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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **29 (2013)**

PDF erstellt am: **23.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-390810>

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“Are You Watching Closely?": The Conflict of Mind-Tricking Narratives in Recent Hollywood Film

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Although films with alternative plotting to traditional cinematic storytelling have existed since the earliest days of the medium, the trend seems to have gathered steam recently. Complex narrative is, of course, a rather broad term that covers a large number of films. In my article, I would like to focus on, what I will be calling, mind-tricking narratives, a subcategory of complex narrative. I use this term to classify a rather new phenomenon in contemporary mainstream film. As the expression already suggests, these are narrative techniques that deliberately play with the viewers' experience, response, and expectations during the viewing of a film usually featuring an utterly surprise outcome in the end. The main issue in my article is how film plots have to be structured in order to achieve the desired goal, i.e. to trick the audience's minds. How can a filmmaker withhold the necessary facts for the viewers to deduce, conclude, perhaps even predict, the unavoidable outcome, yet at the same time, present enough information so that the story holds true and sustains the audience's re-evaluation or even reviewing? For that reason, I will compare the narrative structures of the two 2006 films, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*, directed by Christopher Nolan and Neil Burger, respectively. In a “dos” and “don'ts” analysis *The Prestige* will serve as a prime example for a mind-tricking narrative while *The Illusionist* fails to live up to the task.

In 2006, Hollywood produced and released two films about magicians. At a first glance, they seem to have a lot in common. Their protagonists are magicians played by well-established and famous Hollywood actors.

They are set in a European capital around 1900. Both are adaptations of literary works published in the 1990s. Both are essentially told in one long flashback. And, perhaps, most importantly both attempt to be twist movies, or mind-tricking narratives, as I prefer to call them. Simply put, what mind-tricking narratives try to do is to deliberately fool and mislead the audience in order to completely and wholly stun them. They employ narrative techniques that play with the viewers' experience, response, and expectations during the viewing of a film and feature an utterly surprising outcome in the end. A famous example would be David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), in which one of the main characters, played by Brad Pitt, turns out to be a mere schizophrenic hallucination by the other main character, played by Edward Norton. Another example is M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999). "Oh my goodness – he is dead!" is the mental "gasp" that the great majority of viewers experience after watching this particular film. This reaction is, of course, also exactly the kind of response the filmmakers intended. When I say that mind-tricking narratives *attempt* to employ a plot structure which will lead to such a reaction, then I mean that not all of them succeed in doing so. It is an extremely difficult and elaborate way of telling a story. Mind-tricking narratives offer a meticulously designed distribution of information, break basic narrative conventions, and, in turn, provide two distinct and conflicting readings of the same text. Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* is the prime example of an extraordinarily well-done mind-tricking narrative while Neil Burger's *The Illusionist* rather fails in the attempt. By comparing these two films, this paper seeks to work out the "dos and don'ts" of mind-tricking narratives. At the core of this kind of storytelling lies a big conflict: on the one hand, enough information has to be held back in order to create the mind-boggling twist in the end. But, on the other hand, the right amount of information has to be provided in order to perfect the twist by retrospectively giving it the feel of inevitability. In other words, the central issue is what information is revealed when – which clues are given, which questions raised, and which are finally answered.

First of all, however, we need to elaborate on what exactly is meant by the term mind-tricking narrative.¹ Basically, these narratives are a sub-type of what is now often simply referred to as complex narrative. Despite David Bordwell's postulation that complex plots are merely a slight deviation and/or addition to the simple plot and can, consequently, be "squeezed" into the pattern of Classic Hollywood narrative,²

¹ For an in-depth analysis of mind-tricking narratives, see Klecker.

² Compare, for instance, his reading of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), another example of a mind-tricking narrative, in Bordwell's *The Way Hollywood Tells It*.

this is an area of film studies, which has been discussed at great length in recent years: Bordwell’s “forking-path narratives” (Bordwell, “Film Futures”) and Allan Cameron’s “modular narratives” (Cameron, *Modular Narratives*) are two prominent examples. The focus there has essentially been on films with “unusual” plot structures, i.e. all varieties of fragmented, discontinuous, and simultaneous narratives.

