symbols (Cont.)

**The Knot** - The use of the wrong knot during a trick in the movie’s opening is **responsible for the death of Angier’s wife.** Borden tied the knot and Angier rightfully blames him, but what angers Angier to the point a murder plot years in the making is that Borden insists **he doesn’t know which knot he tied that night:** whether it was the right one or the wrong. Even at gunpoint, he maintains that he simply does not know. The literal knot becomes a **symbolic knot for the rest of the movie.** He who discovers the secret of the knot discovers the source of the illusion that even Angier cannot definitively solve.
Irony

Borden’s notebook **keyword was Tesla**, and was a decoy to distract Angier from finding out the true way he does his trick. However when Angier goes to Tesla, **he has a machine that clones people.** This is irony because Borden sent Angier to Tesla to **throw him off the trick** but this ended up causing Angier to get an even better Teleporting Man trick.
This movie is presented in 3 different timelines:

- The first timeline is the present, where **Borden is sitting in his jail cell**, reading from Angier’s personal notebook
  - This is where we see Borden’s twin kill Angier in the end of the movie
- The second timeline is the past where **Angier is reading from the notebook he stole from Borden**
The third timeline is the **distant past**, where we witness the start of the rivalry between Borden and Angier.

- We see Borden accidently kill Angier’s wife by tying the knot that Angier told him not to knot.

- Throughout the movie, we see **ABACAB being used** as we are taken from the present-past to the present back to the present-past and back to the past.

- A is when Borden is in jail, C is when we see it from the beginning, and B is when we were following Angier.
Spatial Relations

In the movie, we are taken back and forth through different locations. Some of them describe the past events of what happened with Angier and Borden, while others show what happened as they read each other’s journals. All of these locations come together to create a movie that is interconnected within itself.
Causal Relationships

Throughout the movie, we are able to witness one event affect another, which creates a domino effect. When we see Angier shoot Borden’s fingers, there is a stint of hatred that grows. After this, we see each of them sabotaging each other’s shows. This sets off a reaction so that Angier can try to do better than Borden in his special trick.
Change of Knowledge

In the film, the audience and characters have both a restricted and unrestricted point of view. When following Borden, we know less than he does. Being secretive about his twin brother is one of the biggest elements within the story. One example is when he first performs the trick, “The Transporting Man”. The audience sees the magic trick without knowing whether or not it is real. However, there is a point in time when Angier has more knowledge than Borden. Borden attempts to throw off Angier by telling him that his secret was ‘Tesla’
Change of Knowledge (Cont.)

Little does Borden know, Angier actually has success with Tesla. As an audience member, we know more than Borden does. This is an example of unrestricted point of view. At the end of the film, Borden reveals his twin brother to both the audience and Angier. This is when a character has a change of knowledge. Now Angier pieces together what really happened, instead of thinking that Borden was doing real magic.
Change of Knowledge (Cont.)

Accordingly, the story is presented via unrestricted narration, but it is manipulated through many techniques of plot construction. The plot shuffles story order, plays with levels of knowledge, replays some scenes, and cuts off others, withholding their consequences. Yet these maneuvers don’t confuse us about the basic story progression. They arouse curiosity (what has led up to this turn of events?) and suspense (what will happen next?). At the same time, the plot misdirects our attention, suppressing key information about the magicians’ secrets.
Parallelism

The Prestige is based on **parallels**: two magicians, each with a double and an ingénieur. Each magician wounds his counterpart, and each falls in love with a woman but loses her. **Acts are rehearsed and re-performed**, each time with variations, as when Angier’s double becomes more drunk and heedless. The stage trap doors that we see so often point toward the gallows trapdoor that will end the life of the brusque Borden twin. Julia’s drowning in the tank onstage is mirrored in Robert’s drowning below stage.
Parallelism (Cont.)

*The Prestige* makes **constant use of recurring lines**. Julia says that calling the act *The Great Danton* is “sophisticated,” and after her death, Robert honors her by using the name. Tesla’s remark that “Man’s grasp should exceed his nerve” is modified by Robert as his new tagline: “Man’s reach exceeds his imagination.” The most vivid dialogue motif is probably the one launched by Cutter, when he talks of “getting your hands dirty.” At various points, Cutter and Alfred invoke this line to taunt Robert’s reluctance to risk everything for his magic.
Parallelism (Cont.)

