

# **Christopher Nolan and the Art of Anamorphosis**

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the cinema of Christopher Nolan over a 15-year period. It focuses on the portrayal of the subject in five of his major films: *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *Interstellar* (2014). In its chronological critique of Nolan's cinema, this project explores subjectivity, to use Lacanian terminology, as a distorted vision provided by the desire for the impossible *objet petit a*. It records a shift of perspective in Nolan's later characters, which endows them with a better understanding of their relationship with the object cause of desire.

The dissertation studies the relationship between the subject and the *objet petit a* through the encounter with the anamorphic gaze, which reveals the impossibility of fantasy at the heart of desire. In doing so, this project provides several ways through which anamorphosis proves to be a point that exposes the limitations of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. This dissertation proposes the term *structural anamorphosis* to introduce the Lacanian gaze as a temporal point in the film's narrative. Structural anamorphosis is what retroactively uncovers the futility of fantasy and reveals the distorted views of the spectators.

In its discussion of subjectivity, this dissertation shows that the quest for the *objet petit a*, which is the essence of desire, is similar to capitalism's obsession with objects. In his films, Nolan shows how the subject's desire is shaped by ideology unconsciously. By doing so, Nolan dismantles ideology and provides a space for rethinking the surrounding world: the spectators who watch the films of Christopher Nolan understand that they need to reconsider what they have taken for granted as normal.

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## Dedication

To my wife, *Homeira*, the only fantasy that came true.

To my mother, whom I can now only see in my dreams.

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## Introduction

The brevity of the seven-word title of this dissertation (Christopher Nolan and the Art of Anamorphosis) conceals one significant name: Jacques Lacan. The hint to Lacan in the title is the word *anamorphosis*, which he connects to the subject's perception in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973). To put it simply, the term *anamorphosis* signifies a distorted perspective, if the viewer (or the subject) looks at the work of art directly. In order to make sense of an anamorphic image, one needs to look from an awkward, non-perpendicular angle. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the word *anamorphosis*, which comes from Greek (*ana*, meaning "back, again," and *morphosis*, meaning "to form"), is a "distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned" ("Anamorphosis, n"). Anamorphosis "plays havoc with elements and principles" because "instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, it projects them outside themselves and distorts them so that when viewed from a certain point they return to normal"<sup>1</sup> Lacan uses this term to talk about subjectivity, as a position between two poles: something and nothing. The subject is something when she or he mistakenly thinks that she or he is in possession of the scene, as a conscious being, capable of making sense of everything that she or he sees. In the example provided by Lacan (Holbein's *The Ambassadors*), one could initially think of her or himself as fully in control of the picture. There is, however, one obscure spot in the bottom center of the picture which raises curiosity (see fig. 1). Now the subject is nothing

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<sup>1</sup> While the word *anamorphosis* appears first in Gaspar Schott's *Magia universalis naturæ et artis* (1657), the earliest recorded anamorphic drawing appears in Leonardo da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus* (c. 1485) (Baltrušaitis 170; Seckel 11).

when provided with another perspective that reveals the vanity of the first impression. If we look from high on the right side of the picture, the blurred, mysterious spot turns out to be a human skull, returning the gaze of the viewer: it represents Renaissance's



Figure 1. Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533.

*Memento Mori* and undermines the symbols of wealth, knowledge, and power in the picture. This alternative outlook shatters the illusion that perception is managed by the eye in the form of a direct look.

Based on what Lacan says, the relationship between the painting and the viewer is determined by the angle from which she or he looks at the work of art. The viewer's position shifts from all-knowing to partial. In addition, the picture, which initially seemed to be an object being looked at, turns into an all-seeing entity because it seems to be returning the look of the viewer. This radical changing of positions between the subject and the object brings us to one of the seemingly difficult-to-understand quotations of Lacan: "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 106). The scopic field and the gaze in the previous sentence relate to the scopic drive, or the desire to see, which is one of the four partial drives that constitute every human being. For Lacan, desire is caused by a missing object, known as the *objet petit a*: it is the "lost object" or that "which is never found in the position of being the aim of desire" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 185-86). This object cause of desire is what constitutes the gaze, an important term in the Lacanian psychoanalysis. The gaze as the *objet petit a* signifies an essential lack in the life of the subject, the same lack that takes place upon the subject's entry into the Symbolic Order, which should be considered as the realm of language and the law. The subject does not confront the gaze often because getting too close to the *objet petit a* would threaten the subject with the inherent lack in her or his existence. The encounter occurs rarely and only through the irruption of the order of the Real, which, unlike the Symbolic, is full and lacks nothing. When the Real arrives, one can witness the essential void in the structure

of the Symbolic Order. Unveiling this void has one very important outcome: the emancipation of the individual.

For Lacan, the gaze not only embodies the object cause of desire as a lack, but also triggers “visual fascination” or “captivation” of the subject because it “magnetizes the eye,” as one could clearly see in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (Scott 5). As Lacan himself points out in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*,

In Holbein’s picture I showed you at once—without hiding any more than usual—the singular object floating in the foreground [the skull], which is there to be looked at, in order to catch, I would almost say, *to catch in its trap*, the observer, that is to say, us. It is, in short, an obvious way, no doubt an exceptional one, and one due to some moment of reflection on the part of the painter, of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught. (92)

Therefore, a certain work of art such as Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* provides us with the Lacanian gaze as both an irrecoverable lack of the *objet petit a*, and as a trap for the subject (or the viewer) to get “caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 92).

There is an analogous relationship between the spectator and the works of Christopher Nolan. The obsession with the *objet petit a* is the underlying code of Nolan’s filmmaking. His narratives involve a certain traumatic loss that the subject desperately attempts to master. In certain moments when the subject gets troubled by the impossibility of mastering such a lack, one would feel the presence of the Real gaze:<sup>2</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase *the Real gaze* has been adopted from the title of Todd McGowan’s book, “*The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*.”

function of this gaze is to remind the spectator that it is impossible to find an imaginary wholeness both in the theater and in real life. Therefore, the spectator of Nolan experiences the *objet petit a* as an impossibility. In his earlier films, this dissertation argues, Nolan portrays the subject as moving forward, albeit non-progressively: the subject repeats himself time and again to manage the trauma in which he is located, but in vain. In *Memento*, for example, Leonard Shelby, is stuck within a non-ending loop of desire: he kills endlessly to reach the object cause of his desire, which seems to be reunion with his murdered wife. The case is the same with *The Prestige* and *The Dark Knight*: with the passage of time, there is no fulfillment of desire. The basic problem of subjects in these films is that they cannot master the trauma in which they are confined because they are unable to accept it. In a way, they are unable to see that there is a lack in the big Other, or the realm of language and law, which is the residue of the subject's desire. Leonard Shelby (*Memento*), Robert Angier (*The Prestige*), and Harvey Dent (*The Dark Knight*) cannot accept that there is no *objet petit a*, that one could never find an imaginary wholeness with the passage of time. In these three films, the intrusion of the Real cancels out the seemingly progressive movement of time as promised by the Symbolic Order.

By shattering the illusion of the *objet petit a*, and showing the fruitlessness of the seemingly progressive movement of time, Nolan strikes a blow to one significant element of contemporary late capitalism. "The fundamental gesture of capitalism," Todd McGowan points out, "is the promise of future returns" since "the future embodies a type of satisfaction foreclosed to the present" (*Capitalism and Desire* 11-12). In other words, capitalism posits a linear notion of time and promises that subjects would eventually have

a chance to obtain their object cause of desire, the ultimate source of happiness that fills the essential lack. Since capitalism is a large body of interconnected networks, it evades a clear, proper definition. What makes capitalism the proper discourse to critique from a Lacanian perspective is its emphasis on commodity: capitalism is the discourse of (accumulating) objects. As McGowan points out,

The essence of capitalism is accumulation. The capitalist subject is a subject who never has enough and continually seeks more and more. But this project of endless accumulation is built, ironically, on the idea of its end. Capitalist accumulation envisions obtaining the object that would provide the ultimate satisfaction for the desiring subject, the object that would quench the subject's desire and allow it to put an end to the relentless yearning to accumulate. In this sense, an image of the end of capitalism is implicit in its structure, and the key to capitalism's staying power lies in the fact that this ultimately satisfying object doesn't exist.

*(Capitalism and Desire 21)*

Capitalism doesn't exist without this obsession with objects and the future. In no other ideology is there such an obsession with obtaining objects: "The capitalist subject is always looking forward to new objects that might attract its desire" (McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire* 159). In this sense, Lacan's *objet petit a*, has strong connections with capitalism's commodity fetishism because in both there is a future promise. The anamorphic art of Nolan, however, runs against this perspective. As we witness in the cinema of Nolan, desire and fantasy would not help the subjects to find the imaginary wholeness that they are seeking all their lives. In a way, spectators are told to enjoy their

own lack and accept it as it is. In Nolan's later films, such as *Inception* and *Interstellar*, we witness a significant change: the subjects come to the understanding that they need to come to terms with the fact that there is no possibility of discovering the *objet petit a*. They find satisfaction not in a fantasmatic, imaginary wholeness, but in partial enjoyment.

It is in relationship with the social order that we can distinguish total and partial enjoyments. Social order, in the form of contemporary late capitalism, demands total enjoyment from the subject. As Todd McGowan points out, "Capitalism, in its latest manifestations, has played a crucial role in working to de-emphasize prohibition or Law in the social order" (*End of Dissatisfaction* 30). The subjects are asked to enjoy as much as possible. They are told to work in order to obtain the object they have been dreaming of. What the discourse of capitalism allows is "imaginary enjoyment" (McGowan, *End of Dissatisfaction* 73) or "libidinal enjoyment" (Declercq 75). This enjoyment has "anti-social effects" because it "*connects subjects with objects and not with other subjects*" (Declercq 75). The alternative to such a total enjoyment is partial enjoyment. As Todd McGowan puts it,

The advantage of partial enjoyment lies in its connection to the Real. Unlike total enjoyment, which is always imaginary, partial enjoyment is Real. It involves an experience of the Real, specifically the way in which the Real throws the symbolic order out of balance. In the experience of partial enjoyment, the subject enjoys its own lack without feeling this lack as a deprivation. This experience frees the subject by breaking its link to the symbolic Law: the Law no longer seems to hold within itself the secret

that eludes the subject; the secret exists in the subject itself. (*End of Dissatisfaction* 195)

The only way to break with the social order is that the subjects understand the inherent lack in the Symbolic law. They should accept that it is impossible to find the object of dreams known as the *objet petit a*.

In the period between 2000 and 2008 Nolan communicates to the spectators the message that the *objet petit a* does not exist. The portrayal of the subject that Nolan depicts for us in this period is the one who is unable to accept this message. In this period, characters move in a vicious circle which leads nowhere. In the period between 2008-2014 the message remains the same: there is no *objet petit a*. However, the subjects are more sophisticated because they accept the nonexistence of the object cause of desire and move towards partial enjoyment. In the depiction of characters such as Cobb (*Inception*), Amelia Brand and Cooper (*Interstellar*), one can see the shift from earlier sketches that we find in the cinema of Christopher Nolan. The unchanging message of Nolan in both periods is that, unlike what capitalism promises, the *objet petit a* doesn't exist and is beyond the subject's reach.

The anamorphic art of Christopher Nolan has one more function: it captivates spectators. In other words, the spectators come to know that almost nowhere in the film were they in full control of the scene. One significant way through which Nolan challenges perception is the use of multilayered narrative structures: several plotlines run together with the result that no focal point could be detected easily. The task of piecing the film together, therefore, becomes a demanding task. What makes this task even more difficult is the fact that Nolan breaks the boundaries of time and treats it as a relative

concept, with the result that the spectator encounters a fragmented work of art. It is as if something external from nowhere, like the Lacanian gaze, hammers this anamorphically fragmented structure. In addition, the spectators of Nolan need to watch his films with utmost carefulness and attention, because there are quick, almost unnoticeable frames in his films that hide facts. Nolan attempts to deceive the spectators initially in his films with the retroactive aim of telling them that they need to reconsider their conditions in life. In a way, Nolan reflects on how ideology works in general: because of its unconscious functioning, an ideological view of reality is taken for granted.

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to show how Nolan depicts the anamorphic gaze of (or as) the *objet petit a* through the agency of the Real. I claim that we can trace the presence of the Real in the distorted images of the Symbolic Order that we see in Nolan's films. The distortion of the Symbolic Order exposes its limits to the spectators and reveals the fact that, unlike what it seems, it is not a flawless, unimpeachable body of truth. As a ubiquitous form of law and language, the Symbolic Order is what makes ideology functioning proper. The anamorphic art of Christopher Nolan dismantles this functioning of ideology and criticizes the logic of late capitalism in terms of time and the imaginary promise that the future would bring the lost object of desire. In his films, Nolan tells us how deceptive and fragile our conception of reality would be despite its hyperreal façade. The encounter with anamorphic gaze in the cinema of Christopher Nolan, which slows down perception, provides an opportunity for the spectators to re-examine perception and the unconscious functions of ideology. I shall introduce the art of anamorphosis in Christopher Nolan as that which makes the spectators revise their attitudes towards both watching films and life.

To locate anamorphosis in films by Christopher Nolan, I shall take certain ideas from Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan, who have written abundantly on the Lacanian concept of the Real in philosophy and film. In “Grimaces of the Real,” Slavoj Žižek shows us that “the anamorphic distortion of reality is the way the gaze [of the Real] is inscribed into the object’s surface” (47). What Žižek suggests is that the visible deformity that one could see in an object is caused by an invisible gaze on the part of the Real. Žižek provides several examples including David Lynch’s film, *The Elephant Man* (1980), and Edvard Munch’s paintings *Vampire* (1893), *Ashes* (1894), and *The Kiss* (1897), in which the deformed body and the disfigured face indicate the presence of the Real. The gaze of the Real object occurs where there is an incongruity in the image represented by the Symbolic Order. Žižek elaborates on Munch’s painting, *The Scream* (1893), and Sergei Eisenstein’s film, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), in both of which “the scream we perceive is mute since the anxiety is too taut for it to find an outlet in vocalization” (48). In other words, the voice does not accompany the image because it gets stuck in the subject’s throat. It is here that there is a visible crack in our perception of the Symbolic Order. In *The Frigate of Real Tears* (2001), Žižek specifies how one could discern the anamorphic stain in the film *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991):

[W]hen Véronique is sitting on a train next to a window, her perturbed state presaging her impending heart attack is signaled by the barely perceptible distortions of what we see through the train window due to the uneven glass surface. This scene first renders visible her perturbed subjectivity (that is to say, subjectivity as such, since [...] subjectivity as such [...] is correlative to a fold, to a protracted or curved stain in the

Real) in the guise of its ‘objective correlative’, the slightly distorted view of the countryside through the window-frame, i.e. the anamorphic stain which disfigures the clear window; then, Véronique takes into her hand the magic glass ball and, after shaking it, focuses her gaze on it: the relationship between the anamorphic stain and reality is now reversed, the subject perceives clearly the ‘magic’ interior of the ball, while ‘reality’ around it dissolves into a formless smear. (50)

In the relationship between the subject and the object, as Žižek suggests, one could find certain moments when anxiety or trauma appears on stage. It is there that one could witness anamorphosis. Not only does this dissertation take this specific notion of anamorphosis to identify it in the cinema of Nolan, but also it moves further by claiming that there are also examples of what I wish to call *structural anamorphosis* as paradoxical moments where the temporal flow of narrative breaks down with the result that the logic of the Symbolic fails to make sense.

Another scholar, whose work has contributed significantly to the Lacanian Real in film is Todd McGowan. In *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (2007), Todd McGowan specifies that there is a specific trend in the cinema of the past few decades, which he names *the cinema of intersection*: “The experience of the impossible in the cinema of intersection reveals not simply the possibility of the impossible but also its disruptiveness and its inability to be assimilated to the everyday order of things [... it] attempts to highlight the hole in its [ideology’s] midst” (165-66). One of the examples of the film directors that adopts such a trend of filmmaking is Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986), who, as McGowan argues, provided “the encounter with the traumatic real” (179).

McGowan claims that in his films, Tarkovsky portrays a “divide between the world of desire and that of fantasy not in order to stress their difference, but to expose their identity” (182). The fact that desire and fantasy are the same brings forward a disappointing conclusion: fantasy does not provide the subject with the *objet petit a*. Desire simply gives the promise that moving from one partial object to another would eventually bring the object cause of desire, but in vain. As McGowan points out,

The films of Tarkovsky demand that we grasp the underlying identity of the *objet petit a* as it motivates different objects of desire. [...] Through its emphasis on the distinctiveness of the experiences of desire and fantasy, the cinema of intersection renders visible the role that repetition plays in the existence of the subject. The subject does not progress nor does it have a future, and yet it continually invests itself in the idea of progress. This idea of progress—hope for a different future—represents a fantasmatic seduction that the subject rarely escapes. By helping the subject to disentangle itself from this fantasy, Tarkovsky’s cinema confronts the subject with the inescapability of its object, and it offers the subject the possibility of identifying with this object and thereby accepting its own mode of enjoyment rather than imagining that the ultimate enjoyment is elsewhere. (184)

As I will argue in this dissertation, the films of Christopher Nolan, too, represent the subject in such a relationship with the *objet petit a*. It is only in relation to this missing object that the subject interacts with her or his world. While in most of his films there is initially a promise that the future would bring the absent object, the passing of time

proves that the subject is stuck in a loop in which there is no possibility for regaining the lost object. Only those who truly understand that this object is impossible to find (characters in his later films) are able to make sense of this vicious circle.

This dissertation is highly indebted to the theories of Todd McGowan. I have taken several of McGowan's ideas on the Lacanian film theory and capitalism. However, this dissertation provides its unique contribution to existing knowledge by redefining and developing the concept of anamorphosis. In this project, I propose the term *structural anamorphosis* to give a fresh orientation to the Lacanian gaze as having not only a visual but narrative component. At certain moments in Nolan's films temporality breaks down, confusing the viewer; time becomes anamorphotically contorted. I thus illustrate how anamorphosis may have a significant narrative structural dimension. But structural anamorphosis is not simply a non-linear arrangement of the narrative events; rather, it is a temporal dislocation in the film that only retroactively manifests its significance: the futility of the expected fantasy. I will also introduce the encounter with the Lacanian gaze through anamorphosis as an opportunity to rethink perception. To expand, I will discuss how the oblique perspective provided by Nolan's anamorphotic art undermines the spectators' vision and asks them to reconsider what they have already taken for granted in theater and life.

This dissertation consists of an introduction (the current section), six chapters, and a conclusion. **Chapter 1** provides the basic methodology used to critique films that will be discussed individually in Chapters 2-6. It starts with an overview of the concept of subjectivity from Descartes until Lacan. Lacan develops his version of the concept from the 1930s to the 1970s. Subjectivity, as mapped by Lacan, fits the postmodern

deconstructed subject in the cinema of Christopher Nolan, who radically defines time, reality, and storytelling. In elaborating on the methodology, I will elucidate some of the very essential terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis, such as the Real and anamorphosis. Then, I shall discuss the two major trends in Lacanian film theory. Based on their individual understanding of the concept of gaze, each of these theoretical schools emphasizes one aspect of Lacan's topography of subjectivity. This dissertation moves in the direction of the more recent Lacanian film theory which highlights the significance of the order of the Real. In the final pages of Chapter 1, I will introduce important cinematic techniques that allow one to find the coordinates of the Lacanian Real in the cinema of Nolan.<sup>3</sup> Extreme close-up, extreme-long shot, and low-key lighting are the most repeated cinematic terms in this dissertation. Parallel editing (or crosscutting), also, would serve as a key term in this work, not only because it juxtaposes the Real to the Symbolic, but also because it leads to another very significant feature in Nolan: layered narrative as *structural anamorphosis*.

From Chapter 2 onwards, each chapter will individually discuss one of the films directed by Christopher Nolan. These chapters move chronologically: they start with *Memento* (2000) and end with *Interstellar* (2014), and cover most of a 15-year period. The major reason for choosing a chronological approach is to trace Nolan's view of subjectivity over time. It is interesting to note that Nolan starts with a limited scope (as we see in *Memento*): the individual's life in relation to himself or a very small number of other individuals in a socio-geographically small environment (the local subject). With *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Inception*, Nolan aims for the subject within a large

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<sup>3</sup> I am using the term *coordinates* figuratively simply because the Real doesn't have a tangible, physical existence.

society or societies (the global subject): the subject is depicted in either a certain historical period (*The Prestige*), or in the near future in an American society (*The Dark Knight* and *Inception*). And finally, when we get to *Interstellar*, we are provided with an image of the subject with relation to the universe (the universal subject). The significance of such a socio-geographical perspective stems from the fact that, for Lacan, the subject's desire is always shaped by the big Other, which is located in the Symbolic Order. The big Other is an immeasurable entity, other than the subject himself, which is highly important in shaping the subject's desire. The subject's relationship to *objet petit a* is determined by the lack in the big Other: if the subject comes to the understanding that there is an essential lack in the big Other, that the *objet petit a* is also lacking—something that we can see in later films by Nolan—then this subject is a liberated subject. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 we can find examples of the non-liberated subject, the subject in a never-ending connection with the *objet petit a*, while in chapters 5 and 6 we can witness the arrival of the free subject.

In **Chapter 2**, I will argue that *Memento* represents a fragmented subject of desire, who is unable to take in the truth of the *objet petit a*. The loop of desire within which the main character of *Memento* moves would never allow him to reach the object cause of his desire simply because there is no such object in the first place. The intrusion of the Real, which is triggered with the traumatic event of the murder of his wife, continues to haunt Leonard in dreams. He is unable to communicate properly with his past. His future is already doomed because he is unable to master the traumatic event. Therefore, time would bring no fantasized object for Leonard.

The basic argument of **Chapter 3** (*The Prestige*) is that magic serves as the platform where the magician promises that the spectators will obtain their lost object, while he simply creates a loop of desire. I will point out that the backstage of magic serves as the unconscious where certain things are always arranged to be hidden from the eyes of the spectators. And, in this manner, the arrangement of magic is to be seen as a site for the unconscious construction of ideology. I will also focus on the characters of Robert Angier and Alfred Borden, whose fascination with objects prevents them from relating truly to the people around them. *The Prestige* is where the world of objects prevents people from communicating with each other. The film, which pictures early 20<sup>th</sup> century England and United States, depicts one essential feature of capitalism: the fascination of subjects with objects at the cost of losing intersubjective relations.

**Chapter 4** focuses on *The Dark Knight*, which is possibly the most political film by Nolan. My discussion in this chapter involves Batman-Joker oppositions. The mise-en-scène plays a key role in my critique of this film. Nolan's aerial shots provide us with the symbols of the capitalist city of Gotham, such as skyscrapers, multi-industry companies, luxurious restaurants, and the super-rich upper class. I will argue that the seemingly monolithic order of the Symbolic (or the law) is repeatedly struck by the order of the Real through the agency of the Joker. The Joker, with his grotesque face and his extremely unruly behavior is the reverse side or the senseless core of capitalism. While Batman, as an extended form of law, attempts to counteract him, the Joker, nonetheless, leaves his traumatic effect forever. Not only does the Joker succeed in creating chaos in the city of Gotham, but also he leaves his impact by creating a monster from Gotham's best citizen, Harvey Dent. Harvey Dent's basic problem, like Leonard in *Memento* and

Angier in *The Prestige*, is that he is unable to cope with the traumatic event of the death by explosion of his beloved Rachel. In order to master the trauma, he chooses to start an endless killing, the same loop of revenge that we saw in *Memento*. He is engaged in a vicious circle that eventuates in his death.

In Nolan's *Inception* one can best touch the unconscious functioning of ideology. The film centers on the concept of mind heist through inserting an idea into the subject's unconscious while she or he is dreaming. In this chapter, I will discuss the art of *trompe l'œil* as a means to design hyperreal worlds that create the illusion of reality. Besides elaborating on ideology as unconscious, **Chapter 5** highlights the impact of trauma on the subject's mind. I will argue that, although Cobb is haunted by the traumatic memories of death (by suicide) of his wife, he is finally able to find solace because he finds the truth about the *objet petit a*. After a massive turbulence created in dreams, Cobb is relieved once he finds the lack in the logic of desire.

**Chapter 6** focuses on Nolan's *Interstellar*. I will discuss anamorphosis in terms of time, space, and sound as ways to show the limitations of desire at the core of the Symbolic Order: anamorphosis is a surplus or a stain that shows the futility of fantasy promised by desire. This stain demands a rethinking of vision and consciousness. I will also elaborate on the Dust as the traumatic force with massive consequences for Earth.<sup>4</sup> I will claim that, like Cobb in *Inception*, Cooper and Amelia find the lack at heart of desire and deal with the traumatic encounter.

In the concluding section of this dissertation, I highlight the ways through which I have focused on the term anamorphosis in the films of Christopher Nolan. I shall discuss

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<sup>4</sup> I have capitalized the word *Dust* because of its significant role in the film.

the significance of the anamorphic encounter with the Real as a way to reconsider the world around us. I will elaborate on the task of the spectator that Nolan's filmmaking necessitates. Nolan, as a filmmaker, attempts to view or represent the Symbolic Order in ways other than those we already know. This demands from the spectators a rethinking of everything around them, because it is in such moments that they could decrypt ideological formations, especially that of capitalism. Capitalism's emphasis on the *objet petit a* is the major target of Christopher Nolan because not only it deceives subjects by promising that sometime in the future they will get the ultimate object of desire, but also it weakens the relationships among subjects through such obsessions.

## Chapter 1: Lacan, Film Theory, and Nolan

### 1.1 Introductory Statements

This chapter has two major objectives: first, to introduce and clarify the basic concepts and theories that underpin my work throughout this dissertation; and second, to build a framework which will help sketch the anamorphic art of Christopher Nolan. In the first part of this chapter, I shall elaborate on the major concepts which are of considerable importance for both Lacanian film theory and the purposes of this dissertation. This elucidation starts with an overview of the development of the term *subjectivity* by certain major philosophers from Descartes to Lacan. Here, the emphasis lies on the way that philosophy shifted from viewing human beings as conscious living souls having control over their thoughts and actions to seeing them as merely subjects of the unconscious. When we compare Lacan to Descartes, who provided us with the first modern sketch of the human mind, we see a significant evolution. To put it briefly, while Descartes views thinking as that which gives existence to the individual, with his famous “*I think, therefore I am*” (18), Lacan views thinking as taking away the subject’s being: “*I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking*” (*Écrits* 430). This radical change, taking place in a time span of about 320 years,<sup>5</sup> has several missing links, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. For now, it would suffice to mention that what separates Lacan from Descartes is the notion of *the unconscious*, which is of paramount importance in psychoanalysis.

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<sup>5</sup> Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* was first published in 1637 and Lacan’s “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” from which the above citation has been taken, was delivered as a talk in 1957.

Next, this chapter, will take up some of the key terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially the Real, the gaze, the *objet petit a*, and anamorphosis. It should be noted here that the Real has a history of its own. It was introduced by Lacan, but several scholars attempted to develop and reformulate it. Among them, Slavoj Žižek reintroduced and, in a way, revolutionized the term. Žižek's particular interest in film initiated a new trend in Lacanian film theory, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The section on Lacanian film theory will discuss the two major trends that came into existence in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on their focus on a particular order in the Lacanian triad (The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real), the early and the new Lacanian film theories provided different approaches towards reading films. It would suffice for now to say that the early Lacanian film theorists considered film as a space where fantasy reconstituted the subject's relation to ideology, because they had an Althusserian or Foucauldian reading of Lacan, but the new trend, inspired by Žižek and Copjec, emphasized that film had the capability of creating a hole in ideology.

The last section in this chapter describes some of the cinematic techniques and elements used in elaborating Nolan's films throughout this dissertation. Parallel editing, *mise-en-scène*, specific shot types—especially extreme close-up and extreme long shot, and low-key lighting are those features that will provide a better reading of Nolan through the lenses of Lacan.

## **1.2 Subjectivity Before Lacan**

Lacan's theory of subjectivity was informed mostly by the teachings of Freud, who is considered the father of psychoanalysis. Freud's model of human development challenged the accomplishments of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment thinkers with

regard to human consciousness. While they all believed that (wo)man is a conscious being in control of her or his thoughts, the father of psychoanalysis conceived the unconscious as the root of all human actions. While each provided a revision of their predecessors, philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel all focused on human consciousness and reason as the essential constituents of mind. René Descartes (1596-1650), for example, with his *I think, therefore I am* provided the prototypical formulation of cognition and challenged previously held positions towards human mind and existence, which were common in the Middle Ages. Cartesian *cogito*, as it was named later, was a “break from a philosophy of existence based on obedience to social and religious institutions and divine law” (Hall 20). He believed that real thinking started with doubting, and, therefore, attempted to question everything that he doubted because of the possible illogicality of the phenomenon. As he points out in *Discourse on Method*,

For a long time I had noticed that in matters of morality one must sometimes follow opinions that one knows to be quite uncertain, just as if they were indubitable, as has been said above, but because I then desired to devote myself exclusively to the search for the truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable. (18)

Descartes felt the urge to reexamine his ideas based on concrete evidence. As Martin Jay puts it in *Downcast Eyes*, since Descartes believed that vision was “the most comprehensive and the noblest” of all senses, he necessitated “visual observation of

evidence” which would lead to “a decidedly empirical direction” (70-71). Jay argues that “Descartes posited a structure of the mind and then assumed it was congruent with the external world in a specular way” (79). Descartes’ suggestion is that the *I am* brings us awareness of our existence and our knowledge. The fact that the existence of the *I* precedes our orientation towards the surrounding world, as well as any understanding of it, places it above body. As he clarifies in *Discourse on Method*, “Thus this ‘I,’ that is to say, the soul through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body, and even if there were no body at all, it would not cease to be all that it is” (19). In other words, Descartes suggests, there is a duality between the mind and the body.

For Descartes, it is the mind which does the thinking, not the body. For Kant (1724-1804), there is no distinction between mind and body in the process of thinking. Still, Kant agrees with Descartes that it is *I* that is thinking. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposes that *I*, as the repertoire of the phenomenal world, is a unified entity:

The **I think** must **be able** to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing to me. (246)

For Kant, the *I* who thinks already knows that she or he exists. That is why Kant’s *I think* replaces Descartes’ *I think, therefore I am*, meaning that there is no duality in any sense, neither the duality of mind and body, nor the duality of the *I* that exists from the *I* that thinks. However, one thing that is in common with both philosophers is their emphasis on consciousness as the center of human experience.

Like Descartes and Kant, Hegel supported the idea that human beings were rational by nature. Hegel (1770-1831) conceived of human consciousness not as an isolated entity, or simply an internal quality as against the external nature, but actually as existing in connection with another consciousness. As he indicates in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (111). This theory of consciousness is later seen in Lacan, where he makes connections between one’s image of her or himself as always shaped, and in need of recognition, by the desire of the big Other. Such an understanding of consciousness leads Hegel to formulate his master and slave dialectic: the encounter between two consciousnesses makes them come out of their place. Each consciousness loses itself in the other, and, at the same time, finds itself in the image of the other. As Hegel puts it in *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (111)

Although each side of the relationship requires acknowledgment from the other, because of the inherent inequality at the core of this interaction, one becomes master and the other becomes slave:

In this experience, self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness. In immediate self-consciousness the simple ‘I’ is absolute mediation, and has as its essential moment lasting independence.