However, despite their continually rising popularity since the mid-nineties, mind-tricking narratives have largely been ignored. In his anthology *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Warren Buckland explains that the notion of the complex plot does not quite grasp the scope of puzzle plots. He considers the puzzle plot a third kind of plot – after Aristotle’s simple plot, which stresses the importance of the unity of action, time, and place, and the complex plot, which is based on the simple plot with the additional features of reversal and recognition that introduce a new line of causality. The puzzle plot goes beyond the complex plot. The distribution of information is obscure and deliberately misleading; “the events are not simply intertwined but *entangled*” (original emphasis, Buckland 3). However, even this definition of puzzle plots remains rather vague as it covers a wide range of films. They span from rather experimental split-screen editing as in *Timecode* (2000), over non-linear narratives as in Stephen Daldry’s *The Hours* (2002) and *21 Grams* (2003), to films that have a jumbled time conception on a story level, such as Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber’s *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) and Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* (2001), to films whose story is simply confusing, such as Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and, probably, David Lynch’s entire body of work. Puzzle films comprise more or less everything that is in some way(s) out of the ordinary.

Mind-tricking narratives are a very specific instance of a puzzle plot. One core aspect of them is that they do not simply “make people think” but deliberately deceive them. They hold back some vital information until the very end of the film. The instant this piece of information is finally revealed, the audience will experience the ultimate epiphany. This moment of recognition is, of course, a standard element of classical narration, yet, in mind-tricking narratives, it has no cathartic value (at least not in an Aristotelian sense). On the contrary, the film’s resolution will more often than not be the most unsettling scene. It creates a big conflict as it changes the entire reading of the film. In *The Sixth Sense*, for instance, the final and vital input that the character played by Bruce Willis has been dead all along forces the audience to re-interpret the story and completely disregard previously established hypotheses. The provision of two conflicting readings of the same text is the defining characteristic of mind-tricking narratives.

In order to finish this paper in high spirits, let us start with the negative example and leave the epitome of a mind-tricking narrative for later. Neil Burger wrote and directed the film *The Illusionist*, which is loosely based on Steven Millhauser's short story "Eisenheim the Illusionist," published in 1990. The cast includes none lesser than Edward Norton playing the protagonist Eisenheim, Jessica Biel playing his love interest, and Paul Giamatti playing Chief Inspector Uhl. The basic story is fairly simple. The childhood sweethearts Eisenheim and Duchess Sophie von Teschen are separated because of the inappropriateness of their relationship created by their difference in their social status. They are coincidentally reunited as adults in Vienna, even though Sophie is more or less engaged to the Crown Prince Leopold, played by Rufus Sewell, which proves to be quite an obstacle. When their affair comes out, the prince kills Sophie in an outburst of anger. Using ghostly apparitions of different people and, eventually, Sophie herself in his shows, Eisenheim manages to accuse the prince of her murder. The prince shoots himself when Inspector Uhl finally confronts him. However, what we find out only in the very last montage sequence is that Sophie, in fact, is still alive and that everything has been an elaborate set-up by Eisenheim to free Sophie from her oppressive relationship with the prince.

This very condensed plot summary actually suggests the perfect make-up of a mind-tricking narrative. The final all-important twist is certainly there. The problem, however, is that it is a twist that the audience will hardly care about. A closer look at the plot structure and the film's distribution of information will explain why that is the case. As mentioned previously, the film is told in one big flashback. It starts at, what will turn out to be, Eisenheim's last performance. He is about to be arrested by Chief Inspector Uhl, who then talks to the Crown Prince. The prince asks about events in Eisenheim's past that might be used as leverage. This triggers off the flashback that is narrated by Uhl, who has done a lot of research on Eisenheim. After a brief sequence that provides background information on Eisenheim's childhood we return to Vienna, where we see the adult Eisenheim performing tricks on stage. Chief Inspector Uhl is in the audience.

