

## Explore the narrative constructed in Christopher Nolan's 'Inception' and 'The Prestige'

Narrative can be defined in many different ways. For example, the term narrative has been discussed and debated within media to great detail. One way narrative is defined is as “a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in time.” (Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art, 1980) For example, Lacey writes about how we commonly link to the idea of ‘stories’ and events (Lacey, 2000: p5). However, others have taken a more practical approach to defining narrative in media studies and looked at the different ‘narrative techniques to develop the story arc’. In some ways it can be seen as the way in which a story is told either in a specific style or way, however the characters within the narrative play just as an important part in telling the story. Another way the narrative can be defined is through plot structure, the theorist Todorov can be used as an example of defining narrative to have specific steps which tell the story.

The main focus of my investigation will be Christopher Nolan films, specifically *The Prestige* and *Inception*. Within these films I will be trying to identify the common features or conventions shown in terms of narrative in Nolan’s films.

One way in which Fulton et al (2005) defines narrative is in the terms of plot and story, whereby “plot is the wherewithal of narrative construction. It is the higher-order of art selection” and “whereby a basic story (or chain of events) is restructured to become interesting and compelling.” Plot and story is a key way in which we can see Christopher Nolan construct his films, he does this by first creating a simple story by which he can construct a plot that makes the film both intriguing and unique. An excellent example of this is another of Nolan’s film *Memento*, where Nolan constructs the plot to show the story backwards. Plot and story are key to constructing a narrative, “the distinction between story and plot is of paramount importance.” (Fulton. 52, 2005). This distinction of the story and plot allows the audience to separate what they are being shown (the story) and how it is shown to them (the plot), it allows the story to be told in many different ways.



Firstly, one narrative technique that Nolan uses is the idea of frame narrative. Frame narrative is a technique used to show more than one story line. This is commonly described as a story within a story. This usually is to introduce a main narrative, at least in part for the purpose of setting the stage either for a more emphasized second story, or for a set of shorter stories.

Frame narrative can be seen as a technique used frequently throughout Nolan’s films. *The Prestige* and *Inception* have a frame narratives as they both use more than one story line to create the film, the very first scene of each is actually the end of the film’s making the audience “wind up right in the middle of what’s going on” (dialogue taken from *Inception*); *Inception* starts with a scene that is near the end of the film, starting the narrative in the middle of film rather than the beginning, this technique is especially effective in *Inception* as the audience is introduced to the main character ‘Cobb’ as he washes up on a beach. The composition of the shot allows us to see how disorientated the character is allowing us to infer that there is a story behind how he got there. Through the use of this technique, Nolan engages his audience, using a non-linear narrative.



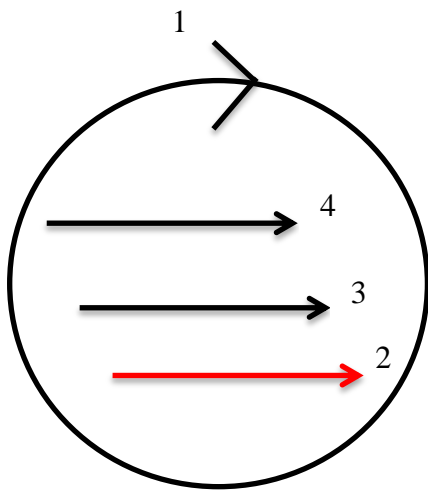
The use of frame narrative is especially effective towards the ending of Nolan's films and in some way could be seen as a stage in Todorov's theory of the Four-Act structure, with the new equilibrium starting the films instead of the equilibrium that already exists.

[Todorov explains that] ...stories start with equilibrium, the created world of the film is set up and characters are introduced. This equilibrium is broken by some action, whether it is from another character or form, but we understand that something has changed. This disruption is recognised by the characters which bring in step four which is that the characters fight to repair what has gone wrong. Finally equilibrium is regained.