The dissolution of that simple unity is the result of the first experience; through this there is posited a pure self-consciousness, and a consciousness which is not purely for itself but for another, i.e. is a merely *immediate* consciousness, or consciousness in the form of *thinghood*. Both moments are essential. Since to begin with they are unequal and opposed, and their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman. (115)

The dependence of one's consciousness on another's and the ongoing need for recognition from the other creates a relationship which is not stable and clear-cut. Indeed, it does not put oneself in the position of the master and the other in the position of the slave forever. This is one of the key points that later Marx uses in talking about class struggle.

While Descartes, Kant, and Hegel all conceived man as a rational being, Nietzsche provided a significant challenge to their theories of the mind. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), in *The Will to Power*, proposed that what we name consciousness has no direct role in our experiencing the world:

That which becomes conscious is involved in causal relations which are entirely withheld from us—the sequence of thoughts, feelings, ideas in consciousness does not signify that this sequence is a causal sequence; but apparently it is so, to the highest degree. Upon this *appearance* we have

founded our whole idea of spirit, reason, logic, etc. (–none of these exist: they are fictitious syntheses and unities), and projected these *into* things and *behind* things! (284)

Therefore, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche rejects the idea that consciousness is “the supreme court” or “the directing agent”; rather, he proposes, it is “only a means of communication” or “an organ of the directing agent” (284). For him, consciousness has a “subsidiary role [...] superfluous, perhaps destined to vanish and give way to a perfect automatism” (283). Nietzsche introduces the unconscious as “the inner world,” as against consciousness which is our relation to the “outer world,” which, he believes, is a “thousandfold complexity,” but we simply consider it as “a unity” just because we “lack any sensitive organs for” it (283-84).

The writings of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) provide us with an even more systematic account of the unconscious mind. Freud’s focus was on “the developmental aspects of individual psychology and a recognition of the powerful influence of the unconscious on conscious life” (Hall 60). In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud reiterates that the psychical mind is divided into “what is conscious and what is unconscious” and emphasizes that his method “cannot situate the essence of the psychical in consciousness, but is obliged to regard consciousness as a quality of the psychical, which may be present in addition to other qualities or may be absent” (3). In other words, consciousness is only a part—and not a significant part—of the whole. The unconscious, as Freud puts it, consists of “very powerful mental processes or ideas” that could affect mental life although “they themselves do not become conscious” (4-5).

In the Freudian notion of the subject, “we have an interior life split between the socially and culturally integrated processes of the conscious mind, and the threatening or unconfessable impulses of the unconscious, which the conscious hopes to keep in its place by a quantum of mental force called repression” (Mansfield 30). In Freud’s topography of subjectivity, the *ego* is responsible for the individual’s conscious life, the *id* is the storehouse of instinctual energies, and the preventive *superego* is the voice of society, morality, and law. As he elaborates, the ego “supervises all its own constituent processes” and, even more, “exercises the censorship on dreams” (*Ego and Id* 8). Freud, connects the ego to reason (or the reality principle) and the id to passions (or the pleasure principle) and suggests that “the ego seems to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id” (19). In order to give us a visual analogy, Freud describes the relationship between the ego and the id as a man on horseback and develops it even further: “Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id’s will into action as if it were its own” (19). Lastly, the superego “represents an energetic reaction-formation against” object choices of the id (30). It stands for the ethical and moral standards of the society that require the subject to move in a particular direction.

For Freud, dreams reveal the unconscious thoughts in an indirect, oblique way. In fact, the unconscious uses dreams to enter consciousness. What he calls *dream-thoughts* is the latent content or the unconscious of the manifest *dream-contents*. In other words,

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation.

*(Interpretation of Dreams 295)*

The original dream thoughts are, therefore, presented to the dreamer in the translated form of the dream-content. In other words, dream-content presents to the dreamer a “pictographic script” of the dream-thoughts (296). The transformation of dream-thoughts into dream-content is due to the fact that the ego filters repressed impulses of the unconscious and represents them to the dreamer in a distorted way. Freud points out that it would lead to error if we attempt “to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation” (296). Such a distortion is part of the *dream-work* which takes place at various levels, two of which are of a considerable importance for our later discussion of Lacan: *condensation* and *displacement*.

Condensation, as Freud says is a “manipulative process” through which only “those elements which have the most numerous and strongest supports acquire the right of entry into the dream-content” (302). In displacement, because of the complex function of the dream-work, an image is replaced for another with the consequence that “the dream-content no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious” (324-25). Both condensation and displacement are part of the censorship function of the ego.

What Freud proposed as a theory of dreams (displacement and condensation in particular) as well as his idea that subjectivity is formed mostly by external forces (society and law), which shape the unconscious is what Lacan later takes to develop his own conception of subjectivity. In the next section, I will elaborate on key concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially those which would prepare us for watching the films of Nolan.

### **1.3 The Lacanian Subject, the Real, and Anamorphosis**

Lacan's account of subjectivity was inspired by the teachings of Freud, Saussure, and Jakobson among others. First and foremost, he took Freud's views on the unconscious as well as his theory of dreams (displacement and condensation); second, he developed Saussure's concept of the sign (the signifier and the signified); and finally, he was fascinated by the way Jakobson compared the two axes of language (metonymy and metaphor) to Freud's concepts of displacement and condensation. This section briefly describes the connection between Lacan and the above-mentioned scholars, and then provides a detailed explanation of the key Lacanian terms that we will encounter throughout this dissertation.

Like Freud, Lacan believed that the unconscious is of critical importance in the formation of the subject. Lacan, however, added an important dimension to his understanding of the unconscious: linguistics. Inspired by Roman Jakobson's "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," which was an innovative combination of the theories of Saussure and Freud, Lacan proposed that "*the unconscious is structured like a language*" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 20), suggesting that along

with speaking or enunciation, there are unconscious streams running in the background. For Lacan, the only way one could access the unconscious was through language:

We only grasp the unconscious finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words. It is for this reason that we have the right—all the more so as the development of Freud's discovery will demonstrate—to recognize that the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language. (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 32)

Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) had proposed that language works within two axes: the horizontal axis of combination or metonymy and the vertical axis of selection or metaphor. The horizontal axis, Jakobson argued, would be called metonymy since it functions on the element of contiguity; it connects words of different grammatical functions to make a sentence. The vertical axis, he said, functions on the element of similarity because it replaces a word with similar meaning, as we witness in a metaphor. The two axes are involved in making every utterance in the system of language. As Jakobson points out in *Language in Literature*, an utterance “is a *combination* of constituent parts (sentences, words, phonemes) *selected* from the repository of all possible constituent parts” (99). Jakobson related the two axes of language to Freud's terms about dream-work:

Thus in an inquiry into the structure of dreams, the decisive question is whether the symbols and the temporal sequences used are based on contiguity (Freud's metonymic “displacement” and synecdochic

“condensation”) or on similarity (Freud’s “identification and symbolism”).  
(113)

This connection between language and dreams is what Lacan embraces to formulate his notion of subject. For Lacan, any attempt to understand the complexities of human mind needs to consider the structures of communication closely.

Lacan was also inspired, like Jakobson, by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), but he made significant changes to them, and, in various ways, subverted Saussure’s ideas. As Saussure puts it in *Course in General Linguistics*, any sign is formed by a combination, in an “arbitrary” enclosure, of the concept (signified) and the sound-image (signifier) (67). The signifier and the signified form an interconnected configuration as they “do not seem to slip away from each other” (Fink, *Lacan to the Letter* 80). In Saussure’s algorithm, the signified is placed over the signifier ( $\frac{\text{Signified}}{\text{Signifier}}$ ), and there is a strong connection between the two in a way that they are considered two sides of the same coin. Lacan, on the contrary, cancels this enclosure and rejects any mutuality between the signifier and the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified, for Lacan, is not a one to one, direct relationship: we cannot simply attach a signifier to a signified. He turns the diagram on its head, by putting the signifier over the signified ( $\frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$ ). Therefore, Lacan prioritizes the signifier by proposing that in language we move from one signifier to another without ever being able to access the signified. In Lacan’s equation, the bar that separates the two, has a significant role: it resists “signification” (Écrits 415) and puts the signifier always ahead of the signified, thus cancelling forever any chance of the latter taking domination over

the former. Lacan equates the meaning produced out of this relationship with what he later calls the *Imaginary* when he says that

[...] the signifier-signified division will always reproduce itself. There's no doubt that meaning is by nature imaginary. Meaning is, like the imaginary, always in the end evanescent, for it is tightly bound to what interests you, that is, to that in which you are ensnared. (*Psychoses* 54)

Language, for Lacan, is an indefinite set of signifiers and signifieds that shape a continual, endless slippage of meaning and that only occasionally, through what he calls *point de capiton* or “quilting point,” comes to a halt (*Psychoses* 267). The function of these points is to momentarily stop the continual “sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan, *Écrits* 419). As Žižek says, the *point de capiton* is “the word which, as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is, so to speak, the word to which ‘things’ themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity” (*Sublime Object* 105). An example by Žižek gives us a better sense of Lacan’s *point de capiton*. If we knit the free floating of signifiers with the word *communism*, then the term *class struggle* (which is the central focus of communist ideology) “confers a precise and fixed signification” to other signifiers such as democracy, feminism, or ecologism because they are all focused on the conflict of interests between contesting groups of society (*Sublime Object* 96). While it is true that under such occasional circumstances we might be able to find meaning, the final outcome of the eternal sliding of the signifiers and the signifieds is nothing but “a continuous evacuation of meaning” and therefore, “a constitutive lack at the core of language” which ultimately results in the absence of any definite meaning (Grosz 95).

The arrangement of signifiers, for Lacan, is not simply a linguistic event, but actually, and more importantly, the emergence of unconscious desires in one's utterances, and this feature makes him different from Saussure. In fact, it is language or discourse that brings us the Lacanian subject. To make it more precise, the subject, for Lacan, is "divided in subordination to the signifier" (Vanier 1649), which means that the subject, considering the fact that she or he is a "speaking being," is a split subject, "since speech divides the subject of the [enunciation] from the subject of the statement" (Evans 195). Such a consideration of the subject, as divided by speech, means that the subject is never fully in control of her or himself; as Dylan Evans points out, "The split denotes the impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness; the subject will never know himself completely, but will always be cut off from his own knowledge" (195). A good example of such a divided subject—subject under the control of the unconscious—in Nolan's films is Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) in *Memento*. He is the one who has murdered his own wife, but his unconscious turns out to have displaced events and people in a way that even he himself, or simply his conscious self, does not know the truth, as he kills a couple of people suspected of raping and murdering his wife.

Things are different before the introduction of a human being to the realm of language. At the beginning, the infant finds her or himself in absolute unity with her or his mother. This is one of the shortest periods in the life of the individual, and much in line with the Lacanian Real, as it is a state of fullness. There is no realization, in any sense, felt by the infant, of the mother's body as external. The very first signs of such a recognition emerge when the infant is between six to eighteen months. This is a period in which the relationship is regulated by an external force. During this stage, the child

recognizes her or his own image in the mirror. This discovery does not necessarily happen in a real mirror, but in actuality, it may occur when the child identifies with the body of a parent or a sibling. The image that the child experiences is both a recognition and misrecognition. It is recognition in the sense that the child can certainly see her or himself as a seemingly unified body separate not only from that of her or his mother, but also from the rest of the world. It is, however, a misrecognition, because what the child sees does not truly reflect her or his fragmented, still uncoordinated body. Moreover, it is not an exact image in terms of dimensions as well as orientation. The child, still imperfect in vision, sees fragments of her or his body, but misconceives them as unified and complete. As Elizabeth Grosz clarifies,

the child is now enmeshed in a system of confused recognition/misrecognition; it sees an image of itself that is both accurate (since it is an inverted reflection, the presence of light rays emanating from the child: the image as icon); as well as delusory (since the image prefigures a unity and mastery that the child still lacks). (39)

In fact, the image that the child sees “as better coordinated and more coherent” than her or his real body “belies real bodily fragmentation” of her or his body (Iversen 7). “The mirror,” Iversen continues, “in Lacan’s account of this developmental stage, does not reflect back an already constituted self. Rather, it creates a reasonable facsimile or simulacrum of a self” (7).

Such a duality of experience begets the child’s ego. This image is an alienated image because its source is located outside the body, it is a reflection, and not a truthful reflection. The resultant specular image is the outcome of the Imaginary, the very first

stage in Lacan's triad of subjectivity. The Imaginary, therefore, is what controls the relationships "between self and other"; it is, to be more exact, "the domain in which the self is dominated by images of the other and seeks its identity in a reflected relation with alterity. Imaginary relations are thus two-person relations, where the self sees itself reflected in the other" (Grosz 46). As Fredric Jameson points out, in his *Ideologies of Theory*, "the mirror stage, which is the precondition for primary narcissism, is also, owing to the equally irreducible gap it opens between the infant and its fellows, the very source of human aggressivity" (87). The Imaginary, therefore, is the source of all future aggressivity and rivalry that every human being experiences. The mirror stage in the Imaginary, as Fredric Jameson affirms, creates "a relationship of otherness" and serves as the primordial source of "the violent situational content of those judgments of good and evil that will later cool off and sediment into the various systems of ethics" (*Ideologies of Theory* 89). In other words, it is the mirror stage that provides an ethical position for the subject, and it is always from this specific position that the subject considers things as either ethically good or bad. In Nolan's *The Prestige*, in the rivalry between the two magicians, each performs evil to the other equally. The film portrays the never-ending battle between Angier and Borden as they are shown in several hostile encounters. However, we, as spectators, take side with one of them (either Angier or Borden) because we all have experienced the mirror stage.

The ego which is shaped by the Imaginary, as I mentioned before, is an alienated ego, because of the child's identification with an image outside the body. This alienated image is actually an illusion of what the child would like to be in the future, it is an ideal portrait, and in this sense, it is an ideal ego. It is here that the Imaginary functions to

purge the constructed ego of any undesirable “impulses and objects that cannot be assimilated into the beautiful, coherent picture” (Iversen 7). This is an initial phase of banishing the Real, the next step of which would be when the Symbolic Order enters the scene. One of these bits and pieces to be “marginalized by the defensive ego” is death (7). In the initial Imaginary phase, death is filtered so that the subject leads a normal life. In later stages of life, death appears as a traumatic encounter for the subject. It is not merely death but actually the way the subject encounters it that matters. When someone finds her or himself very close to death, she or he faces the return of the repressed Real. The speechlessness that accompanies the traumatic death of a close relative shows the void on which the Symbolic Order has been built. In the cinema of Nolan, death has a significant role as it introduces a traumatic encounter, which the subject should master in order to resume her or his normal life. In Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*, the Joker arranges for the death by explosion of Rachel and Harvey Dent. They are placed in two different locations to be exploded at the same time, while they can talk to and hear each other through radio. The joint feeling of disappointment and horror experienced by both characters, which is depicted through their tearful eyes and flushed faces, shows the void of subjectivity and the return of the Real. In such moments—and through the agency of the Real—one can clearly see how fragile is the façade of stability created by the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders.

Because of the fact that the Imaginary procedures fail to give the subject a unified whole, and, instead, give her or him an alienated image, there is a need for the arrival of the Symbolic to solve the problem. But we need to keep in mind that the Symbolic is already there; it is there in the process of the mirror stage in the moments when parents

use language to describe the images of their infant. The illusory function of the Imaginary forces the infant to seek stability in the Symbolic. To put it simply, the Symbolic is the realm of language. However, as language brings us many other related categories such as law and culture, we need to consider the Symbolic as a wide network with a significant role in shaping subjectivity. When the subject is introduced into language, she or he is actually assigned a position in the Symbolic Order. As Stavrakakis affirms in *Lacan and the Political*, “By submitting to the laws of language the child becomes a subject in language, it inhabits language, and hopes to gain an adequate representation through the world of words” (20). It is, therefore, the law of the language, and the play of signification that forms the subject; consequently, Stavrakakis continues, the subject “becomes an effect of the signifier. In that sense it is a certain subordination, an exercise of power, that constitutes the condition of possibility for the constitution of subjectivity” (20). It is *the-Name-of-the-Father*, which, as the agent of the Symbolic law (or simply, power), sets rules for the subject to be able to live in the society.

Once the subject enters the realm of language, she or he experiences *separation*. The subject is now formed as she or he interacts with something (i.e. language) that is once again outside the subject’s body. Similar to the alienation that takes place in the Imaginary, the separation in the Symbolic, or the realm of the big Other, plays a noticeable role in the formation of the subject. The outcome of separation is desire. The fact that the individual experiences alienation in the Imaginary, and, then, is further separated in the Symbolic, produces a subject which is not only divided but also, a desiring being, always in search of something lost (the initial union with the body of the mother). In fact, the divided subject, divided in the sense that it is now a speaking subject,

loses all contact with the Real, which I will elaborate on soon. Such a desiring subject always desires what the Other (it could be simply the mother or the big Other) desires, because the subject is a constitution of something external. As Bruce Fink points out,

The child would like to be the sole object of its mother's affections, but her desire almost always goes beyond the child: there is something about her desire which escapes the child, which is beyond its control. A strict identity between the child's desire and hers cannot be maintained; her desire's independence from her child's creates a rift between them, a gap in which her desire, unfathomable to the child, functions in a unique way.

*(Lacanian Subject 59)*

This is the tragedy of the Lacanian subject. The subject will never know what the Other desires because desire comes from the unconscious. This failure leads to separation from the Other's desire (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 121). In the process of (mis)communication of desire, the subject blindly wants to be desired by the Other, as in the case of a child who wants to be the object of mother's desire. The result is that what the subject consciously thinks to be her or his own desire is simply (the desire to be) the desire of the Other which has been internalized in a mutually misunderstood discourse. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* involves the idea of planting an idea into the subject's mind without her or him ever suspecting that what she or he wants is the other's wish. The focal character, Cobb, succeeds in planting the idea, in a very long and complicated unconscious process, in Fisher's mind, of taking a different path from that of his father.

Considering the fact that in both the Imaginary and the Symbolic it is something external that gives rise to the subject's formation, her or his unconscious is also

determined by and located in the Other. If separation brings nothing but desire, why does the subject submit to it? The answer is that the subject accepts the law to avoid further fragmentation. The arrival of the-Name-of-the-Father, as the agent of the Symbolic order, breaks any remaining connection between the child and the mother and adamantly prohibits it in the future. The annihilation of the child-mother unity by the (Symbolic) father brings about the “separation [which] leads to the subject’s expulsion from the Other, in which he or she was still nothing but a place-holder” (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 58). This is the impact of the Symbolic on the Real. The Name-of-the-Father is the law, that tells the child to avoid any desire for the mother. This rule is internalized upon the child’s introduction to the language, when she or he finds a place in the signifying chain. That is why it is no exaggeration if we claim that “the subject is an effect of language” (Evans 198).

The further division of the subject by language shapes the underlying framework of Lacan’s theory of subjectivity. And it is here that Lacan, following Freud, distinguishes himself from the rationalist philosophies of mind. As I mentioned earlier, Lacan rewrites Descartes’ famous *I think, therefore I am* by replacing it with *I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking*. What Lacan suggests here is that being does not co-exist with thinking. For Lacan, unlike Descartes, thinking and being are mutually exclusive; if you are thinking, then you cease to exist; if you exist, you are unable to think (and therefore, speak.). While the Cartesian ego is in control of itself, in terms of being and consciousness, for Lacan, “ego thinking is mere conscious rationalization” and only a false thinking (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 44). The Lacanian subject is split between the ego and the unconscious, between an “ineluctably false sense

of self,” which happens in the Imaginary, and “the automatic functioning of language” or the signifying chain, which is a function of the Symbolic (45). It is only occasionally and only “momentarily” that this split subject, while mostly “excluded at the level of the unconscious thought,” can move beyond the id (or the unconscious), take control of it, and therefore, overcome the division (46, 48). In Nolan’s *Memento*, the two plotlines, one in black and white and the other in color, represent the ego and the unconscious. In the black plotline, we see a linear narrative, in which Leonard seems to be conscious about whatever he says or remembers; in the color plotline, on the other hand, we witness a non-linear narrative in which events are distorted and dream-like. Interestingly enough, the color narrative takes more than two thirds of the film’s length, which is an indication of the fact that the unconscious has a more important role than conscious mind. As the film proceeds, the spectator is more and more convinced that Leonard, despite his seemingly empirical approach towards truth, would not access knowledge.

The subject of Lacan, unlike that of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel, and even more radical than Nietzsche and Freud, is not the subject of knowledge, but of non-knowledge. Neither the mirror stage nor the big Other produces a subject in control of (an internal) consciousness. As Bruce Fink indicates,

By internalizing the way the Other sees one, by assimilating the Other’s approving and disapproving looks and comments, one learns to see oneself as the Other sees one, to know oneself as the Other knows one. As the child in front of the mirror turns around and looks to the adult standing behind her for a nod, recognition, a word of approval or ratification [...] she comes to see herself as if from the adult’s vantage point, comes to see

herself as if she were the parental Other, comes to be aware of herself as if from the outside, as if she were another person. (*Lacan to the Letter* 108)

In other words, it is always in the position of the Other that the subjects define themselves. Self-consciousness is an illusion created by the ego, developed further by the big Other in the Symbolic Order, and therefore, the subject of the unconscious has no knowledge of the self in the literal sense of the word. The outcome of such a positioning of the self is discontent.

As mentioned above, the social order that is shaped by the Symbolic creates “incomplete or lacking” subjects whose experience of the realm of the law and language brings them nothing but separation and negativity (McGowan, *End of Dissatisfaction* 16). Language substitutes symbols for absent things, and, as a result, produces negativity. As McGowan points out,

The symbol brings death and alienation into the world because it brings absence—or, more properly, presence in absence. Because the symbol allows us to experience the presence of absence, it allows us also to become conscious of death without actually dying. The symbol thus makes it possible for us to obtain a kind of being-towards-death” (26).

The subject is now caught in an endless quest for something to fill the gap, like the play of signification which is a never-ending attempt to find the eventual signified. The culprit, as Joan Copjec points out, is simply language because signification always gives the subject something (signifier) in place of something else (signified):

Desire [...] stems from the feeling of our having been duped by language, cheated of something, not from our having been presented with a

determinate object or goal for which we can aim. Desire has no content—  
It is for nothing—because language can deliver to us no incontrovertible  
truth, no positive goal (55).

Desire is indeed the leftover of the demand expressed through language to another or  
interpreted through the Other.

In the play of signification, in the movement from one signifier to another, we  
lose part of our “animal being” to become “social animals” (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 116).  
Giving up (or sacrificing) “part of themselves” makes subjects “imagine or fantasize an  
object that exists in the gap left by their sacrifice” (McGowan, *End of Dissatisfaction* 16).  
That something which seems to promise an eventual satisfaction and a consequent end of  
desire is called the *objet petit a*. The essential lack in the subject, which, as indicated  
previously, is an outcome of the Symbolic and the resultant death of the Real, shapes the  
*objet petit a*. As Stavrakakis clarifies, “The object [*a*] aims to cover over this lack, it is  
promising to bring back the real; this is an imaginary promise which can be supported  
only when the object is posited as missing” (51). The *objet petit a*, however, is possibly  
“just a little piece of Real” because upon “the emergence of the signifier” and the  
“murder” of the Real, it seems impossible to reunite with it; the object is just a reminder  
of “the loss of an always already-lost Unity” (Chiesa 122). This “reminder” serves as a  
“remainder,” too, not only of the past unity between the subject and the (m)Other, but  
also of the following rift between them (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 59). The role of the *objet  
petit a* is to create an illusion for the split subject of wholeness because, as Lacan says,  
“the being of the subject is the suturing of a lack” (*Object of Psychoanalysis* 189). As

Bruce Fink confirms, “by clinging to object *a*, the subject is able to ignore his or her division” (*Lacanian Subject* 59).

The *objet petit a* is not an object in the literal sense of the word, nor is it something that exists in reality. To quote Slavoj Žižek, “we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency—because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier” (*Sublime Object* 104). In other words, the *objet petit a* is simply a corollary of the signifier, something produced by the desiring subject in order to fill the hole produced by the Symbolic. Richard Boothby describes the *objet petit a* as “primordially lost” and an “essentially lacking object,” or “a profoundly negative object,” which is absent rather than present (244). Boothby believes that the *objet petit a* has a retroactive character in the sense that it is the cause of desire; it actually precedes the subject as “there is always already an object of desire in relation to which the desiring subject is constituted in the first place” (244). The retroactive function of the *objet petit a* is a consequence of the same process in signification. In this process, the subject only finds meaning retroactively, that is, by considering the sentence backward, as it is impossible to make sense of an utterance while it is not yet finished. *The objet petit a* manipulates fantasies, and serves as an instrument that gives the subject excitement. It should be noted that this object is not the object of desire, but actually its cause. Also, it is not aimed at satisfaction because desire disappears when it finds its object; rather, it moves from one object to another since it looks for its “continuation and furtherance” (Fink, *Clinical* 51). The essential feature of Christopher Nolan’ films is their portrayal of the subject in search of the missing object of desire. In *The Prestige*, for example, Angier’s life seems to be

affected by his search for the *objet petit a*. That is why Angier embarks on a long journey to have Tesla build him an impossible machine that one could only find in dreams. Tesla eventually provides Angier with the machine of his dreams; however, Angier is disappointed because he finds that, like any other object, the Machine doesn't give him what he has been looking for. The Angier that we see at the end of the film is much more dissatisfied than the Angier that we see at the beginning. The subject always wants or desires something more, and this is, to reiterate, because of the lack in language. Language, as a site of the big Other, articulates our demands in an improper way as the Other does not know exactly what we want as subjects.

The relationship between the subject and *the objet petit a* creates fantasy. Fantasy is not simply "an imagined scenario representing the realization of desire"; rather, "through fantasy we learn 'how to desire'" (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 132). The function of fantasy, therefore, is to hide the gap in the desire of the Other in order to provide meaning for the senseless experiences of the subject (132). Fantasy, in this sense, is an instrument of ideology. In Todd McGowan's words, "Ideology [...] needs fantasy to compensate for its constitutive incompleteness. No ideology can ever provide all the answers for the subject, and fantasy fills in the blank spaces in an ideological edifice" (*Real Gaze* 36). Capitalism, for example, tells the subjects that by following a set of objects they would eventually find the *objet petit a*. In the capitalist ideology, time is an important factor because it is in the future that one could find her or his lost object. The relationship between the subject and the *objet petit a* is determined by an indefinite number of objects, none of which help the subject to obtain the eventual object. The subject in contemporary late capitalism is told to follow the path of desire until she or he is reunited with the

object cause of her or his desire in a moment of fantasy. As I will discuss later, the best message that one could get from watching Nolan's films is that the *objet petit a* does not exist. The spectators are tacitly told that it is capitalism that urges them to be obsessed with objects and, as a result, become isolated subjects surrounded by indefinite number of objects.

It is only through fantasy that most of the non-answerable questions of ideological thinking find their explanations. As Stavrakakis points out,

From millenarianism to the Communist Manifesto and up to Green ideology, we know that every political promise is supported by a reference to a lost state of harmony, unity and fullness, a reference to a pre-symbolic real which most political projects aspire to bring back. (52)

The problem, however, lies in the fact that they provide a specific ideological perspective, which is always already limited and is only a misrepresentation of the Real. Ideology is incomplete because it “functions on the level of the signifier” (McGowan, *Real Gaze* 36). The signifier gives ideology a paradoxical nature because, while it provides ideology with “power to constitute identity, to provide the totality of identities that the subject can possibly adopt,” yet “it also limits the ability of ideology to create a social reality complete unto itself. Every system of signification—and thus every ideology—is beset by lack, lacking what exists beyond the signifier” (36). The fantasy provided by such perspectives gives us only a shadow of the real enjoyment we seek. That is why the divided subject finds only an imaginary relief from her or his essential lack. To quote Stavrakakis,

If the human condition is marked by a quest for a lost/impossible enjoyment, fantasy offers the promise of an encounter with this precious *jouissance*, an encounter that is fantasised as covering over the lack in the Other and, consequently, as filling the lack in the subject. (46)

Fantasy, however, does not provide the key to total enjoyment, because such an enjoyment is impossible in the first place. If it is prohibition in the Symbolic that creates desire, and it is the Imaginary function of fantasy that brings subjects an illusory completion, then how can subjects make a significant change to their conditions? Maybe in the Real.

The Real is one of the most elusive, complicated terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis because of its paradoxical nature: it is nothing and everything since it does not exist, but it is that in which “[t]here is no absence” (Lacan, *Ego in Freud’s Theory* 313). The simplest definition of the Real is that it is a fullness, a state of non-lack, which is, at the same time, impossible since, as Lacan clarifies, it “resists symbolization” (*Freud’s Papers* 66). That is why Lacan uses the term “ex-sistence” to describe it because it exists beyond or outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Heath 55). Ironic as it may seem, the Real, while being impossible, occurs to us in our phenomenal world, in our daily life. As Alenka Zupančič points out, “the impossibility of the Real does not prevent it from having effect in the realm of the possible” (235). Or, as Yannis Stavrakakis puts it, “Although it is impossible to touch the real, it is possible to encircle its impossibility, exactly because this impossibility is always emerging within a symbolization” (83). However, the function of the Real is different from the Symbolic. Slavoj Žižek points out that the Real is not another center around which “symbolic

formations fluctuate” but “an obstacle” that displaces every center (*Puppet and Dwarf* 67). In fact, the Real uncovers “precisely what is excluded from our reality” (Leader and Groves 61) because our perception is shaped by language or the Symbolic Order. Reality appears as an obstacle to the Real; it serves as a suppressive force that splits the subject, so that any reunion with the Real seems impossible. Unlike the Imaginary, in which the subject fantasizes about satisfaction, and therefore moves in line with, and confirms the ideological social order (or the Symbolic), in the Real, as Todd McGowan points out, things move differently:

Real enjoyment occurs when the subject abandons the security of its symbolic identity and thereby breaks from the constraints of the symbolic order. In this enjoyment, the rules of the symbolic game cease to apply. The subject neither obeys nor disobeys: she/he enjoys through a disinterest in these prevailing rules. Thus, enjoyment in the Real is a radical experience, but at the same time it is necessarily traumatic because it leaves the subject without any ground on which to stand. (*End of Dissatisfaction* 70)

Such a traumatic enjoyment is in fact a “partial enjoyment” as it happens in the Real and as it breaks the links of the subject to “the symbolic Law” (69). This partial enjoyment is not the same as the limited pleasure we take as a regulation of the pleasure principle. On the contrary, as McGowan continues, “In the experience of partial enjoyment, the subject enjoys its own lack without feeling this lack as a deprivation” (195).

