'Are You Watching Closely?'

A study of Christopher Nolan's engagement with structure, chronology and motif

By Mukund Madhav Varma, Ravi Bhoraskar and Sudha Shastri

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A year before Christopher Nolan made the movie that would initiate his explorations in nonlinearity in *Following* (1998), he produced a three-minute film called *Doodlebug* (1997) about a man who tracks and kills an ostensible insect, but who/which in fact is revealed to be a miniature version of himself; the irony is complete when he in turn, is trampled by a larger version of himself, thus generating a classic *mise en abyme*. Self-reference, recursion, embedded levels and circularity: the tools of postmodernism to generate fragmentation, unreliability and incoherence – which came to dominate Nolan's subsequent cinematic explorations – are already present in this first foray.

We will explore the techniques of nonlinearity in *Following* and *The Prestige* (2006), and use the relatively more popular *Memento* (2000) to draw patterns of similarities therein, especially with respect to the genre of the detective novel, the deployment of motifs, and their reflection of the postmodern moment that they both create and are created in. In the latter part of the article we will focus on the imaginative ways in which themes and techniques in the respective films complement each other.

Starting from the chronologically earliest of the three, *Following* is already a sophisticated venture. If one were to gauge it for verisimilitude in the realistic tradition, one might even be able to argue that
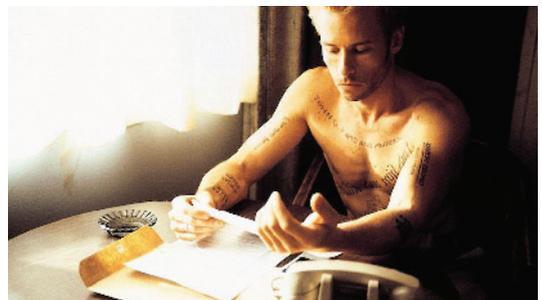
its laboured randomness brings it closer to lived experience than conferring on it a state of artistic deliberation in the style of *Memento*. But the structure of *Following* ensures early enough that instead of appealing to the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, it challenges intelligibility to such an extent that the spectator stays paradoxically detached from a story packed with thrilling scenes, in his/her attempt to make sense of 'what actually happens'. Bewilderment becomes the prevailing mood generated by this film, because of the seemingly arbitrary and repeated mixing of temporally adjacent scenes across three of its four timelines.

Similarly, *The Prestige* not only switches timelines repeatedly within its plot structure, but further filters the viewer's access to the story by framing it in two different journals, maintained by the two pro-

tagonists. The journal as a narrative form is already suspect because of the questionable reliability of the first-person narrator. The film further complicates the reliability question by revealing that Alfred Borden and Robert Angier have each written these diaries keeping the other in mind as a potential reader, and that the bitter rivalry and enmity between the two men should caution the spectator into weighing the 'truth' of the utterances in these records.

This is only one of the ways in which Nolan makes doubt central to any access to knowledge, thereby emphatically underscoring the postmodern temper of the film. The nature of this doubt varies from film to film. In *Following*, it is the viewer who experiences doubt in his/her attempt to comprehend the links between the scenes that are presented. No causal link serves to connect them at the first viewing,

and it is only by wilfully suspending belief that the scenes can be chronologically sequenced.

In the words of David Bordwell:

> [I]n comprehending a narrative film, the spectator seeks to grasp the filmic continuum as a set of events occurring in defined settings and unified by principles of temporality and causation. To understand a film's story is to grasp what happens and where, when, and why it happens. (Bordwell 1985: 34)

Following challenges these criteria which are typical of realistic representation, and makes demands on the viewer through techniques best defined as postmodern, as they make self-reflexivity essential to the viewing process.

Memento is complicated in a different way. The movie experiments with two chronological directions, one forward and the other backwards in time. While this seems more ordered than *Following*, the pressing question of causality comes to replace the more straightforward question of what comes after

what. The causal connections between chronologically ordered scenes elude understanding, and the lack of certitude that this generates reflects the postmodern paradigm of capturing experience.

The postmodern identity of *The Prestige* on the other hand, is not an outcome of its structure, since the framing devices and the ensuing layers of action lend themselves to be dismantled by an alert spectator who does arrive at a truth. However, it takes the postmodern question on narrative authority further by not only deploying a first-person narrative form (the journal), and two mutually antagonistic first-person narrators, but also by creating a rationale for suspecting the credentials of both narrators. At the end of the day, the critical question seems more to do with the construction of ontologies than that of linear progression.[1]

The films

Following, as the title suggests, is about the penchant of a young man called Bill for following peo-

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ple, ostensibly to collect characters for a book he is writing. He is confronted by one of the people he has been shadowing, Cobb, who introduces himself as a burglar, and offers to take the frankly curious Bill under his wing on his burgling expeditions. Eventually, Bill becomes friendly with a blonde (the Blonde), whom he befriends in a bar, having burgled her house earlier.

As the romantic angle of Bill's interest in the Blonde develops, he confesses to her that he is a burglar, and also offers to get her photographs back by burgling the safe in which, as she says, her ex-boyfriend, a bald guy (the Bald Guy) has kept them for blackmailing purposes. In a denouement typical of the neo-noir genre that *Following* draws from,

the Blonde is revealed to be working in partnership with Cobb, and together they have framed Bill for the recent brutal murder of an old woman that Cobb claims to have been falsely implicated in.

While a devastated Bill turns himself in to the police to confess the truth (as he thinks it), the detective genre gives a further twist to the story by exposing Cobb as the Bald Guy's henchman, with orders to execute the Blonde for blackmailing the Bald Guy. This gruesome murder is attributed to Bill by the policeman, who also informs Bill that there has been no recent murder of an old woman.

The Prestige grows out of a formulaic plot of rivalry between professionals. The mutually destructive relationship between Robert Angier and Alfred Borden has its origin in their joint apprenticeship to a senior magician. When Angier's wife dies tragically

in a trick gone awry, and Angier with some reason holds Borden responsible for this, the two become rivals and then bitter enemies. They expend a considerable part of their energies on sabotaging each other's performances, and also damaging each other's personal lives to the furthest extent possible. The story is complicated by the inclusion of a replicating instrument designed by Nikola Tesla, which plays a sinister role in Angier's attempts to outwit his rival.

