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From Plato to Marx: The Dishonest Realities of Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*

Harmony, the state of agreement and balance, is a vital element of a working, intellectual, and civilized society (Plato, 2010). Plato believes that through “maintaining harmony and propriety,” progressive enlightenment is possible (Hatcher, 2017). In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx, a renowned sociologist, historian, and revolutionary, also explored harmony, or the lack thereof, to develop a doctrine known as Marxism, which combined “philosophical anthropology, a theory of history, and an economic and political program” (McLellan, 2018). Marx's philosophy recognized and identified the modes of production and the economic class system as the origin of the social divide. His theory on industrial capitalism identifies two main groups: the working class, which became known as the Proletariat, and the upper class consisting of nobility and capitalists known as the Bourgeoisie (McLellan, 2018). This separation in society and labour resulted in conflict and injustice. Comparatively, screenwriter, producer, and director Christopher Nolan often uses historical, economic, and social theories such as these as the foundation for his intricately woven stories. Nolan's 2006 film *The Prestige*, along with his other works including *Memento* (2000), *Insomnia* (2002), and *Inception* (2010) show great intellectual depth. Uniquely, *The Prestige* takes the protagonists and the audience on similar existential psychological journeys, which defamiliarizes conventional notions of the self, society, and the universe. The concepts of confinement and enlightenment in Plato's Allegory of the Cave are juxtaposed with concepts of social and political division in Marxism. Plato's Allegory is separated into three parts: The Cave and the Fire, The Stages of Liberation, and The Return to the Cave. Similarly, *The Prestige* is divided into three acts: The Pledge, The Turn, and The Prestige. Nolan synthesizes ancient and contemporary methodologies in his nonlinear storytelling through two rival magicians' diary entries, which reveal their obsessive

competitive nature. He fools both his viewers and the protagonists into willingly believing the dishonest realities presented to them.

With the opening image of an array of forgotten top hats on the forest ground, Nolan introduces the central theme of the film: appearance vs reality. John Cutter, the ingénieur and designer of illusions, narrates the opening sequence by explaining the acts of a magic trick. The first act is known as The Pledge. “The magician shows you something ordinary - a deck of cards, a bird, or a man. He shows you this object, and pledges to you its utter normality. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it, to see if the thing is real, ordinary, normal. But, of course, it probably isn't” (*The Prestige*, 2006). Correspondingly, Plato's Allegory of the Cave begins with The Cave and the Fire. The allegory presents a scenario in which individuals are chained within the confines of an underground cave, facing the walls and unable to move their heads. A fire behind the prisoners casts shadows on the wall they are facing. “Between the fire and those who are shackled [...] there runs a walkway at a certain height [...] a low wall has been built the length of the walkway, like the low curtain that puppeteers put up, over which they show their puppets” (Sheehan, 2016). Through the walkway and the shadow, which does not extend behind the prisoners, Plato emphasizes the illusion which compels the prisoners to view falsehoods as realities. Therefore, the prisoners and theatre audiences alike are obliged to believe their eyes: The images on the wall cast by the fire and the magicians' acts are real. There is no “distinction of the visible and the intelligible,” when the prisoners and the audiences simply accept what they see as reality without questioning the shadows or the showmen (Plato, 2010, p.20). Nolan understands that the order of information and events is an essential part of storytelling and filmmaking, just like in a magic trick.

The Pledge is not only the first act of a magic trick but also the first act of the film. Rival magicians Robert Angier and Alfred Borden have made it their life's mission to