If we want to imagine the Real, we might need to think about a time in which there was no language, a period like the dawn of man. In this pre-linguistic period, there

was no language and consequently, no Symbolic Order (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 24). The Real then was simply killed when language arrived. Today, if we want to conceive the Real, we should consider the infant's body, before it comes under the control of the Symbolic Order, before "it is subjected to toilet training and instructed in the ways of the world" (24). Once the baby passes through phases of socialization, "the body is progressively written or overwritten with signifiers; pleasure is localized in certain zones, while other zones are neutralized by the word and coaxed into compliance with social, behavioral norms" (24). Before this process happens, there was once "one unbroken erogenous zone" with no privileged areas (24). The Symbolic (in the form of language), then, outweighs the Real. Language is thus synonymous with existence because anything that is not uttered in language, does not exist. As Fink points out in *The Lacanian Subject*, "language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words" (25). The absence of the Real is synonymous with a narrow, ideological thinking because the reality constructed by language is a product of the social group to which the individual belongs. In other words, "Every person's *reality* differs by the mere fact that every cultural and religious group, subculture, family, and set of friends develops its own words, expressions, and idiosyncratic meanings" (26).

The Real is non-existent in our reality. This fact, however, does not mean that the Real is dead; rather, it exists outside our own reality. To make it even more ironic, the Real is a condition for the Symbolic to exist, yet it a threat for its stability. In Sean Homer's words, the Real is "the unknown that exists at the limit of this socio-symbolic universe and is in constant tension with it. The real is also a very paradoxical concept; it

supports our social reality – the social world cannot exist without it – but it also undermines that reality” (81). As Lacan himself confirms, “the real is beyond...[and] behind the automaton” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 53-54). By *automaton*, Lacan means the signifying chain, as against what he calls *Tuché* or “*the encounter with the real*” (53).

The Real, as mentioned above, does not disappear, forever; it resurfaces in specific moments, such as in trauma or dreams. Richard Boothby points out that while “the real escapes all representation [...] its indeterminate force may be encountered in the experience of the uncanny or evidenced in the effects of the trauma” (12). The Real of trauma “returns in a sense in the form of a center of gravity around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle, without ever being able to hit it” (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 28). This return results in an impossible situation, an unusual representation, or an impasse which devastates the normal way of things happening. As Fink indicates, “If the real finds a signifier, that signifier must be operating in a way that is highly unusual. For the signifier generally replaces, crosses out, and annihilates the real; it signifies a subject to another signifier, but it does not signify the real as such” (*Lacanian Subject* 115).

Trauma is part and parcel of the cinema of Christopher Nolan. It appears as an encounter, which exceeds the limits of the subject; in other words, it is that which is repeated in the psyche of the subjects in a way that it seems beyond their control. The traumatic encounter in Nolan’s films appears in the form of an unexpected death (in almost all of his films), a natural disaster (*Interstellar*), or chaos (*The Dark Knight*). It is in such moments that we should expect the encounter with the gaze, an encounter that reveals the senseless core of fantasy.

The return of the Real creates a weird representation of the Symbolic. It is perhaps here that Lacan's view of subjectivity is to be differentiated from a constructionist such as Althusser. Louis Althusser (1918-1990), in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," provides a pessimist version of Lacan by indicating that "ideology is eternal" and "an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born" (175-76). He reiterates that through "*interpellation* or hailing" ideology surrounds the subject forever, and therefore, there remains no hope for breaking the rules of ideology (174). Lacan's notion of the Real, on the other hand, creates a chance to challenge the status quo of society in order to emancipate subjects. That is why Stavrakakis calls Lacan a "real-ist" (69) because of the radical positioning of the Real as opposed to the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the triad of subjectivity. Lacan's *real-ism*, however, as Stavrakakis indicates, is

alien to all other standard versions of epistemological realism in the sense that this real is not the ultimate referent of signification, it is not something representable, but exactly the opposite, the impossible which dislocates reality from within. The real does not exist in the sense of being adequately represented in reality; its effects however are disrupting and changing reality, its consequences are felt within the field of representation (69).

The effects of the Real, to reiterate, are felt in our everyday life. While the Imaginary Order, through the support of the Symbolic, attempts to create the illusion of self-mastery for the subject, the Real interrupts such a continuous stream through anxiety and trauma. As Boothby notes, "the real erupts in the disintegration of the imaginary. The real affords

no direct engagement and no positive characterization but is encountered only in the negation of the imaginary” (149). The Real, Boothby continues, “intrudes traumatically upon the subject from beyond the battery of representations like a force from outside the psychological system” (294). Boothby provides us with coordinates of the Real when he indicates that it could be witnessed “only in the misalignments, dislocations, and catastrophes (in the mathematical sense of the term) of the structures of representation” (295). In fact, the Real acts as an absent cause. As Žižek puts it, “The paradox of the Lacanian Real, then, is that it is an entity which, although it does not exist [...], has a series of properties - it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects” (*Sublime Object* 183).

Slavoj Žižek, in elaborating on Hitchcockian films, provides us with several ways through which we can feel the presence of the Real in cinema. The famous *MacGuffin* in Hitchcock, for example, is a non-existent object, as we never see but only hear about it. It serves as a trick “to set the story in motion,” as something that “must seem to be of vital importance” for the characters (*Sublime Object* 183). In other words, the Hitchcockian MacGuffin is an absent cause since, while it doesn’t even exist, it acts as a driving force, a propeller of the action of the film. In Nolan’s *Interstellar*, *the others*, who seem to be watching our planet from somewhere in the outer space, have an analogous role: they do not exist but initiate the interstellar mission.

For Žižek, there are other ways in which one can see the emergence of the Real in film. One is through an object which serves as a means of “exchange circulating among subjects, serving as a kind of guarantee, pawn, on their symbolic relationship” (*Sublime Object* 206). This object, which mostly serves in double relations or between opposite

sides of a pole, is actually “a leftover of the Real,” but it has a positive function because it restores the symbolic structure (207). The third way in which an object represents the Real could be identified in Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963). In this film, as Žižek clarifies, the birds have “a massive, oppressive material presence,” which is to be seen as an “imaginary objectification of the Real” (209). They are always a stain in the scene and undermine the spectator’s seeming mastery of the image. In Nolan’s *Interstellar*, the Dust which is an all-encompassing, devouring, inscrutable object is of this third kind of the manifestation of the Real. The Dust not only blurs the view, but also causes the trauma that triggers a mission to the outer space.

The arrival of the Real is simultaneous with a twisted, disjointed Symbolic. In other words, as Žižek says, the Real is “a cause [...] which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way” (*Sublime Object* 184). Because of some certain features, Slavoj Žižek considers the Lacanian Real as “a sublime object,” which is “an embodiment of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order” (192). For Žižek, the sublime object has one significant feature:

The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object - it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all. (192)

The sublime object of the Real is crystalized, or at least felt in the Symbolic world through *anamorphosis*, which we may simply define as looking awry.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan elaborates on the term *anamorphosis* by talking about a painting titled *The Ambassadors* by the German and Swiss artist, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543). In this painting, there are two ambassadors, one in secular and the other in clerical attire, at the court of Henry VIII. There are also a number of objects symbolizing art, science, wealth, and other worldly values of the Renaissance. Until now, we may think that we are in control of the look as everything seems clear to the eyes. Suddenly we notice that there is also a distorted object in the picture which could not be recognized by looking directly. It is only by looking from a specific angle that this “magical floating object” turns out to be a skull staring at us (92). As Lacan clarifies, the inverted skull “is a use...of the geometral dimension of vision in order to capture the subject” (92). It represents the split subject, or, in Lacan’s words, “the annihilated subject” since it “reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death’s head” (92). As Margaret Iversen points out, the skull in the painting stands for “the blind spot in conscious perception”; in other words, “The real, in the scopic field, is formed when vision is split between conscious sight and what is expelled” (7). The Real in this respect is “the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted” (Žižek, *Puppet and Dwarf* 75). This sudden realization of the lack in our understanding is precisely the trauma of the Real. And, the function of anamorphosis is to invert the perspective to show us that the Real is always there to undercut the Symbolic. Therefore, it is possible to see the Real happen through distortions in the Symbolic, since, as Žižek says, “the Real intervenes through anamorphosis” (75).

In anamorphosis, we encounter the Real gaze that the *objet petit a* does not exist.

Here, in our delineation of the term anamorphosis, the notion of *gaze* is of pivotal significance. In order to shape his own version of the gaze, Lacan adopted the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). As mentioned in section 1.2, Descartes, ocularcentric as he was, prioritized vision over all other senses because he believed that sight would give a direct, clear exploration of the external world. Sartre “posited a radical break between sight and consciousness” by claiming that one’s self “is constituted by the gaze of the other” (Jay 288). Sartre differentiates between the eye and the look in *Being and Nothingness*, when he points out that

If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes [...] It is never when eyes are looking at you that you can find them beautiful or ugly, that you can remark on their color. The Other’s look hides his eyes; he seems to go *in front of them*. This illusion stems from the fact that eyes as objects of my perception remain at a precise distance [...] whereas the look is upon me without distance while at the same time it holds me at a distance [...]

(258)

The gaze, for Sartre, is an intersubjective entity in the world of objects. In other words, when I, as a subject, become conscious of the fact that another subject is looking at me, my existence is being threatened:

The look which the eyes [of the Other] manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I

occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defence—in short, that I *am seen*. (259)

When the subject discovers that she or he is being-looked-at, she or he experiences shame; in a way, she or he loses her or his freedom. Unlike Sartre, Lacan's notion of the gaze does not require intersubjective relations. As he puts it,

A gaze surprises him [Sartre] in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame. The gaze in question is certainly the presence of others as such. But does this mean that originally it is in the relation of subject to subject, in the function of the existence of others as looking at me, that we apprehend what the gaze really is? (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 84)

What makes Sartre different from Lacan is that he equates the gaze with looking while Lacan reiterates that the gaze is not the same as the look:

The gaze sees itself—to be precise, the gaze of which Sartre speaks, the gaze that surprises me and reduces me to shame, since this is the feeling he regards as the most dominant. The gaze I encounter [...] is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other. (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 84)

For Lacan, the location of the gaze is not simply in the eyes of the subject but in the object. In Dylan Evans' words, "When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it" (73).

By indicating that the gaze is not visible, Lacan seems to be closer to Merleau-Ponty in his understanding of this term. Both Lacan and Merleau-Ponty believe in “the pre-existence” of the gaze: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 72). There is a considerable difference, however, in their views when we examine them closely. For Merleau-Ponty, “there is a universal all-seer” or “an imaginary being behind the eternal gaze” and “the visible depends on the eye of the seer” (Quinet 139). Lacan, on the contrary, argues that “such a being doesn’t exist” and the gaze “is neither apprehensible nor visible, a blind gaze which is erased from the world” (Quinet 139). The Lacanian gaze belongs to the realm of the Real because it is not identifiable in the phenomenal world. Lacan provides us with a definition of the gaze, which specifies the fact that the gaze is not equal to the look: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is we call the gaze” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 73). The gaze, therefore, is not discernible to the eye. Nevertheless, what determines the subject “in the visible” is the gaze located outside: “the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied” and “I [as the subject] am photo-graphed” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 106). This instrument does not see the subject because it is blind.

In elaborating on the concept of the gaze, Lacan focuses on the art of painting. He points out that in every picture, there is always a trace of the painter’s gaze. The painter, does not simply want “to be looked at”; rather, he “gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there

as one lays down one's weapons" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 101). The anamorphic stain in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which subverts the viewer's look because of its askew position, provides a sudden encounter with the gaze as the *objet petit a*. The function of anamorphosis is to challenge ideology as it provides an angle which breaks through the seemingly flawless picture that every ideology provides. As Žižek says,

The criticism of ideology must perform a somewhat homological operation: if we look at the element which holds together the ideological edifice, at this 'phallic', erected Guarantee of Meaning, from the right (or, more precisely- politically speaking - left) perspective, we are able to recognize in it the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning. (*Sublime Object* 110)

In other words, it is only from one specific angle that we may be able to criticize an all-encompassing ideology. It is only through uncovering the mechanics that produce ideology, that we are able to expand our perception of things. What Lacan elaborates on, however, is, in his discussion of anamorphosis, how art could serve as disruptive of its own logic, of its own illusion. As Iversen mentions in *Beyond Pleasure*, "the distended skull in the foreground should be understood as figuring for Lacan something about the nature of art in general. The suggestion is that art, the beautiful illusion, contains within itself a seed of its own dissolution" (11). In other words, even if a work of art, like film, creates an illusion or an ideological framework, it simultaneously incorporates the means of its own subversion. This last point is what makes the recent Lacanian film theory different from the previous generation of Lacanian film theorists. In the next section of

this chapter, we witness how the recent Lacanian film theory creates an anti-ideological approach towards watching films.

#### **1.4 Lacanian Film Theories and Ideology**

Lacanian film theory is no longer a unified, congruent body of literature. While in the 1970s and the 1980s, film was seen as an ideological apparatus repositioning the imaginary relationship of the subject to the network of power, from the 1990s onwards there has been a shift of perspective which introduces film as a means of ideological resistance. Joan Copjec, a key thinker of the recent Lacanian film theory, argues that the major problem with early Lacanian film theory is that it takes “the screen as mirror” (16). She objects to what she calls “Foucauldization” of Lacan, which she describes as “a misreading” that labelled Lacan as a “spendthrift” Foucault (19). Due to such a misunderstanding, Copjec says, film theory went into a wrong direction by considering “cinematic representation [...] not a clear or distorted reflection of a prior and external reality but one among many social discourses that helped to construct reality and the spectatorial subject” (20). Inspired by Althusser’s rethinking of Lacanian Imaginary, which made it an essential part of the construction of the subject, early Lacanian film theorists, such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Comolli, and Stephen Heath, Copjec argues, posited that since “the screen is a mirror [...] representations produced by the institution of cinema, the images presented on the screen, are accepted by the subject as its own” (21). Such an internalization of the image by the spectator would result in what they called the “reality effect” or the “subject effect” because, they said, it made the subject take “the image as a full and sufficient representation of itself

and its world” and therefore, “satisfied that it has been adequately reflected on the screen” (22). What exactly happens in this case is that the subject identifies with the gaze, or “the point from which the image makes sense” (22). The subject finds that if she or he takes this position, then she or he would be able to supply the image with meaning. In elaborating further on the early Lacanian film theory, Copjec indicates that a misunderstanding of the place of the gaze occasioned the wrong direction:

In [early Lacanian] film theory, the gaze is located “in front of” the image, as its signified, the point of maximal meaning or sum of all that appears in the image and the point that “gives” meaning. The subject is, then, thought to identify with and thus, in a sense, to coincide with the gaze. In Lacan, on the other hand, the gaze is located “behind” the image, as that which fails to appear in it and thus as that which makes all its meanings suspect. And the subject, instead of coinciding with or identifying with the gaze, is rather cut off from it. (36)

In other words, Copjec believes, while the previous generation of Lacanian film theorists Foucauldized Lacan by indicating that Lacan’s gaze is similar to Foucault’s panoptic gaze, which includes an always-watching Other tracing the subject’s every step, making her or him attempt to be recognized by it, the Lacanian Other is actually blind, incapable of seeing the subject, and therefore, does not try to make her or him seek recognition.

Copjec is right to point out that the early Lacanian film theorists were inspired by Louis Althusser, too. In his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” Althusser considered Lacan’s Imaginary as culprit in the formation of every ideology. He considered ideologies as “imaginary construction[s]” and as both “illusion[s]” of

reality—because “they do not correspond to reality”—and an “allusion to reality”—because they attempt to “discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world” (162). The mirror in the Imaginary is where an ideology manifests itself to the subject. Inspired by such a perspective, early Lacanian film theorists proposed that “the filmic image and the narrative of classical Hollywood movies were complicit in the formation of subjects who, captivated by the image, would identify themselves with idealized film characters and reproduce their social roles” (Iversen 7-8). In other words, since the spectators considered the motion picture as a mirror for their own conditions, they misrecognized such “a representation as a reflection of [their] real relation to the world” (Iversen 8). One such film critic was Laura Mulvey, who, in her *Visual and Other Pleasures*, elaborated on the similarities between screen and mirror and the fact that such a misrecognition would eventually result in both a forgetting and a reconstituting of the ego:

[I]t is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the “I,” of subjectivity [...] Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings, for instance), the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition. (18)

What Mulvey was trying to affirm, through such an Althusserian framework, was the view that Hollywood cinema was simply attempting to strengthen ideological values of patriarchal society by representing an image of the woman as an object of male gaze.

Another critic, whose work is in line with the theories of Althusser, is Christian Metz. He does not consider the screen as a mirror, as something in which the spectators find their own image, but actually as representing objects other than the spectator; in this sense,

At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am *all-perceiving* [...] because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived world would have no one to perceive it, the instance, in other words, which *constitutes* the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film). (48)

Here Metz is attempting to point out that the subject inhales what she or he sees on the screen. The active role of the spectator is here happening through perception of what she or he is not, through voyeurism, again absorbing a certain ideology. What Metz, Mulvey, Baudry and other Althusserian film critics were trying to confirm was that, as Todd McGowan observes, “the spectator inhabits the position of the child looking in the mirror. Like this child, the spectator derives a sense of mastery based on the position that the spectator occupies relative to the events on the screen” (*Real Gaze 2*). This illusion of mastery and completeness is what the Lacanian Real attempts to challenge.

The purpose of the anamorphic Real, contrary to what the Imaginary conducts, is not simply to run against the idea that ideology is all-encompassing, present everywhere. Rather, it proposes that even if we posit such an image for ideology, there is always a point of rapture. To quote Todd McGowan,

To affirm the real is to affirm that the work of ideology never comes off without a hitch. Every ideology includes a point within its structure that it can't account for or represent. This is the point, the real, at which ideology opens up to the outside. The real thus allows ideology to include new phenomena, and at the same time, it marks ideology's vulnerability. When we call ideology into question, we do so from this real point within it.

*(Real Gaze 3)*

In order to identify the Real point of ideology, the post-1990s Lacanian film theorists posited a new understanding of the term *gaze*. As mentioned previously, the Lacanian gaze is not subjective; on the contrary, it is located in the object and therefore, it is objective. In McGowan's words, the gaze is "an object, [since it] acts to trigger our desire visually, and as such it is what Lacan calls an *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire" (*Real Gaze 6*). In other words, the object cause of desire, as a "lacuna in the visual field," or "the gap within the subject's seemingly omnipotent look" is what makes us desiring beings (6). The little object, as McGowan points out, is irreducible "to the field of the big Other"; it is some kind of small other which "is lost in the process of signification and ideological interpellation" (6).

The encounter with the gaze as the *objet petit a* is what the recent Lacanian film theory provides with a special role: to act as the agent of the Real and resist ideology. As Todd McGowan puts it,

Early Lacanian film theory missed the gaze because it conceived of the cinematic experience predominantly in terms of the imaginary and the symbolic order, not in terms of the real. This omission was crucial because the real provides the key for understanding the radical role that the gaze plays within filmic experience. As a manifestation of the real rather than of the imaginary, the gaze marks a disturbance in the functioning of ideology rather than its expression. (*Real Gaze* 6-7)

The skull in Holbein's painting is the best example of the distortion in the field of visible. Elaborating on the way that the skull is gazing back our subjective look, McGowan points out that as soon as the viewers start looking at the picture they become part of it because they are trapped in the objective gaze:

The gaze exists in the way that the spectator's perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator's involvement in a scene from which the spectator seems excluded. It makes clear the effect of subjective activity on what the subject sees in the picture, revealing that the picture is not simply there to be seen and that seeing is not a neutral activity [...] the existence of the gaze as a disruption (or a stain) in the picture—an objective gaze—means that spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself. (*Real Gaze* 7)

What McGowan specifies here has an important implication as we arrive at the conclusion that the location of the gaze is behind the object of art, or, the film itself. This gaze, which “is not the spectator’s external view of the filmic image, but the mode in which the spectator is accounted for within the film itself” incorporates “a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film” (7-8). The early Lacanian film theorists believed that, similar to the experience of the child in the mirror stage, the spectators discovered an illusory mastery, or simply a fantasized pleasure over the filmic object, while in reality, to quote McGowan, there is only “submission to this object” (10). The Lacanian gaze is not a site of pleasure and mastery, but actually a threat to such a stability. As McGowan puts it,

[T]he gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision. It is a blank spot in the subject’s look, a blank spot that threatens the subject’s sense of mastery in looking because the subject cannot see it directly or successfully integrate it into the rest of its visual field [...] Even when the subject sees a complete image, something remains obscure: the subject cannot see how its own desire distorts what it sees. The gaze of the object includes the subject in what the subject sees, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible. (*Real Gaze* 11)

What the recent trend in Lacanian film theory suggests is not to “gain critical distance from the scene of cinematic manipulation and view the cinematic experience with an attitude of suspicion from the beginning” because such a consciousness would create “a

barrier to the real” (McGowan, *Real Gaze* 14). While it is possible that the primary function of the film is to instill a certain ideology in the individual, it may also “open up the possibility of an encounter with the traumatic real that disrupts the power of ideology” (15). The solution to the fantasmatic space of cinema is not critical distance, but something else: “Rather than importing the attitude of everyday life (that of conscious reflection) into the cinema in order to disrupt its fascinating spell, we should export our attitude in the cinema (our openness to the gaze) to our everyday life” (15).

The encounter with the Real has a traumatic effect for both the subject and the big Other: it discovers points of failure in the Symbolic that would let the subject gain freedom from all “the constraints of the big Other” (McGowan, *Real Gaze* 16). If we consider fantasy as “an imaginary scenario that fills in the gaps within ideology” in order “for the individual subject to imagine a path out of the dissatisfaction produced by the demands of social existence” (23), then the function of the gaze of the Real is exactly the opposite: to “[deprive] spectators of their symbolic support and thereby [force] them to experience their radical freedom” (171). McGowan indicates that the basic feature of this kind of cinema, which he calls *the cinema of intersection*, is to disturb the spectators by showing that neither fantasy nor desire gives the subject what she or he lacks. As mentioned earlier, ideology works through fantasy to fill in the gaps of its own lack and provide the subject with an imaginary satisfaction. In the cinema of separation, however, McGowan points out, while we may see this “fantasmatic dimension,” we can simultaneously witness the disruption of such an ideological view through uncovering “the traumatic excess that is central to the ideology and that ideology cannot publicly acknowledge” (37). This excessive enjoyment which lies at the heart of an ideological

perception could be viewed in various ways: “as the obscene activity that accompanies the functioning of symbolic authority, the enjoyment that authority figures derive from the exercise of their authority; and, subsequently, as the unspoken enjoyment that stains our everyday social interactions” (42).

While the Althusserian theory posits that ideology always succeeds in the interpellation of subjects, and there is no way to escape this necessity, the recent Lacanian theorists point out that it is possible that ideology fails at certain points. The cinema of intersection provides two separate paths for fantasy and desire to ultimately show that none of which would lead to the lost object of desire. By doing so, the cinema of intersection provides an encounter with the Real. As McGowan clarifies, this encounter occurs when

we experience the absence in the Other in a privileged way. Hence, rather than producing dependence, the cinema of intersection produces an experience of freedom. The encounter with the real is the encounter with the Other’s failure, and this encounter traumatizes the subject because it deprives the subject of support in the Other. The subject derives its symbolic identity from the Other, and as a result, the encounter with the Other’s lack leaves the subject without any sense of identity. (*Real Gaze* 175)

This liberating factor is what the cinema of intersection, or the cinema of the Real makes happen: it provides the spectator with freedom from the constraints of ideological perception by targeting the grounds on which she or he stands. Every ideology has certain borders which, if violated, would bring severe consequences for the individual.

Transgressing beyond those borders produces an impossible situation which would traumatize the subject. The eventual outcome, however, may make such a trauma a priceless experience:

The only way to break from the controlling logic of the ideology is to reject the possibilities that it presents and opt for the impossible. The impossible is impossible within a specific ideological framework, and the act of accomplishing the impossible has the effect of radically transforming the framework [...]. By facilitating an encounter with the gaze, the cinema of intersection encourages the spectator to identify with this object. Though other forms of cinema push the subject in the direction of freedom, it is only the cinema of intersection that emphasizes identification with the impossible object. In doing so, this cinema allows the subject to grasp its own nothingness—to see itself in the nothingness of the object. The reduction of the subject to the nothingness of the *objet petit a* is the most extreme form of freedom available to the subject. It implies a rejection of the world of the Other and an affirmation of the subject's private fantasmatic response to that world. To identify with the object is to insist on one's particular way of enjoying at the expense of one's symbolic identity. (McGowan, *Real Gaze* 177-78)

As we shall see later, in the cinema of Christopher Nolan the spectators are provided with the subject's quest for the *objet petit a*. Through the gaze of the *objet petit a*, one could find that it is impossible to get fantasmatic reunion with the object cause of desire. The anamorphic gaze of the *objet petit a* signifies the fact that nowhere could

the subject find what the discourse of capitalism promises (through obsession with objects). The path of desire in Nolan's later films, however, doesn't imprison subjects; rather, we can see more sophisticated characters who are able to manage the essential lack in their being.

### **1.5 Nolan and the Irruption of the Anamorphic Real**

There is a disturbing element in the cinema of Christopher Nolan, which stems from the fact that his films show the subject's attempts to master a traumatic event. The subjects desperately initiate a mission to recover the lost object of desire but they don't find it. In his films, Nolan prolongs the path of desire to ultimately show that, like the play of signification, it leads nowhere; desire doesn't provide a fantasmatic moment of obtaining the *objet petit a*. Moreover, Nolan's art is cunning in the sense that it misguides us, fools us, and, in a sense, lies to us, but then exposes its own lies. In other words, in his portrayal of the gaze of the *objet petit a*, Nolan perplexes the spectators by creating a hole, or a stain, in their understanding of the familiar world. These two elements (the encounter with the gaze of the *objet petit a* and the structural complexity of the plot) are the key features that shape the anamorphic world of Christopher Nolan.

The most recurrent traumatic event in the films of Nolan is death. Death is associated with the Real because, as something traumatic for the conscious subject, death is somehow rejected during the mirror stage. However, it resurfaces at certain moments in each individual's life and destabilizes the Symbolic Order. In Nolan's films, death appears as an overwhelming trauma, which significantly affects the subject's life. The story of *Memento* revolves around the subject's desperate struggle to deal with the

traumatic rape and murder of his wife. The accidental death of Angier's wife in *The Prestige* initiates his impossible mission to obtain the machine of fantasies. In *The Dark Knight*, the death by explosion of Harvey Dent's wife-to-be, Rachel, brings about massive changes in the second half of the film as Harvey doesn't find a way to master the trauma. Cobb's essential problem in *Inception* is to deal with the memories of his dead wife, who reappears in his dreams and haunts him until he eventually finds a way to deal with it. In *Interstellar*, there are certain moments when the deaths of certain people break into the narrative of the film, creating a point in which the subjects (and the spectators) are disturbed.

In the films of Nolan, when the subjects undergo a traumatic event, they start a mission to deal with the experience. Here, the *mise-en-scène* plays a key role as it depicts certain objects that are critical in the relationship between the subject and the desire for the *objet petit a*. Leonard's Polaroid in *Memento*, which photographs his victims, reveals how his vision is distorted by his desire. It is the object that visualizes and extends his desire for the impossible object. Angier's Machine in *The Prestige* is a partial object that promises to be the one that fills his lack,<sup>6</sup> but turns out to be an obsession that brings about his destruction. Harvey's lucky coin in *The Dark Knight* reveals the obscene core of the law. It is this lucky coin that turns Gotham's best citizen into a serial killer by erasing the boundaries between the good and the evil. The paradoxical Penrose Steps in *Inception*, that never moves up or down despite the illusion of doing so, signifies the deceitful path of desire. I would like to call this object *the staircase of desire* because, like desire, it never finds its destination. In *Interstellar*, the bookshelf creates the illusion

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<sup>6</sup> I have capitalized the word *Machine* because of its significant role in the film.

that there is an impossible Other, who watches and manipulates our planet. This bookshelf triggers the desire to know in Cooper and Murph, and, in a way, sets the story in motion by making Cooper accept the interstellar mission to save the world.

The encounter with the traumatic event, as I mentioned earlier, triggers the desire to master the lack. The subjects, then, start a quest to find the object that fills the lack. In *The Prestige*, for example, right after his wife's death, Angier initiates a mission to find the machine that would make him a better magician than Borden. Or, in *Memento* and *The Dark Knight*, Leonard and Harvey Dent start serial killings to avenge their loved ones. One can witness a thirst for *jouissance* in all these characters: they repeat blind attempts to get the ultimate pleasure that they are looking for without knowing exactly what they do really want. They cannot figure out that total enjoyment is an impossibility, a false promise by the Other. That is why they cannot find a way out of the loop of desire. In *Inception* and *Interstellar*, Cobb and Cooper (and Amelia, to some extent) eventually figure out the truth of desire and the *objet petit a*. They understand that moving from one object to another would not help them fill their lack. The key to such an understanding is to be obtained through the encounter with the gaze of the *objet petit a*: In specific moments, these characters realize that desire would not help them find the lost object of desire.

This encounter with the gaze happens for the spectators, too. Nolan's art of anamorphosis makes it possible for the spectators to find the truth of desire. One specific way through which Nolan provides such an encounter is through what I would call *structural anamorphosis*. As a temporal encounter with the gaze, structural anamorphosis serves as a trap that belatedly reveals the truth that nowhere in the film were the

spectators in control of the scene. Structural anamorphosis is a surplus that appears through crosscutting (or parallel editing). It is a common feature of Nolan's films to present two or more sets of action in two or more interconnected plotlines. Therefore, crosscutting plays a key role in his cinema. Nolan usually starts by incorporating a scene which might belong to a different set of actions; in other words, the initial scene of the film is not really the point from which the story starts. This scene is a surplus that has two key features: first, it is a harbinger of the failure of the fantasy that the subject imagines; and second, it is a point that later reveals that the spectators were not actually in control of the filmic image. These two elements remind us of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: the subjects (those who look at the work of art) encounter a stain that not only highlights their nothingness but also tells them that their vision provided them with an incomplete look of the work of art. In Nolan, structural anamorphosis, as a stain or surplus, is a sequence or scene that belatedly reveals its significance.

Structural anamorphosis (through crosscutting) is one way through which Nolan provides the spectators with the cunning function of desire. Nolan's cinematography, too, has a significant role in presenting the spectators with certain moments to show them that they are not in control of the image. Specific shots in Nolan's films provide us with the anamorphic stain. For example, the sudden appearance of the Dust in *Interstellar*, is recorded in three shots. As Cooper and his son are in the middle of a friendly talk enjoying watching the game of baseball, the camera cuts to the baseball field. This first cut tracks the ball until a player catches it. In this cut, we can only see the lower part of the player's body. As the camera tilts up, the player removes his sunglasses in wonder: he seems to be looking at something distant. The next shot, which is an over the shoulder of

the player, shows the approaching gigantic Dust. These three consecutive shots introduce the Dust as a stain in the picture that both the film spectators and the people in the stadium were unaware of. Prior to these three shots, both the film spectators and those in the stadium imagined that they were in control of the scene, but the approaching Dust shatters this illusion. This sudden realization of knowledge, which shows the limited perspective at the core of the subject's vision, is an essential element in the cinema of Nolan. It reveals that subjects are only partially in control of the picture they see.