The crux of the competition between the two is the trick of 'the transported man' whose success depends on the transportation of the magician from one place to another, simply by his disappearance from one place and reappearance in another. In trying to imitate Borden's act of the transported man, Angier initially makes do with a lookalike called Gerald Root. In this he is helped by Cutter, a stage engineer (*ingenieur*) who turns sympathetic to Angier after his wife's death. This arrangement however proves to be short-lived, as Angier resents Root standing in the limelight and bowing to the applause, while he himself (as part of the trick) is obliged to stay under the trap door. Moreover, Root begins to blackmail Angier. This is when Angier takes recourse to science for making a replicating machine that he can use for the success of his trick. Angier does this since Borden misleads him into thinking that Borden uses Tesla's technology in his trick.

The film ends with Angier apparently being killed by Borden when he tries to find the secret of Angier's magical illusion. Borden is tried in court and executed, but only after he learns to his despair that Angier did not die, but reinvented himself as Lord Caldlow who takes custody of Borden's daughter. But this surprise ending is overtaken by an equally surprising second ending, from which the spectator learns that Borden, all along, has been Borden/Fallon, that he was one of identical twins, and while Fallon dies, it is Borden who lives to avenge his brother's death by shooting Lord Caldlow dead.[2]

Detective fiction

One of the more obvious genre-frames that all three movies function within, is that of detective fiction. The case for *Memento* has been presented by writers like John Scaggs who argues that the tattoo script on Leonard Shelby's body functions as a text to be read 'emphasizing the relationship between detection and reading that is crucial to hard-boiled detective fiction', and that 'the living body becomes a text requiring decipherment, just as the dead body has traditionally been the catalyst for the narrative movement of detective fiction' (Scaggs 2005: 81). Scaggs as well as others (including Daniel Jones and Schmidt) have worked on this aspect of *Memento*, in particular situating it within the tradition of neo-noir fiction.

All three films of Nolan sport a mismatch between 'fabula' (or 'story'), in which successive acts are sequenced chronologically, and 'syuzhet' (or 'plot'),

in which they can be chronologically distorted to produce the effect of suspense, and the thrill of knowledge as discovery. Bordwell observes that '[d]etective films provide clear illustrations of how the syuzhet manipulates fabula information over an entire narrative' (1985: 64). If, Bordwell points out, the fabula's causal chain comprises a crime and its investigation, then the syuzhet withholds critical scenes in the crime part of the fabula. This description would apply equally to *Following* and to *The Prestige*, where the syuzhet begins with or near about the investigation. The progress of the syuzhet would typically be marked by gaps and questions, which would gradually be filled in by the spectator as the fabula came to be reconstructed.

> In the detective tale, the syuzhet typically delays revelation of the criminal by inserting comedy [e.g., byplay with incompetent police], romance [a young couple falls under suspicion, or the detective is prey to romantic inclinations], and the commission of more crimes. This last retardatory device is especially useful since it generates new causal gaps and hypotheses. (Bordwell 1985: 64)

In *Following*, it is time that, by being 'out of joint', becomes the biggest retardatory component in the film. 'Anachrony', Gerard Genette's (1980) term for non-chronological order, is imaginatively worked in *Following*, in the form of both prolepses (flashforwards) and analepses (flashbacks), and on different narrative levels. Thus, on one level, the entire movie is an analeptic recall by Bill who is being interrogated by a police officer for a murder he did not commit. On another level (within this frame of recall), the acts recalled do not follow a sequential course.

The impact of the resolution comes not from one surprise ending, which again is a detective novel prerequisite, but from two endings, so that before the viewer has the time to fully assimilate the shock value of the first ending, which is the framing of Bill by Cobb and the Blonde, a second ending follows quickly upon the first, in which Cobb kills the Blonde, whom the film has thus far shown to be Cobb's collaborator and friend.

The introduction of the 'absent' corpse of the old woman is a speculative space for interpretation. Here is a curious synthesis of anachrony in the form of prolepsis, and the gap or absence which is integral to the syuzhet of detective fiction, in the old woman's corpse, which Cobb is supposed to have been arrested for. The viewer learns at the end of the movie that no old woman's murder was being investigated, for no such murder was committed at all. Instead this becomes an imaginative gap in time that Cobb has symbolically invested in by gesturing to the past (as a murder he *had* been questioned over), but which will be actually filled in the future

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('future' respective to the time the viewer is first told of it as already having happened in the past). For one, with Cobb's murder of the Blonde, the film presents the spectator with one more hidden layer of betrayal and murder; for another it also raises the question implicitly, whether the scrambling of scenes in the syuzhet includes the mythical corpse of the old woman, for whose murder Cobb claimed to have been questioned, but which is in fact the real corpse of the Blonde, for whose murder the innocent Bill is arrested.

One man's quasi-voyeuristic hobby in *Following* becomes in *Memento* the compulsive act of a revenge-seeker, generically embedded within the detective fiction and the neo-noir traditions.[3] The fabula of *Memento* is the story of Leonard Shelby, protagonist, hunting down the man who raped and killed his wife. Traditional detective stories resolve delay with closure, but the postmodern *Memento*, however, rejects this move towards resolution in order to challenge the notion of coherence itself. To complicate things further, Shelby is also afflicted with anterograde amnesia, which ensures that his grip on time, as far as the recent past is concerned, is tenuous.

The Prestige is also structured on an analepsis, with the beginning of the syuzhet close to the ending of the fabula – like *Following* – with the supposed murder of Angier by Borden. As in *Following*, the film offers a double-ending, with Angier's survival of his own death outdone by Borden's survival of his.

Repetition and structure: Motifs and outcomes

What makes Nolan's experimentation with the detective genre perhaps unique is the way in which he structures the syuzhet with the motif of repetition. Predictably, Nolan's use of repetition as a structural motif varies from *Following* to *Memento* to *The Prestige*.