sabotage and outdo each other by discovering the secrets of their opponent's magic tricks. Through the nonlinear storyline, the audience is unknowingly presented with the film's end. The narrator directly asks “are you watching closely?” The final act of Angier's version of the infamous The Transported Man is the opening act of the film. Both men have been restlessly perfecting this simple trick. A man disappears and within seconds reappears across the stage. How can a single man disappear and reappear in a different location within the blink of an eye? Due to both magicians' obsession with The Prestige, Angier is able to lure Borden with the prospect of discovering his secret into a trap that frames Borden for Angier's death. Borden goes backstage during one of Angier's shows in an attempt to discover his methods. Borden finds a blind stage aid guarding a water tank, into which Angier falls after jumping through the trap door from the stage. In an attempt to save a panicking Angier from drowning in the tank, Borden frantically uses an ax to break the tank's glass. Regrettably, all help comes too late as Borden witnesses the death of his former colleague. In prison, Borden receives Angier's diary from a solicitor wanting to purchase his tricks. Christopher Nolan forthwith uses both Angier's diary and subsequently Borden's notebook, both of which are fakes, to tell the story. Nolan applies French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory of the hermeneutics of suspicion, a common device derived from the writings of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. “These thinkers jointly constitute the 'school of suspicion.' [...] they share a commitment to unmasking 'the lies and illusions of consciousness'” (Felski, 2012). Their interpretations focus on “self-evident meanings” to draw out “less visible and less flattering truths” (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 356). The hermeneutics of suspicion intends to uncover the disguised meaning of texts to discover the truth about human interactions and existence. The illusion of the self in Angier's and Borden's diaries is a tool Nolan deliberately incorporated into the narrative to mislead not only the characters but the audience. This untrustworthy tool of narration

coincides with the hermeneutics of suspicion and sets up the first act: The Pledge.

Both Ricoeur's and Plato's theories support the idea that self-knowledge can only be achieved by placing oneself in a frame of reference that considers time, space, and relation to others (Pellauer, 2016). To escape the pain of enlightenment, the magicians live their illusions. Nolan applies Ricoeur's methods of examining the intent and integrity of texts, which can be interpreted in numerous ways. Having the film and the story unfold through the diaries of magicians, Nolan creates suspicion and countless red herrings. Cutter plainly states during Borden's trial, "[t]hese are magicians, your honor. Showmen. Men who live by dressing up plain and sometimes brutal truths to amaze. To shock." Both Angier and Borden rely on illusion to cope with their reality: that the world they live in is unjust and bleak. In order to succeed, not only in their profession but in life, they must be totally devoted to their art. As Borden tells Angier, "[u]tter self-sacrifice. It's the only way to escape *this*."

The lack of equality in social and political environments is represented in the different class systems: the Proletariat and Bourgeoisie, as Marx explains and Nolan applies. Borden represents the Proletariat, the lower working class citizens, while Angier represents the nobility or Bourgeoisie. Borden struggles to get by and is forced to rely on his magic tricks for income. Angier, however, comes from a prominent family. Both live double lives: Borden has a secret identical twin, disguised as Mr. Fallon, and Angier lives under a false name to save his family's reputation while he lives out his dreams. If Angier fails in his endeavors as a magician, he has multiple financial backups. The Borden twins rely on each other for professional success and financial survival.

Marxism is a theory based on conflict, which is created by the separation of the rich and the poor. However, the antagonism between Angier and Borden goes beyond that of social classes. While working as stage aids for the same magician, Angier's wife drowns on

stage as a trick goes terribly wrong. She is unable to loosen the knot binding her hands, which Borden had tied. Angier cannot forgive Borden, and makes it his mission to discover Borden's secrets and sabotage his life. René Girard, a French philosopher and historian of social science, whose work concentrated on philosophical anthropology, dedicated his work to deciphering human behavior and desire (Andrade, 2015). Girard writes that “[p]eople are social creatures, and their behavior is based on imitation to a much greater degree than generally supposed” (Haven, 2008). Although Angier and Borden are divided by their social classes, their toxic mimetic rivalry is grounded in their mutual hatred for one another and their desire and determination to become the greatest act of their time. As Girard perfectly concludes, “[w]e would like our desires to come from our deepest selves, our personal depths—but if it did, it would not be desire. Desire is always for something we feel we lack” (Haven, 2008). Borden's and Angier's extreme competitive nature, which turns into obsessive rivalry, in turn allows neither of them to truly succeed or settle.