In the next five chapters, I will discuss Nolan's films based on the framework that I have described in this section. My argument, as I have mentioned before, is that in the cinema of Nolan we experience the fact that the *objet petit a* doesn't exist. In other words, the network of objects that shape the subject's life in a capitalist society doesn't lead to a definite destination. As we proceed throughout chapters 2-6, we shift from subjects who are unable to find the truth of the *objet petit a*, as we shall witness in chapters 2, 3, and 4, to those who are. Leonard Shelby and Harvey Dent in *Memento* and *The Dark Knight* start an endless killing of people in order to revenge their loss. They imagine that annihilating other subjects would help them regain the past. Also, in *The Prestige*, the basic problem of Angier is that he attempts to replace subjects with objects. After the accidental death of his wife, Angier starts a life of moving from one object to another to master the trauma but in vain. Even after he obtains the impossible Machine, he doesn't find satisfaction. Cobb in *Inception*, Cooper and Amelia Brand in *Interstellar*, as we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, are examples of the liberated subject in the later phase of Nolan's filmmaking. In these films, the subjects come to know that the *objet petit a* doesn't exist. They understand that they need to be content with partial enjoyments because time,

despite what contemporary late capitalism suggest, would not provide them with the object of their fantasies. Therefore, in our chronological discussion of the films by Nolan we move from the imprisoned subject of desire to the liberated subject who knows that neither desire nor fantasy would help her or him find the lost object.

## Chapter 2: The Loop of Desire in *Memento*

### 2.1 Introductory Statements

*Memento* (2000) was Nolan's first venture into Hollywood. Before *Memento*, Nolan had made his first feature film, *The Following* (1998), which was produced on black and white film stock in London, UK. During his early period of filmmaking, which includes a short (3 minutes) film titled *Doodlebug* (1997), *The Following*, and *Memento*, Nolan starts with what I would call *the local subject* or the subject who is limited to a room (*Doodlebug*) or within a very small geography (*The Following* and *Memento*). Even in *Insomnia* (2002), which followed *Memento*, we can witness this geographically limited subject. As we shall see in *Memento*, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is highly dependent on mapping the small world in which he lives in order to know the spots to which he commutes and the people with whom he interacts. Leonard's system, which includes taking notes and Polaroid photos, as well as tattooing some information on his body, is what helps him make sense of his surrounding world and map his desire.

The subject that we see in *Memento* is the clear example of the subject of desire. He moves exactly in the direction of desire in order to get the *objet petit a*. Despite his attempts to move beyond the Symbolic Order, Leonard, however, doesn't find the path out of it because he is unable to see that moving in the direction of desire would not help him find the lost object. Leonard is the subject of capitalism who moves from one object to another (by annihilating other subjects) in order to discover the fantasmatic moment that he has been looking for. In certain moments, Leonard (and the spectator) encounters the Real gaze, but he is unable to get the message; that is why he remains imprisoned in the vicious circle of desire.

## 2.2 The Unconscious Core of Desire

In “Memento Mori,” Jonathan Nolan’s short story on which Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* is based,<sup>7</sup> the major character, Earl, who is later renamed as Leonard in the film, elaborates on the human mind in the same way as Lacan does. As we read the short story, we find that for Earl, the human mind is a sum of fragments, mostly under the control of the unconscious, and, therefore, the subjects are only occasionally in control of their thoughts:

*[...] Every man is broken into twenty-four-hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours. It’s a daily pantomime, one man yielding control to the next: a backstage crowded with old hacks clamoring for their turn in the spotlight. Every week, every day. The angry man hands the baton over to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist. Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots.*

*This is the tragedy of life. Because for a few minutes of every day, every man becomes a genius. Moments of clarity, insight, whatever you want to call them. The clouds part, the planets get in a neat little line, and everything becomes obvious. I should quit smoking, maybe, or here’s how I could make a fast million, or such and such is the key to eternal*

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<sup>7</sup> During a road trip from Chicago to Los Angeles, Jonathan shares the idea of writing this short story with his brother, Christopher. A couple of months later, he sends “a very rough first draft” (Mottram 162) to Christopher while continuing to finish the story. The short story is published by *Esquire* in 2001, less than a year after the release date of the film.

*happiness. That's the miserable truth. For a few moments, the secrets of the universe are opened to us.* (189)

The idea of the subject as fragmented (or split), as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is what Lacan proposes to signify that the subject is significantly overshadowed by the unconscious. As Lacan declares, “Discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon—discontinuity, in which something is manifested as a vacillation” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 25). Leonard Shelby, the focal character in *Memento*, is one of the most concrete examples of the Lacanian subject not only in Christopher Nolan but also in the cinema of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout the film, it dawns on the spectators that Leonard is mostly under the control of his unconscious, and dream predominates in his reality.

Leonard's essential problem, as we see the film, is his mind's inability to create new memories because of a condition he calls “anterograde memory loss” or “short-term memory loss” (00:28:00-02).<sup>8</sup> This is, as he claims, due to a blow on his head which he received during a traumatic event, namely the rape and murder of his wife,<sup>9</sup> which, we are told, he survived, but his wife didn't. While he cannot remember anything that happened after the incident, he can properly recall pre-trauma memories. Leonard's condition forces him to create a system in order to remember. This “systematization” is, for Leonard, “the key to productivity, efficiency and success” (Gallego 43). He tattoos what he calls “vital” (00:10:51) information on his body, takes Polaroid pictures from

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<sup>8</sup> While the scientific name for Leonard's disease is *anterograde amnesia*—the term that almost all other secondary sources use in their discussion of the *Memento*—he never uses it in the film. Leonard shows an implied resistance to the term *amnesia* when other people use it to describe his condition.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard's wife (Jorja Fox) is unnamed throughout the film, but is mentioned by Nolan as Catherine Shelby in the list of ‘Cast and Crew’ in the screenplay (*Memento & Following* 104).

people he meets (and captions them), and hangs a very large hand-drawn map on the wall of the motel room where he stays. Leonard's only impulse for being alive, *he* says, is revenge. That is why he starts a non-stop serial killing of the supposed murderers of his wife. Since, however, he cannot remember if he has taken his revenge, the killing goes on. Leonard's repetitive circle includes identifying a supposed murderer, chasing him, and eventually eliminating him in order to revenge the loss that, as he claims, ruined his life. Leonard, in this sense, is caught in the loop of desire.

There is a derelict building,<sup>10</sup> where Leonard brings the supposed murderers of his wife for revenge recurrently. Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) informs him that this building is "an abandoned place outside of town" (00:20:53-55). As Leonard has captioned Natalie's Polaroid picture, "SHE HAS ALSO LOST SOMEONE,"<sup>11</sup> and she would help him "OUT OF PITY." Although because of his *condition* Leonard does not remember this isolated place when Natalie provides him with the coordinates, we eventually figure out that he has already been there, killing Natalie's lover, Jimmy Grantz (Larry Holden), who "used to do bigger [drug] deals there" (00:20:56-58). It is ironic that Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), who makes Leonard kill Jimmy, later encounters the same fate when Natalie mesmerizes Leonard into believing that it was Teddy who murdered his wife. The building, therefore, appears two times in the film: the first time, in the second color sequence as Leonard shoots Teddy; the second time, in the last black and white sequence, when he strangles Jimmy Grantz and starts fantasizing about his next venture. The real chronological order of these two sequences, however, is the reverse, since one of the two

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<sup>10</sup> I have taken the term *derelict building* from the original screenplay of the film.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard uses capital letters to caption the Polaroid pictures. There is only one instance that he uses lower-case letters. This is when Teddy urges him not to trust Natalie: "Take my pen. Write this down. Do not trust her" (01:07:14-18). When Teddy leaves, however, Leonard crosses these words out.

plotlines of the film moves backwards: Teddy is killed much later after Leonard throttles Jimmy to death. This building, in fact, connects the beginning of the film to its ending. It is no exaggeration if we name this building *the repository of desire*, where *jouissance* is crystalized. It is this place, located nowhere in Leonard's map, like the unconscious of human mind, that conducts his actions.

In both cases where the building appears, Nolan uses extreme long shots the moment that Leonard enters the yard and parks his car there. He doesn't show us the route to the place, but simply casts us into it. If we consider the building as the realm of desire, and Leonard the subject of the unconscious, we may gather the extreme long shot as an analogous representation of the location of the subject: the subject is only a spot surrounded by desire. In other words, the extreme long shot gives us a picture of the Symbolic Order within which the subject is then seen in action. In the color narrative, as Leonard and Teddy exit the car, Leonard takes a look at another car parked in the yard (the car he himself once brought there upon killing Jimmy). There is a medium shot as Leonard stands beside the car, which is then followed by an extreme close up of his hand as he inspects the inside of the car and finds some bullets there. When Leonard enters the building, he takes a few steps (medium shot, then cuts in) as he examines a few Polaroid pictures holding in his left hand, and finally pauses right after he finds a picture of Teddy, until he reads the caption: "DON'T BELIEVE HIS LIES. HE IS THE ONE. KILL HIM." This shift of perspective from one object (the building) to another (Polaroid photos) illustrates the movement of Leonard's desire; that is why he imagines that he has finally achieved the eventual signified: "I've finally found him. How long have I been looking?" (00:05:18-22). Here, the Polaroid has a significant role: it acts as an anamorphic point

in which the subject's visual drive makes him see things in a specific order. In other words, Leonard's Polaroid serves as a tool which visualizes his desire. The spectators, also, fall in the trap of Leonard's visual drive, believing what they see, because, after all, they are the subjects of desire, too.

There is an analogous instance of the building at the end of the black and white sequence in which Leonard strangles Jimmy to death. Here again, Leonard is shown as he exits the car and looks around (medium shot), then he goes to the door (tracking shot) as he curiously turns his head around to view the outside of the building. A few minutes later, as Jimmy Grantz car enters the building, the intensity of emotion is increased with a close-up of Leonard, paralleled with instant cuts to his murdered wife. Once again Leonard's unconscious desire gets the better of him: in a few seconds, Jimmy Grantz is dead. The building, as a crystallization of the unconscious, represents a never-ending loop always returning to the same place, similar to the Möbius strip: Leonard finds a target, follows him, brings him to this place, and eventually kills him in order to avenge the supposed (or imaginary) rape and murder of his wife. This building, therefore, serves as the storehouse of desire, as it is never satisfied and is always looking for more, for simply continuation of its path, and the suspected victims signify the phantoms or fantasies of the *objet petit a*, as they never give Leonard what he wants, but they simply prolong his desire.

### **2.3 The *Objet Petit a* and Transgression of the Symbolic Order**

Leonard's constant movement in the path of desire is directly related to the play of signification in language. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan points out that

[t]he function of the pleasure principle is, in effect, to lead the subject from signifier to signifier, by generating as many signifiers as are required to maintain at as low a level as possible the tension that regulates the whole functioning of the psychic apparatus. (119)

The domain of signifiers that Lacan relates to the pleasure principle applies to Leonard's circular movement. In the repetition compulsion that we witness in Leonard, in his never-ending cycle of chasing and killing people in order to avenge the supposed rape and murder of his wife, we find the quest for abundant *jouissance*. Leonard's desire, in this sense, is blind since he transgresses constraints of the Symbolic Order and moves beyond the limits imposed by the pleasure principle. Leonard searches for people named John G. to kill them and to take his revenge. However, John G. is the signifier without a signified, reminding us of the endless play of signification. This is how desire works: it is a corollary of the non-stop working of language and the lack that it brings about. As Teddy tells Leonard nearly at the end of the film,

I gave you a reason to live and you were more than happy to help. You don't want the truth. You make up your own truth, like your police file. It was complete when I gave it to you. Who took out the twelve pages? [...] See, it was you. To create a puzzle you could never solve. Do you know how many towns, how many John Gs or James Gs? (01:45:46-46:10)

What Teddy says is probably the film's best way of showing how signification (the glissement of signifier over the signified) works. The search for the killer is already meaningless because, as Teddy reveals, Leonard identified and eliminated that man a year ago. Therefore, the search is for something impossible, as there is no such thing as a

living murderer anymore. This absence of the signified is similar to what happens in the play of signification: while the *one* signified is no more present, from one signifier to another, there is a never-ending search to find it because, as Lacan confirms, “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 207).

Upon the murder of Jimmy, Teddy arrives to see what happened. Leonard, strikes him on the head with his gun, and intends to kill him at the moment although this is delayed until the end of the film. Now the question is: why does Leonard allow Teddy to stay alive until a certain point in the film? He lets him live longer to fantasize his murder first because desire requires a story to continue its path: it triggers the wish to obtain or do something, but the very moment that the subject has accomplished the mission, there starts a new wish. The new wish is to be first fantasized upon until you reach a point where you could obtain the seeming object of desire. While there is no *objet petit a*, every object presents itself to be that which fully fills the lack of the subject.

The best representation of the nature of *the objet petit a* is shown in the initial sequence of the film, which is photographed in reverse motion (see figs. 2-5). It starts from an extreme close-up of a Polaroid showing the dead body of Teddy on the floor with splashes of blood on the wall. On the left side of the frame, we see Leonard’s left hand holding this picture, located on the right hand side of the frame. He shakes it every few seconds so that the picture finds its final form and texture. Since, however, the sequence is in reverse order, as we proceed, the clear, complete image of Teddy’s body fades gradually until it loses its texture and only a blank paper remains. There is, then, an instant cut from this blank paper to Leonard’s face in extreme close-up with splashes of

blood on it: The contrast between the object and the individual is important here as the former creates curiosity and mystery, but the latter clarifies things. It is only after the blankness, in a retroactive (reverse) movement, that it dawns on the spectator that Leonard has killed Teddy and this is his body on the ground. The resultant blankness is to be seen as the anamorphic moment because it represents the gaze of the Real object that instantly reveals to the spectators how insufficient is their knowledge of truth from one moment to the next both in the context of the film and in real life. This fading of the texture and the resultant blankness is the reality of the search for *objet petit a*: as soon as you get what you want, it loses its grandeur, its sublime nature. It becomes trivial and meaningless as desire never requires a *final* satisfaction. It is this blankness that serves as the gaze, and therefore the embodiment of the Real. That is why the lost object always escapes Leonard's reach. Desire does not remember, it is forgetful. It looks forward and defines its object as a mirage, as an illusion of a future to come. In this sense, desire is an accomplice of capitalism since in both there is an obsession with objects.



Figure 2. *Memento*: shot 1



Figure 3. *Memento*: shot 2



Figure 4. *Memento*: shot 3



Figure 5. *Memento*: shot 4

The forgetfulness that accompanies desire has significant corollaries for the subject. For Michael McKenna, the precondition to “heal from the pain of loss” requires one to first accept the reality of what has happened to one in the form of trauma (37). Leonard is forgetful, though. That is why, McKenna continues, he is unable to grieve and, therefore, heal. McKenna goes on to suggest that “the same applies to the desire for revenge, which for Leonard can never be quenched” (37). McKenna indicates that

Even the one meaningful task Leonard seeks to achieve, one that would have narrative structure—the hunting down and killing of his wife’s murderer—is undermined as something that could be meaningful for Leonard *once achieved*. Suppose he does leave evidence to himself that he succeeded, with a tattoo reading “I’ve done it.” [...] He is nevertheless easily able to wonder if he had been deceived, and so did not really do it.

(37)

McKenna, in the above-mentioned lines, is referring to a scene nearly at the end of the film, where Leonard is fantasizing about somewhere in future where he lies in the bed, with his wife’s head over the right, and the tattooed “I’VE DONE IT” over the left side of his chest. Nolan uses parallel editing to picture this scene of the daydream as a projection of Leonard’s mind while he is driving his car, with his eyes closed. The truth, however, lies somewhere else. It is not the simple fact that since he will not remember, he will not be able to trust his own knowledge about what he has done. In that daydream scene, Leonard’s face shows a look of apathy and lack of energy. There is no eventual satisfaction in his face because of the encounter with the gaze. This impassiveness results from imagining having achieved the eventual *one*. Is not this fantasized daydream

Leonard's nightmare of the destruction of his web of desire? It is actually the working of desire and *the objet petit a* that undermines this goal. Leonard, while dreaming of a prospective revenge and a tattooed "I'VE DONE IT" on the left side of his chest, is not really looking for that final outcome, as this would devastate him, making his efforts, and even more, his existence, meaningless. He needs such a goal to maintain his fantasies. Leonard's essential problem, like most other human beings, is his inability to understand the gaze of the *objet petit a*. That is why he is unable to answer the question 'what does the Other really want?' In a couple of instances the Polaroid provides an encounter with the gaze. Both situations occur as Leonard looks at a Polaroid of his own, which shows him smiling as he is pointing his right index finger at the left side of his chest. When Leonard understands that he has probably obtained what he is looking for, his face shows a combination of dejection and fear (see figs 6-9). In this sense, his face shows the encounter with the gaze because it shows the futility of his fantasy. However, Leonard doesn't accept this bitter truth and continues his impossible mission.



Figure 6. *Memento*: shot 5



Figure 7. *Memento*: shot 6



Figure 8. *Memento*: shot 7



Figure 9. *Memento*: shot 8

Leonard's sustained desire, therefore, is juxtaposed to certain fantasies, like that of "I'VE DONE IT." But this fantasy is perpetually disillusioned as a result of not knowing the precise location of the Other in which desire resides. As Todd McGowan says, "The *objet petit a*—the gaze in the case of the visual drive—motivates the subject's desire, but this desire is not a desire to encounter this object. On the contrary, desire wants to sustain itself *as* desire" ("Vicissitudes" 34). Therefore, it is no exaggeration if we see this forgetfulness as part of the plan of the subject's desire in order to resume its path. Leonard's switching from one object to another places him precisely in the discourse of capitalism in the sense that he annihilates other subjects to reach the object of his desire. His inability to see the truth that the Other doesn't exist makes him stick to the path of desire forever.

It is excessive desire that makes Leonard's life meaningful. As Raymond Martin points out, while it is true that Leonard "is not able—at least not in a normal fashion—to love, to help others in need, to make discoveries about the nature of reality, to rear children, to create most sorts of art, [and] to be autonomous" at least he has "a heartfelt purpose in living" (98). Martin is right that Leonard has some purpose: he doesn't want to be a *corpse* or a *vegetable*.<sup>12</sup> However, there is no purpose in his purpose. In other words, this purpose does not know any real destination. The basic question that the spectator asks when watching the film is the very essential question of desire: what does Leonard

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<sup>12</sup> In "Memento Mori," Earl describes himself as "A corpse. A vegetable who probably wouldn't remember to eat or take a shit if someone wasn't there to remind you" (187). In *Memento*, the word *vegetable* appears only once and that is when Sammy's wife tells Leonard that "When I look into Sammy's eyes, I don't see some vegetable, I see the same old Sammy" (01:03:32-38). If Leonard is the renamed version of Earl, then the metaphor of vegetable applies to him, not Sammy. This transference is due to a displacement that occurred in Leonard's memory.

really want? The simple answer ‘to avenge his wife’s rape and murder’ does not qualify as the proper answer because when he decides to choose Teddy as his next victim, he is aware that Teddy is not the one he is looking for. Therefore, his search for new objects is always doomed to fail, and does not bring him an absolute satisfaction. For Todd McGowan, Leonard’s wild passion to find an eventual object of satisfaction is very much like capitalist society:

Like Leonard, capitalist society believes in the possibility of the future. The waste it leaves behind in this quest, like the dead bodies that Leonard accumulates in his attempt to move on, is the inescapable product of the quest itself. Despite the vehemence of the effort, the traumatic past remains present. The future never provides the missing satisfaction—neither for capitalist society nor for Leonard. Dissatisfaction with the new commodity will leave the consumer with an insatiable lust for the next commodity, and an inability to remember the vengeance of his wife will leave Leonard continually pursuing it. (*Fictional 57*)

McGowan is right that the never-ending desire of obtaining something new is the essence of capitalism. As a member of capitalist society, Leonard is looking for the future regaining of the lost object. Leonard is perhaps as blind as capitalism. He doesn’t know that it is impossible to regain idyllic reunion with the lost object. Like capitalism, he moves wildly without knowing what would happen in the future. However, we should not forget the fact that he suffers from the traumatic blow that has disintegrated his life. This means that the very functioning of the Symbolic, on which the pillars of capitalism is based, is not working flawlessly for Leonard.

Christopher Nolan confides the future of Leonard's past to the spectator of *Memento*. To be more precise, in the first color sequence, in reverse motion, he places the answer right at the beginning of the film. The structural organization of the plot juxtaposes the past and the future and, therefore, puts anticipation along with retroaction in the same path, happening at the same time. To elaborate, the last color sequence, which is actually the starting point of the film, shows Leonard killing Teddy, the supposed murderer of his wife, and then taking a Polaroid photo of his body on the ground. The mystery is already solved. The next sequence, the first in black and white, shows Leonard in a motel room figuring out what brought him there, which is actually, as we find later, to avenge his wife's death, whom he believes Teddy has killed. The initial sequence of the film does not initiate the story: it is its ending. This first sequence retroactively reveals that Leonard doesn't obtain what he is looking for. The sequence sticks out as a surplus that belatedly uncovers the truth about Leonard's desire. It is the gaze of the *objet petit a* as it reveals its inaccessibility. Besides, as the spectators reach the end of the film, they understand that they were not in control of the filmic image. In this sense, the first color sequence provides us with *structural anamorphosis*: a temporal surplus as the gaze. This temporal gaze reminds us of the stain in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: in this painting, the skull retroactively opposes worldly objects to death and reminds the viewers that they were not in control of the image from the start.

The way that Nolan represents the subject to the spectators is a combination of subjective and objective shots. At certain times in the film, the spectators watch everything from Leonard's distorted view, as in the case of the Polaroid. The Polaroid, as mentioned earlier, acts anamorphotically to highlight Leonard's attempts to move not in

the direction of knowledge but actually in the direction of desire: the way that Leonard casts his look on other subjects (by taking photos) signifies the fact that his desire distorts the reality in which he lives (see figs. 10-11). At several other moments, however, the spectators look at Leonard from a distance. For example, in the black and white plotline, several frames are taken from Leonard in high angle shot from the top corner of the room (see figs. 12-13). The question that comes to the mind in the case of these shots is that from whose point of view we are looking at Leonard? This is an unusual angle which



Figure 10. *Memento*: shot 9



Figure 11. *Memento*: shot 10



Figure 12. *Memento*: shot 11



Figure 13. *Memento*: shot 12

should be ascribed to the gaze of the *objet petit a* because it never dawns on us who is looking at Leonard from this weird angle. Such confluences of perspective disturb the spectators because they reveal clear facts about all other subjects: not only Leonard but everyone else moves precisely in the distorted direction of desire. It is exactly this distortion at the core of desire that helps the discourse of capitalism to instill certain ideas into the subject's mind. The discourse of capitalism is the discourse of the Other in the

sense that it promises that commodities (or objects) will lead subjects to the eventual satisfaction that they desire. Capitalism promises that the final object, or the *objet petit a*, will be obtained if the subject sticks to the path of desire. However, the more the subjects invest in the Other, the less they gain because the Other is only a void opened by the lack, which is the essence of desire.

#### **2.4 The Big Other and Leonard's Subjectified World**

*Memento*, as mentioned earlier, is the realm of desire in the sense that there is an intense display of the lack in the subject and a never-ending attempt to obtain the *objet petit a*. The lack, as mentioned before, is the outcome of the emergence of the Symbolic. The gaze of the *objet petit a*, on the other hand, resides in the Real. It is the Real that imposes a significant shock to the Symbolic Order in *Memento*. Based on the information that Leonard provides, because of the traumatic event of the murder of his wife, he suffers from anterograde amnesia, a condition which disrupts the very functioning of memory. That is why Leonard decides to proceed “not by memory, but by instinct” (00:32:32-34). We know that memory is a function of language (or the Symbolic Order) and, therefore, we may claim that for the post-trauma Leonard the Symbolic Order is fractured and disjointed. At certain times in the film, the spectator is presented with the fact that Leonard is practicing the passage from the mirror stage to the Symbolic Order (a solid Symbolic Order and not a post-traumatic fractured structure).

In the way that Leonard makes sense of his grotesque body, and the way he interacts with other subjects one can witness that the subject is being formed ideologically. We are told that Leonard has survived the loss (of the object) and is now struggling to position himself in the system. Initially in the film, Leonard, in a voice-over,

acknowledges his condition, and the need for creating a method for survival: “You really do need a system if you’re gonna make it work” (00:06:57-07:01). Before finishing this sentence, the camera shifts from a high angle shot of Leonard (from the top corner of the room) to a close-up of a paper note taped to his left thigh, with the handwritten message: “SHAVE.” This shift from extreme close-up to an unusual high angle from the corner of the room gets the spectator closer to the gaze of the Real because it contrasts a very limited perspective with an all-embracing gaze with an unknown origin.

As we proceed in watching the film, we come to the conclusion that Leonard is a function of his notes. To make it more clear, his actions are monitored by the words he has tattooed on his body. In the fourth color sequence of the film, there is a scene in which as Leonard removes his shirt he notices these tattoos. The camera then tilts, and the spectator witnesses an extreme close-up of the tattoos written on the different parts of Leonard’s body. We need to consider that language, as the bearer of the Symbolic Order *writes* the subject, and this way ideology is instilled in the subject’s body and mind. Leonard, in this sense, is only a function of signification. His being is shown, therefore, to be highly dependent on his notes and tattoos. In this specific scene, the camera gives point of view shots of Leonard as he examines his body and inspects a piece of paper to double-check the information related to the person who killed his wife. Then, he walks to the mirror. When he looks at himself in the mirror as he wears his shirt, his focus is on something written on top of his chest beneath the neck: “JOHN G. RAPED AND MURDERED MY WIFE.” He moves back, as he is looking at the mirror, then writes a note under the picture of Teddy: “KILL HIM.” We can read the rest: “DON’T BELIEVE HIS LIES. HE IS THE ONE.” There is then a cut to the black and white narrative

showing him talking to somebody through the phone. While doing this, he walks to the mirror and focuses on the tattoo: “JOHN G. RAPED AND MURDERED MY WIFE.” He is explaining his *system* to the individual on the phone (Teddy) and compares himself to Sammy Jankis as he says: “I have a more graceful solution to the memory problem. I’m disciplined and organized. I use habit and routine to make my life possible. Sammy had no drive, no reason to make it work. Me, yeah, I got a reason” (00:16:36-56). These words are very much like those uttered by the child upon seeing her or himself in the mirror; she or he is proud of the very fact that she or he has a separate, seemingly coordinated body of her or his own. Then, the camera pans from Leonard’s right shoulder to his left showing the tattoo, “JOHN G. RAPED AND MURDERED MY WIFE” (see figs. 14-15). During this conversation, in which there are extreme close ups of Leonard’s tattoos and medium close ups of his face as he inspects them, the spectator can clearly see how forceful is language in shaping the life of the subject. Every time that Leonard recognizes a tattooed message on his body he seems to have figured out how to take the next step. Briefly speaking, language tells the subject what to do next.



Figure 14. *Memento*: shot 13



Figure 15. *Memento*: shot 14

Leonard’s tattooed body moves in the direction of the Polaroid because it pushes desire forward: the words on his body instill the idea of killing other people in his mind. The weird, grotesque appearance of tattoos, therefore distorts Leonard’s view because it

emanates from and forms Leonard's desire. The tattoos, in a way, tell Leonard that he should seek desire anywhere other than his own body and, therefore, confirm that it is in the Other that his desire resides. For the spectators of the film, Leonard's tattooed body should also be seen as the location of anamorphosis because not only does it startle them but also it represents the subject of desire in search of the *objet petit a*. One could say that in this grotesque, tattooed body the Real gaze invites the spectators to focus on the subject of desire and the way his quest for the impossible object is thwarted eventually.

Leonard creates his system of notes and tattoos because he finds memory unreliable. In the seventh color sequence, he tells Teddy, "Memory can change the shape of a room. It can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation. They're not a record. They're irrelevant if you have the facts" (00:24:09-19). Leonard's insistence on gathering *the facts* is what makes him a subject of knowledge: "Facts, not memories" (00:24:04-05). Leonard is Cartesian in this sense because he suspects almost anything except the most obvious facts. When Leonard suspects Natalie's truthfulness over the case of Dodd (Callum Keith Rennie), she tells him, "You can question everything. You can never know anything for sure" (00:33:57-34:00), to which he answers, "There are things you can know for sure" (00:34:00-34:02). He knocks on the coffee table and resumes, "I know what that's gonna sound like when I knock on it" (00:34:05-07). He then picks up a glass bowl, saying, "I know what that's gonna feel like when I pick it up. See! Certainties" (00:34:08-12) Leonard, therefore, is not just a subject of desire, as we saw in the previous pages. He cares for knowledge, too. However, the Lacanian subject, as we see the example of Leonard, sacrifices knowledge for desire at the end of the day. As Todd McGowan points out,

*Memento* shows, however, that we are not simply subjects of knowledge seeking to learn about the world in front of us but subjects of desire invested in this world through our desire. The conception of the subject of knowledge constructs a barrier between itself and its world: this subject never sees how the world takes it into account through the world's very structure. Contra what the subject of knowledge necessarily believes, the world is not just there to be seen by a knowing subject but is already structured around the subject's look when the subject sees it for the first time. It is in this sense that the subject is always a subject of desire rather than simply a subject of knowledge. The subject of desire invests itself and thus shapes what it knows; it distorts the apparently external world.

(*Fictional* 40-41)

Leonard's attempt to represent himself as highly interested in the objective world, then, is always overshadowed by his subjectivization of it. His system of notes, maps, tattoos, and Polaroid pictures, while it seems to be in line with his purpose to record facts only, eventually turn out to be only *his* version of knowledge. In showing us all these strategies, Nolan is simply breaking the Symbolic into fragments, as these strategies all serve to register the subject within a certain law and order. The proper functioning of the Symbolic would result in no fragmentation, it is a unified image only. The spectators of *Memento* are, therefore, able to see behind the magical unifying function of the Symbolic in the real life when watching such a fragmentation in the theater.