Repetition in *Following*: Economy

Prima facie, repetition is a technique that seems counter-intuitive to use in the context of a suspenseful narrative, since it implicitly retards chronological progress. But when chronology itself becomes the question, repetition, instead of having a deadening

effect on the viewer, functions as a sign of familiarity for the viewer to look out for.

In *Following*, repetition pertains not to specific scenes, either *in toto* or in part, but to the primary situations that move the plot. Thus, while Bill's burglary of the Blonde's apartment is only shown once, burglary as a repetitive act is shown across the movie. In *The Prestige*, repetition is more direct. Scenes are themselves repeated to show more than they did the first time, a case in point being the scene of Olivia's defection from Angier to Borden, as mentioned earlier.

Repetition is typically used to establish thematic unity through incremental addition; Nolan's use of it in *Following* is ingenious: spread across timelines, repetition paradoxically achieves the effect of economy. The movie is able to re-deploy this minimalist touch to achieve many unusual results. For instance, the streamlining applies to the plot as well as the characterization, and the way the two serve each other's purposes towards minimalism.

One way in which to understand the scrambled structure of *Following* is to see the three timelines in the analepsis as circulating a set of actions several times. These actions are following, burgling and betrayal. Conversely, Nolan's ordering of the story in a deliberately haphazard manner enables him to make do with remarkably few basic situations; these are prevented from generating the effect of monotony or even brevity because they are scattered in time; simultaneously they amplify the story through a process of self-re-deployment. Thus the syuzhet is economical because it works with a basic set of situations, but by repeating them across contexts in time, it amplifies the fabula. It is time that plays a critical role in making contexts intelligible.

Repetition in *Following* is also noteworthy because it is a motif that Nolan will use again in *Memento*. In 'Surviving *Memento*' (2005), William G. Little demonstrates persuasively that 'the plot's most conspicuous feature' is 'Leonard's *repetition* of certain behaviors: his *repeated* failure of short-term memory; his *repeated* tattooing; his *repeated* killing; his *repeated* attempts to narrativize his experience' (2005: 67–68, emphases added). Little interprets Leonard's compulsion to repeat as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the case of *Following*, the trope of repetition is not intrinsic to character in the way that it is in *Memento*. On the other hand, this facilitates closure

for *Following* in a way that is denied to *Memento*, since the latter movie is a tale told before, after and will be repeated ad infinitum, as the final section of this article will demonstrate.

Moreover, in the case of *Following*, the viewer is positioned such that s/he can make an objective interpretation. Even though what s/he watches is filtered almost entirely through Bill's point-of-view,[4] the ontological status of what s/he views is not in question.

This in turn reflects the way in which these two films differently project the issue of reliability. So, while in *Following* the viewer holds the key to the chronological riddle that s/he is presented with, in *Memento* the viewer's access to the fabula is through different characters whose unreliability is variously established.

As a third and contradictory effect, the re-use of the same stock situations in *Following* complicates the process of meaning-making, because of the confusion that they can – and do – generate by being repeated across different contexts. The different timelines in *Following* are distinguished by the appearance of the protagonist as (1) unshaven, (2) clean-shaven and (3) clean-shaven but battered; all of which are framed by (4) wherein he is being questioned by a policeman. After the viewer reconfigures the syuzhet to match the fabula, s/he learns that at the beginning of the story Bill is unshaven and long-haired; midway through the story, at Cobb's suggestion, he changes his appearance with a haircut and shave; later, towards the end, he is beaten up by Cobb, and sports bruises on his face. His interrogation by the police officer accounts for the last timeline, with which the film also begins.
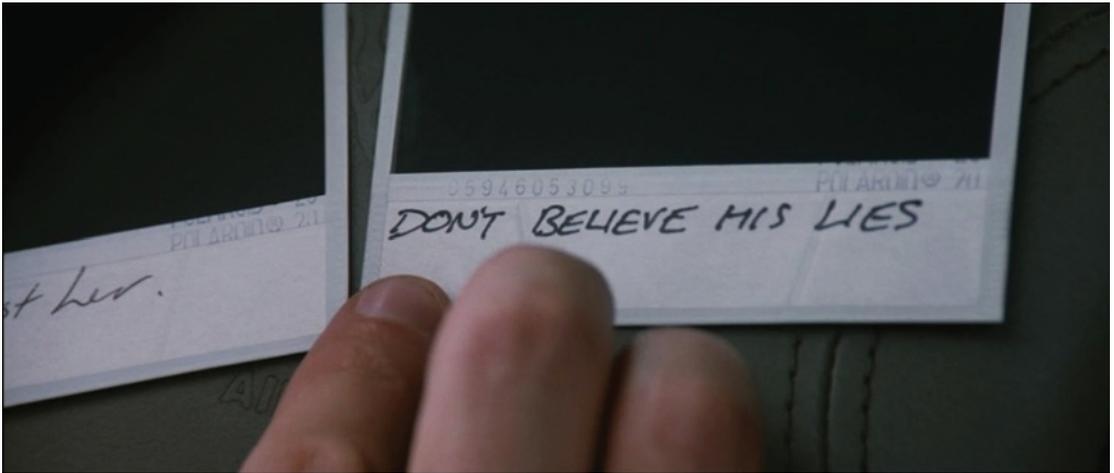
The basic situations that move the syuzhet are 'following', 'getting introduced to people', 'burgling' and 'betrayal'. In each of his three avatars Bill follows different people. A basic situation could also be nuanced or enhanced for impact; for instance, the

viewer is initially led to believe that Bill is shadowing Cobb, like he shadows so many others, but s/he learns later from the Blonde that it was Cobb who was shadowing Bill before he decided to make him his decoy – a twist in the plot calculated to produce irony and shock. Likewise, the viewer is initially led to believe that Bill is being betrayed by Cobb and the Blonde together, but there is a further twist here when s/he finds that the Blonde is in turn betrayed by Cobb. As pointed out above, these recursive revelations of plot where closure is followed by disclosure more than once, lead to a packed denouement.