Since it is through Uhl's eyes that we see the entire film, let me provide a few insights into his character. He, like Eisenheim, comes from a lower social class. He is essentially a well-meaning human being but has been corrupted somewhat by being too close a friend of the Crown Prince's in order to move up on the career ladder. One of his most important character traits is his inquisitiveness. He loves magic tricks, enjoys being stunned by them but also always tries to figure them out.

Crown Prince Leopold shares this particular character trait even though he hates being fascinated by magic tricks. He simply and only wants to find out how they work, which in Eisenheim’s case, he never can. This means that in this film we have two dominant characters that constantly try to work out various magic tricks. Therefore, even if viewers by their own nature and inclination do not attempt to figure them out, they do so due to the fact that two characters constantly “make” them do so. As a matter of fact, the film places much more importance on the workings of the magic tricks than on the actual murder. After Eisenheim provoked the prince during a private performance at the *Hofburg* (the court palace in Vienna) and his plan to elope with Sophie is revealed, the prince kills Sophie, or so the viewers assume without any suspicion. Though we never actually see the murder itself, it is essential to point out that not the tiniest seed is planted that Sophie is still alive. Not the slightest doubt is raised, neither at the time of the murder nor later on when her body is found. For the viewers – and I would like to argue, even the most attentive one – Sophie is, in fact, dead.

Another voiceover by Uhl allows the film to jump in time. The police arrested someone for Sophie’s murder and Eisenheim is about to start a new magic show. In this show, he performs the most stunning trick of them all. He conjures up spirits live onstage. The audience sees apparitions standing next to Eisenheim, talking to the audience, responding to their questions, and on one occasion even walking down the aisle next to the seating area of the theater. Uhl as well as the prince are awestruck and deeply unsettled by this trick. They try – as usual – to figure it out and so several possible ways of performing such a trick are presented in the film. None of them, though, can really live up to the perfection of Eisenheim’s version. The viewers, too, are “forced” to think along. They try to explain for themselves how this trick might be done and, perhaps, even wonder whether Eisenheim does, in fact, have supernatural powers that enable him to conjure up real ghosts. When he finally has Sophie’s ghost appear, Uhl attempts to arrest him for implicitly accusing the Crown Prince of her murder. However, Eisenheim turns out to be an apparition himself. Eventually, Uhl has gathered enough circumstantial evidence against the prince so that he is truly convinced of his guilt. He visits the prince at his residence to confront him. At this point, the story has finally caught up with the beginning of the film – the flashback is over. As the prince realizes his defeat, he shoots himself. Uhl leaves the *Hofburg* and a little boy hands him an envelope containing the explanation of one of Eisenheim’s main tricks. He spots Eisenheim, disguised with a beard, on the street and follows him all the way to the train station. He misses Eisenheim by seconds. And this is when Uhl experiences an epiphany visualized by a rather short

montage sequence. The Chief Inspector realizes that Sophie is still alive. She drugged the prince and pretended to be dead while Eisenheim planted fake evidence against the prince. At the end of the film Sophie and Eisenheim are happily reunited at some undisclosed location.

The final reaction of the average film viewer is utter surprise. No one could have ever seen that coming. And, in this case, that is exactly the problem. As previously mentioned, at no point did the film hint at even the slightest possibility that Sophie might still be alive. No inconsistencies in terms of her death are ever shown. To put it provocatively, the audience will simply not care about the fact that she is still alive. Emotionally, they will be happy for Eisenheim but filmically, in terms of the narrative presented, they will experience frustration. Instead of revealing how the magic tricks are done, the viewers are presented with an almost pointless twist ending that does not at all reward them for all the hard mental work they invested into watching and following the film.