Leonard uses tattoos because, he believes, "if you have a piece of information which is vital," then "writing on your body instead of on a piece of paper can be the

answer” because “it’s just a permanent way of keeping a note” (00:10:46-56). Polaroid camera is used to record people he meets and places he visits so that future encounters become more convenient. He takes Polaroid pictures from Teddy, Natalie, Dodd, and Jimmy Grantz. These four people are the major network through which Leonard acts and finds meaning for his actions. It is these people who tell Leonard about himself and his wife, and it is they who shape his desire. In other words, the function of the Polaroid is clearly to channel Leonard’s desire to somewhere other than his own body. It does, therefore, make sense if, following Lacan, we claim that it is from the Other that we, as subjects, take our existence: “Desire is not the private affair it appears to be but is always constituted in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of other subjects” (Evans 39). As Leonard confirms, the ego is always shaped in connection with something outside:

I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can’t remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world’s still there. Do I believe the world’s still there? Is it still out there? Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I’m no different. (01:49:33-50:08)

There are multiple instances representing Leonard’s attempts to shape his existence with recourse to some external image or a double. In the scene with Natali in the restaurant, he doesn’t prove himself to be so good when reflecting on his own mind. When Natalie asks him to talk about his dead wife, Leonard uses trivial words: “She was beautiful. To me, she was perfect” (00:19:37-38). That is why she tells him: “Don’t just recite the words. Close your eyes and remember her” (00:19:43-50). Leonard’s focus,

however, is on the world outside: “The world doesn’t just disappear when you close your eyes, does it?” (00:19:13-16). This emphasis on the world outside signifies Lacan’s theory of mirror stage and the formation of the ego based on something outside the subject’s body. Not only does Leonard take his existence from an outside Other, but also he posits his own image projected in the mirror as a site of self-formation. Even in Leonard’s voice-overs that we see in the color narrative, we can identify a mirror-like significance because it is only in relation to such monologues that Leonard shapes his world.

It is no exaggeration if we claim that the mirror plays a key role in Leonard’s orientation and adaptation to the world outside after the traumatic incident. While Leonard’s reflected image in the mirror is so much different from the one he experienced as child in the mirror stage, it still moves in the same direction due to the fact that the post-traumatic Leonard has lost his connections to the Symbolic Order considerably. The significance of the mirror stage in developing the Symbolic is crystalized throughout the film at certain times. Earlier in the film, Leonard, as he is explaining his system, sticks notes to a mirror in the room. He proves himself too much dependent on the presence of his own image located outside. Every time he finds his reflected image in the mirror, he pauses, ponders, and identifies with it.

Even more, Leonard’s transference of his own actions to Sammy Jankis, the double that he talks about, reminds us of the mirror stage in which we create our personalities in connection with an image (of someone) outside our bodies. Moreover, there is a memorable scene when Natalie unties Leonard’s shirt upper button to inspect the tattoos on his chest. She then asks him to stand in front of the mirror with her in the

background. Natalie then moves gently and stands in front of him with her back onto the mirror. She removes Leonard's shirt and starts to gently touch the tattoos on his body. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of the mirror reflecting Leonard's image as he experiences weird mixed feelings of self-discovery. A few seconds later, Natalie shows a picture of someone she says she has lost, named Jimmy. Later in the film, Natalie, knowing about Leonard's condition, sets him up to get rid of Dodd and Teddy. This scene represents how ideology works in general: when the subject is placed into the Symbolic Order, then everything moves automatically.

Nearly at the end of the film when Leonard strangles Jimmy to death, he takes his clothes and, in a way, identifies with the murdered. Leonard's desire to act both as the murderer and the victim reveals his narcissist impulses: in this scene, one can clearly see both aggressivity and identification. In other words, he wants to both kill Jimmy and, at the same time, take his role. Later on (it appears earlier in the reverse story), we see Leonard passes the night with Jimmy's girl, Natalie. We know that for Lacan narcissism has direct connections with the mirror stage. As Evans puts, "Lacan thus defines narcissism as the erotic attraction to the [specular image]; this erotic relation underlies the primary identification by which the ego is formed in the mirror stage. Narcissism has both an erotic character and an aggressive character" (123). It would then make sense if we see Leonard's killing of Jimmy Grantz as an action attached to his strong desire to define his existence in relation to the other.

From what I mentioned above, Leonard identifies with some *other* as a double, or an alter ego, to make sense of his condition. At the same time, he believes in an outside world, an Other which still exists even if he cannot remember what he has done. Todd

McGowan suggests that since Leonard connects his actions with the existence of an Other, of an arbiter of human deeds, therefore, he is an obvious example of the Althusserian interpellated subject:

Throughout the film, Leonard is unable to avow the lack of support in society for the subject's ethical being. He believes that the meaning of his actions lies in social recognition, a recognition that will exist even if no one sees these actions or has knowledge of them. In this way, Leonard serves as the perfect model for an ideologically interpellated subject because his condition has stripped away all the seemingly natural justifications for believing in a substantive link between himself and society. (*Fictional* 63)

But then, there is a question: If Leonard is really looking for social recognition, if he believes in an Other, then, why does he kill people without reason? At least, in the case of Teddy, he knows that he is manipulating himself to kill Teddy:

I'm not a killer. I'm just someone who wanted to make things right. Can I just let myself forget what you've told me? Can I just let myself forget what you made me do? You think I just want another puzzle to solve? Another John G to look for? You're a John G. So you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes, I will. (01:47:14-48:30)

Leonard is not a thoroughly interpellated subject. At least, he is a grotesque image of a subject living under capitalist system. Leonard's post-traumatic character, without exaggeration, is a monstrous one, a neurotic Frankenstein. He shows a disappearance of

basic human feelings and proves to be a callous killer. In this sense, Leonard represents partial dysfunction of the system. In other words, because of the encroachment of the Real in the form of trauma Leonard could hardly be called a true projection of the interpellated subject. However, he is not to be seen as a liberated subject because his transgression only confirms his position in the path of desire. In order for a subject to be called a free subject, she or he should know the truth of desire and the non-existence of the *objet petit a*. Otherwise, transgression would only produce a more desirous subject.

## 2.5 The Intrusion of the Real in Death and Dreams

The incursion of the Real into the Symbolic is mostly seen through the representation of death, of its detestable and forceful irruption, specifically of a wife or a wife to be, in almost all major films by Christopher Nolan. As mentioned earlier, death, as a concept which is connected to the ugly side of human existence, is filtered by the defensive ego in the initial stages of the subject's development. The spectator of Nolan, however, feels its overpresence. In *Memento*, *Inception*, and *Interstellar* the wife is already dead. In *The Prestige*, the wives of both magicians, and in *The Dark Knight*, the wife to be die during the action of the film. This uncanny presence of death traumatizes the subject severely by disrupting his apparently stable grounds. The dead wife or woman signifies an essential lack, or a void in the Symbolic since it imposes a threat to the stable worldview with which the spectator comes to the theater.

In *Memento*, Leonard's dead wife, he claims, has been raped and murdered. Throughout the film, he attempts vehemently to overcome this traumatic experience. Margaret A. Toth argues that the concept of *home* serves "as a structuring *loss*" in *Memento* (79). For her, the lost home is a site of "palpable presence in the film" (79).

That is why, she believes, “it is fetishized, as in the scene where Leonard hires a prostitute to place his dead wife’s belongings around his hotel room in an effort to recreate the last moments they shared together” (79). If we take a close look at the sequence, we find out that Leonard is not simply trying to remember the last moments they spent together; rather, he attempts to remake the scene of the incident. He, in a way, attempts to repeat the trauma in order to master the resultant lack. Leonard arranges for a blonde escort to come to the motel room in which he resides. When the blonde arrives, Leonard prefers not to sleep with her. Instead, he asks for something else: “We just go to bed. You wait for me to fall asleep. You go into the bathroom and you slam the door [...] loud enough to wake me up” (01:01:21-28). Before doing that, however, Leonard gives her a paper bag, which contains his wife’s belongings: a book, a hairbrush, a pair of underwear, and a teddy bear. He then tells her what to do next: “First I just need you to put these things around the room. Just pretend they’re your things and that this is your bedroom” (01:01:34-42). When the escort goes to the bathroom, she slams the door, and Leonard wakes up. As Leonard opens the bathroom door, parallel scenes of the night of the incident resurface in his mind. However, he doesn’t find his dead wife; rather, he finds the escort snorting cocaine. Leonard asks her to leave with discontent because she fails to build the scene of the incident very effectively.

Leonard’s attempts to master the traumatic incident make his waking life like a dream. The starting point of the black and white narrative seems like waking up: *in medias res*. Here, there is an extreme close-up of Leonard’s chin as the camera tilts up, showing his face pictured like a silhouette (low-key lighting), with his voice-over: “So where are you? You’re in some motel room. You just wake up and you’re in a motel

room” (00:02:36-42). Like this scene, dreams have no beginning, as they somehow position the dreamer in the middle of things. In the last scene of the film, also, Leonard’s car screeches to a halt in front of the tattoo parlor as he says, “Now where was I?” (01:50:23-24), which signals the end of the film. This is very similar to a scene in the middle of the color narrative, where he suddenly wakes up from a dream of the scene of the incident, with another voice-over: “Awake” (00:40:22). Such inserts signify the fact that the film has no reality but dream. If it is, as Lacan says, always in dreaming that we get closer to the Real of our beings and our desires, then should not we interpret the structure of the film as a dream, and therefore, as something that brings us close encounters of the Real kind?

What makes the film similar to a dream is the parallel narratives that are juxtaposed to and run into each other without any boundaries. There are two major storylines along which the film proceeds: the color and the black and white. The representation of the unconscious is seen through the interspersion of the black and white narrative into the color narrative. The color narrative is the starting point of the film and much longer in length than the black and white.<sup>13</sup> The color narrative chronologically starts when Leonard wears Jimmy’s clothes until his killing of Teddy. The black and white narrative pictures a period prior to the color narrative: it starts where Leonard suddenly finds himself in a motel room until the murder of Jimmy Grantz and joins the color at a certain point nearly at the end of the film. The color narrative moves backwards; in other words, the first episode in the color narrative is indeed the ending point of the film. The structure of sequences in *Memento* should be read this way: C23,<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Around 85 minutes of the film is in color and 24 minutes in black and white.

<sup>14</sup> C stands for color.

BW1,<sup>15</sup> C22, BW2, C21, BW3, C20, BW4, C19, BW5, C18, BW6, C17, BW7, C16, BW8, C15, BW9, C14, BW10, C13, BW11, C12, BW12, C11, BW13, C10, BW14, C9, BW15, C8, BW16, C7, BW17, C6, BW18, C5, BW19, C4, BW20, C3, BW21, C2, BW22, C1. There are also two points in the film which are of importance for these two stories to proceed. The first one is the initial color sequence (C23), which is in reverse motion and the second one is nearly at the end of the film, where a long sequence, starting in black and white (BW22) and continuing in color (C1), joins the two narratives, and this is the way the film eventually ends with the color narrative, the same way it started. In the black and white narrative, which is much shorter in length, Leonard, seemingly more conscious, observes things more objectively. The color plotline, much longer in length than the black and white, represents Leonard as somehow delirious and unconscious and seeing things more as a subjectivization of his experience. The length of the black and white as opposed to the color story is comparable to the ratio of the conscious and unconscious states of the mind. As I mentioned before, Lacan believes that we live an unconscious life with only occasional resurgences of the conscious mind. The fact that parallel narratives in *Memento* do not have the same weight, brings us to think of the film not only as representing the dominance of the unconscious over consciousness, but also as a picture of dream work. In other words, this structure reminds us of what Freud and Lacan propose about dreams: they work mostly as a function of the unconscious. *Memento* has a structure similar to that of a dream since it gives the spectator a storyline which is like a fuzzy puzzle.

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<sup>15</sup> BW stands for black and white.

This complicated structure of *Memento*, should not be defined simply as non-linear narrative. It is a dream that highlights the unreliability of perception. The spectators of the film experience “a very unclassical formal mode” (Jackson 55) because *Memento* starts at the end and ends in the middle, thus creating a plot which disrupts them from any taken-for-granted knowledge. *Memento* privileges “ambiguity over certainty” (Molloy 80), which results in a disturbing experience for the spectators. The spectators feel even more disturbed when several cuts from the scene of the trauma constantly resurface in Leonard’s mind. Also, because of the specific positioning of the sequences, what happens to the spectators is that they temporarily forget what happened before. For example, when C23 is suddenly interrupted by BW1, upon the arrival of the next color narrative, which is C22, we seem to have already forgotten what happened in C23. As Nolan confirms, this forgetfulness is part of the plan to put the spectator in Leonard’s position: “One day I drank too much coffee and said to myself, ‘Well, if you tell the story backwards, then the audience is put in the same position as Leonard. He doesn’t know what just happened, but neither do we’” (qtd. in Winters). This structural organization of sequences dissolves the realist logic of straight timeline, and offers, in Lacanian sense, a Realist one, because it disrupts the ordinary logic through which the spectator watches a film. The filmic image constantly reminds the spectators that they are not in control of the scene.

Structural formation of *Memento* is not the only feature that makes it like dreams. Throughout the film, we see how characters reflect on the erasure of boundaries between dream and wakefulness. For example, there is a conversation between Leonard and Burt at the beginning of the film when the former compares his life to a dream:

Burt: What's the last thing you remember?

Leonard: My wife

Burt: What's it like?

Leonard: It's like waking. It's like just you woke up. (00:08:58-09:12)

There is another scene, of which I talked earlier, nearly in the middle of the film, where Leonard wakes up from a nightmare all of a sudden, with a voice-over: *awake*. Here, we see ten quick shots in less than seven seconds. These parallel shots picture the traumatic scene of the rape and murder of his wife. Considering the fact that even in Leonard's wakefulness we see similar sets of quick shots of the same traumatic incident, we may conclude that there is no difference between dream and wakefulness in *Memento*. Nearly at the end of the film, Teddy tells Leonard that his life is like a dream: "You're living a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest that you wouldn't end even if I wasn't in the picture" (01:46:36-45). That is why the whole structure of the film is comparable to that of a dream.

If Leonard's life is like a dream, it is most probably because of displacement, which is a significant element of dream work, and also a shortfall of memory. Displacement of some events and people (especially in case of Sammy Jankis), which is a dysfunction of memory, is what affects Leonard's story considerably. As Deborah Knight and George McKnight argue, "the story of Sammy is not what it initially seems to be, namely a memory of actual past events concerning Sammy. Rather, on reflection it appears to be a story that has displaced Leonard's memory of the events concerning his role in his wife's death" (159-60). Based on such a displacement, Knight and McKnight continue, "It is possible that Leonard has displaced his own responsibility for his wife's

death by creating the story of Sammy Jankis, the man he exposed as a fraud” (160). In addition, when we read Jonathan Nolan’s short story, the term *vegetable* with which, as Leonard claims, Sammy’s wife describes his husband is what indeed Earl uses to express his own condition. Leonard conflates his condition with what happened to Sammy Jankis.

The pure witness to such a transference and displacement is seen in one of the black and white sequences, where Leonard is giving a voice-over to what happened to Sammy after he killed his wife through overdose of insulin injections. In this sequence, we see Sammy on a wheelchair in a mental hospital. There is a very quick shot, less than a second, when Sammy is smiling at a doctor who is passing in front of him. The doctor, in this scene, stands momentarily between the spectator and Sammy, but when he is gone, it is not Sammy, but Leonard who is on the wheelchair (see figs. 16-19). While there is no other evidence in the film that Leonard was once in a mental hospital, in “Memento Mori,” Earl is shown to have spent some time there. That is why Leonard transfers what he himself did, namely murdering his own wife using insulin shots, to Sammy Jankis. In other words, Leonard’s mind manipulates part of what really happened in order to absolve him of what he did to his wife.

There is one more scene nearly at the end of the film that pictures Leonard’s displacement of the case of Sammy with his own. As Teddy reveals, it was Leonard who performed the injection of insulin, not Sammy: “Your wife surviving the assault. Her not believing your condition. The torment and pain and anguish tearing up her inside. The insulin” (01:42:48-58). There is a quick cut to a scene in the past that shows Leonard preparing the injection, but then another cut to the present time as Leonard tells Teddy,



Figure 16. *Memento*: shot 15



Figure 17. *Memento*: shot 16



Figure 18. *Memento*: shot 17



Figure 19. *Memento*: shot 18

“That’s Sammy, not me. I told you about Sammy” (01:42:59-43:02). A few seconds later, Teddy clarifies that “Sammy didn’t have a wife. It was your wife who had diabetes” (01:43:25-31). There is another cut, in parallel editing, to the scene of the incident, showing Leonard’s wife on the bathroom floor still alive. Once again, we come back to Leonard’s dumbfounded face in close up, but then there is a parallel scene in the past that pictures Leonard as he is doing the injection. Leonard tells Teddy that his wife wasn’t diabetic at all, to which Lenny answers, “You sure?” (01:43:45). The scene of injection then comes back, but now there is no insulin injection, as Leonard’s mind replaces it with simply him pinching his wife’s thigh, her telling him, “Ouch! Cut it out” (01:43:51-52). The camera then cuts to Leonard’s face as he tells Sammy, “She wasn’t diabetic. You think I don’t know my own wife?” (01:43:53-56). Teddy’s next answer shows that Leonard is selective in remembering things: “I guess I can make you remember the things you wanna be true” (01:43:58-44:02). What Teddy implies is that the manipulation of events by Leonard’s unconscious makes memories more palatable.

In this unconscious manipulation of memories dream has its own share. In the middle of the film, Leonard suddenly wakes up from a dream that repeats the scene of the traumatic incident. His dream shows only fragments: Leonard's hurried movement to the bathroom door is paralleled to extreme close ups of his wife's body on the floor. There is also a masked man turning his head to the right, and a crystal bottle that breaks into pieces upon Leonard's falling on the ceramic floor. The lengthiest description of the scene of the incident is around 65 seconds starting from where Leonard awakes until he is hit by the second assailant and collapses on the floor, unconscious. "I was asleep" (01:18:41), says Leonard to Natalie as he is describing the incident. Nolan uses parallel editing to picture Leonard's account of the incident. There is an extreme close-up of Leonard's face asleep, using low key lighting: "Something woke me up" (01:18:44). Leonard stretches his hand to where his wife was sleeping, but he doesn't find her: "Her side of the bed was cold. She'd obviously been out of bed for a while" (01:18:50-53). The camera then shows Leonard's face in the dark, wondering where his wife would be now. He gets up, finds his way out of the room, until he hears his wife's vague voice in the bathroom. The camera zooms in, as we see the crack underneath the bathroom door, where the light, mixed with moving shadows from inside the bathroom, is reflected outside. Anxious and frightened, Leonard runs towards the door, preparing his gun to shoot. The scene is shot in low key lighting and extreme close-ups. When Leonard hits the door open, he faces a masked man sitting over his wife's body, wrapped in plastic bag. The camera then cuts to Leonard's face showing a close-up of his face: extreme fear, with neck vessels protruded, mouth open with teeth grinding together, eyebrows up and eyes wide open, shooting the assailant. Leonard's facial expression projects the trauma of

the Real. He quickly enters to see what happened to his wife, but then a second man from behind smashes his head on the mirror, causing him to collapse on the floor. There is then a medium close-up two shot, looking down at Leonard and his wife as their heads lie in opposite directions: blood from Leonard's head appears like a stain in the image. The camera then pans to the floor as Leonard and his wife disappear from the frame.

What if there was no second man on the scene? Leonard once says that the police believed that there was no second man. We already know that, unlike what he claims, Leonard's wife most probably survived the incident (or most probably there was no such incident), but died because of his mistake. What if this dream is only a displacement of everything so as to fulfill a wish? What if Leonard accidentally killed her wife, but he didn't want to take the guilt upon himself? Therefore, we could discern two dream thoughts in the background of his dream: I killed my wife by accident, but I do not want to take the responsibility and guilt. The two assailants on the scene are therefore simply ego-identifications or projections of his unconscious mind. The first man, who sits over his wife's body belongs to the first dream-thought: Leonard's mind replaces him with a masked man to signify that it was an outsider, who killed his wife. Leonard's mind, however, has another preoccupation: to absolve him from the guilt of murdering his own wife. Therefore, there appears a second man from behind, smashing Leonard's head to the mirror. This is the true essence of dreaming: it is only a site of displacements and ego identifications. The one who suddenly wakes up from the dream of seeing someone dead (in our case Leonard) wakes up to continue his dream in reality: in his mind, he repeats the dream so that he could probably stop the incident: to master the traumatic incident. For Lacan, "*in the dream*" there is "*another reality*" that "*wakes the sleeper*" (*Four*

*Fundamental Concepts* 58). Leonard wakes up in the middle of his dreams to change what Lacan calls “the missed reality” (58), which is the guilt that he feels for the murder of his wife. It is in dreams that we may get close to the Real of our existence. To quote Lacan,

The real has to be sought beyond the dream—in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative. This is the real that governs our activities more than any other and it is psychoanalysis that designates it for us” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 60).

Our psychic reality always escapes our grasp because we are under the control of social codes. This is what Žižek says about the true nature of dreaming: “what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming, is sometimes the truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded” (“Freud Lives” 32). Leonard’s ego identifications or displacements in the dream are his subconscious attempts to hide the truth or knowledge of his Real existence. Filip Kovacevic points out that “It is exactly the anxiety of this encounter [with the Real], this trauma that precipitates the escape into the waking life” (84). As mentioned earlier, the desire not to know is stronger than the desire to know in Leonard. To view things retroactively, it would be enough to consider the initial scene of the film once again. Leonard has killed Teddy and holds a Polaroid photo of his dead body in his hand. It is only at the end of the film that the spectator, witnessing Leonard’s conversation with Teddy, discovers that the beginning of the film was an outcome of Leonard’s desire not to see objectively: he eliminates the one who wants to tell him the truth. The spectator’s encounter with knowledge moves only retroactively because the

plot has been designed to move in reverse. This retroactive knowledge result from *structural anamorphosis*: the gaze as a temporal encounter, or a narrative component that only belatedly reveals to the spectators that they were not in control of the image.

Noël Carrol argues that “telling the story backwards [...] forces the audience to make sense of the narrative with heightened self-awareness” and this creates a “process of following the story [...] which is] conscious and deliberate” with the result that we, as spectators, “have to think overtly about what we are doing” (137). Contrary to what Carrol says, the relationship between the spectator and Leonard is not governed by distance or self-awareness of the highest degree. It is a vacillating position, both inside and outside of Leonard’s mind: *Memento*, to quote Todd McGowan, “makes it impossible for the spectator to escape the loop of desire” (*Fictional* 56). In doing so, Nolan is showing the spectator the reality of subjectivity, and the fact that like Leonard, the spectator may really want not to know. As Todd McGowan says, “By showing the spectator a subject of desire lurking beneath a seemingly perfect subject of knowledge, *Memento* aims at undermining the prioritizing of truth that derives from this later form of subjectivity, and thereby freeing the spectator from the trap that the cinema has historically perpetuated” (*Fictional* 66).

The bitter thing for the spectator of *Memento* is that desire is massive, fantasy is incomplete, and the *objet petit a* seems impossible to locate. That is why *Memento* fills the spectator’s head with innumerable questions regarding Leonard’s life and motives for existence. In this sense, the spectators encounter a disturbing experience, both in the way they watch the film and in the way they desire. As McGowan says,

The spectator's lack of satisfaction in Leonard's revenge separates *Memento* from almost all other revenge films. Most films of this type build up to the act of revenge and foreground the spectator's enjoyment of it [...] *Memento* denies the satisfaction of revenge by never allowing the spectator to know with any certainty who the correct target is or if there even is a correct target. As the film develops it, this uncertainty cannot be resolved with more facts. The facts that would provide the basis for revenge are missing because the film displays an active indifference toward them. (*Fictional* 61-62)

Leonard's life is a projection of repetition, of the impossible action of going ahead without progress, somewhat similar to the Penrose Steps in *Inception*, where there is movement ahead and above, without any advancement, or like the Möbius Strip of which Lacan talks abundantly, a surface with seemingly multiple dimensions, which, in reality, is a loop: wherever you start to move, you would come back to the same place. And, it is always in paradoxes that the Real is projected. The Symbolic, when encountering such a traumatic paradox, provides only a fantasmatic solution, which is doomed to fail if the spectators watch things closely. Because of the fact that Leonard is unable to see the truth of the *objet petit a*, because he is imprisoned by the discourse of capitalism that by moving from one object to another he would eventually fill the lack, he cannot see the lack in the Other, and that is why despite his attempts to reach absolute pleasure he doesn't succeed in obtaining it. In the next chapter, we shall see that in *The Prestige* the infatuation with objects becomes even more intense and ruins intersubjective relations.

## Chapter 3: The Unconscious Core of Magic in *The Prestige*

### 3.1 Introductory Statements

*The Prestige* (2006) marks the shift from the local to the global subject in the career of Christopher Nolan. The film is vast in scope as it pictures the subject within a geographically larger environment, which makes it significantly different from *Memento*. *The Prestige*, which is based on Christopher Priest's novel of the same name,<sup>16</sup> depicts the life of two rival magicians, Borden and Angier, in late Victorian and early 1900s London and America. After the accidental death of Angier's wife as a result of Borden's mistake, they start an endless rivalry both in life and career, which ends only when they die. The film depicts the two magicians' attempts to outdo each other in performing magic tricks as their rivalry turns into hatred and destroys their personal lives.

The central argument of this chapter is that the subject's obsession with objects destroys intersubjective relations that are required for the well-being of the society. After the traumatic death of his wife, Angier starts a quest for the *objet petit a* along the path of desire. While he imagines that by obtaining the impossible Machine he would reach the eventual object of satisfaction, he faces death and disaster at the end of the day. Borden, too, sacrifices his body and his wife to find satisfaction in the realm of objects, which, in this case, is performing magic tricks. Both Angier and Borden do not get the message that objects do not help them get the real cause of desire. That is why, like Leonard in *Memento*, none of them find satisfaction by the end of the film. Angier and Borden stand

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995) is the novel based on which Nolan, Jonathan and Christopher, wrote the film's screenplay.

for capitalism itself: they sacrifice everything to get total enjoyment, but they fail eventually.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that magic has an ideological function because it hides the truth from the audience and keeps telling them to come again to the theater in order to find the object of desire. The spectators do not consider the fact that there is a point from which the unconscious of the magic is looking back at them. This is the point that hides a surplus, namely the Real gaze (of the magic), which is not visible to the spectators because of the veil that desire puts in front of their look. Here, the backstage of magic, as an ideological location, is similar to capitalism because it hides the preparatory process of production from the spectator (or consumer).

Last but not least, I will consider the layered structure of the film as a manifestation of structural anamorphosis because it slows down perception by creating a non-linear story and hiding several facts from the spectator's eye (thus prolonging desire), which are revealed only at the end of the film. It is only when the spectators are done with watching the film that they come to the (retroactive) understanding that how deceitful is the path of desire. I will argue that the anamorphic image that Nolan provides for the spectators, should be adopted in real life to reconsider the relationship between subjects and objects.

### **3.2 Magic Acts and the Annihilation of the Original**

In “Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox,” Slavoj Žižek argues that the three acts of magic—namely the pledge, the turn, and the prestige—in

Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* are reminiscent of the Hegelian triad (thesis, antithesis, and synthesis):

Is this triple movement not the Hegelian triad at its purest? The thesis (pledge), its catastrophic negation (turn), the magical resolution of the catastrophe (prestige)? And, as Hegel was well aware, the catch is that, in order for the miracle of the "prestige" to occur, there must be a squashed dead bird somewhere. (286)

Žižek's 'squashed dead bird' is a reference to a magic trick in which a bird is literally killed so that an identical twin be presented to the audience under the name of the original.

In Nolan's *The Prestige*, the spectator of magic, like that of cinema, is interested in the replica not the original. The witness to such a return of the symbol for the original is seen in the sequence where a magician called Virgil (J. Paul Moore) performs an illusion. Virgil places a bird in a cage, which is shown in close up, and covers it with a shawl. For a second, the shawl consumes the whole frame, signifying that the magician is hiding something from the audience. The camera then tilts to Virgil as he raises both hands and, then, slams on the covered cage. Everything seems to have disappeared when Virgil lifts the cover, as there is no sign of the bird and the cage anymore. A boy, sitting among the spectators, starts crying as he points to the magician: "He killed it" (00:18:50-52). His aunt, seated beside him, tries to calm him down by telling him that "He didn't" (00:18:56-57). Virgil, almost confused at what the little boy says, takes a flower from his lapel and covers it with his shawl. When he lifts the shawl again, the flower has turned into a bird. The spectators, assuming that this is the original bird that Virgil made

disappear, begin to clap, but the boy continues his weeping. The boy does not stop crying by saying, “No, he killed it” (00:19:06-08). When the magic show is finished, Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), here assistant to Virgil, approaches the boy with the cage in his hand. He shows the bird to the boy and says: “Look, see. He is alright, he is fine. Look at him” (00:19:17-21). The boy says softly, “But where is his brother?” (00:19:21-23). Borden pauses, smiles, and tells his aunt: “He’s a sharp lad, your son!” (00:19:27-29).

Later on, when Borden goes to a room backstage, we see a huge number of birds, each with its identical twin. Borden puts the bird in a cage, saying, “You’re the lucky one today” (00:19:39-40), then taps on the top of the table in the middle of the room. A panel is opened and we see a flattened birdcage inside. He brings out the original (killed) bird from the cage, in an extreme close up, a scene which is extremely unpleasant to look at, and puts it into the garbage can. It now dawns on the film spectator that this is the bird that Virgil disappeared to amaze his audience with a replacement. The squashed dead bird is then the surplus, which is never visible to the eye of the spectator. Now the question is why all other people in the theater clap with joy, but the little boy’s eyes are filled with tears? It is this little child who, still in his first encounters with the Symbolic and language, is able to look awry and find the hole in the Symbolic. In the network of the Symbolic there is always a void, a nonsensical point which is impossible to locate if we look straightforwardly (the grotesque body of the dead bird). This void, which belongs with the realm of the Real, is not discernible as it is behind the object or act, outside the spectators’ vision, staring at them. The spectators’ desire distorts their vision and puts a veil between their vision and the point from which the magician’s art originates. The work of the magician, therefore, always contains a blind location where

the Real gaze is staring back at the audience. In other words, the gaze, which falls outside the field of vision is at the root of the magician's trick. However, the spectators miss the encounter with the gaze as they are not looking for the truth; rather, they are after the desire of the Other.

Magic, in this sense, has an ideological function. The magician's role is to hide something, to cover part of the reality in order to create a scene of wonder, a moment of fantasy. The Lacanian subject, as Žižek confirms, is looking for "*identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the law's suspension*" (*Metastases of Enjoyment* 55). The illusionist is able to momentarily provide such a moment of enjoyment and this fantasized reality is supported by the subject's desire. As Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) tells Borden at the end of the film,

The audience knows the truth. The world is simple. It's miserable. Solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, then you could make them wonder. And then you got to see something very special. You really don't know. It was the look on their faces. (02:02:26-03:10)

The spectators come to see the fulfillment of their desire, to obtain the impossible *objet petit a*, and the magician promises to provide that impossible object. However, what a magician does, under the name of real magic, is simply to sustain the spectators' desire so that they would come back tomorrow to continue such a dream. Since the Lacanian subject is a split one, torn between knowledge and desire, she or he comes back to simultaneously know the truth about the magic trick and have her or his desire satisfied. Since the unconscious desire is stronger, the subject would never know the truth. Similar

to the play of signification, magic replaces the symbol for the original and keeps moving forward without ever providing the audience with the eventual signified.