If shadowing constitutes the exposition of both fabula and syuzhet, the complication is initiated through the burglaries. This too is repeated across timelines. Bill is unshaven and long-haired when his own flat is burgled and when the Blonde's flat is as well. He is also unshaven when he and Cobb are discovered in the first flat they are shown burgling. When he is burgling the safe, he is clean-shaven and battered.

The minimal set of situations in *Following* is complemented by the introduction of a minimal number of characters that move the story forward. The Blonde adds to the complication in the story and also enables proliferation of timelines through her interactions with Bill. When Bill first meets her at the bar, he is clean-shaven. When burgling her house, he is long-haired. And finally when he confronts her after finding that her story about the photos was a hoax, he is clean-shaven and battered. Cobb, similarly, enables Bill's transition from one timeline to the next in the capacity of a guru. It is Cobb who recommends that Bill change his appearance. It is Cobb who physically assaults him after learning that Bill has slept with the Blonde. Just as Cobb began the story, he ends it by disappearing – literally – from the scene, leaving an inept and unconvincing Bill to explain to the policeman his 'side of things'.

The primary function of the characters is therefore to take the plot ahead. They are stock characters, recognizable types: the ruthless villain who schemes and takes advantage of a weak, diffident and not very scrupulous young man; a blonde who seduces and betrays the young man to her advantage, but is in turn betrayed and killed by the villain. A senior villain who pulls strings is also deployed to repeat situations; the Blonde, who narrates his gruesome method of torture and murder to Bill at the restaurant, little knows that he is going to have her tortured and killed in the same manner. She is the stereotypical femme fatale.[5]

It follows then that the characters lend themselves to be identified as types rather than individuals. The film encourages this perception in an explicit fashion, up to the point of the credits. Thus the young man who introduces himself as 'Bill' in the film is (nevertheless) credited as 'the young man' in the titles, a possible concession to anonymity, which repudiates any kind of identity that could grant uniqueness through particulars. Cobb in fact says as much to the Blonde, that Bill is a stroke of luck for them as he is a loner. The blonde woman whose house Bill and Cobb burgle, and whom Bill begins to date, and who is revealed later to be Cobb's friend, is 'the Blonde', and her ex-boyfriend is 'the Bald Guy'. The general absence of names is too pronounced to be ignored. Names are also unreliable. 'Cobb', we learn at the very end, is not Cobb's name. The viewer is encouraged to assume that Cobb's real name is 'Daniel Lloyd', the name that he cheats Bill into signing a credit card with and using as his own. When this name is attributed to Bill, its only value lies in its illegitimacy, and it signposts itself as an open signifier.

Repetition in *Memento*: The question of frequency

It is interesting to observe that *Memento* also repeats the motif of following or shadowing. This trope has multiple filmic outcomes. On a fundamental level, it initiates the action in the story in both films. In *Following*, as we have pointed out earlier, Bill receives a shock at the end when he learns from the Blonde that contrary to what he could never have suspected, it was he who had been shadowed and marked for a purpose by Cobb. What begins as a relatively harmless act of a writer-voyeur becomes a nightmarish act of pursuit in which the voyeur turns victim.

Memento leaves the viewer with more questions at the end than at the beginning. We do not know if Leonard Shelby is who he claims to be, or if he is Sammy Jankis, displaced. Does he compulsively repeat actions in his own life (hunting a quarry to murder for revenge) or is he 'repeating' Sammy's life? Who is Natalie? How many times has he met her? The viewer is led to believe that at least once he has forgotten meeting her before. Who, or which of the men, is John G? Has John G been killed, or is he going to be killed? Repetition potentially eliminates the notion of 'before' and 'after', which is the point that *Memento* makes by giving its protagonist a memory-related 'condition'.

As *Memento* shows, repetition begs the question of frequency, raised by Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980).[6] Bordwell qualifies this is as follows:

> [T]he viewer presumes that fabula events are unique occurrences, but each one can be represented in the syuzhet any number of times. For convenience let us say that the syuzhet can represent a fabu-

la event once (1), more than once (1+),
or not at all (0). (Bordwell 1985: 79)

Memento works on iterative frequency, where, apart from the protagonist's repetitive behaviour in many of his actions throughout the film, the entire film requires to be seen as constituting an act that Shelby has performed many times, but which is shown (only) once.

Repetition in *The Prestige*: Mirrors and loops

In *The Prestige*, repetition inheres primarily in replication, especially with respect to the two protagonists, whose careers mirror each other to a recognizably large extent.

As in *Following*, the syuzhet of *The Prestige* is marked by mutually intersecting timelines, the principal effect of which is to upturn chronology and generate a non-linear plot. *The Prestige* compromises intelligibility more than *Following* because replication and repetition here are restricted not just to situation, but include character as well. This naturally leads to the foregrounding of the issue of identity, an established favourite theme for Nolan from *Following* through *Memento*.

Thus, both Angier and his wife die by drowning, and Borden/Fallon and his wife die by hanging. Angier's wife's death is caused by an accident while Borden's wife Sarah commits suicide. Borden and Fallon are not just identical twins, but also live each other's lives interchangeably. Meanwhile, Angier too acquires the ability to clone himself endlessly after Tesla makes the replicating machine for him. This mirror-image proliferation, not restricted to two in Angier's case, further confuses the question of 'who was the real Angier?' and who was his clone.

The motif of repetition in the syuzhet is established through the development of situations deriving naturally from rivalry. Incensed by Borden's confession that he does not know whether it was his knot-tying that led to Angier's wife's death (this confession/confusion is a result of Borden and Fallon participating seamlessly in each other's experiences), Angier relentlessly persecutes Borden by sabotaging his public performances, with Borden in turn doing the same to Angier. The introduction of Olivia into the story who, from being Angier's stage-hand becomes Borden's assistant and eventually (Fallon's) lover, is one of the more marked instances of betrayal in the film. A much more profound instance of betrayal is the one that happens within a perceived 'self' whereby Borden and Fallon have been both betrayed by and betrayed each other, in the sense that each is obliged to account for the deeds of the other. In the movie this produces multiple effects since this 'betrayal' is unwitting, ironic, possibly inevitable and hence tragic.