In an interview, director and screenwriter Neil Burger explained what he thinks the movie is about: “The movie is less about how does [Eisenheim] do these tricks? How is it done? Than this sort of uncanny sense that nothing is what it seems. I want the movie to inhabit this realm of dream and mystery” (“The Making of *The Illusionist*” 14:20 - 14:35). I see his point. The question whether Eisenheim has supernatural powers or not most definitely goes into that direction. On the other hand, though, he employs two characters, Uhl and the prince, who spend a lot of time investigating these tricks. Therefore, I find it extremely hard to argue that this is not what the movie is about. As mentioned previously, the film does not merely invite but practically forces us to think along – if not with the prince then most definitely with Uhl as he is our narrator. Interestingly enough, Neil Burger’s own audio commentary on the DVD version of *The Illusionist* supports this point. While discussing his film, he spends a great amount of time explaining how the tricks work and not only in a filmic sense, i.e. which special effects they used, but more importantly, he explains how similar versions of the tricks were actually performed by magicians who lived around 1900. This means that Burger must be aware of the fascination people have for how magic tricks work. Therefore, I find it extremely surprising that he would “miss” that aspect in his own film.

To sum up this analysis of *The Illusionist*, in a “proper” mind-tricking narrative the filmmakers must answer all big questions raised in the film. Conversely, it is fairly pointless to answer questions a viewer would not, or is at least very unlikely to, raise. The aha-effect of “Sophie is still alive,” which is in a way the opposite of “Bruce Willis’s character is dead” in *The Sixth Sense*, is completely drowned out by the frustration

the audience goes through when the main question of “how are these tricks done” is never answered.

Keeping all this in mind, I would like to move on to the role model of mind-tricking narratives. Christopher Nolan wrote and directed *The Prestige*, which is based on Christopher Priest’s novel of the same name. In this film, two magicians share an equally important role. Christian Bale plays Alfred Borden and Hugh Jackman incorporates the role of Robert Angier. Again, the basic story is easily summarized. Two rivaling magicians try to outdo each other with their magic tricks, in particular the so-called “Transported Man.” Angier is the less skilled magician but a much better showman. His competitiveness stems mostly from his blaming Borden for his wife’s death. Borden, on the other hand, is a brilliant mind and, thus, a much better magician. Unfortunately, he does not really know how to “sell” his tricks properly. His rivalry comes from his utter dedication to magic as an art form and his conviction as well as desire that no one can or ever will outthink him. In the end, both of them die, and then again they do not really. But let us start from the beginning.

The film starts with a short montage sequence of Angier’s death in a water tank and John Cutter, Angier’s *ingénieur*³ played by Michael Caine, who performs the very common trick of a little bird disappearing from a cage. Cutter’s voiceover explains:

Every 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 that it is, indeed, real. Yeah, 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. [. . .] 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. (*The Prestige* 01:02 - 03:08)

What I would like to argue here is mainly two things. First of all, I would like to illustrate that Christopher Nolan designed the plot of the film exactly according to this structure of a magic trick, namely, the

³ The technician of a magician. He is the one who really comes up with the magic tricks.

Pledge, the Turn, and the Prestige. Secondly, I would like to point out that *The Prestige*, unlike *The Illusionist*, does not only raise and answer the “right” questions but, additionally, plants clues for the audience to pick up on throughout the movie and, thus, greatly enhances the pleasure of repeated viewings.

But let us start with the former. In an interview, Christian Bale explained how he shares this notion of *The Prestige* being structured like a magic trick:

That’s what I think Chris [Nolan] did so well is, you know, doing a movie about rivalry, happens to be about magicians and explaining this whole notion of the Pledge, the Turn, the Prestige, of how a magic trick works. And then, without really realizing it, the viewers are also being shown an absolute magic trick throughout and they’re being told they’re being shown a magic trick but you don’t kind of realize it or you don’t believe it.