The second act of a magic trick is called the The Turn. Cutter explains to the audience that “[t]he magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. [...] Now you are looking for the secret. But you won't find it...” The Turn follows Plato's second act structure, The Stages of Liberation. The prisoners who have been chained in the underground cave, who know only the illusions on the walls, are now set free. This is the first part of The Stages of Liberation. The sight of the burning fire must be painful, because “[due to] the flickering brightness [he] would be unable to look at those things whose shadows he saw previously” (Sheehan, 2016). The prisoners are now forced to confront their existence. Their truth, the shadows on the walls and the echoes coming from beyond, were all deceptions. Angier, just like the prisoners in the cave, also finds himself facing the truth, without being able to accept it. “[...] he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now

called realities” (Plato, 2010, p.4). His obsession with finding out the trick to Borden's The Transported Man drives him mad. Cutter, now Angier's ingénieur, is convinced that there is a simple answer to Borden's trick. Borden uses a double. One man introduces the trick, then disappears through the door, and the double reappears through the other door across the stage a few seconds later. It is an ingenious trick with an uncomplicated explanation. However, Angier is unable to accept the answer. “The trick is too good – too simple – the audience hardly knows what they've seen.” He, like the audience, wants to be fooled into believing in an intricate, convoluted, and grand explanation.

At first, Angier takes Cutter's advice and with the help of his stage aid, Olivia, they find Angier a double: Mr. Root, a drunken failed actor. Although Cutter spends weeks training Mr. Root, the partnership only last for a short period before Mr. Root, influenced by Borden, realizes that he can make demands, thus controlling Angier's success. Not only does Mr. Root begin to sabotage the performance, which leads to Angier's leg injury, but he takes Angier's most prized possession: The Prestige. Angier, through his fanatical obsession with the key to Borden's trick, becomes a slave to his own mind. “The man stole my life. I'm going to steal his trick.” Both characters live double lives, whether they intended to or not. Dualism, “a cyclical, [...] repetitive view on history” focuses on the “ultimate destiny of humanity and the world” (Stefon & Bianchi, 2016). Associated with the Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines, dualism traces back to Plato and his works *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, and *Cratylus* (Stefon & Bianchi, 2016). Platonism, regarding the harmony in the cosmos, is more “radially dualistic” because it emphasizes the dialectal character of the “cosmic struggle between two antithetical principles” of good and evil (Stefon & Bianchi, 2016). The conflict between Borden and Angier, the dualities of the self as expressed by society as a whole, takes the trick from a harmless illusion of using a double to a horrifying scientific marvel using a cloning

machine.

In an attempt to mislead Angier, Borden provides the five letter cypher to his false diary entries: Tesla. This leads Angier to Colorado Springs, where Tesla is experimenting to create new technologies, such as the means to clone. Nolan, for the first time in the film, introduces a real-life character. In reality, Nikola Tesla was an inventor, electrical engineer, and futurist known for his alternating-current electrical system, which ultimately led to the discovery of the rotating magnetic field (Gunderman, 2018). By incorporating a further aspect of realism, such as Tesla, Nolan blurs the transition of fact and fiction and reinforces the convolution of appearances and realities.

The film correctly states that Tesla is the father of the modern world's technology. (Mosher, 2017). During the Industrial Revolution, in which *The Prestige* is set, many other scientists could have been mentioned, however, unlike the others, Tesla had alternate motivations just like Angier and Borden. Through technocracy, the control of society and/or industry by the technically advanced, Tesla was able to become an elite of society, with many idolizing him and his embodiment of the American Dream (Burdett, 2015, p. 26). In the film, Tesla means to develop a cloning device for Angier, which, in his mind, will cripple Borden's technique of using a double. Tesla understands Angier and his obsession on a deeper level, because he too has experienced it. Tesla, like Angier, has an arch rival, Thomas Edison. This real life rivalry became known as the War of Currents. Edison developed the direct current (DC), which are currents that run in a single direction, while Tesla developed alternating currents (AC) to solve the problem of converting between higher and lower voltages (Lantero, 2014). Both Tesla and Angier use unorthodox methods, while Edison and Borden use traditional approaches to problem solving. Before Tesla begins the development of the instrument, he tells Angier, "You're familiar with a phrase, 'Man's reach exceeds his grasp'?"