As the above illustrations show, the motif of repetition is structured (1) in a way that each repetition implicates and draws upon the previous/next, thereby linking actions in a circular fashion, and (2) in a way that eschews causality at the same time, by occurring across different levels. One example of (1) is Angier sabotaging Borden's show, which in turn leads to Borden sabotaging Angier's show, so that a potentially infinite loop is created. And one of several examples of (2), is the way that Angier's death is mirrored by his wife's – not just through literal drowning but also by being located strategically in a public performance – and the way in which the rivalry between Angier and Borden is prefigured by the war of the currents between Edison and Tesla, inside the film as well as 'outside' in history.

Repetition in *The Prestige* reintroduces the question of identity, complicated through twins and clones, and also adds an emotional angle to the issue of identity by introducing the notion of sacrifice. Not only is the obvious question raised of whether Angier or Borden has made the greater sacrifice, but also the more intricate question of what it costs the self to sacrifice 'itself' in the form of a twin or a clone. Even though Angier's double is artificially generated, the spectator is led to believe that there is no real difference between the 'original' and the duplicated versions, since the two share their past including their memories and motives. This suggests that the self itself has been replicated.

Drawing from *Following* through *Memento*, *The Prestige* continues the exploration of the theme of betrayal. In *Following*, betrayal is one of the prime movers of action. In *Memento*, the viewer is left to deal with the question whether Shelby's sense of being betrayed is real or imagined. And finally, betrayal acquires a certain symmetrical shape in *The Prestige*, where it connects situations not just in a linear fashion but also laterally, as it moves between the two protagonists' choices of action.

Form complements content

Following

In the concluding section of this article we discuss the creative collaborations of content and form in these three films, and visually represent the ways in which the form of each movie mirrors its thematic concerns in the graphs that follow.

We began by describing the postmodern spirit of *Following*, *Memento* and *The Prestige*. We revert to it here by marking the self-reflexivity characteristic of postmodernism. Self-reflexivity in *Following* achieves the double purpose of not just disengaging the viewer from the fabula in his/her attempts to make temporal sense of it, but also of showing how form and content mirror each other, taking voyeurism as a point of intersection.

As a struggling, unemployed writer living on the fringe of society, Bill is the picture of abject loneliness that is often characteristic of urban life; but his furtiveness, and his self-centredness verging on selfishness, preclude the viewer's sympathy for him. The gritty, urban locale that is the staple of neo-noir is thus quintessential to his character.

Lacking excitement in his life, Bill obtains pleasure in a voyeuristic manner from following other people with lives more interesting than his own, ostensibly to find inspiration for his novel. As he says to the police officer at the beginning of the film, 'You watch somebody's behaviour, and it raises a hundred thousand questions, and… I wanted to ask those questions, and I wanted to know what the answers were, and so I'd follow people to try and find out.' This is not the only instance of voyeurism, though. While pilfering houses that he burgles with Cobb, Bill shows his readiness to follow Cobb's example in showing interest in women's lingerie.

Nolan positions the audience precisely in Bill's situation by ensuring the visibility of the handheld

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camera in scenes where the viewer is enabled to see him/herself watching the film, situated one ontological level above Bill. The shaking camera, especially in the chase sequences, cannot escape the alert viewer's observation that they are in fact seeing themselves indulging in what they despise Bill for doing. Some scenes are shown to the viewer through Bill's point of view, and in some others, the viewer is positioned behind Bill. In both cases, the camera is sufficiently shaky to draw attention to itself.

From this position, the viewers become voyeurs themselves: peeping into the life of someone they are curious about. Even were we to argue from the stand that all cinema is essentially voyeuristic, the cinematic technique used by Nolan strongly accentuates the voyeurism in this case. Drawing attention to which, Nolan says, 'I saw the hand-held, black-and-white 16mm cinematography as a way of tapping into the cinematic feel of film noir, whilst giving it a different spin by shooting the scenes in a more modern documentary style' (*Unofficial Christopher Nolan Website* n.d.).

The screenplay for *Following* also enhances this supposition: 'The man's back disappears into the crowd and we cease to follow him' (*Unofficial Christopher Nolan*

Website n.d.), leading us to speculate on the identity of the 'we'. A self-reflexive and metaleptic chain is thus implicated in Bill following a man being followed by the camera, from behind which the viewer watches.

In an attempt to visualize the nonlinear structure of *Following* we have plotted the events of the film as they appear in the syuzhet versus where they would be placed in the fabula. The fabula is plotted on the vertical axis, and the syuzhet on the horizontal. We have used the word 'event' in a restrictive fashion, to mean 'sequence of scenes in one timeline'. Each new event is thus a change in timeline. All actions that take place continuously in the syuzhet, with no prolepses or analepses in between, constitute a single event. This definition is consistent across all three movies/graphs.