(“*Das Notizbuch des Regisseurs*” 14:31 - 15:00)

In other words, a film as the ultimate sleight of hand. The devices that Nolan used in order to achieve this are manifold. Similar to *The Illusionist*, the entire story of *The Prestige* is also told in a flashback, or two to be precise. One is folded into the other. The actual discourse Now is the time when most of the story has already happened. Being accused of Angier’s murder, we find Borden in jail. He is given Angier’s journal and starts to read in his cell. This is when the first flashback starts. Accompanied by Borden’s voiceover that slowly merges into Angier’s, we see Angier in Colorado Springs, where he tries to meet the scientist Nikola Tesla, played by David Bowie. Tesla, however, refuses to see him, and so, back at the hotel, Angier starts reading Borden’s notebook. It starts only days after Angier and Borden met for the first time. This, again, triggers off a flashback, in other words, a flashback within a flashback. Angier’s voiceover, that now slowly changes back into Borden’s, takes us back in time to the Orpheum Theatre in London, where the water tank trick⁴ is performed on stage. A brief montage sequence of Angier reading in Colorado and Borden reading in his cell reminds the viewer of the double flashback structure of these scenes. Soon afterwards, we again jump back in time and witness the decisive water tank accident. Angier’s wife does not manage to get out and drowns, perhaps, because Borden tied the wrong knot. Angier ends up blaming him for his wife’s

⁴ Angier’s wife Julia McCullough, played by Piper Perabo, is tied up by two volunteers from the audience. These “audience members” are actually plants by the magician – Borden and Angier. She is dropped into a big tank filled with water. This tank is locked and then covered with a big red curtain. Within less than a minute she manages to free herself and stands next to the tank when the curtain is pulled back up.

death. After the tank accident, both Angier and Borden start to set up their own magic shows. The rivalry begins. Angier, using the stage name “The Great Danton,” is supported by Cutter, who now works as his *ingénieur*, and a female assistant called Olivia Wenscombe, played by Scarlett Johansson. Borden gets emotional support by marrying Sarah, played by Rebecca Hall, who soon has his daughter. Angier and Borden start to spy on and even sabotage each other, so much so that Borden’s left hand gets partly mutilated. In the midst of this account of how these two magicians became highly successful, the film keeps cutting to Borden in jail and Angier in Colorado Springs. These scenes give more details about what happens (in Borden’s case) and happened (in Angier’s case) there.⁵

About fifty-two minutes into the film, we reach the Turn. With Angier spying in the audience, Borden performs his master trick “The Transported Man” for the first time. Explained in a very simplified manner, this trick constitutes one door on the left and one on the right end of the stage. Borden goes through and disappears in one and comes out of the other practically the same second. The audience at the magic show is stunned and Angier is completely dumbfounded. But not only Angier, also the film viewers are utterly surprised. For the first time, they ask themselves, how this trick is done. Also for the first time, the film does not reveal the mechanics of a trick. Something ordinary, the story of two rivaling magicians, that is, has been turned into something quite extraordinary by the filmmaker. Not only Angier and Cutter but also the viewers try to get behind the secret of “The Transported Man,” but of course they cannot. Therefore, this question will linger until the end of the film, the third act, the Prestige.

Still in the second act, the Turn, a lot of story information is given. Angier and Cutter try to copy “The Transported Man” by using a double, a hired actor who looks stunningly like Angier (and is, in fact, played by Hugh Jackman himself). Knowing that his act is not even closely as good, he sends his assistant, Olivia, to spy on Borden. She cannot uncover the secret but steals Borden’s notebook and brings it to Angier. At this point, we find out how Angier obtained this journal. Since this notebook is written in cipher, he blackmails Borden into revealing his secret. Borden tells him that it is Tesla. Angier travels to Colorado Springs, Tesla’s current residence, and asks him to build him a machine for the trick. Here, the film has come full circle in terms of the flashback within the flashback, the period of time when Angier starts

⁵ One has to keep in mind that the time level of Borden being in jail constitutes the actual discourse. Now while Angier’s time spent in Colorado Springs is part of a flashback and therefore in the past.