Ladd (2014)

Todorov's theory explains the simple structure to narratives that are conventionally seen, however this narrative structure is usually applied by media theorists to discuss a linear narrative, which Nolan's films do not have. Nonetheless, some of the stages in Todorov's theory can be applied to *Inception* and *The Prestige*. Although both of Nolan's films use a non-linear narrative and start with the ending of the story, while the films play out they contain aspects of a disruption and a resolution; in *Inception* this can be seen in when 'Mol', 'Cobb's' wife, kills herself and is taken away from his children, the resolution to this is the dream sequence when he has to make sure the plan goes ahead so that he can return home, however, the ending of the film sees 'Cobb's' totem spinning, this then cuts before the audience is shown whether the totem falls or not "Therefore it is possible that there is no reinstatement of the equilibrium." (Rowe: 2012). Similarly, in *The Prestige* the disruption is caused by 'Angier's' wife drowning, and the resolution is the rivalry between the two main protagonists as 'Angier' tries to beat 'Alfred' and get revenge over his wife's death. However, rather than basing the whole film around this narrative structure, instead I would argue that Nolan uses this illusion of a familiar narrative to trick the audience. The elements of Todorov's theory that are in Nolan's work seem to create a simple structure for the films, this means that audiences will recognise some of the conventional patterns and structures to the film and make it easier to follow. However, as becomes clear, the narrative for Nolan's films is much more complex and the familiar elements are in fact deceiving the audience for what actually follows. Lowe suggests that although the *Inception* has a "... basic narrative the film itself is much more complex than this simple synopsis." (Rowe, 2012) There are differences in terms of how this is constructed in *Inception* and *The Prestige*, and I will be analysing this further later in my investigation.

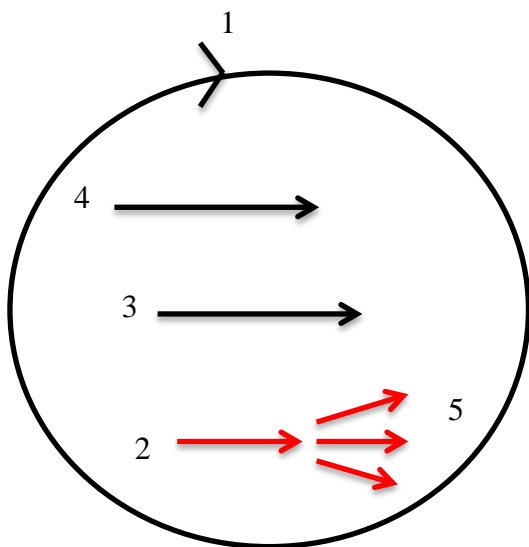
Another common technique that Nolan uses to construct his narrative is cross-cutting story lines (parallel editing to show different story arcs that are occurring). The way Nolan uses cross-cutting story lines help to divert the audience's attention away from narrative is the key to understanding the narrative, because of this it means that the audience is then surprised with the outcome of the film. This construction of narrative is often referred to as Enigma codes. Stam et al said that enigma codes help to "delay revelation, to dodge the moment of truth...delaying final disclosure until the ultimate moment" (cited in Lacey, 73, 2000). Enigma codes can be seen in *The Prestige*, the audience is shown to pay attention to the rivalry between the two protagonists and their battle against each other, this then leaves room for the 'big reveal' at the end showing the audience what has actually been taking place, making the film itself a trick.



1. Alfred's secret
2. The Present - Angier
3. The Past - the rivalry
4. The diary

The diagrams that are shown, present the storylines that can be seen in *The Prestige* and *Inception*. Each film has more than one story line flowing through the films, each arrow inside the circles show a story line shown through-out the film; while the red one is the main focus. The circle around the individual arrows shows the story line that the audience's attention is diverted away from; this is the story that should be the main focus of the film as it explains why everything has happened as well as containing the surprise at the end of the films. In *The Prestige* the main story line that the audience is being distracted from is Alfred's secret, this narrative is seen throughout the film but isn't drawn attention to as it contains the plot twist shown at the end of the film. The

diagram on the left shows the storylines that are contained within *Inception* as well as the other diagram above that shows *The Prestige* story lines, in both of these films Nolan cuts between the stories that are created to achieve the complexity that is seen in his work and his narratives.



1. Cobb's story
2. The Dream
3. Planning the dream- the present
4. Cobb's past Layers within the dreams
5. Cobb's past Layers within the dreams

*Inception* has more than one line of narrative flowing throughout the film, in fact it has four timelines that cross cut each other throughout the film. This technique is very sophisticated and is seen in most of Nolan's films, by embedding stories it takes the audience's attention away from what soon will be revealed as the real important timeline that links everything together.