The resulting graph (Figure 1) provides a remarkable insight into the structure of the film, discussed above in the section on repetition and economy. The structured ordering of stock situations in the film is manifested in the graph as a zigzag line with dots at both ends and the middle. The three diagonal lines across the graph represent the three appearances that Bill sports in the film, and thereby constitute the three timelines.
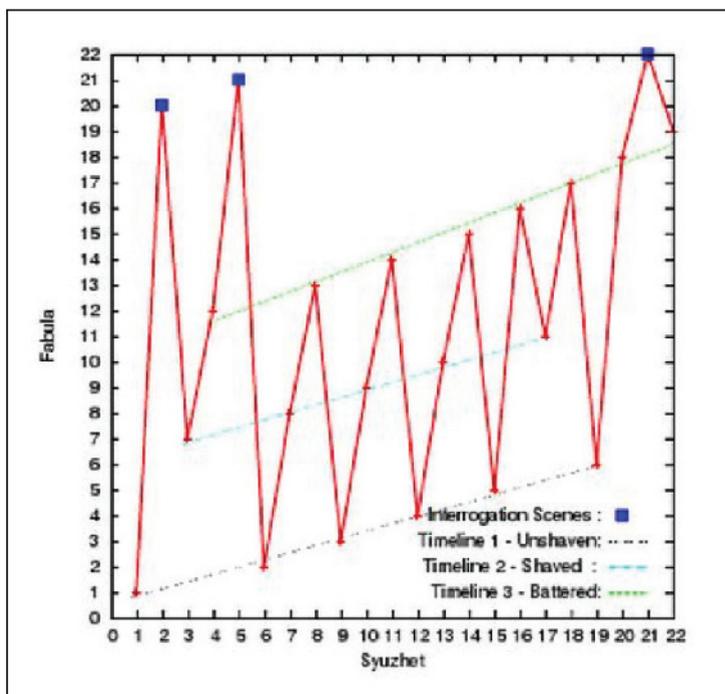
Figure 1: Plot of events as they happen in the fabula versus where they appear in the syuzhet for *Following* (the list of events used to plot this graph can be found at Appendix I).
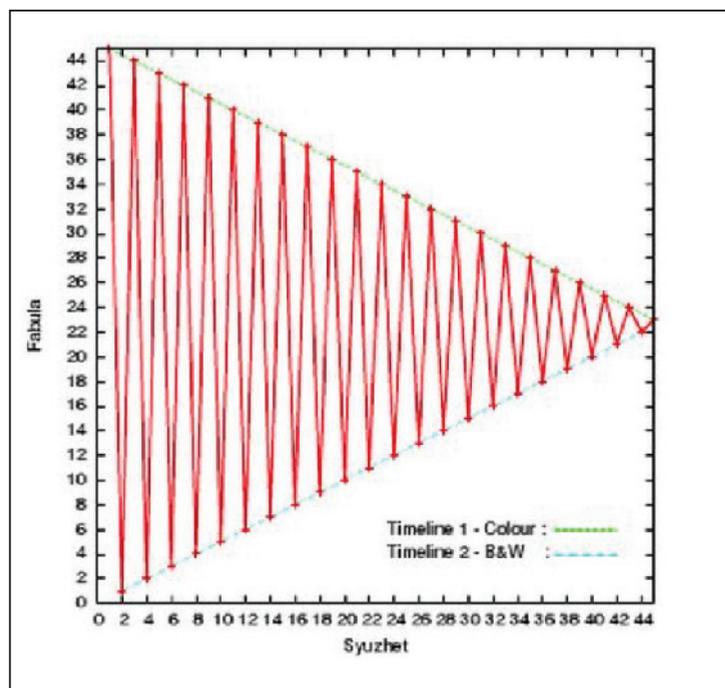

Figure 2: Plot of events as they happen in the fabula vs where they appear in the syuzhet for *Memento.*[7]

The graph reveals through its three parallel lines that if we were to view the film in a linear fashion, we would begin with the line at the bottom, move up through the middle line, and then reach the topmost line. The graph also shows that the chronological scattering of the events is not random but ordered: this is deduced from the regularity with which the events switch across the three timelines. Had the ordering of events been haphazard and unplanned, it would not have been possible to draw three distinct 'bottom', 'middle' and 'top' lines.

More importantly, the graph explains why the viewer is able to make sense of *Following* more intuitively than a nonlinear film like, say, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

Memento

The self-reflexivity of form with respect to content in *Memento* is even more pointed. Having a memory span of fifteen minutes, Shelby exacts revenge for the murder of his wife by leaving photographs and tattooing text on his body as clues for his future self. The scenes in colour, which move temporally backwards into the fabula, are each short enough to suggest that they are formal simulations of the short-term memory spans of the protagonist Leonard Shelby.

The graph for *Memento* (Figure 2) is constructed similarly as the previous one, with the timeline of the syuzhet on the horizontal axis and that of the fabula on the vertical axis. The fabula as well as the syuzhet span the 113 minutes of Leonard's life depicted in the film, in an interrupted or fragmented manner.

In Figure 2, we have discretized the events as differentiated in the movie by the alternating black-

and-white and colour sequences. The immediate observation that can be made about the nonlinear syuzhet of *Memento* is that it is extremely organized and systematic, as compared to the seemingly haphazard ones of *Following* and *The Prestige*. In particular, there are three peculiar features of the narrative: (1) the story is narrated to the viewer in discrete clips of less than fifteen minutes each; (2) there are scenes in colour and black-and-white, with the scenes in colour showing chronologically later events. These are shown alternately; (3) the sequences in colour move backward in time, and the black-and-white forward in time, till they eventually converge to form the same scene. This scene, depicted as the rightmost point on the graph, is the visual representation of what can be called a 'reset' button in Leonard's life, which is the point at which he starts building another mystery/chase routine for himself.

The two timelines, one in colour and the other in black-and-white, show us two iterations of the 'cycle' in Shelby's life, in reverse and forward chronology respectively. The graph in Figure 2 signposts some interesting observations unique to *Memento*. For example, unlike the traditional detective tale, or even *Following* and *The Prestige*, the climax and resolution of *Memento* are chronologically in the middle, rather than at the end. The unusual plot structure, moreover, ties in with the unusual character of Leonard Shelby.

Since he suffers from anterograde amnesia, he is unable to recall any event extending beyond fifteen minutes in the immediate past. Looking through his eyes, the viewer must relinquish this ability as well. Thus, no scene in the film is more than fifteen minutes in continuous duration. Lacking short-term memory, Shelby reconstructs his life and purpose every fifteen minutes using his long-term memories – by recalling his past. The 'remember Sammy Jankis' tattoo

on his arm is thus a reminder from Leonard Shelby, to Leonard Shelby, of his condition, the tragedy in his past, and his quest for revenge. The viewer is given an idea of what this reconstruction must feel like, by being shown a black-and-white 'past' scene after every 'present' scene in colour. The black-and-white scenes help the viewer understand the events that led to whatever is transpiring on-screen, just as 'Sammy Jankis' helps Shelby understand the events that led to him being what he is and doing what he is doing.