deciphering and reading Borden's notebook. On the last page, a huge shock awaits him. Borden directly addresses Angier, thus, revealing that this entire notebook was a fake. It is part of a meticulously designed diversion premeditated by Borden a long time before. The viewers are just as shocked as Angier. Most of what the film has presented them so far is now subject to complete re-evaluation. Borden has revealed himself as a completely unreliable narrator. Angier also finds out that Tesla, in fact, never built a machine for Borden. All the more surprisingly, Tesla and Angier find out that it actually works. The machine that Tesla has built for Angier manages to duplicate top hats and cats. Reassured, Angier travels back to London, where he experiments with the machine. Angier's voiceover explaining how he tried to duplicate himself leads us to Borden again sitting in his cell reading Angier's journal. All of a sudden, Angier directly addresses Borden revealing that he knew that Borden would be in jail reading this notebook, awaiting his death for Angier's murder. This time, the viewers feel Borden's terror. This journal, too, was an elaborate set-up, except that this one was a frame to murder that will lead to Borden's death sentence. The next sequences are rather difficult to place, not in terms of the storyline as it is a mere continuation of what happened upon Angier's return to London, but regarding the narration itself. Since both flashbacks are most definitely over, it is not at all clear who the narrator of the following is. Is it Borden's memory or Angier's or that of both? If so, it is not indicated accordingly. This is either the only narrative inconsistency that Christopher Nolan lets pass, or it is the beginning of the actual discourse Now. In other words, these are all the story events that happen right before Borden is accused of murder and starts reading Angier's journal. Be that as it may, these story events are very important. Angier reunites with Cutter and sets out to perform exactly one hundred shows featuring his improved version of the trick, now called "The Real Transported Man." Upon seeing this, Borden starts agonizing about how this trick is done but simply cannot figure it out. He keeps coming to Angier's shows in disguise until he finally, in his utter frustration, sneaks backstage where he witnesses Angier drown in the water tank. In other words, the story has finally caught up with the very beginning of the film. Borden is arrested, tried in court, and found guilty. However, shortly before Borden is hung, Angier turns up at the jail disguised as a man called Lord Caldlow. Borden recognizes him and suffers his second shock – he will be killed for the murder of a person who is still alive. Cutter, who was appointed to deliver Angier's belongings to "Lord Caldlow," finds out about Angier's plot and is deeply appalled. The next sequence crosscuts between them, Angier and Cutter, hiding the machine in some kind of storage room and Borden being hung.

With Borden’s last words before his death, namely, “abracadabra,” the third act, the *Prestige*, finally starts. Someone sneaks up on Angier in the storage room – Cutter is already gone – and shoots him. The shooter turns out to be none other than Borden himself as if he were resurrected from the dead. In his final moments, Angier has an epiphany and, thus, figures out what really happened. The following voice-over by Angier and Borden alternately revealing the true story is visualized by a fast-cut montage sequence of already seen scenes as well as some new material. Borden had a double, his very own twin brother, and they shared one identity their entire life. Therefore, “one” Borden was actually killed by hanging, but the other one is reunited with his daughter at the very end of the film. The secret of “The Transported Man” is revealed.

With this close reading of *The Prestige* I hope to have illustrated why it is the perfect embodiment of a mind-tricking narrative. By not only explaining the basic structure of a magic trick but also employing it as the plot structure of the film, Nolan managed to turn a movie into a sleight of hand. It astounds and impresses the audience just as much as if they were to watch a person disappear and reappear on stage. One of the most important aspects is that, unlike *The Illusionist*, it answers the same question that it raises. The final moment of revelation that Nolan creates, the shock the audience experiences, ties in with the questions they have been puzzling about for the better part of the film. An artful and thoughtful distribution of story information is the key, as Nolan himself explains:

The filmmaker almost more so than the novelist has a very close relationship with a magician in terms of the way in which we’re using the release of information, what we tell the audience when, the point of view that we’re drawing them into. We use those techniques to fool an audience, to engage an audience in all kinds of blind alleys and red herrings and so forth and then ultimately, hopefully, a successful narrative payoff.