It's a lie. Man's grasp exceeds his nerve. The only limits on scientific progress are those imposed by society.” Every obsession comes with sacrifice, as Tesla warns Angier, and only by overcoming one's fears will one achieve the impossible. The character of Tesla represents the enlightened individual; the ex-prisoner who understands the pain and sacrifice of the truth, directly parallel to Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

The Stages of Liberation in Plato's Allegory of the Cave not only discuss the initial encounter with the fire, but the encounter with daylight and the pain, blindness, and rage that ensues (Plato, 2010). Cage metaphors are a prominent tool used by Nolan to tell his story. At first glance the bird cages, water tanks, and boxes symbolize physical and mental confinement. Nolan uses the cage as a symbol of confinement within the self, society, and the universe. Plato uses caves, Marx uses classes, and Nolan uses cages to show the constraints of life.

Once Angier owns what he desires, *The Turn* concludes. Tesla has successfully built a cloning device for Angier, who takes it out of the box and assembles it with the instructions he was given. The blinding light of the electrical rays of the machine, just like the sunlight of the outside world the prisoners experience, forces the viewer to witness terrible truths. “Knowledge is the real object of the whole science” (Plato, 2010, p. 26). As Plato describes: knowledge is the intention of science, even if it is a truth rather not discovered or admitted. Similarly, Angier is faced with looking himself (knowledge) in the eye, resulting in the murder of his own clone. The last part of *The Stages of Liberation* directly questions the nature and cost of enlightenment. What does the prisoner prefer? Does he envy those in the cave for their blindness and ignorance (Plato, 2010, p. 26)? Or does he thrive on knowing the painful truths?

The Prestige, the last act, reveals the key to not only *The Transported Man* but to the

bitter truth of humanity. The final stage in Plato's Allegory is the Return to The Cave. The freed prisoner returns to the cave in order to share his experiences with the prisoners and ultimately set them free. "[...] [H]e had gone up but only in order to come back down into the cave with his eyes ruined" (Sheehan, 2016). Enlightenment comes at a great cost. The reality of the truth is too painful and horrifying, that when the freed prisoner does return, still weak and not yet readjusted to the dark, the chained prisoners are unable to accept the truths of another and fight to destroy the facts by killing its bearer. Robert Angier, just like the enlightened prisoner, must return to complete his mission. In this case Angier returns from his travels to Colorado in an attempt to perform his last 100 shows of The Real Transported Man with Tesla's cloning machine. Every night, in order to perform the trick, he steps into the machine and drowns a copy of himself in a water tank, the same way his wife drowned, while the other reappears on the balcony for the last act of the trick, The Prestige.

Although Borden hangs for the murder of Angier's clone, Borden's twin brother survives. As Alfred and Robert inevitably return to their cave, the secrets that have haunted their lives are exposed. Humanity's internal and external conflicts are expressions of good and evil found in the self, society, and the universe. Angier tells Tesla, "[i]f people thought the things I did on stage were real, they wouldn't clap - they'd scream." Angier admits to himself and Borden in his last moments of life that the laws of the universe, just like those of society and the self, present painful realities. According to Karl Marx, "[r]eason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form" (Marx, 1843). As Marx explains, reason, or lack thereof, is the cause for Angier's acts of depredation towards Borden in retribution for his wife's death. Angier's need for justice overpowers his ability to reason rationally.

Plato's Allegory, like stage magic in *The Prestige*, operates under the same principle of disbelief. As Angier lies dying on the floor from Borden's shot wound in between rows of

water tanks with deceased copies of himself, both Angier's truth and subsequently Borden's truth are revealed: "[t]he audience knows the truth – the world is simple. Miserable. Solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, you could make them wonder." It took courage for Angier and Borden to perform their tricks. As he stepped into the machine each time, Angier did not know whether he would be the man to drown in the tank or the man to experience The Prestige. The Borden brothers each lived "half a life," always alternating between performing and experiencing different parts of the tricks (The Pledge, The Turn, The Prestige) and who would spend time with loving wife Sarah (loved by one twin), daughter Jess, and mistress Olivia (loved by the other twin). Plato, Marx, and Nolan prove through an allegory, a theory, and nonlinear storytelling that life, or rather reality, is simple but not easy. Individual motivation and desire to escape the reality of life and the cycle of conflict that comes with it will continue to challenge people's ability to exist in harmony.

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