At the end of the movie, it is emphatically suggested that the person whom Shelby has been hunting down throughout the movie is not his wife's killer; that he had killed the real murderer a year ago; and that he feels compelled to repeat the cycle of revenge-killing since he cannot remember each murder. This is how the events at the end of the movie act as a 'reset' button in Leonard Shelby's life, a point where he starts over the events that we are shown throughout the movie. The convergence of the 'past' and 'present' timelines, with the black-and-white scenes and those in colour becoming one, brings home this realization to the viewer: that the past and the future are the same, and the sequence of events shown in the movie has no special or unique meaning. The form and the content are, thus, intricately linked in *Memento* as well, just as they were in *Following*.

The Prestige

The mirroring of content and form in *The Prestige* has a sleight-of-hand effect, when one finds that the structure of the film is modelled on the form of a magic trick: the film of course, is *about* magic tricks. The opening dialogue of the film in Borden's voice: 'Are you watching closely?' is addressed not just to

'Since the early 1990s, popular cinema has displayed a turn towards narrative complexity.'

the film-internal audience, but also to the viewer of the film outside its storyworld.

The spectator of this particular film, we argue, is watching a magic trick at the same time that s/he is watching a film. The nonlinear structure of the movie cleverly delays the introduction of vital information and maintains a gap throughout the film, which enhances the audience's experience of being caught in an illusion.

What is the format of a magic trick?

Cutter describes this to Borden's little daughter (and across the ontological divide, to the viewer) in the very next dialogue of the film:

> Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the Pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course it probably isn't.

The Pledge of *The Prestige*, the 'something ordinary', is the rivalry between two magicians, beginning with the death of one of their spouses leading up to the death of the other.

'The second act', Cutter continues, is called 'the Turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary'. In the film, this is the introduction of Tesla, who interrupts the main plot to produce the replicating machine for Angier. 'Now you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking,' says Cutter. The viewer eventually learns that Borden did not take Tesla's help, but until then has no idea how Borden does his transportation act, since it is beyond the spectator's ability to guess that Borden is sharing a life with his twin. When the Tesla arc comes to an end, the viewer is still not certain whether Tesla did succeed in building Angier's machine successfully, or how his magic trick works.

The third act of the magic act, as well as of Nolan's film, is 'the Prestige'. To quote Cutter again, '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
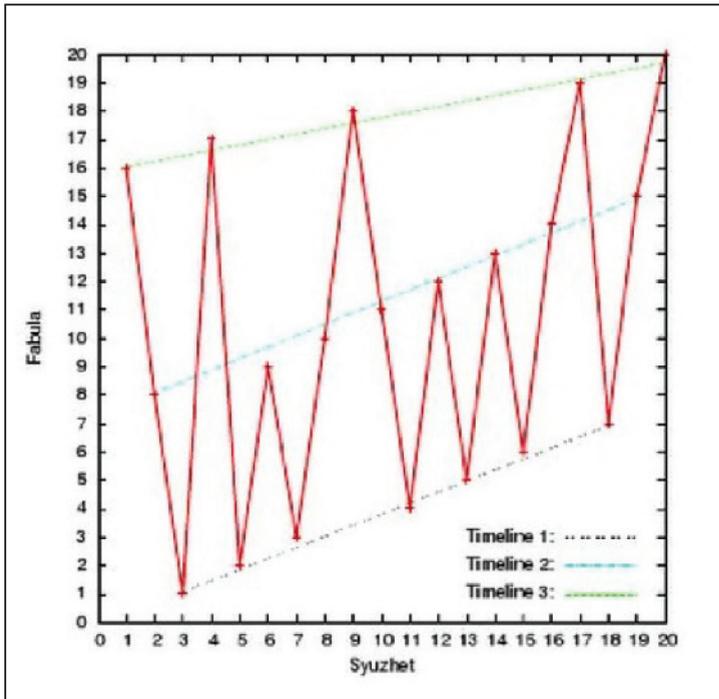
Figure 3: Plot of events as they happen in the fabula vs where appear in the syuzhet for *The Prestige*.[8]

part, the part we call the Prestige.' In the third act, the film first brings back Angier, and then Borden, both of whom have been believed to be dead in their final confrontation.

What follows is the resolution of the film, where both tricks are explained. While it may be argued that the syuzhet of every film works like a magic trick – with the exposition, the rising–falling action and the resolution – it is unusual to see a well-defined structure in the fabula. The fabula–syuzhet graph of *The Prestige* (Figure 3) makes this clear.

In the syuzhet, the exposition, the rising–falling action and the resolution take place from left to right, while the magic trick takes place from bottom to top. As in the case of *Following*, the three timelines are seen as a top, middle and bottom line.

The nonlinear nature of *The Prestige* however is more intri-

cate than *Following*, since Borden reads Angier's diary in which he writes about the problem of deciphering Borden's diary. The constant and mutual implication of the two protagonists is thus not just nonlinear, but loop-like. And since they aim their diaries at each other, the reliability of their accounts is problematized. Thus, for example, Olivia's defection from Angier to Borden is shown twice, and it is only the second time that the audience knows the entire truth. This means, reading the graph, that the viewer is twice distanced from the events presented in the bottom timeline, and once removed from those in the middle.

The most significant observation to be derived from the graphs is how these three lines double up as parts of the magic trick. The bottom line is the record in Borden's diary of how he and Angier became rivals and

enemies, which is the Pledge; this is chronologically followed by the account of Angier's visit to Colorado Springs and his meeting with Tesla, which is recorded in Angier's diary, which is the Turn; and the topmost line corresponds to the imprisonment of Borden/Fallon and the subsequent revelations about their deaths: fake and real, which is the Prestige.

In conclusion

We have attempted to read three of Christopher Nolan's films from the perspective eloquently argued by Allen Cameron (2008):

> Since the early 1990s, popular cinema has displayed a turn towards narrative complexity. In many cases, this complexity has taken the form of a database aesthetic, in which the narrative is divided into discrete segments and subjected to complex articulations. These films, which I am calling 'modular narratives', articulate a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation. They suggest both the pleasures and the threats offered by a modular conception of time. (Cameron 2008: 1)

As Cameron goes on to elaborate, these experiments with time go beyond the more common use of flashbacks that have existed much earlier than the 1990s. The later and more intricate, involved and sophisticated play with time is a consequence of the Internet, which has shaped the imaginative explorations of art, and enabled new modes of meaning-making for the film as well as its viewers. The pleasure of making sense becomes, in the process, a

self-sufficient act, and irrelevant to the very different order of the pleasure of escaping into the world of the film. Nolan's films, in particular the three that have formed the subject of our article, have found a niche for themselves in this changed sociocultural context, and have become cultural signs of the age.