The magician's mystification of part of the truth in order to create wonder is similar to fantasy film, where the laws of probability are simply challenged in order to bring a painless resolution to what desire necessitates. Nolan parallels magic performance with the way it is arranged offstage to highlight the function of desire in perception. The fundamental law on which magic is based is the fact that the audience doesn't want the truth: the desire not to know is at work here. It is this desire to be deceived, to be fooled that governs the relationship between the magician and the spectators. As Alfred Borden notes, in Christopher Priest's eponymous novel,

The performer is of course not a sorcerer at all, but an actor who plays the part of a sorcerer and who wishes the audience to believe, if only temporarily, that he is in contact with darker powers. The audience, meantime, knows that what they are seeing is not true sorcery, but they suppress the knowledge and acquiesce to the selfsame wish as the performer's. The greater the performer's skill at maintaining the illusion, the better at this deceptive sorcery he is judged to be. (37)

The spectators of magic, we witness, are "not really looking" (00:02:37-38) for the secret because they "want to be fooled" (00:02:44-46).

What the magicians perform on stage in *The Prestige*, as Nolan shows, has another layer offstage, which functions as the key to the secret, or simply the unconscious of the magic. This unconscious space is where certain things happen that are hidden from the view of the spectators. Besides presenting the audience with an altered version of

reality, the magician, like a film director, provides the spectators with the finished product. He eliminates all the work that contributed to the production of his show. As an instance, every night, after the performance of *The Real Transported Man* by Angier, his assistants move the tank containing the dead body of Angier's replica to somewhere outside the theater. As Todd McGowan points out,

One of the chief effects of magic [...] is its tendency to focus audience attention on the result. If the illusionist [...] performs the art well, the audience pays attention to what appears [...] on stage [...] rather than to the work occurring outside of the audience's vision, the work that goes into constructing the illusion [...]. In this sense, it is] like capitalism itself [that] hides the fact that labor rather than exchange is the source of value [...] (*Fictional* 109)

The surplus that stays hidden from the eye of the spectator, the part that, if revealed, would undermine the functioning of the act is the core of magic (and the discourse of capitalism).

A deeper level of the impact of capitalism on the socio-economic life of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period that the film focuses on, could be seen in the realm of science which magicians invoke in order to perform the more astonishing magic tricks. This is specifically seen in the famous rivalry between Tesla and Edison which the film depicts, albeit in passing, signifying the role that science played in those years in strengthening the pillars of capitalism. Tesla's exhibition of alternating current in London is introduced as "one of the miracles of our age" (00:44:36-38) and "a technological marvel" (00:44:39-41) by the man who "is going to change the world" (00:44:52-53),

although the exposition is ruined, to quote Tesla's assistant, as "[p]art of Thomas Edison's smear campaign against Mr. Tesla's superior alternating current" (00:45:23-29). Later in the film, there is a scene that depicts the arrival of electricity as a key step in the lives of the people of the era. In this scene, Angier and Tesla's assistant, Alley (Andy Serkis), are looking from the mountains to the town of Colorado Springs. The scene pictures the darkness of the night and the faraway lights of the town. Alley tells Angier that "Tesla electrified the whole town in exchange for using the generators when we need them" (00:43:30-33). As Angier looks back to view the city lights, they disappear suddenly. Darkness covers everywhere. When Angier turns his head again to face Alley, he finds himself surrounded by an indefinite number of bulbs on the ground which produce a very dazzling light. Angier's only words are "Magic! Real magic!" (00:44:28-31). The magic Angier talks about is the gift that science brings for the capitalist society to help it develop at full throttle. The film depicts, in passing, a pivotal stage of capitalism and how it shapes the world of subjects by surrounding them with infinite number of objects. The way that science provides magicians with tools to entertain people in *The Prestige* signifies the formation of a wide network of interconnected discourses in an era which is of significant importance in the development of capitalism. Later on, the sabotage of Tesla's laboratory by Edison's men specifically limns the waste produced by the competitive market of capitalism, which, in this case, is caused by the non-ending rivalry between two poles of electrical innovations of the time.

Nolan's depiction of the technological innovation of the period is very much in line with his metaphorical representation of magic and its ideological significances. Not only does the magician hide the truth, in terms of representing something ordinary as

wonder, but also he conceals the waste of the production. The function of the ideology is to hide the truth, to attach the subject to a specific perspective towards viewing the world. In *The Prestige*, every time a magic trick is performed, something is concealed from the spectators' vision: this could be either a dead man or a dead bird. This is a surplus denied by the Symbolic, a traumatic point beyond the limit of the spectator, something that resides in the Real. In other words, a signifier in the Symbolic Order replaces that forbidden Real point in order to construct the subject's reality because, as Slavoj Žižek points out, ideology is "a symbolic field which contains such a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility" (*Plague of Fantasies* 98).

Nolan's juxtaposition of the two sides of the world of magic has an autotelic function. The realm of magic is to be considered as a metaphor for the art of filmmaking, and, at the same time, a microcosm of ideological formations, particularly capitalism. By locating the unconscious of magic, especially the labor and waste of production as well as explaining the secret of the magic trick, Nolan provides us with the anamorphic point that is hidden from us if we look directly. From this particular perspective, he challenges the way we view things and invites us to reconsider it. He dismantles the solid, well-shaped capitalist ideology in order to make us watch things closer. Nolan inserts manifestations of the Lacanian Real throughout the film to undercut the solid, rule-based Symbolic, which dominates the world of the spectator of magic as well as that of film. That is why the Real appears much sooner than expected in *The Prestige*.

### 3.3 Manifestations of the Imaginary and the Intrusions of the Real

Like *Memento*, the story of *The Prestige* revolves around a central traumatic event, which dislocates the subject from the position he holds in the Symbolic Order. This traumatic incident, namely the death of Angier's wife, Julia (Piper Perabo), triggers the enmity between Borden and Angier. During a magic trick by Milton (Ricky Jay), Borden, who serves as assistant to the magician, ties a complex knot to Julia's hands and she, unable to untie it inside the water tank, dies in front of the audience. The act begins when Julia, the voluptuous, beautiful young lady, as the projection of the desire of the spectators on stage, is hoisted into the air. She is first shown in close-up side view, with a vertical rope separating her from Borden, who is shown in a blurry view from a distance. As she is lifted in the air smiling, the camera tilts, then cuts to a view of her from behind. We hear the continuous sound of the mechanical rope hoist mixed with diegetic marching-style drum as Julia's husband, Robert Angier, is shown in a close-up with a look of admiration and satisfaction watching her raised into the air (see fig. 20). Once again, we have a full shot of Julia until she is positioned above the water tank, and eventually plunged into it. The tank is locked automatically and is covered with a red fabric. The spectators' expectations shift from hopeful questioning looks to impatient anxious murmurs, and they are shown in close-ups with a background of low key lighting as it takes longer than usual for the actress to reappear. Cutter (Michael Caine) runs towards the tank with an axe in his hand and removes the cover. Beneath the red fabric, the most traumatic event is going to happen. There are extreme close ups of Julia's face as she is desperately struggling to untie herself inside the tank paralleled with horrified looks of the spectators and the dumbfounded face of Angier in medium shot and close-

up. Julia's attempts come to an end and she dies inside the water tank and in front of the audience. Extreme close-ups of Julia's face, as she drowns, and her upright motionless body indicate the return of the Real in the disgusting form of death (see fig. 21).

Once Cutter breaks the glass tank with an axe, Julia's body collapses on the ground, with Angier rushing over her body as the scene shows frightened faces of the spectators. Angier's face, as he bends over Julia's dead body, shows a mixture of total disbelief and extreme fear. The expected fulfillment of desire turns into the most disgusting scene: a harsh blow to fantasy in the form of death. It is here that we encounter the anamorphic gaze: Angier's dejected eyes (see fig. 22) and the downcast faces of the spectators (see fig. 23) undermine the way they looked at Julia a few minutes ago. Julia's death signals a critical point in the story because it creates an enmity between the two magicians as Angier believes that Borden tied a complex knot that caused her wife's death. It is Julia's death that serves as the vehicle for the action of the film: it ignites desire in Angier, whose only impulse in the rest of the film is to master the resultant lack. Like Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, Angier finds desire and the path to the *objet petit a* as the only option to deal with the trauma.

The hostility between Robert Angier and Alfred Borden increases with the passage of time. This brings forward manifestations of the Lacanian Imaginary Order since, as I mentioned in chapter 1, it is in this phase that there occurs a relationship of otherness, which results in all future aggressivity. After Julia's death, Angier is obsessed



Figure 20. *The Prestige*: shot 1



Figure 21. *The Prestige*: shot 2



Figure 22. *The Prestige*: shot 3



Figure 23. *The Prestige*: shot 4

with Borden's private life to see if he has a wife and if he is happy with her. When Angier attends London's Royal Albert Hall, which exhibits the alternating current invented by Tesla (David Bowie), he notices that Borden is also sitting in the audience. After the abrupt ending of the exhibit, he follows Borden. The scene shows tracking shots of Angier and Borden as they are walking in a crowded street. The camera then cuts to a full shot of Borden as he approaches his wife, Sarah (Rebecca Hall), who is pushing a pram. Borden lifts the baby, and, as he is smiling, he says, "Have you had a nice day with mummy, huh?" (00:46:35-37). Then he looks at Sarah, in close up, kisses her, saying, "Sarah, I love you" (00:46:40-43). The camera then cuts to the envious Angier with his glistening eyes in close up as his voice-over describes his feelings: "I saw happiness. Happiness that should have been mine" (00:46:49-53). Later in the film, he tells Olivia (Scarlett Johansson), "He has a family now and he is performing again. Borden is out there living his life just as he intended, as if nothing has happened. And look at me, I'm alone and no theater will touch me" (00:53:10-21). Angier, in his relationship with

Borden, displays a mixture of identification—at certain times he admires what Borden performs as magic—and otherness, as he envies Borden’s seemingly better life and attempts to avenge Julia’s death.

Angier, then, decides to outdo Borden both in magic tricks and in personal life. Despite his efforts, however, he always seems one step behind. He succeeds in purloining Borden’s diary, which includes his magic tricks but the key to Borden’s most prestigious act, The Transported Man, is missing. That is why Angier kidnaps Borden’s ingénieur, Fallon (Christian Bale), in order to extort from Borden the code to his magic trick. Once Borden provides Angier with the code (TESLA), he sets off to Colorado to see Nikola Tesla and asks him to build him the same machine he made for Borden. However, as Angier figures out later (while reading Borden’s diary), Tesla never made such a machine for Borden. In other words, there is no signified behind the signifier TESLA. In this sense, the machine serves as the *objet petit a* because it does not exist but it propels desire. As Angier comes to the last pages of Borden’s diary, he finds out that his assistant, Olivia, whom he had sent to steal Borden’s diary, fell in love with Borden, and it was Borden who asked her to give his diary to Angier in order to convince him to embark on an impossible mission. In the last few pages of Borden’s diary, Angier faces the Real gaze, the gaze that tells the subject that the *objet petit a* is only a phantom. The last few lines of Borden’s diary reveal that Angier was deceived long ago:

Today my mistress proves her truthfulness. Not to me, you understand.

I’ve been convinced [...] Today, Olivia proves her love for me, to you,

Angier! Yes, Angier, she gave you this notebook at my request. And, yes.

‘Tesla’ is merely the key to my diary, not to my trick. You really think I’d

part with my secret so easily after so much? Goodbye Angier. May you find solace for your forward ambition back in your American home.

(01:22:32-23:05)

While reading these lines, Nolan shows us an extreme close up of Angier's face as he reads the lines dumbfounded. The camera then cuts to Angier's hands crumpling the diary.

Angier's mission, his long journey to Colorado, turns out not to be "a search, a search for answers" (00:07:42-44), as he claims, but to obtain the impossible Machine. This is how it works in the cinema of Christopher Nolan: the subject supposed to know, or the subject of knowledge, is always a façade for the subject of desire. It is desire that functions as the driving force for Angier's actions: he is never satisfied with what he has, and he wants more. When Angier succeeds in his first performance of *The New Transported Man*, he doesn't find what he has achieved as the final object of satisfaction. Right after the show, he thinks that what Borden does for the same trick is much better than his: "I need to know how he does it [...] so I can do it better" (01:02:13-16). That is why he asks his assistant, Olivia Wenscombe, to go and work for Borden so she could find his secret. Cutter reveals to Angier the truth behind Borden's trick, but it doesn't work: "I already know how he does it, Robert. Same way he always has, the same way as we do. It's just that you want something more" (01:16:52-59). However, the desire for the impossible *objet petit a* is a futile endeavor because, as Todd McGowan puts it, similar to *Memento*, here again "the future does not hold the solution to the problem of desire and that the destiny of the subject is one of a failed repetition rather than progress toward possible future" (*Out of Time* 31).

Angier's diary has a symmetrical role. Once Borden is found guilty of Angier's alleged murder, which occurred during Angier's performance of *The Real Transported Man*, he is provided with Angier's diary by someone introducing himself as Lord Caldlow (Hugh Jackman), who later turns out to be Angier in disguise. In the last few lines of the diary, Borden finds out that Angier is not really dead, but alive: "But here at the turn, I must leave you, Borden. Yes, you Borden. Sitting there, in your cell, reading my diary, awaiting your death, for my murder" (01:31:27-41). Borden's face, perplexed, shows disbelief. Unlike what Borden, Cutter, the Judge, and the spectators of the film thought, Angier's supposed death never happened. Angier's diary, like that of Borden's, is based on nothing, but, this nothing has a significant effect. It is a signifier without signified because it is based on Angier's death by Borden, which didn't happen in reality and it was actually during the cloning (by the Machine) that the original Angier died.

The two magician's diaries instantly serve as agents of the gaze because they provide an oblique connection to the truth. They initiate desire and temporarily tell the subject (here the magician) that he is in control of the scene (each magician imagines that by reading the diary he would be able to discover the truth about the other.) but he eventually understands that he is far from the truth. The spectators, also, fall prey to the trap of desire as they see everything through the eyes of subjects in the film. In this regard, the diaries are similar to Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, because in a moment of revelation the magicians and the spectators understand that they are not in control of the scene. Therefore, there occurs a change of positions: the seemingly all-knowing subjects (the magicians and the film spectators), who thought themselves to be in control of everything, suddenly obtain the knowledge that they were being looked at

all that time, and such a discovery produces intense anxiety. The diary serves as the agent of the Real, because in it there is something they cannot discover, it is hidden, or rather, nonexistent. The spectators of the film, then, receive the message that the film is a trap, a trap in the sense that it invites their look to eventually surround them with the gaze, the gaze which reveals to them that desire is deceitful. The anamorphic arrangement of the diaries and their connection with the truth is the message of the film: it is always from a retroactive position that the subjects find out that they were provided with a mirage. Therefore, anamorphosis is an attempt to slow down the process of watching the film to tell the spectators that not only in the theaters but also in real life there are traps (ideologies) that they need to be cautious about. Such a perspective has the ultimate goal of reconsidering or revisiting certain ideas or discourses that have already shaped the subjects' realities.

Although Angier discovers that Tesla didn't build a machine for Borden, he convinces Tesla to make one for him. The Machine that Tesla builds for Angier to perform the trick called The Real Transported Man is an excess to desire, because it promises that it could bring unlimited enjoyment for the subject. Not only is it real, in the sense that it literally exists, but also it moves beyond reality because of its ability to create exact same copies of everything. The Machine has a retroactive function in the film. Its first emergence is when it is not working anymore, as it is being inspected by the Judge (Daniel Davis) to uncover the secret of Angier's death: it is an extreme long shot, using low-key lighting, putting the Machine cabinet in the center of the frame in such a way as to emphasize its enormous size. Then, two men appear in the darkness and approach it. Upon showing the Machine to the Judge, Cutter warns him that it is "[t]he

most disappointing of all” (00:22:16-17) tricks because “It has no trick. It’s real” (00:22:21-25). The disappointing fact about the Machine is its promise to go beyond the limits of the pleasure principle by producing *jouissance*. However, it only sacrifices the original to produce a replica. The Machine, therefore, only provides mirages of the *objet petit a* without ever presenting the audience with the real thing.

In his first meeting with Angier, Tesla warns him that his obsession (with desire) would have consequences. The scene shows Tesla and Angier in shot reverse shot, sitting around a table overlooking the valley on the deck of Tesla’s laboratory:

Angier: I need something impossible.

[...]

Tesla: Go home. Forget this thing. I can recognize an obsession. No good will come of it.

Angier: Hasn’t good come of your obsessions?

Tesla: At first, but I have followed them too long. I am their slave. And one day they will choose to destroy me.

Angier: If you understand an obsession then you know you won’t change my mind. (00:50:33-51:57)

Angier is right about the working of desire: the subject of desire becomes obsessed with obtaining the impossible *objet petit a*. He proves to be the subject (of capitalism) who is obsessed with the world of objects. His only impulse is to get the best tools to perform the best magic tricks. Such an obsession makes Angier forget about his wife. When Olivia tells him that Borden’s diary “won’t get your wife back,” Angier responds, “I don’t care about my wife—I care about his [Borden’s] secret!” (01:11:56-59). Once he

utters these words, the camera shows an extreme close up of his face, and he realizes what he has said. Angier moves away from the world of subjects and devotes himself to the Machine.

When the building of the Machine is finished, Tesla leaves Angier a letter of instruction. As Angier is reading the letter, with Tesla's voice-over, the spectator discerns Tesla's deep concerns: because of the extraordinary ability of the Machine to create the same out of the original, Tesla warns Angier against using it:

The truly extraordinary is not permitted in science and industry. Perhaps you'll find more luck in your field, where people are happy to be mystified [...] I add only one suggestion on using the machine. Destroy it. Drop it to the bottom of the deepest ocean. Such a thing will bring you only misery. (01:30:17-48)

The look in Angier's eyes that we see after reading Tesla's letter is straight and determined, accompanied by his voice-over, "Tesla's warning is as unheeded as he knew it would be" (01:30:53-56). Angier's obsessive desire is so strong that he doesn't even think about Tesla's advice.

The Machine, which stands for the technological innovations of the industrial age, proves to be a complex creation. It consists of a large cylindrical unit the height of a long man and the width is so as to accommodate six men. There is a large globe above the cylinder which absorbs bolts of electricity radiating from two nearby generators and transmits it to the object inside. When an object is placed inside the cylinder, whether it is a hat, a cat, or a man, it is reproduced somewhere else as the radiating bolts disappear with a sputtering noise. Angier arranges a first private performance to show his trick to

the theatrical agent, Ackerman (Edward Hibbert), who expresses extreme wonder at the prestige that the Machine (re)produces. For him, the Machine is too real, and that is why he asks Angier to make some adjustments in the Machine's appearance: "It's very rare to see real magic [...] but you'll have to dress it up a little. Disguise it. Give them enough reason to doubt it" (01:37:48-38:11). Angier makes a few adjustments and decorations to the appearance of the Machine so that it becomes more acceptable to the vision.

The Machine's first performance proves to be eye-dazzling. Angier stands in the center of the stage, preparing the spectators for what his magic trick is going to show: "In my travels I have seen the future, and it is a strange future indeed. The world, ladies and gentlemen, is on the brink of new and terrifying possibilities" (01:41:14-29). As he knocks his cane on the ground and spreads his arms, there is a shift from medium to extreme long shot, depicting both the spectators and the stage, as a blue spotlight focuses on Angier. The audience applauds. The camera then instantly cuts to Borden, who is sitting in the audience, but then cuts back to Angier as he continues his introductory speech: "What you're about to witness is not magic. It's purely science" (01:41:49-55). As a few people come on the stage to examine the Machine, Angier closes his eyes. When the people on the stage leave, he tosses his cane to his assistant, removes his coat and the ring on his left hand, pauses for a second, then gently turns around and moves towards the Machine to place himself inside. Bolts of light radiate from the Machine and their reflection is seen on the spectators' faces. Angier disappears in a second. The real Angier is drowned in a tank of water beneath the stage; his dead body (or the waste of the production) remains hidden from the eyes of the spectators. If the wall that separates this

dead body from the audience is removed, we could see that the motionless body is looking (at the audience) with his eyes wide open.

As the spectators look at each other anxiously, waiting for him to reappear on the stage, they hear Angier's footsteps from behind. The Machine has worked. As everyone turns around, Angier is shown in the back, towering over the audience. Cries of wonder fill the theater and the sound of the spectators' claps becomes simultaneous with Angier's final speech: "Man's reach exceeds his imagination" (01:42:57-43:00). He then spreads his hands. The camera cuts to Borden whose look shows disappointment and perplexity, then cuts again to Angier whose face shows excitement and satisfaction. Angier's performance of *The Real Transported Man* appears as a stain in the picture, as an excess in desire, since the trick's prestige appears as a blow to consciousness. The camera is placed right above Angier's head showing him as distinguished from the spectators located far from him. Similar to Holbein's anamorphic painting, which highlights a void in our perception, Angier's duplicate stands behind the audience, somewhere neglected by them. If we recollect everything for a second, there is a dead body under the stage with open, motionless eyes. This dead body is the real Angier. The replica appears at the other corner of the stage as a stain in the picture, momentarily neglected by the look. Angier's dead body serves as the location from which the invisible gaze is returning the look of the audience and the film spectators. The function of this dead body is the same as the *objet petit a* because while it does not exist anymore, it provides the audience with a mirage, misguiding them to believe that the replica is the original. Similar to the anamorphic gaze in Holbein's painting, the *objet petit a* is a "parallax object" because it

is “only when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective” that one can see it (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 18).

### 3.4 Ideological Considerations of Self-Annihilation and Sacrifice

In *The Prestige*, sacrifice and self-destruction are essential to most magic tricks. When Borden loses two fingers during the bullet catch trick, he has to cut off two of his twin’s fingers in order to preserve his cover. Angier’s duplication of himself, too, occurs through a process of self-annihilation. In order for a duplicate to appear as the prestige of the magic trick, Angier needs to die in the first place. In Christopher Priest’s novel, *The Prestige*, on which Nolan has based the film,<sup>17</sup> we can witness the ultimate pain that comes with such a sacrifice. During *In a Flash*,<sup>18</sup> while Rupert Angier has stated the mechanics of the illusion,<sup>19</sup> Borden goes down the stage where he finds the generator that produces electricity for the Machine and turns it off:

The transmission had been interrupted! But it had begun before it was stopped, and now I could see an image of myself on the rail; there was my ghost, my *doppelgänger*, momentarily frozen in the stance I had adopted when I turned to look, half twisted, half crouching, looking away and up. It was a thin, insubstantial copy of myself, a partial prestige. Even as I looked, this image of myself straightened in alarm, threw out his arms, and collapsed backwards and out of sight into the loge itself! (339-40)

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<sup>17</sup> Nolan’s adaptation of Priest’s eponymous novel is, to a considerable degree, an innovative move as he makes noticeable adjustments to the plot.

<sup>18</sup> *In a Flash* is renamed as *The Real Transported Man* in the film.

<sup>19</sup> Rupert is modified as Robert in the film.

The startling outcome of the interrupted procedure is the facsimile of Angier, a ghostly creature which is almost invisible in dim light. The original Angier, also, loses a considerable weight, becomes a man without soul, and dies eventually because of the injury:

Both I and my prestige were much reduced by Borden's intervention. We each had problems to cope with. I was in a wraithlike condition, my prestige was in debilitated health. While he had corporeality and freedom of movement in the world, from the moment of the accident he was doomed to die; meanwhile, I had been condemned to a life in the shadows, but my health was intact.<sup>20</sup> (370-71)

In the film, we are able to witness how traumatic it is for Angier to undergo such a sacrificial procedure. Nearly at the end of the film, as Angier is dying, he remembers his initial test with the Machine as he is talking to Borden: "I've made sacrifices [...] It takes everything" (02:00:36-46). Through parallel editing Nolan depicts Angier's pale face as he is dying, and at the same time, scenes of his recollections with his voice-over. When he places himself inside the Machine during the test, he discovers that the Machine has created a double, a twin like himself within a few seconds. He immediately picks up a gun and kills his double. The double which is eliminated instantly is the excess that appears as an anomaly in the system. It is the unbearable Real which is not understandable by the Symbolic Order. When Angier encounters his double for the first time, he feels the threat that would disturb his position in the realm of the Symbolic and that is why he kills the double. As Angier says, "It took courage to climb into that machine every night, not

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<sup>20</sup> This part is narrated by the Angier's ghost-like facsimile.

knowing if I'd be the man in the box or in the prestige" (02:01:16-32). The Real, here, is not simply the identical replica, but actually the void it creates, the instability it brings about.

The subject goes through this painful sacrifice to get something impossible, namely the *jouissance* that comes with the *objet petit a*. Both in Priest's novel and Nolan's film, this element of sacrifice crystalizes not to cover a lack in the Symbolic, as we may witness in fantasy film, but actually to highlight the impossibility of obtaining total satisfaction. Angier's self-annihilation and reincarnation point to a hole in the Symbolic, to a specific view of the world which may be disturbing to watch. As Todd McGowan points out,

Self-sacrifice functions ideologically when it is tied to the promise of a recovered wholeness for the subject [...] An emancipatory self-sacrifice, in contrast, works to shatter the image of wholeness. It targets the source of illusion of wholeness in order to indicate that there is an opening to a beyond within the seemingly closed whole. (*Fictional* 112)

The destruction of the subject to get something impossible is at the core of capitalism. Capitalism keeps telling the subjects to sacrifice whatever they have in order to get a phantasmagoric moment of happiness by obtaining the *objet petit a*. However, the subject never gets the reward for the sacrifice.

This sacrificial element is also seen in Borden's actions. When one of the Borden twins loses two fingers in the bullet catch trick, the other agrees to share his fate. The scene shows the Borden twins in medium shot, with one sitting and the other standing next to him in their workshop. The camera then cuts to an extreme close-up of the left

hand of the one sitting on the chair. A second later, the one who has lost two fingers, puts his hand over the latter's. The standing Borden places a chisel on the sitting Borden, picks up a hammer, and then the other screams as the hammer cuts his fingers. The Borden brothers' profession takes priority over everything else. Borden doesn't even tell his wife, Sarah, that he has a twin brother who assists him in performing magic tricks. Sarah does not know that it is not her husband, who is in love with Olivia, but actually his twin brother. That is why Sarah, in desperation, commits suicide. The Bordens sacrifice their own bodies as well as their loved ones to get what they want and this is the void at the core of capitalism: sacrificing one's own body and intersubjective relations for the sake of objects. The rivalry between Angier and Borden starts a quest for the sublime *objet petit a*, a never-ending mission to move beyond the ordinary. Earlier in the film, Cutter tells Angier, "You got to get your hands dirty, if you're going to achieve the impossible" (00:35:43-46). Both Borden and Angier are ready to depart with their loved ones in order to pursue the path of desire.

There is another dimension to the ideological considerations of the film: Nolan's treatment of social class which is connected to the concept of doubleness in *The Prestige*. Here, the doubleness creates a space where social classes melt and the lower classes triumph over the upper classes. Borden and Angier use doubles to perform their teleportation magic trick. Borden has a twin brother who assists him in this magic trick: One of the brothers disappears in the turn and the other appears as the prestige. Before obtaining the Machine, Angier, too, uses a double called Root (Hugh Jackman). Throughout the film, it dawns on us that Robert Angier is an upper-class man with no monetary restrictions. As Borden says at the end of the film, he spends "a fortune"

(02:01:58) to build the Machine. Angier's double, Root, is an alcoholic lower-class character with no money, who later blackmails Angier for playing the role of his double. Borden twins belong to the working class, and there is a continuous reference to their weak financial situation in the first half of the film. During the teleportation trick, we witness a temporary removal of class boundaries, which gives us evidence that the film plays with the notion of social class.

Because of his astonishing similarity to Angier, Root is employed to play the role of the prestige in *The New Transported Man*, with the former being the pledge of the trick. Every time the trick is performed, Angier disappears from the door downstage and Root reappears from the door upstage. The one who finally receives the spectators' applause is not Angier, but to his dissatisfaction, the alcoholic Root. To put it simply, the upper-class Angier collapses in order for the lower-class Root to raise. In the rehearsals, to Angier's surprise, Root shows himself to be even better than Angier in playing his role. After, their first performance, Angier expresses his discontent with the situation: "I spent the ovation hiding under the stage. No one cares about the man who disappears, the man who goes into the box. They care about the man who comes out the other side" (01:01:15-21). That is why he proposes a solution: "Maybe we could switch before the tricks, I could be the prestige, and Root ends up below the stage" (01:01:26-30). His proposition, however, is rejected by Cutter, and he continues to hear the spectators' ovation only under the stage. Later on, Olivia tells Borden that such a situation is "killing him [Angier]. He is obsessed with discovering your methods. He thinks of nothing else, takes no pleasure in our success" (01:05:13-19). In the teleportation trick, therefore, the

spectators may see the upper-class Angier in the pledge, but the prestige is always the working or lower class.

When Borden goads Root into blackmailing Angier, he accepts it. Later, Borden, with Root's assistance, ruins Angier's performance of *The New Transported Man*. In this specific sequence, Angier, as usual, introduces the show, then, a trap door opens and he goes underneath the stage. However, there is no cushion under the stage as Borden has removed it. When Angier looks to the other side, he doesn't find Root. To his surprise, it is Borden who has replaced Root. He goes up through the trap door, ruining Angier's performance. Once again, then, the working class replaces the upper-class in the magic trick.

While Angier's plot to get Borden killed seems successful with Borden's trial, imprisonment, and eventual hanging by neck, with one of the Borden twins still alive, there is a reversal of fortunes. In the last few scenes of the film, Borden's twin shoots Angier and leaves to pick up his brother's little daughter, Jess (Samantha Mahurin), who is with Cutter. Through crosscutting we also see that Angier's dead body lies on the ground, surrounded by flames, and the film ends with a side view of Angier's dead replica in a water tank. The ending, therefore, signifies that even after spending a fortune the upper-class Angier fails to create replicas of his social class and while Borden dies, his generation survives through his brother and Jess.

### **3.5 Narrative Structure as an Anamorphic View of Filmic Image**

There are several narrative lines running through *The Prestige*. The film's complicated plot reminds us of *Memento* and its layered structure. The arrangement of plotlines in both films requires the undivided attention of the spectator to uncover certain

facts. While there are no more black and white or color narratives at work to emphasize the chronological distinction of plotlines (as we saw in *Memento*), still the nonlinear layers of the plot are the codes to understanding the film. However, it is not simply because of its nonlinear plot that *The Prestige* is a rather difficult film to follow. Nolan's manipulation of events works in complex ways to retroactively ask the spectators to rearrange every scene in their minds. As Bordwell and Thompson point out, "The plot shuffles story order, plays with levels of knowledge, replays some scenes, and cuts off others, withholding their consequences [to misdirect] our attention" (*Film Art* 300). Like *Memento*, *The Prestige* depicts events mostly from a retroactive view of time. In other words, the narration occurs after most of the action has occurred. This retroactive perspective cuts through the more chronological, anticipatory standpoint. Lacan's view of time is not different from the way that Nolan arranges the plots for his films. Lacan rejects "a linear notion of time" because "in the psyche time can equally well act in reverse, by retroaction and anticipation" (Evans 209). For Lacan, history is a "synthesis" of the past and the present or the past as lived in the present (*Freud's Papers* 36). Such a synthesis of retroaction and anticipation means that Lacan is actually providing us with a model of time which occurs in the unconscious. The past is not dead because there are certain memories that reappear to affect our present. At the same time, the present is here to shed light on the past and give us a clue about what to expect in the future. It would make sense to consider Nolan's layered plot in *The Prestige* from what Lacan proposes about time to see how retroaction and anticipation shape the plot of the film.