(“*Das Notizbuch des Regisseurs*” 14:03-14:28)

The technique of telling the story in two flashbacks is one essential aspect of achieving this narrative payoff. Apart from the fact that with these two narrators we get two subjective narrations that combined result in a rather omniscient view, Nolan also created a mimetically motivated selection of the information that is concealed. Since the notebooks were not authentic but written in order to manipulate and fool the other character, it makes perfect sense that decisive information, such as having a twin brother and duplicating oneself a hundred times

with a machine, is withheld – and not just from the respective characters but also from the audience.

The truly fascinating thing about *The Prestige*, though, is not all the story information that is concealed but really all the information that is given. The narrative payoff is greatly heightened by all the clues that are planted. Some of them are quite subtle and can really only be detected after second and third viewings. Others are blatantly obvious – in retrospect, that is. During the big final revelation montage sequence, viewers will remember certain things that they have been told or they have seen and they will find it difficult to believe that they did not figure this out by themselves. One aspect that, in retrospect, seems almost comical is the fact that the film actually immediately gives away the twist ending by telling us quite upfront how Borden performs his trick. Upon Angier's question addressed to Cutter, he instantly replies, "he uses a double" (*The Prestige* 52:38 – 52:39). Of course, Cutter is merely referring to this particular trick and not Borden's entire life, but still, he is exactly right.

Furthermore, the film shows several analogies to Borden's situation. The bird trick, for instance, can be seen as such. When the birdcage is smashed and the bird inside "disappears," what really happens is that the bird is killed and another one, a double, is brought back by the magician. During a performance of this trick, a smart little boy starts crying because he is convinced the magician killed the bird. When Borden shows the other bird to reassure him that it is fine, the boy simply remarks, "but where is his brother?" (*The Prestige* 18:34 - 18:35). A similar analogy can be found in the Chinese magician Chung Ling Soo. Cutter sends Angier and Borden to his magic show in order to figure out the "fishbowl trick." The key for this trick is that Chung Ling Soo is actually really strong. He only pretends to be a weak elderly man, a character he has to play not only on but also off stage. While watching Chung Ling Soo walking toward his carriage – slowly, bent over, and supported by a cane, Borden explains to Angier with great admiration, at the same time hinting at his own life: "This is the trick. This is a performance right here. This is why no one can detect his method. Total devotion to his art. Utter self-sacrifice" (*The Prestige* 15:58 - 16:11). Talking to his wife about this, Angier remarks, "I couldn't fathom it. Living my whole life pretending to be someone else" (16:46 - 16:49). Of course, this is exactly what Borden has been doing.

I could list a great number of further clues, some of which are revisited in the final montage sequence and some of which can really only be detected after a second viewing. The question remains, why viewers do not pick up on them. Why are we not able to predict this twist ending? One possible reason might be that part of us does not really want to figure it out. Similar to Chief Inspector Uhl from *The Illusionist*, we want

to know how it works and yet again love to be fascinated and stunned by a magic trick. The final voiceover by Cutter suggests just that: “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” (*The Prestige* 01:59:30 - 01:59:49).

The viewer’s desire to be fooled is one of the main reasons why films with mind-tricking narratives have been so successful in recent years. The two films discussed merely serve as a representation of so many other puzzle films that Hollywood has released lately. In many ways, they work according to the same formula that I have tried to work out in my analyses. The interplay of giving and withholding information is most vital. What I really wanted to point out, though, is that a good mind-tricking narrative does not just produce *any* kind of twist ending. The challenge goes far beyond that. While it is important not to leave any questions unanswered, it is just as vital that the ending fills gaps that have been previously created. Otherwise, the audience might not even care about the twist. The final revelation has to reward the viewers and not frustrate them.

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