*The Prestige* uses the same techniques that can be seen within *Inception*; however instead of using dreams and the mind's perception to drive the narrative,

the actual characters are used in *The Prestige* to do this. The story is shown through accounts of the two main protagonists and their diaries, like *Inception* Nolan embeds different stories into the film, *The Prestige* contains four story lines but cuts between three this helps to create the idea that the audience should be paying attention to one story line when in fact that isn't the most important

One of the features of Nolan's use of narrative in *Inception* is the way that he uses character dialogue to enable the audience to understand the plot. For example, in this mid-shot the two



characters are discussing how our minds work while we are dreaming; this scene is particularly interesting as the audience is made to feel that the events are actually taking place, like the female character is made to feel, when in fact they're both in a dream. This is done through using the dialogue to distract the audience from how the

scenes may link together, before this scene takes place there is actually a clue to them being a dream, but this is only realised afterwards because it is directly pointed out to the audience. There are specific parts of the dialogue that foreshadow events within the film that are either about to happen or going to happen later on. In this scene there are specific parts of the dialogue that tell the audience in directly that the scene is taking place in a dream. This can be seen in the line "Dreams feel real while we're in them, it's only when we wake up we realise that something was actually strange." The composition of the shot is quite deliberate in creating the sense that the action has almost paused to explain the narrative, this starts to show the complexity of how narrative works in Nolan's films.

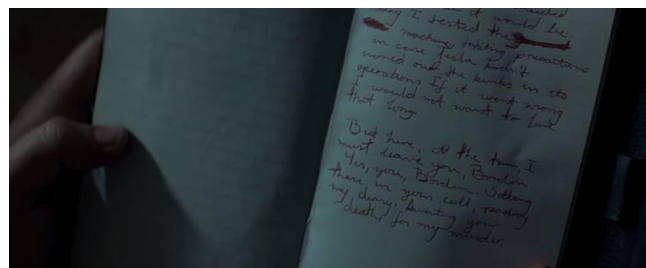


*The Prestige* can be seen to use the cross-cutting technique more than 'Inception' as there are only two main characters that the story revolves around. In the mid-shot it shows Angier one of the main characters releasing the betrayal of his assistant, this sequence of the film cuts between three of the story lines seen in *The Prestige*, the narrating over these scenes is combined with character dialogue in certain

sequences but is mainly of Angier's rival Alfred voice as he reads from his diary, this not only helps link the scenes but also helps to distinguish between the different storylines.

In both *Inception* and *The Prestige* dialogue that narrates over the scene is used frequently. This technique helps to link the narrative together when the story lines are being cut between the present, future and past. For example, in this shot the sound we here is the other character's voice (Alfred) as Angier reads from his diary, in this scene the dialogue refers to a past event, "Today's most curious development.." before it cuts to flashbacks of the events of what the diary contains. This use of narrating over the scenes has two purposes: it not only helps to drive the action or plot forward, it also provides exposition for audience and gives insight to character's mind. This insight into the character's mind is especially developed at the end of the scene when Angier reads ".To you Angier, yes Angier, she gave you this notebook on my request." This dialogue is used to shock the audience as it isn't realised that the note book was written directly for the person reading it; the diaries were meant to trick each other into thinking that they were reading their personal thoughts but they were actually deliberate. Stam et al (2000) said that narration creates "hierarchies of power that may develop around the image of a character. This character image becomes the authoritative focal point of a scene, occupying a certain privileged position." This point is particularly relevant to the scenes shown in the screen shots as the narration, especially towards the end of the scenes, shows that one of the characters has been manipulating the course of all the events occurring within the film. The narration throughout these scene helps to establish not only which character this is, but also the extent of their power over others.

Nolan himself has described his films in terms of suggesting the narrative to the audience, "*The Prestige* is very much about filmmaking. It's also intended to suggest how the film itself is spooling its narrative out to the audience. We want people really to be aware of the effect the film is having on them as it's unfolding before their eyes." (Lambie, 2014)



Christopher Nolan constructs his narratives in many different ways; however the main way in which he does this is through the use of frame narrative, because of the continued use of this technique it is easy to see this as a convention of his films rather than a technique he adopts. Through the clever use of cross cutting story lines Nolan has been able to achieve sophisticated stories that engage his audiences throughout and leave them surprised. His films not only have their own unique narrative structure but they also subvert Todorov's theory of 'Four-Act structure' making them unpredictable allowing an in depth story to develop. Furthermore, it could be argued that Nolan's narrative style is distinctly postmodern, it can be determined that Nolan very self-consciously and deliberately plays with film narrative conventions. Lacey (2000) identifies a key feature of postmodernism, which is the use of "fragmentations" and that postmodern texts "are not rooted in any particular time and space." This can be seen throughout Nolan's work when we consider his construction of the story and plot as well as aspects of the conventional non-linear narrative. Nolan self-consciously experiments with the rules of film to create surprising narratives for audiences, therefore in my own production I will reflect the conventional techniques that I have discussed and seen in his work, particularly from the construction of *Inception* and *The Prestige*.

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