There are three interdependent plotlines discernible in *The Prestige*: The first layer is the central plotline which represents the events that happened in the near past and

those running in the present. This layer is a synthesis of the two more plotlines: it connects the other two by going to and fro, using flashbacks and flash-forwards, to propel the action of the story. It starts with Borden's trial for the alleged murder of Robert Angier and ends with Borden's death by hanging and Angier's murder by Borden's twin. The central plotline also updates us on the two magician's unfinished diaries by giving us information on Angier's performance of *The Real Transported Man* as well as Borden's aggravated relationship with Sarah. This focal plotline is interspersed with two more narratives: (1) Robert Angier's diary read by Alfred Borden, which starts from Angier's intention to travel to Colorado to have Tesla make a special machine for his magic tricks until his initial tests with the Machine to see if it is working as promised; (2) Alfred Borden's diary read by Angier, which recollects events that happened earlier than those recorded in Angier's diary. It starts with the two magicians working together as young talents, then moves to their later hostility after Julia's death, and ends when Borden gives Angier's assistant, Olivia, his notebook of tricks, but asks her to pretend that she really stole it so that Angier embarks on a mission to find its truth. The central plotline joins these two narratives and brings things to an end. Since, however, these three plotlines are treated concurrently, editing plays a considerable role in the film.

Editing becomes a demanding task when the past and the present mingle together. As David Bordwell says,

*In The Prestige*, embedded stories permit Nolan's crosscutting to become more audacious. Crosscutting juxtaposes the two men's life stories, at the same times keeping us focused on the trial taking place in the present.

Moreover, the discovered-manuscript convention motivates not only trips into the past but a brisk alternation of past and present. (*Labyrinth* 37)

Like in *Memento*, parallel editing has a central role in juxtaposing the different layers of the plot in *The Prestige*. The initial sequence of the film establishes these parallel worlds and, in a way, prepares the spectators for such a complicated experience. The film starts with a scene of a bunch of hats on the ground in the woods, which the spectators will retroactively discover to be the one witnessed by Angier outside Tesla's laboratory. This scene, which is later repeated in Angier's diary, has a voice-over, clearly Borden's voice, saying, "Are you watching closely?" (00:00:57-58), thus anticipating the narration of his diary as an integral part of the film. Therefore, this very short scene, which is less than fifteen seconds, heralds the intense rivalry between the two magicians as the essential feature of the story of the film. Right after this very short scene, there is a sequence which includes shots of the film's last sequence—which is actually the ending point of the central plot—where Cutter performs a magic trick for Borden's little daughter, paralleled with shots from Angier's first performance of *The Real Transported Man*. Therefore, in the very first sequence of the film, Nolan informs the spectator of all the layers of the film through crosscutting. However, as it is common with his filmmaking, he withholds certain important facts—in this case, the prestige of *The Real Transported Man*—from the spectator until later in the film. The key to structural anamorphosis is precisely here: the spectators only belatedly discover the futility of Angier's quest for the impossible object. In these introductory shots, we are not provided with Angier's tragic ending; however, quick shots from a later sequence (*The Real Transported Man*), which portray Angier's excessive pride, foreshadow the vanity of his fantasy. It is only

retroactively that the film spectators come to comprehend concealed information. The gaze, in the form of a narrative component, exposes itself as an unnoticed surplus. The film, therefore, serves as a trap, a puzzle which eventually reveals to the spectators that, unlike what they imagined, they were not in control of the scene.

It is interesting to see that even characters defer meaning by hiding information from each other. One clear example occurs after the death by drowning of Angier's wife, Julia. During Julia's funeral inside the mausoleum, as Cutter and Angier stand over Julia's open coffin, the former, seeing the latter's predicament, tells him an anecdote: "I knew an old sailor once. They told me he went overboard, tangled in the sails. They pulled him out, but it took him five minutes to cough" (00:26:04-16). Angier stares blankly at Julia's body in extreme close up waiting for the rest of Cutter's sentence. Cutter continues, "He said it was like..." (00:26:18-19); he pauses, looks at Angier in less than a second, then resumes, "going home" (00:26:20-21). These last words, like Lacanian *point de capiton*, bring a temporary resolution to Angier's agony. Nearly at the end of the film, Cutter tells Angier the same anecdote: "I once told you about a sailor who described drowning to me" (01:56:41-46). Angier replies, "Yeah, he said it was like going home" (01:56:47-48). Cutter continues, "I was lying. He said it was agony" (01:56:50-53). What distinguishes these two scenes is the lighting. In the mausoleum, the scene is bright, with all the background being white, while in the latter, there is low key lighting displaying only Cutter's face. This playing with words by some characters does not happen by chance: it sets the default template based on which the film's overall structure stands. By doing so, the film escapes any straightforward narration, and this feature makes certain facts difficult to comprehend.

Nolan demands from the spectators to look carefully at the film and watch for the traps that might distract them. This is precisely in line with what we know from anamorphosis: it is a picture, a parallax object, which is decoded from one specific angle. The sentence ‘*Are you watching closely?*’ is repeated several times in the film. It implies the fact that in watching the magic tricks as well as in watching films, the spectators are blind to something, or simply, to the secret of the seemingly impossible magical act. They are deceived into taking an impossible illusion as real. As Patricia Pisters points out,

Here Nolan acknowledges that vision is a mental operation, with a partial (in any case open and dynamic) relationship to the external world, and that illusionist filmmakers, as neuroscientists with different means, show us how the nature of the brain and the nature of the filmic image call perception’s relation to reality into question. (84)

The spectators of magic and film, in other words, are looking for the impossible object of their desire and that is why they are unable to discover the truth. While the secret of magic, unlike what it seems to be, is simple, it should remain hidden at all costs. As Borden says, “Never show anyone. They’ll beg you and flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up, you’ll be nothing to them” (00:20:12-19). Magic, therefore, acts like desire because it conceals the fact that there is nothing sublime, no *objet petit a* behind it. The sentence ‘*Are you watching closely?*’ is not simply an address to the audience of magic, but actually a reference to the relationship between the spectator of cinema and the filmic image. For example, part of what Nolan does, the way he shows Fallon, mostly in very quick shots, not in full, but from behind or from the left or the

right side, is a trick: he doesn't want to reveal that Fallon is Borden's twin. Therefore, the way he steals information from the film spectators moves parallel to what magic does to the spectators. As Ann Heilmann puts it, "*The Prestige* proffers an explicit invitation to reflect on its constructedness by invoking our knowledge of and interest in Victorian science and yet succeeds in deceiving us, just as Victorian conjurors did their audience in the very act of displaying all the Props" (39). In other words, we could say, what Nolan represents as magic is only a world within the world of cinema. The film, therefore, becomes an autotelic picture, something that reveals the truth about itself. It is only belatedly and retroactively that the film spectator figures out the truth about Borden twins.

The mingling of the past and the present, therefore, creates a story, which is not easy to grasp. In the beginning of the film, the spectators are presented with the film's closure, which is to suggest that they have already seen the film's ending. However, important facts are revealed later. Since the beginning of the film is its ending, the structure is similar to the Mobius strip, which, as Lacan says, like desire "has no underside, that is to say, that in following it, one will come back mathematically to the surface that is supposed to be its other side" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 235). In other words, if you start from a certain point in the strip, you would reach the same point at the end because the starting point and the end are the same. Besides, the three chronologically different layers of the film flow into each other to create an atemporal space, where perception loses its connection with direct, realistic storytelling. What Nolan does here is to suggest that his filmmaking is similar to magic because, like magicians, he withholds the truth from vision, and, in this sense, he sustains desire for the

impossible. The final scene of the film makes it exactly like Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: the frame shows Angier's dead body on the ground, surrounded by flames in his underground storage (see figs. 24-27). On each side of this large space there are several empty water tanks. We, as spectators, imagine that we are in control of the scene. Suddenly the camera pans to the left: there is a dead body in a water tank, which belongs to one of Angier's clones. The body is in upright position in side view with protruding eyes. Now we come to understand that it was this dead body that served as a trap for our



Figure 24. *The Prestige*: shot 5



Figure 25. *The Prestige*: shot 6



Figure 26. *The Prestige*: shot 7



Figure 27. *The Prestige*: shot 8

look. In other words, it was the gaze of the *objet petit a* which was shaping our desire. The film, therefore, reveals to be where one could find the anamorphic gaze of the object cause of desire.

Nolan's portrayal of the anamorphic image implicitly asks the spectators to look away in order to find the truth, to uncover the fantasized position that they are always placed in. His arrangement of the plot mirrors the spectators' position towards film and

magic to make them more conscious of the ways that certain things are arranged without their knowledge in real life. What if the filmic image is only a microcosm for the way that we see the world around us? It would make quite a bit of sense, then, to look again to the world we are situated in to reconsider our relationship with subjects and objects. In doing such a task, we need to slow down perception and change the angle from which we have always been looking at the surrounding world.

While in Chapters 1 and 2, I focused on narrative time and the arrangement of events in the plot to talk about Nolan's anamorphic art, in the next chapter, I shall discuss the way that *mise-en-scène* creates a space where the anamorphic Real distorts the way that we understand the Symbolic Order.

## Chapter 4: *The Dark Knight* and Radical Politics of the Real

### 4.1 Introductory Statements

Christopher Nolan's direct preoccupation with politics appears only in *The Dark Knight Trilogy*. *The Dark Knight* (2008) is the second film in this trilogy, the first one being *Batman Begins* (2005), and the last one, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). *The Dark Knight* depicts the rivalry between Batman (Christian Bale) and the Joker (Heath Ledger) as symbolic representations of good (or law) and evil (or chaos) in the fictional city of Gotham. The film does not end with the flawless triumph of good over evil: the Joker doesn't die and Batman escapes the city, with police dogs on the hunt. Moreover, the Joker leaves his impact on the social order by turning Gotham's best citizen, Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), into a vengeful monster.

In this chapter, I will argue that Nolan's representation of Batman, as the projection of the (distorted) desire of the spectators, is constantly undercut by the Joker, whose role is to highlight the void in the Symbolic Order and the essential lack in desire. While Batman serves as the fantasy that forms the spectators' desire, the Joker, I will argue, is the anamorphic stain, which projects the nightmarish fears of the society, or the Real core of desire. By particularly focusing on the *mise-en-scène* (especially make-up and costume), I will discuss the ways that Batman and the Joker prove to be the two sides of capitalism: while Batman's ultimate power and wealth is what capitalism promises, the Joker's violent, unruly actions project the underside of capitalism, the senseless core on which it stands.

The Joker, I shall propose, provides us with the anamorphic gaze of the Real. His revolutionary politics, which are enacted through explosion and anarchy, pose a

massive threat to stability and order. The Joker's disruptive impact on the social order will be discussed especially in connection with Harvey Dent's metamorphosis and the video footage that he prepares and sends to the world. I will ultimately suggest that the Joker is a foreclosed surplus, whose (re)appearance is a means to undercut capitalism and subvert the film as a medium of presentation (or perception).

#### **4.2 Gotham's Dark Knight and The Fantasy at the Core of Capitalism**

In this chapter, I will discuss how Nolan's revitalization of the DC Comics character the Joker provides the spectators with a space for rethinking the social order and the film. Before elaborating on the Joker's appearance and actions, however, it would make sense to examine Batman as the fantasy that shapes the spectators' dreams. We need to look at Batman and his secret identity, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale), in order to understand why we should consider him as a subject of capitalism. In this section, I will argue that Batman (or Bruce Wayne), as a complicated character, creates a paradoxical picture for the spectators: while he presents himself as the ultimate fantasy of the spectators, the one with whom they can identify, he proves to be inaccessible (like the *objet petit a*) in different ways. In my discussion, I shall also consider Batman as the agent of power whose vigilante quests serve to maintain order in Gotham.

In *The Dark Knight*, the most political scenes occur nearly at the end. In the last sequence of the film, the spectators are presented with the way that ideology (or power) functions by misrepresenting events in order to maintain order in society. In this particular scene, Gordon (Gary Oldman) makes a brief memorial speech at Harvey Dent's funeral. Here, the *mise-en-scène* is familiar to the spectator of the film since it depicts a cliché, as it is common with funerals for eminent political figures: a large

picture of the deceased behind the person who is at the podium making a speech, a number of attendants listening to the speaker respectfully, a flag of the United States in the right, and a flag of the city (here Gotham) in the left. Gordon's speech is too short, and at the same time, too far from the truth: "A hero. Not the hero we deserved, but the hero we needed. Nothing less than a knight. Shining!" (02:22:27-36). The spectator's task to uncover the truthfulness of such a memorial statement does not seem to be a tough one: it would be enough to take a look at the preceding dialogue between Gordon and Batman over the dead body of Harvey Dent. The low-key lighting effect is the dominant feature here as the two men are shown in the middle of the night with close-ups of their faces as they talk to each other. Here, Gordon tells Batman that "The Joker won. Harvey's prosecution, everything he fought for, undone. Whatever chance you gave us of fixing our city dies with Harvey's reputation. We bet it all on him. The Joker took the best of us and tore him down. People will lose all hope" (02:21:00-21). Batman's answer is probably the most cynically ideological sentence of the film: "They won't. They must never know what he (Harvey Dent) did" (02:21:22-28). As Batman is talking to Gordon, he bends over the body of Harvey Dent and turns his revolting, burned face, which is shown in extreme close-up, to the good side. This way power creates a narrative of history and of truth. No matter what the fact is, power always feeds subjects with a skewed version of reality in order to maintain its seemingly impeccable façade. The task of the subject is to find a specific angle from which such ideologies are uncovered.

There is another big lie that we witness at the end of *The Dark Knight*. In the above-mentioned sequence, Batman decides to take the blame for the killings of a number of police officers as well as the ruin of Harvey Dent to label himself as the new

villain of the town: “I’m whatever Gotham needs me to be. Call it in. You’ll hunt me. You’ll condemn me. Set the dogs on me, because that’s what needs to happen, because sometimes truth isn’t good enough” (02:22:18-58). Batman’s voice-over coincides with a scene that would happen in the future with Gordon standing on the roof of Gotham Central with an axe in his hand, destroying the bat symbol, while a number of the police crew and reporters are watching him. There is then a cut to the present as Batman runs away and the dogs are unleashed to follow him. Gordon’s little son asks him, “Why’s he running, Dad?” (02:23:34-35), to which Gordon answers, “[b]ecause we have to chase him.” (02:23:37-38). Therefore, Batman becomes the Christ-like hero who sacrifices himself (another cliché) to serve as the object of desire of the people of Gotham.

Bruce Wayne and Batman, the two sides of the same coin, who stand for wealth and power respectively, are the fantasies in the heart of capitalist ideology. Bruce Wayne is the real man behind the masked Batman. The message is clear: in order to become an icon of power (Batman) one first needs to become an icon of wealth (Bruce Wayne). In *Batman Begins*, in reply to Rachel (Katie Holmes), who asks for his identity, Batman says, “It’s not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me” (01:57:42-48). Contrary to what Batman says, it is important to know the man underneath. As Bane (Tom Hardy) tells Batman in *The Dark Knight Rises*, he “merely adopted the dark” (01:14:13-16) to conceal his real identity. It is this hidden identity that reveals important facts about Batman.

Bruce Wayne has many characteristics that define him as a perfect subject of capitalism. From *Batman Begins*, we know that he was born to a rich father, Thomas Wayne (Linus Roache), a physician who owns Wayne Enterprises (from his ancestors).

After Thomas Wayne's death, Bruce inherits the company. Wayne Enterprises is a multinational company whose headquarters are located in the city of Gotham. The skyscraper which accommodates the company is shown only once in aerial shot: as one of the highest buildings of the city, it towers over most of the surrounding structures. Bruce Wayne himself is a billionaire, a philanderer, and a philanthropist, too. Whether we call him Batman or Bruce Wayne, he has no choice but to defend the city of Gotham against criminals because they would threaten the system in which he has a big share. His major attempt throughout the film is to cancel out the immense effect of the Joker's traumatic invasions to eventually fill in the void of the Symbolic. The vigilante operations that Batman undertakes are beyond an individual's attempts to protect his own interests; rather, they are the symbolic representation of the way that the established order maintains its power. It would therefore make sense to claim that Bruce Wayne is the unconscious motive behind Batman's nocturnal activities.

Batman creates desire and provides the spectators with a fantasized future. While he seems to be too close—in the sense he is on the screen in front of the spectators—he is, in fact, too far because his wealth and power are beyond the reach of (nearly all of) the spectators. Batman introduces himself as the one who is able to provide the spectators with the object(s) they have been looking for desperately in real life. As we watch the film, however, we understand that Batman is an impossibility both in wealth and power. In the beginning of the film, he presents himself as the only one who has the right to be *the Batman*. He considers himself to be irreplaceable as he disapproves of those volunteers who masquerade as Batman by calling them “copycats” (00:12:54). In this sequence, we are presented with the unconscious of the city. The unconscious of Gotham

lies in the territories of the criminals where drug dealers meet in certain locations. When the Mob is doing an underground deal inside a parking garage, a fake Batman arrives to stop them. The two sides of the deal are the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy) and the Chechen (Ritchie Coster). The two fake Batmen's desperate attempts fail: one of them is punched by the Scarecrow, and the other is dragged into the ground by a few strong dogs after the real Batman bends his gun barrel and slaps him in the face. When one of the fake Batmen tells him that "We're trying to help you" (00:10:21-23), Batman shows his discontent by telling him that "I don't need help" (00:10:23-24). The fake Batman asks him, "What gives you the right? What's the difference between you and me?" (00:10:26-29). Here, Batman's reply is remarkable as it distinguishes him from the rest: "I'm not wearing hockey pads" (00:10:30-31). In this sense, Batman introduces himself as the eventual signified, the signifier with only *one* signified. In other words, Batman has no alternative and no one can even imagine to replace him.

Right from the start, Batman proves himself to be the *one* superhero: he has his unique Batsuit, and the advanced Tumbler he drives is a superb technology, a flawless vehicle capable of flying as well as converting into a smaller Batpod. Among all these, Batman's mask has a special role because it enables him (as Bruce Wayne) to temporarily move away from his true identity and enter the realm of the unconscious, where he could play endlessly with the Joker. As Slavoj Žižek points out in talking about Batman in *The Dark Knight*, "The Mask is thus the asexual "partial object" which allows the subject to remain in (or regress to) the pre-Oedipal anal-oral universe where there is no death or guilt, just endless fun and fighting" (*Living in the End Times* 60). Batman's Batsuit and mask are those features that bring him a new identity. His dark apparel resembles the

color of the (k)night (or the unconscious): Batman seems promising for the film spectators because he creates the fantasy of liberation from the constraints of the law or the Symbolic Order. However, we should be reminded that this apparel isn't affordable (both literally and metonymically) for an ordinary film spectator. Also, throughout the film we are told that there is only one Batman. That is why Batman is not an accessible target.

Batman's exclusively designed suit and vehicle are not the only things that distinguish him from everyone else. He owns a secret underground facility which makes his whereabouts impossible to track down. There is only one man who is allowed in his bunker: his loyal butler, Alfred (Michael Caine). For Bruce Wayne, Alfred is more than a butler. In *Batman Begins*, when Bruce's parents are murdered, he is raised by Alfred, who symbolically replaces his father. Alfred plays a significant role in handling Bruce's traumatic experience; he is the father figure, who restores Bruce's loose connections with the society. That is why he is the only one who has the right to penetrate Bruce's hideout. The bunker is the place where Batman prepares himself for his vigilante operations. Inside this spacious underground haven, there are a few monitors (through which Batman oversees certain spots in the city), his Tumbler Batmobile, as well as his Batsuit and guns in a cabinet. This hidden location could be identified as the unconscious of Gotham because it is here that Batman is revealed to be Bruce Wayne: the protector of the city turns out to be the billionaire businessman. The secret facility provides us with another perspective, which runs parallel to Batman's nocturnal adventures. Like the offstage provisions of the magicians in *The Prestige*, the bunker in *The Dark Knight* is the location where certain arrangements are made to prepare Batman for his vigilante

operations. However, such locations are always kept hidden from the eyes of the ordinary people to maintain their sublime appearance. In providing the spectators of the film with these parallel worlds, Nolan attempts to uncover the triviality (or closeness) of such seemingly sublime facades in order to uncover their ideological constructions.

As the film proceeds, Batman's control over the city increases. Nearly at the end of the film, Bruce Wayne (or Batman) proves himself to be an agent of power by creating a special surveillance system. He manages to monitor Gotham's phone communications by turning all cell phones into a microphone in order to locate the Joker. By doing so, he, as Lucius (Morgan Freeman) says, "can image all of Gotham" (01:56:08-09) and therefore spy "on thirty million people" (01:56:33-34). As they are talking to each other, we hear a babble of an unlimited number of voices in the background. Batman is watching over the whole city without anyone noticing it. If, as Lucius tells Batman, "[t]his is too much power for one person" (01:56:26-27), then how could one justify it in a democracy? Batman's initially self-appointed position as Gotham's vigilante has turned into a consensus because it strengthens the pillars of power. There is a scene in a restaurant owned by Bruce Wayne, where Harvey Dent, Natascha (Beatrice Rosen), Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and Bruce himself discuss Batman's ultimate power and its justification:

Natascha: How could you want to raise children in a city like this?

Wayne: Well, I was raised here. I turned out OK.

[...]

Natascha: I'm talking about the kind of city that idolizes a masked vigilante.

Harvey: Gotham City is proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what's right.

Natascha: Gotham needs heroes like you—elected officials, not a man who thinks he's above the law.

Wayne: Exactly. Who appointed the Batman?

Harvey: We did. All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city.

Natascha: But this is a democracy, Harvey.

Harvey: When their enemies were at the gates, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. It wasn't considered an honor. It was considered a public service.

Rachel: Harvey, the last man they asked to protect the republic was named Caesar, and he never gave up his power. (00:20:03-51)

From what Harvey Dent, as Gotham's district attorney, says, absolute power is justified once performed for the protection of the city. Dent's idea of the suspension of democracy in the name of *public service* shows the way that the discourse of power manipulates language in order to mislead people into believing that a threat is beneficial to the society.

Batman's wealth and power make him an exception. He performs vigilante operations against criminals as part of his public service for Gotham. These missions are always shown in aerial shot, implying Batman's unlimited control not only over the city of Gotham but also over the rest of the world. During his nightly attack on Lau's company in Hong Kong,<sup>21</sup> he is shown in particularly sublime angles. The camera first

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<sup>21</sup> This remind us of the U.S so-called anti-terrorist actions in certain countries, like those in Afghanistan, under the name of securing world peace.

shows a skyscraper in aerial shot. Then, it moves 180 degrees until we see Bruce Wayne's long shot in a Batsuit from a distance. He then puts on his Batman's hood (or mask) as he crouches to fire four timed bombs at the building of LSI Holdings. Our next shot is that of Batman in high angle subjective shot as he is standing over the skyscraper overlooking LSI Holdings. He then drops from the supertall building as he spreads his wings. The next shot is from underneath, portraying Batman as he is flying, but then cuts to an aerial shot, to finally depict him in an extreme long shot from a far distance, magnifying the huge skyscraper he drops from. Batman breaks into the building, kills almost all guards, drags Lau (Chin Han) by his shoe in an extremely humiliating manner, brings him to the broken windows, flies into the air with him, and disappears. What is particularly significant about this sequence is the super-intelligent technology that Batman uses in penetrating LSI Holdings. Although he doesn't show any superhuman powers, his expensive apparel and guns put him beyond an ordinary man. In other words, Bruce Wayne's wealth makes him an impossible superman.

The domestic parallel to the Hong Kong incident happens over the rooftops of Gotham. The scene shows Batman standing atop another supertall skyscraper towering over the whole city. Here again, the scene starts with an aerial shot but then pans to a low angle shot of Batman, as he is listening, through his expensive earpieces, to the conversations of the whole city (see figs. 28-29). Such sublime shots highlight Batman's exceptional powers as a superhero at the service of the society. At the end of the day, however, Batman's missions are only a means to support the established order. To sum up what I have mentioned, the spectators identify with Batman because he provides them with what capitalism promises in the form of a (dreamlike) fantasy: super-wealthy and

exceptionally empowered (to perform his vigilante missions). The paradoxical point about this fantasy is that the spectators are told that there is only one Batman: nobody is permitted to do what Batman does.



Figure 28. *The Dark Knight*: shot 1



Figure 29. *The Dark Knight*: shot 2

Not only does Batman consider himself to be the *one* without substitution, but also the one who would never be accessed, or the one who, as himself says, “has no limits” (00:13:35-38). At the end of the film, he tells Gordon that Gotham is not yet ready to accept him. That is why he runs in the streets of Gotham in order to be followed. In the scene where dogs are unleashed to chase him, Gordon’s voice-over romanticizes and idolizes him: “[H]e’s the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So we’ll hunt him because he can take it. Because he’s not our hero. He’s a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a dark knight” (02:23:52-24:25). Batman is running with a broken leg, and the camera shows him in tracking shots in a low-key setting as the dogs, in long shot, are hunting him. He eventually climbs on his Batpod along the underground streets of Gotham. Then, we witness high-key lighting as he approaches the end of the tunnel, and the low-key lighting fades. A second later, a flash of light makes Batman disappear and the film ends.

Batman’s fast-paced movement towards the source of light at the end of the film, and the intruding brightness that gradually gets closer is reminiscent of the very first

scene of the film, though in a reverse form. This initial scene, which takes around 10 seconds, pictures enormous flames in dark azure and black consuming the frame, out of which a bat symbol arises which gets closer until its blackness devours the whole frame and the bat itself disappears. Once you get closer to the sublime, it loses its sublimity, it becomes trivial, and super-ordinary. That is why the final scene depicts Batman as he is attempting to escape, to be unattainable, to become impossible. The abrupt arrival of Batman out of darkness in the beginning of the film eventually leads to his sudden departure (or disappearance) at the end. Initially Batman seems to be too close to the film spectators (as a projection of their fantasies) but he is in fact too far from them as the film ending proves (desire never allows the subject to obtain the *objet petit a*). Thus, the sublimity of desire lies in its paradoxical nature: it misguides the subjects into believing that they will reach the object that fills their lack, but it doesn't guide them to that object. This complicated character of desire is also evident in Batman: his appearance in the film is not simply to serve as the bulwark of capitalism (we already know that he owns Wayne Enterprise) or to defend the Symbolic Order; rather, he is a lure for the film spectators in the sense that he shapes their fantasies.

The abovementioned initial scene anticipates the trauma that the spectators would experience in watching the film. The devouring flames are repeated once again as the Joker explodes Gotham General Hospital. Here, the explosion causes gargantuan dark azure and black flames as the building collapses on the ground. From the beginning to the end, the explosion takes 60 seconds, which is a considerable length, magnifying its effects on the people of Gotham. The cross-cutting employed here shows the Joker's indifferent strolling along the hallways of the hospital as he pushes the buttons of the

detonator in his right hand: simultaneously, we see the horrified faces of the people in the school bus near the building as a piercing blast makes them cover their ears with their hands. When the explosion causes the destruction of the building, the camera cuts to Gordon's face who dumbfoundedly hears the roaring of the explosion. The role of parallel editing here is to prolong the impact of the horrifying explosion on individual people of Gotham: while the whole action in reality wouldn't take more than 10 seconds, in the plot it takes around a minute. The slowing down of the explosion through crosscutting shows the real impact of the resultant trauma on the people. The significance of the two explosions in the film is immense because they introduce massive changes to the set of events in the story. One particular change takes place in the character of Harvey Dent.

Batman's only possible alternative to maintain order in Gotham is Harvey Dent. He is Gotham's district attorney, and a man with strict discipline and order. In the fundraiser sequence at Bruce Wayne's mansion, in a conversation between Rachel and Bruce in the balcony, the latter tells the former: "You know that day you once told me about, when Gotham no longer needs Batman. It's coming. It's happening now—Harvey is that hero. He locked up half of the city's criminals, and he did it without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a hero with a face" (00:45:45-46:05). Here, Bruce Wayne is referring to Harvey's apprehension of a number of criminals associated with the underground Mob, bringing them into the court, and charging them with several felonies. Before going through such a critical operation, the Mayor (Nestor Carbonell) warns Harvey of the possible consequences: "They're all coming after you, now. And not just the Mob. Politicians, journalists, cops—anyone whose wallet's about to get lighter. Are

you up to it?” (00:41:26-35). Harvey Dent simply smiles at this, implying that it wouldn't be a hard task for him. In the fundraiser sequence, Bruce Wayne expresses his strong belief in Harvey's capability to redeem the city from its current conditions. The scene shows Bruce, Harvey, and Rachel, all three in different points in the center of the hall, creating a triangle as they are surrounded by the attendants. The camera portrays single shot close-ups of each and a dim view of the background people, as Bruce praises Harvey: “I believe in Harvey Dent. I believe that on his watch, Gotham can feel a little safer, a little more optimistic. Look at this face. This is the face of Gotham's bright future” (00:45:09-24).

Bruce Wayne's anticipatory remark about Harvey's face and Gotham's future, however, turns into the exact opposite with the passage of time: after Rachel's death, Harvey turns into a monster who attempts to avenge her loss by murdering select people from the Mob as well as the police crew. Such a shift from a hero to a villain reminds us of what Harvey says nearly at the beginning of the film: “I guess you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain” (00:20:54-57). In the next section, I will elaborate on Harvey Dent's change of character, which is caused by the Joker's plans.

### **4.3 When the Real Betrays the Void of the Symbolic**

It is mere accident that the actor who played the role of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* is the namesake of one of the greatest literary characters of English literature. The name Heathcliff Andrew Ledger reminds us of the character Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's

*Wuthering Heights* (1847).<sup>22</sup> It is even more interesting to note that Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and the Joker in *The Dark Knight* are not so different from each other: they are both violent and beast-like whose actions causes only disasters for the people around them. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson argues that Heathcliff is not an ordinary character or a human being; rather, he stands for “an impersonal process” or “the locus of history” which introduces a new phase of capitalism (113-14). For Jameson, history is very much like the Lacanian Real because it is not expressible in language any more: it is an “absent cause” responsible for certain socio-economic changes (19-20). What if we consider the Joker as another Heathcliff whose emergence in the film is caused by the anamorphic gaze of the Real? In this section, I argue that the Joker has several features that buttress the idea that his appearance in Gotham (and in film) is made by an absent cause, namely the Real. This absent cause, I claim, reminds the spectators that fantasies are fragile dreams shaped by the machinations of desire. The presence of the Joker in the film is, like the anamorphic stain, to highlight the distorted vision of the spectators and to show them the limitations of the Symbolic Order. In my discussion, I shall particularly focus on the Joker’s unknown origins, his weird face, and his unsystematic, violent actions to propose that his existence should be attributed to the order of the Real.