By weaving parallels and journal entries into the plot, the film propels the action forward while enhancing the mysteries. We are continually confronted with new information that has to be fitted into what we have already seen and heard. Yet the film also hints at what is concealed. Most centrally, the secret of both illusions is substitution of a double, and this is suggested by a visual motif.
Parallelism (Cont.)

We learn that, since canaries look alike, magicians make canaries vanish and reappear by *killing one and substituting another*. This is a prototype of Robert’s cloning technique, but it also foreshadows the consequences of the Borden twins’ decision to live out their *act*, with one eventually sacrificed for the other.
Dialogue can ***mislead throughout the movie***. Olivia, Robert’s spy in his rival’s camp, assures him that Alfred doesn’t use a double, because the man onstage is lacking two fingers; we later learn that one **Alfred cut off his fingers so the twins would remain identical**. In retrospect, many lines prove to have hinted at the Borden brothers’ secret. In a quarrel with Olivia, Alfred assures her that “part of me” had a child with Sarah but “part of me” didn’t, “the part that found you, the part that’s sitting here right now.”
At the prison, bidding farewell to Fallon (his disguised twin), Alfred refers to the other’s urge to quit. “You were right. I should have left him to his damn trick. . . . You go live your life in full now.” Robert’s own cloning strategy is foreshadowed when he tries to hire a double: “I don’t need him to be my brother. I need him to be me.”
Motivations

One of the biggest motivations that was drawn in this movie was Love:

1. Angier loved his dead wife
2. Borden loved Olivia
3. Borden’s twin loved Sarah
4. Everyone Loved Magic
Another important motivation in this movie was Revenge

1. Angier wanted revenge for Borden murdering Angier’s wife
2. Borden wanted revenge on Angier for killing Borden’s twin brother and using Borden’s daughter in magic.
The flaw of both magicians is their obsession. Borden is obsessed with magic and maintaining the illusion while Angier is only obsessed with beating Borden both on and off the stage.
Anagnorisis (critical discovery)

Critical discoveries are made as the two illusionists read each other’s diaries. Angier realizes that Borden’s diary is a fake and begins to cry because his obsession is too great. Borden knows something is wrong when Angier addresses him (from the diary) in jail at the end of his diary. When he sees Lord Caldlow (Angier), he understands that Angier has gone too far.
Peripeteia (Reversal of circumstances)

This occurs after each magician sabotages the other’s act. After Angier shoots Borden, Angier’s popularity grows as “The Great Danton”, while Borden has to rework his act. The same thing occurs when Borden maims an audience member during Angier’s bird cage act.
Catharsis (Purgation of the audience)

As the film goes on, the audience cannot decide which character is the villain since they both commit immoral deeds. But when Angier murders duplicates of himself and takes Borden’s daughter, the audience can perceive him as the antagonist.
The Prestige is realistic in that it takes place in the late 1800s England and America. It uses the archaic clothing and technology, and alludes to people of that time period. Two relevant people mentioned are Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla, who appear as rivals throughout the movie. The areas where it is not as voyeuristic is with Tesla’s cloning device, which hadn’t existed in previous time periods and our time periods.
Visceral

The Prestige shocks you at the beginning of the movie when Angier’s wife dies. It makes you sympathetic towards Angier, but then confuses and sickens you when Angier says the reason he wants to discover the technique to the Teleporting Man was more important to him than his wife’s death.
Visceral (Cont.)

Two of the biggest emotions you feel while you watch the movie are confused and shocked because there are many twists and turns in the movie. During the movie, the scenes make you commiserate with Angier, as he appears to be the protagonist, but as time goes on you start to realize he may not be the person who you thought he is after all.
Vicarious

When your watching Angier’s grief, it makes you see him as a good person and someone who is rightly angry at Borden. You’re now sympathetic and your heart goes out to him and his loss. However, as you progress more in the movie, you begin to see a purposeful change in behavior that confuses you. It’s confusing because the movie made you admire the character but now it’s clear he was an immoral person.
Verisimilitude

There are many qualities in this movie that make it appear realistic such as the emotions you see when Angier’s wife dies. There is a hidden jealousy in which Angier craves Borden’s lifestyle. The reactions (for example, Angier’s wife dying) of the audience were appropriate for the situation, as no one was laughing.
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