Contributor's details

Mukund Madhav Varma is a physicist by training, computational biologist by profession and a literature enthusiast at heart.

Ravi Bhoraskar is a software engineer at Facebook, where he works on the Instagram team. He enjoys crime and detective fiction, but not crime itself.

Sudha Shastri is Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai.

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Endnotes

1. In his landmark study of postmodern fiction, Brian McHale uses the concept of the 'dominant' to distinguish modernist from postmodernist fiction. The postmodernist dominant is 'ontological' and typically raises the following questions of a text: 'What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?… and so on' (1987: 10).

2. Although to all practical purposes Borden and Fallon are one man and share all they have, they are in the final analysis distinct from each other on account of the woman each loves: Borden loves his wife Sarah while Fallon is in love with Olivia. Hence the question, 'which of them lived and which died' is applicable to Borden/Fallon, and this is reinforced towards the end of the film when the twin who is taken away to the gallows is established as Fallon since he apologises to his brother for what happened with and to Sarah. In the case of Angier, this question is irrelevant, since each of his clones inherits his past and is interchangeable with him, and no two Angiers survive into the future beyond the stage-managed illusion, as one of them invariably dies to let the other continue.

3. For a meticulous and well-researched analysis of *Memento* as a film in the neo-noir genre, see Torben Schmidt's 'Christopher Nolan's *Memento*: Analysis of the Narrative Structure of a *Noirish Revenge Film*' (2003).

Appendix I
Timeline for *Following*

Syuzhet	Fabula	Scene Description
1	1	Bill is shown to be following people. He is talking to somebody about his penchant for following people.
2	20	Interrogation scene #1: The scene has switched to the interrogation. We are shown Bill talking to his interrogator. The interrogator asks him, 'You were playing secret agent?'
3	7	Clean-shaven Bill is shown looking at pictures of the Blonde.
4	12	Battered Bill is lying on the ground, a glove stuffed into his mouth. The scene then moves to his apartment where he is typing. Later he is shown following the Bald Guy.
5	21	Interrogation scene #2: Second interrogation scene, where Bill is talking about his self-imposed rules.
6	2	Unshaven Bill is shown following Cobb. His confrontation with Cobb takes place, and Cobb takes him under his wing.
7	8	Clean-shaven Bill meets the Blonde in the restaurant, and takes her to his house.
8	13	Battered Bill follows the Bald Guy. He then calls up Cobb asking for advice about how to arm himself.
9	3	Unshaven Bill takes Cobb to his own house to 'rob' it.
10	9	Clean-shaven Bill sees the Bald Guy leave the Blonde's apartment.
11	14	Battered Bill arms himself with a hammer.
12	4	Unshaven Bill and Cobb rob the Blonde's house. Then they visit the empty flats.
13	10	Clean-shaven Bill goes on a date with the Blonde.
14	15	Battered Bill robs the Bald Guy's restaurant.
15	5	Unshaven Bill is eating with Cobb in the restaurant who gives him Daniel Lloyd's credit card. Unshaven Bill is typing something. He shaves himself, becomes Clean-shaven Bill. Bill calls up Cobb. Cobb and the Blonde are shown in bed.
16	16	Battered Bill is in the restaurant he was robbing. He is taping money to his body. He hits somebody with his hammer.
17	11	Clean-shaven Bill confesses to the Blonde about the Robbery. He meets Cobb who beats him. He becomes Battered Bill.
18	17	Battered Bill is typing.
19	6	The Blonde and Cobb are discussing her infidelity.
20	18	Battered Bill is at home, untaping the money. He calls the Blonde. He meets her to confront her about the photographs, where she tells him the truth.
21	22	Interrogation scene #3: The Officer tells Bill there are no unsolved murders and does he have anything to add.
22	19	Cobb is shown talking to the Blonde and killing her. He then disappears into the crowd.

Appendix II

The sequence of events for *The Prestige* has been taken from *Movie Snobs* (2007) and subsequently the numbering of the syuzhet and corresponding fabula have been worked out as:

Syuzhet	Fabula
1	16
2	8
3	1
4	17
5	2
6	9
7	3
8	10
9	18
10	11
11	4
12	12
13	5
14	13
15	6
16	14
17	19
18	7
19	15
20	20

4. The viewer is led to understand that Bill's account of his entrapment and betrayal comes from his recollection. All the scenes in this analeptic frame foster this belief; all but one where Bill informs Cobb over a telephonic conversation that he is changing his appearance. While the scene initially shows Cobb talking to Bill, it gradually moves to reveal the presence of the Blonde in Cobb's room, a fact that Bill could not have had knowledge of at that juncture. This scene begs the questions of narrative perspective and reliability, but these are beyond the purview of this article to address.

5. 'The quintessential *femme fatale* of *film noir* uses her sexual attractiveness and ruthless cunning to manipulate men in order to gain power, independence, money, or all three at once. She rejects the conventional roles of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women, and in the end her transgression of social norms leads to her own destruction and the destruction of the men who are attracted to her' (Blaser and Blaser 2008).

6. Gerard Genette describes four basic types of relationships between the possibilities for repetition of the events narrated in a story and their narration in a text: '*Narrating once what happened once […] 91N/1S*', '*Narrating n times what happened n times (nN/nS)*', '*Narrating n times what happened once (nN/1S)*' and '*Narrating one time* (or rather: *at one time) what happened n times (1N/nS)*' (1980: 114–16).

7. The chronology observed for this figure is based on Schmidt's 'Plot Table' (2003: 25–28).

8. The chronology observed for this figure is based on the explanation worked out in *Movie Snobs* (2007).

Drawing from this we have worked out the numbering of the syuzhet and the corresponding fabula. See Appendix II.