The first important point that makes us claim that the Joker is an impossible phenomenon is the fact that he literally comes from nowhere. He is not the type of criminal that we could find in real life as he “defies explanation” (Cocksworth 542). As Gordon informs the Mayor when they trap the Joker, he has nothing to be identified with:

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<sup>22</sup> In 2009, Heath Ledger received a posthumous Academy Award for the best supporting actor for his role of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

“Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias” (01:24:00-12). The Joker is to be considered as “a larger than life symbol” (Bott 242) or, to quote Jesse Kavadlo, “less a character than a cypher” (170). He is an anomaly, a grotesque figure whose actions, like the anamorphic stain, introduce excess into the film. For Slavoj Žižek, because of its traumatic nature, the Real is experienced as a nightmare: “*precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition*” (*Desert of the Real* 19). The Joker’s appearance and actions in the film are no less than a nightmare because of their traumatic effect on the people of Gotham (and the spectators). Another particular feature in his character, which makes us claim that the Joker’s presence in the film is caused by the absent Real, is his weird face: some people call him a freak because his face is an exception that exceeds the norm. He has hideous scars on both sides of his face, which start from the corners of his mouth and run roughly symmetrical to the ears, making his appearance look like smiling broadly at all times. His face, monstrously disfigured, is a stain in the picture. It is curious to see how he tells different stories about his face: the more the Joker tells us about his scars, the less we know about their origins. The Joker’s story, which he narrates several times, move in the opposite direction of the rather simple structure of the film: it is a signifier with no signified. His narrative introduces certain breaks in the film’s overall pace, thus creating a twisted form of storytelling. Three times in the film the Joker tells anecdotes regarding the origins of the scars on his face (to Gambol, Rachel, and Batman). Every time that the Joker narrates the story of his scars, he tells a different story. The first time,

he tells his story to Gambol (Michael Jai White) in a pool hall. He puts a blade on Gambol's mouth, in an extreme close-up, and narrates his tale in cold blood as Gambol's fearful eyes glisten with tears:

You Wanna know how I got these scars? My father was a drinker and a fiend. And one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that, not one bit! So, me watching, he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it. He turns to me and he says, 'why so serious?' He comes at me with the knife, 'why so serious?' He sticks the blade in my mouth, 'let's put a smile on that face'.  
And, why so serious? (00:30:09-31:08)

The very moment that he articulates the last three words, he kills Gambol in cold blood. Until now, we as spectators accept what the Joker says but our trust doesn't take long because the next time that he talks about his scars, he provides us with a different version.

The Joker's scars are the signifier without a proper signified. The second time that he begins explaining the reason for his gruesome cuts, he narrates to Rachel another story. The scene is inside Bruce Wayne's mansion and the occasion is the fundraiser party. He moves towards Rachel, turns around her as the camera is turning with him 360 degrees. Rachel's face shows her intense feelings. As he grabs her face, he says,

You look nervous. Is it the scars? Wanna know how I got them? [...] I had a wife, beautiful like you, who tells me I worry too much, who tells me I ought to smile more, who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks [...] One day they carve her face, and we have no money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again. I just want her to know

I don't care about the scars. So I stick a razor in my mouth and do this to myself. And you know what? She can't stand the sight of me. She leaves!

Now I see the funny side. Now I'm always smiling. (00:50:45-51:52)

The third time that the Joker attempts to tell the story of his scars, this time to Batman, happens nearly at the end of the film. Here, Batman and the Joker are inside the penthouse of a skyscraper fighting each other. The Joker pushes Batman over a glass window, and as it breaks, Batman falls on his back, and the steel window frame crashes down on his neck. The Joker bends over him and pushes the steel beam over his neck. The scene shows extreme close-ups of both in a setting with low-key lighting. The Joker tells Batman: "It's a funny world we live in. Speaking of which, you know how I got these scars?" (02:12:59-13:01). As he is halfway through his sentence, Batman answers, "No. But I know how you got these" (02:13:01-04). Batman suddenly fires a few blades from his gauntlet which hit the Joker's neck, and then grabs his chest and frees himself by kicking the Joker out of the building. This time the Joker finds no opportunity to resume the story of his scars, and therefore, his story never ends. The Joker, therefore, has no specific origins. As Slavoj Žižek indicates, "the Joker has no back-story and lacks any clear motivation: he tells different people different stories about his scars, mocking the idea that some deep-rooted trauma drives him (*Living in the End Times* 60). In this sense, the Joker's scars hang endlessly in the play of signification, and the signifier never finds a signified. In other words, he imposes his own rules on the Symbolic Order and flows freely in and out of it without limitations. The Joker's stories halt the film's narrative flow and implicitly indicate the unreliability of language as a system of

symbols. In this sense, the Joker's narratives serve as the anamorphic excess that raises the curiosity of the spectators and makes them aware of their limited perspective.

The Joker's first appearance in the film happens at the beginning, during the bank heist. He is standing next to a traffic light, waiting for the other gang members to arrive and drive him to the bank. He is initially shown in full shot from the back, then the camera gets closer to him in low angle shot, but the emphasis is not on the stature, but actually on the mask he is holding in his left hand. While we have not yet seen the Joker's face, his mask, which he keeps tight to his left foot above his knee, is staring at us. Initially, the mask falls in the lowest possible spot in the frame; eight seconds later, however, it becomes the center of attention, the focal point of the frame returning the gaze of the spectators (see figs. 30-33). This is reminiscent of the anamorphic point that Lacan finds in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: the object of our vision always already gazes back at us without our conscious knowledge.



Figure 30. *The Dark Knight*: shot 3



Figure 31. *The Dark Knight*: shot 4



Figure 32. *The Dark Knight*: shot 5



Figure 33. *The Dark Knight*: shot 6

We see the Joker's face for the first time inside the bank, as he is getting ready to leave the building with the huge amount of money that he has packed in large bags. He crouches over the half-dead body of the bank manager and slides a smoke grenade into the manager's mouth after he shouts, "What do you believe in?" (00:05:35-36). The Joker, in an over the shoulder shot, answers, "I believe whatever doesn't kill you, simply makes you stranger" (00:05:37-44). When he finishes this sentence, he removes his mask: the camera suddenly shifts to an extreme close-up of his face, magnifying the milky-white makeup and the scars, creating a disgusting terror in the spectator which is clearly reflected in the bank manager's face who gasps with extreme fear. Such a magnification of the repulsive features of the Joker's face anticipates the traumatic experience of the spectators in watching the film.

The third feature in the Joker that makes him an extraordinary, or rather unearthly character, is his actions. The Joker doesn't rob banks for money as he shows total disregard for profit. He doesn't kill people to get rid of them: he wants to (sadistically) relish their agony as they die. He is not an ordinary criminal, but a specifically unusual villain. In one occasion, inside Bruce Wayne's underground bunker, Alfred advises Bruce to take the Joker seriously, and not a simple criminal. In this scene, as Alfred and Bruce are shown in shot reverse shot, close-up, the Joker's face is displayed in one of the monitors in an extreme close-up, laughing. Batman says, "Criminals aren't complicated, Alfred. We just need to figure out what he's after" (00:54:07-11). Alfred tells him an anecdote in response, which reminds us of the nature of the Joker's actions:

A long time ago, I was in Burma and my friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders

by bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. So we went looking for the stones. But in six months, we never met anyone who traded with him. One day I saw a child playing with a ruby the size of a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away [...] Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just wanna watch the world burn. (00:54:18-55:11)

The bandit's purpose in throwing the rubies away is clear: trivializing the sublime. The sublime object, in the Joker's case, is money. For him, too, money or numbers are meaningless. He takes pleasure from watching everything burn because he is "the bringer of anarchy as chaos for the sake of chaos" (Bordoloi 93). There is a scene where the Joker is shown atop a huge pile of cash, which is around 8-10 meters high. The pile is shown from a low angle as the Joker slides down and, as a corollary of his movement, numerous bundles of money fall over. He leaves Lau on the top of the pile. When the Chechen asks him, "what you do with all your money?" (01:42:34-36), the Joker answers "I'm a guy of simple taste. I enjoy dynamite, and gunpowder, and gasoline" (01:42:37-46). Then, one of the Joker's assistants brings a gasoline can and splashes it on the pile of cash. The Chechen is enraged and attempts to interfere. The Joker aims a gun at him, sets the pile on fire, saying, "And you know that the thing they [the Mob] have in common? They're cheap [...] All you care about is money. This town deserves a better class of criminal, and I'm going to give it to them [...] This is my city" (01:42:53-43:42). As the Joker is talking to the Chechen, there are flames in the

background, their shadows falling on the Chechen's desperate face. When the pile of money is almost burned, the Joker continues, "It's not about money. It's about sending a message. Everything burns" (01:43:58-44:06). The Joker, in this sense, introduces himself as the Real side of capitalism, his actions being an immense blow to the laws of the established order. As Patricia Pisters points out,

The Joker does have a political message. He is not interested in the piles of money that the heavily organized crime factions in the city are after—he just burns it, ridiculing criminal forms of capitalist greediness. He similarly derides the false forms of safety that come from obeying rules and upsets the established order to show the chaos underneath it. (94)

We should remind ourselves, once again, that the Joker is the anamorphic stain (of the Real) that is imposed on the discourse of capitalism. He trivializes the sublime object of money and fights the idolized Batman (who stands for power). The Joker's role is therefore to disturb the spectators' fantasies, and to show them how fragile is the Symbolic Order.

It is not the sadistic pleasure of watching people in agony that defines the Joker. He also takes masochistic enjoyment from being the object of torture. In the scene when Batman beats him in order to find information on the whereabouts of Harvey and Rachel, the Joker seems invincible. The more the torture is intensified, the more the Joker's satisfaction becomes: he laughs hysterically and continuously, saying, "You have nothing. Nothing to threaten me with. Nothing to do with all your strength" (01:30:14-21). Even at the end of the film when Batman kicks him out of windows of the skyscraper, the Joker laughs frantically as he is hanging in the air, saying, "I took

Gotham's white knight [Harvey Dent]. And I brought him down to my level. It wasn't hard—madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push” (02:14:53-15:09). The Joker proves himself to be fond of dying. In the middle of the film, in a scene where Batman gets closer to him with his Batpod at full speed, the Joker doesn't budge an inch, repeating, “I want you do it. Come on. Hit me” (01:22:08-10). The Joker, in this sense, proves to take pleasure from being beaten or killed, which are signs of his masochistic character.

The Joker's actions, once started, produce a domino effect, an unbroken chain of never-ending traumatic events that wreak havoc on the city of Gotham. The burning of the pile of money is followed by the explosion of the hospital, and then, his threatening to eliminate anyone who wouldn't join him, which results in the whole population deciding to leave the town. The Joker's radical actions produce a big void, a nonsensical empty space in the Symbolic Order, which disrupts the normal functioning of the affairs. He adopts an anti-humanistic approach to challenge the very basic values of individual people in the society. For example, a few times in the film he sets his plans based on survival, the most essential instinct of all living beings. In the pool hall, after he eliminates Gambol, he offers two alternatives for Gambol's men: to die or to join his team. However, as he mentions, “there's only one spot open right now, so we're gonna have tryouts” (00:31:28-33). As he articulates the last word (tryouts), the Joker is shown in extreme close-up, breaking a pool cue into two halves. He keeps one half, but throws the second in front of Gambol's three men, who are staring fearfully at each other. The scene ends abruptly, but it is implied that only one of the three would stay alive after he grabs the pool cue. This sudden cut omits the surplus (the brutal fight for survival and the

resultant dead bodies), which is not allowed in the Symbolic Order. This surplus is the unethical core or the underside of the discourse of capitalism: the hidden rivalry for survival and the subsequent waste.

The Joker insists on revealing the instinctual, selfish side of humanity. After the incident of the explosion of the hospital, he sends another message asking the people of the city to either join him or leave the city. The Joker's threat creates an uproar in Gotham as the people swarm into the bridge to leave the town. They are shown in extreme long shot, to emphasize their magnitude, and extreme close-up, to magnify their anxiety. Two giant boats, one accommodating the criminals and, the other, innocent citizens, leave the city by the evening. It doesn't take a long time to find out that there are "a hundred barrels down there [in the engine room] rigged to blow" (02:00:36-37). The Joker's trace is here once again. He has placed bombs and one remote detonator in each ferry. A few minutes later, there is a telephone message from the Joker:

Tonight, you're all gonna be a part of a social experiment. Through the magic of diesel fuel and ammonium nitrate, I'm ready right now to blow you all sky-high. If anyone attempts to get off their boat, you all die. Each of you has a remote to blow up the other boat. At midnight, I blow you all up. If, however, one of you presses the button, I'll let that boat live. So who's it gonna be? Harvey Dent's most wanted scumbag collection or the sweet and innocent civilians? You choose. Oh, and you might want to decide quickly, because the people on the other boat may not be quite so noble. (02:01:01-02:21)

There is an uproar in the boats right after the end of the Joker's phone call. After an intense argument over blowing up the other boat or doing nothing, the so-called 'innocent citizens' decide to put it on a vote, to democracy. Once the voting is over, the results are declared: "The tally is 140 against, 396 for" (02:07:31-36). This means that those who support elimination of the people in the other boat are about three times as great as those against it. In the other boat, one of the criminals of the city throws the detonator into the sea. This "blurring of boundaries" between good and evil signifies "the instability of oppositions and the shades of grey between black and white" (Brooker 207). The Joker's plan succeeds because he deconstructs the ethical values of the society as well as the politics of democracy.

The Joker's actions run spontaneously in the film as we are always already trapped in them without knowing about their origins. In all cases, the spectator becomes aware of the Joker's plans only *in medias res*. One of such plans happens earlier in the film as he kidnaps Rachel and Harvey Dent. He keeps each in a different location, and places two bombs (in both locations) that would detonate at the same time. While death is a most recurrent motif in the films by Christopher Nolan, in no other film than in *The Dark Knight* the subjects await it with such a tremendous anxiety. Here Nolan doesn't use split screen, but employs parallel editing, allowing each character to speak at a moment, thus prolonging the agony. What makes the experience even more distressful for Rachel and Harvey is the fact that the Joker has embedded microphones in both locations, so they could hear each other's most excruciating moments. Rachel and Harvey are shown in extreme close-up (in a low-key setting) in order to magnify the terror inside. Rachel, who is in love with Harvey, and for a long time has refused to accept his

marriage proposal, tells him that “I don’t want to live without you and I do have an answer for you. My answer is yes [...] Listen, somewh...” (01:35:25-56). Before going ahead to continue her sentence, a massive blast stops her, and we see a flash of red light on her distraught face, and then the explosion kills her. Rachel’s last words picturing a fantasized future with Harvey come to nothing seconds later. This way the Real forces itself on the stage, annihilating any prospect for the fruition of a promised fantasy. The Real is always traumatic: it comes abruptly from nowhere and it suppresses the voice: it is an absent cause that “intrudes *as if* from an outside radically unassimilable to the logic of the signifier,” threatening the subject’s relationship with the Symbolic Order (Eyers 80).

The metamorphosis of Harvey Dent, both mental and physical, therefore takes place in a traumatic encounter. Like Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, I argue, Harvey Dent becomes a violent psychopath who destroys other subjects in order to avenge his wife’s death. He, in other words, imagines that there is total satisfaction in (*jouissance* of) the Other, which, for him, appears in the form of revenge. Harvey’s problem is that he is unable to see that in reality “*jouissance*, enjoyment, is always only a half-enjoyment” (Zupančič 108). To clarify, the subject can never find total enjoyment in real life. As I mentioned earlier, Harvey Dent, who was once considered to be a future ‘Batman in daylight’, turns into a serial killer after the death of Rachel. Harvey’s disfigured face and violent actions betray the void at the heart of the Symbolic Order. They project the anamorphic gaze of the Real returning the look of the film spectators. In other words, Harvey’s grotesque face and destructive actions exhibit the core of desire of the film spectators in an oblique way. Here, my argument is that the message that the spectator

can get from the post traumatic Harvey Dent is a Real message: the ugly side of Harvey Dent is his (desire for) excessive *jouissance*. It would make sense to take a close look at Harvey's face and actions to see how they signify the Real gaze.

Harvey's mutilated face is not a pleasant scene to look. While the right side of his face seems neat, the other side, grotesque as it is, makes the spectators shiver with disgust: the eye has lost its upturned oval shape and has become a protruding circle because there are no eyelashes or eyebrows. One could easily see the area inside located under the eyelids. The skin on the left side of the face is removed for the most part, and that is why one could observe the teeth and the gums as well as the inside layers beneath the cheeks. The nose, too, on the left is burnt and there is a visible crack on the tip. The hair on the left side of the forehead is lost and the skin is torn in some parts. The first time that Harvey finds out what has happened to his face, he is shown in extreme close-up as he inspects the bandage over his face. He shrieks with rage, but we do not hear his voice probably because it is so loud that the spectators cannot bear it (we don't hear him because Nolan replaces it with a low-pitched sad score.). When Gordon comes to visit him in the hospital, Harvey is lying in the bed, staring at an ambiguous point on the left. As Gordon is in the right side, to him everything seems normal as he is yet unable to see Harvey's left side of the face. As the camera zooms, Harvey turns his face. Since the camera cuts to Gordon's face in less than a second, the spectator is unable to see a clear shot of Harvey's face. However, Gordon's facial expressions, his dumbfounded eyes and wide open mouth, put him in the position of the spectator. If we recall Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, the anamorphosis lies in the fact that a certain spot in the painting is not discernible to the eye because it has been drawn as an object in a specific angle. That is

why we need a specific position to decode the geometral object, or the skeleton. Here again, Gordon's position, as well as that of the film's spectator, makes him unable to have a clear view of Harvey's face. All of a sudden, however, Harvey turns the left side, and therefore, Gordon views the whole face (see figs. 34-37). In this sense, Harvey's left side of the face functions as the anamorphic point in the picture because it introduces an excess which is not palatable to the eye.



Figure 34. *The Dark Knight*: shot 7



Figure 35. *The Dark Knight*: shot 8



Figure 36. *The Dark Knight*: shot 9



Figure 37. *The Dark Knight*: shot 10

Harvey Dent's ugly side of the face reveals the obscene side of his actions. Since he regards himself as a victim, he decides, like Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, to destroy all those people he believes are responsible for the death of his fantasized love object. He loses his connection with the pleasure principle because he becomes an agent of *jouissance*, and this is why he starts a serial killing which only ends with his own death. In the first half of the film, Harvey's lucky coin signifies the divide in his mind and anticipates his radical change of character. Even before the traumatic death of Rachel,

Harvey shows that he is torn between his adherence to the law and his fondness of the violation of the codes of normal life. In one particular scene when Rachel asks him not jeopardize his life to trap the Joker, he tosses his lucky coin to decide. She begs him, “This is your life. You can’t leave something like that to chance” (01:14:10-14). Harvey smiles, but doesn’t change his mind.

The Harvey Dent that arrives after the traumatic incident of the death of Rachel is a serial killer. He kills a police officer named Wuertz (Ron Dean), as well as the Mob Italian boss, Maroni (Eric Roberts), and his driver. The Two-Face’s next kill never happens because of his sudden death. Even the death of Harvey Dent does not change anything, and his monstrosity, which is the outcome of the Joker’s successful attempts, introduces a void in the Symbolic Order. Harvey Dent’s serial killing, like that of Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, is doomed to fail. In the path that he takes, he is looking for an ultimate satisfaction that he would find by obtaining the object of desire. His basic problem is that he doesn’t get the true message of the Joker. In the hospital, the Joker tells him why he is different from everyone else in Gotham:

Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it. You know I just do things. The Mob has plans. The cops have plans. Gordon’s got plans. You know, they’re schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I’m not a schemer, I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are [...] It’s the schemers who put you where you are. You were a schemer. You had plans. And look where

that got you. I just did what I do best—I took your little plan, and I turned it on itself. (01:48:12-49:44)

By creating such a distinction, the Joker differentiates between those who search for an ultimate object of desire and himself, who lives in the moment. Harvey Dent and the rest of Gotham imagine that there is an Other, which would give them what they desire. This (nonexistent) Other is at the core of ideology (especially capitalism). Capitalism forces its subjects to be schemers, to make plans to get more. When the only purpose of the subject is “to achieve some ultimate object” through scheming, his or her act “enslaves one to the object of one’s scheme” (McGowan, *Fictional* 134).

To sum up what I discussed in this section, the anamorphic gaze of the Real thus lies in the image of the Joker and Harvey Dent. While Batman promises that the path of desire would lead to fantasy—a straightforward promise at the heart of capitalism—in the paralleled world that appears in the second half of the film, we witness that investing in the desire of the Other wouldn’t give the subjects what they want. This anamorphic gaze is addressed to the spectators to ask them to reconsider the world around them to see how fragile is the Symbolic Order and its constructions.

#### **4.4 The Anamorphic Surplus and the Subversion of the Film**

The way that the Joker communicates with the surrounding world moves in the same direction as his actions: it signifies disorder and chaos. A couple of times, he sends recorded video messages informing the society of his actions, plans, and demands. While these videos are broadcast by GCN (Gotham City Network), they do not resemble the professional videos one could follow in such TV channels; rather, they seem like amateurish videos, taken with handheld camera, with the frame shaking as if an

earthquake is occurring. If we take *The Dark Knight* as an artwork produced after a long, iterative process of cinematography and editing, then the existence of such an alternative video footage is the anamorphic point which produces a void at the heart of the work of art. My argument is that the Joker's amateurish videos serve as the point from which the Real returns the look of the spectator: his video footage deconstruct the spectator's vision and the film (as a seemingly continuous process).

The spectator is presented with the Joker's first video message through the television set in Wayne's Enterprise and it catches the attention of Alfred and Bruce Wayne. While we are watching the video, there are repeated cuts to Bruce Wayne's and Alfred's disturbed, dejected faces, shocked by the content. Before playing the video, GCN shows a hanging dead body in Batsuit being pulled down by a crane. We later discover that the body belongs to a man, whom the Joker killed after using him in his footage. The Joker's video starts with a man (in Batsuit) tied to a chair. The Joker asks him to introduce himself and the fake Batman calls himself Brian Douglas. The Joker laughs as his handheld camera shakes with a harsh noise, which is caused by his movements. The camera gets closer and the Joker asks him if he is the real Batman, with Brian saying no. There are repeated shakings of the camera once again as the Joker removes the fake Batman's mask, asking him, "Then why do you dress up like him?" (00:42:42-43). The camera, then, moves back, with the Joker's hand hanging Batman's mask in the air, as he bursts into a grotesque laughter. The fake Batman replies, "Because he is a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of scum like you" (00:42:47-50). Here, the camera gets too close to Brian's face as the Joker pulls his hair, slaps him in the face, and asks him if Batman "made Gotham a better place?" (00:43:00-01). Then, the Joker shouts

violently twice, “Look at me!” (00:43:04-05). The very moment that Brian looks at him, the Joker cuts to his own face, saying, with a trembling voice, “You see, this is how crazy Batman’s made Gotham. You want order in Gotham, Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in” (00:43:10-20). The camera gets closer to the Joker’s face as he is moving around the room, saying, “And every day he doesn’t, people will die, starting tonight. I’m a man of my word” (00:43:22-29). Then he once again roars into laughter. The camera shakes several times and turns upside down: this weird movement of the camera is so quick that we can see no clear image (see figs. 38-41), as we hear Brian shouting desperately. The Joker’s obsession throughout the film appears to be the unmasking of Batman and show his face to the world. In a sense, he is looking for the truth. Slavoj Žižek believes that “paradoxically, the only figure of truth in the film is the Joker, its supreme villain” (*Living in the End Times* 59).



Figure 38. *The Dark Knight*: shot 11



Figure 39. *The Dark Knight*: shot 12



Figure 40. *The Dark Knight*: shot 13



Figure 41. *The Dark Knight*: shot 14

The occasion of the second video message is immediately after the explosion of the hospital, this time inside a bar as people are watching GCN news. Before playing the Joker's video, GCN is showing the aftermath of the explosion of the hospital, with the news host saying, "People are still missing, including GCN's own Mike Engel" (01:53:30-33). A second later, the news host's voice-over announces that "I'm now being told that we are cutting to a video GCN has just received" (01:53:34-37). As the Joker's video starts playing, there are again repeated cuts to the people in the bar with shocked faces, as they start leaving the place before the end of the Joker's message. The video starts with a close-up of Engel (Anthony Michael Hall), as we notice a hand-written "BREAKING NEWS" and a few splashes of red paint on the wall behind him. Engel starts reading the Joker's message with glistening, frightened eyes: "What does it take to make you people wanna join in?" (01:53:40-42). As Engel continues, we see the Joker's shadow on his face repeating the last word of each sentence that he reads:

I've gotta get you of the bench (the Joker repeats, "bench.") and into the game (the Joker repeats, "the game" and laughs.). Come nightfall, this city is mine (the Joker repeats, "mine.") and anyone left here plays by my rules (the Joker repeats, "rules."). If you don't wanna be in the game (the Joker repeats, "game."), get out now! (the Joker repeats, "get out now!") (01:53:45-54:02).

When he finishes reading, the camera starts shaking, and we see a glimpse of the Joker's face, laughing in extreme close-up.

Not only does the Joker's alternative video footage create traumatic moments for the people of Gotham, but also it subverts the film that the spectator is watching by

providing an alternative view of filmmaking. Through giving us raw, unedited videos recorded with a handheld, continuously shaky camera, the Joker turns the film on its head. By doing so, by trivializing the sublime, he challenges our perception of the film we watch. The Joker adds the monstrous to his videos by representing torture and violence in the screen. This is synonymous with replacing the copy with the original by giving us a representation of action not as it might happen in reality but with the Real action as it is. The way that the Joker makes the spectators confront the limited nature of vision is important as it makes them aware of the distorted view that is essential to vision. The Joker provides the spectators with a surplus which is denied in the Symbolic Order. This surplus is shown to us through the anamorphic gaze of the Real. Here, the gaze should be seen in the horrified faces of the people that watch the Joker's videos. This surplus provides us with the ways through which we can find a better view of the world around us.

In Chapters 4 and 5, we are able to see a major change in the subject as presented by Nolan. While in the previous films, the subjects move in the path of desire to find *the objet petit a*, in *Inception* and *Interstellar* the subjects cut this illusion and come to understand that there will be no ultimate object that would satisfy desire. The subjects, as appear in Nolan's later films, realize that in the realm of the Other there is no total enjoyment. They accept the fact that the fantasized image that the discourse of capitalism promises leads them to no eventual object of desire. Thus, in *Inception* and *Interstellar* we see subjects that find a way out of the path of desire.

## Chapter 5: *Inception*'s Impossible Encounters

### 5.1 Introductory Statements

*Inception* (2010) is the first film in Nolan's repertoire that provides us with a significant change in the relationship between the subject and the *objet petit a*. While in Nolan's previous films, as I discussed in chapters on *Memento*, *The Prestige*, and *The Dark Knight*, the subjects resist the fact that the *objet petit a* is inaccessible, in *Inception* (and *Interstellar*, as we shall see in the next chapter) the subject realizes that such an object is impossible to obtain. This understanding has an important consequence: the subject finds that the underlying fantasy at the core of ideology (especially in the discourse of contemporary late capitalism) brings no ultimate object of satisfaction. Although (contemporary late) capitalism advocates constant greed for objects and obliges subjects to seek enjoyment in every form, it hides the fact that there is no way to access such a moment of *jouissance*. In *Inception*, as I will argue in this chapter, the subject ultimately finds a way to free himself from the machinations of desire: this is possible through the subject's encounter with the gaze of (or as) the *objet petit a*. In the depths of his mind, Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) finds the impossibility of union with the object cause of his desire: he finds happiness in partial enjoyment. In this sense, therefore, *Inception* provides a significant contrast to Nolan's previous films.

*Inception*'s portrayal of the impossibility of (obtaining) the *objet petit a* and the deceitful path of desire, I will claim, could be seen especially when the film exposes the limits of the Symbolic Order (on which the discourse of capitalism stands). First and foremost, the priority of illusions over reality and the maze-like structure of the film mimics the illusion that the endless path of desire would ultimately result in a fantasized

reality, but then shatters this imaginary picture by revealing that even in the deepest layer there is no lost object of desire. Second, the subject's encounter with repeated trauma (the case of Cobb and the haunting memories of his dead wife) initially misleads him into believing that he would need the *objet petit a* to fill his gap but then he finds that there is no such absolute object to invest in. Finally, the appearance of certain paradoxical (or impossible) objects and images in the film is an indication of the lack or incompleteness at the core of the Symbolic Order. The contradictory nature of paradox reveals an important point about the play of signification: something that exists in a particular way, turns into its opposite, to nonexistence in another way. The nonsense that is always included in paradox is what we require to question the status quo of the social reality.

Along the way in this chapter, I will highlight the notion of *inception* as the film's reflection on how ideology works on the subjects' unconscious to make them desire (or think) in a certain way. As I will argue later, *Inception* doesn't merely reflect on the functioning of ideology; rather, it asks the spectators to examine the authenticity of the reality they are experiencing and look for the moments that would provide opportunities for the revision and rethinking of their surrounding world.

## **5.2 The Endless Core of Dreams and the Endless Path of Desire**

It goes without saying that Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is the realm of hyperreality. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the whole film is a prolonged dream, although the narrative may seem to alternate between dream and reality. *Inception* starts in the middle of a dream but its ending is ambiguous, without clarifying if the spectator is represented with reality or another dream in the final sequence. The seeming reality in the film has only one layer, but dream proves to be the realm of the infinite,

where one could experience the deepest, almost inaccessible layers of the unconscious. While the preliminary design of incepting an idea into the subject's mind takes place in reality, the major action of the film, including the operation of inception, occurs in the multiple layers of dream. Since in *Inception* dreams provide a space to simulate reality, it is almost impossible (for both the target subject of the trick and the spectators) to distinguish between illusion and reality. In other words, dream becomes the reality of the subject. As Nolan confirms in an interview, "one of the key lines in the film is dreams feel real while we're in them" ("*Inception* Interview" 00:01:05-08). The disappearance of the boundaries between dreams and reality is at the heart of *Inception*.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan argues that the art technique known as *trompe l'œil*, which uses optical illusion to present an image as a three-dimensional object, is "the soul" of the *objet petit a* because "it pretends to be something other than what it is" (112). Lacan talks in particular about a *trompe l'œil* painting by the ancient Greek painter, Parrhasius: a veil which is so real that creates the (illusory) perspective that there is something behind it. For Lacan, the message of Parrhasius is that "if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it" (112). In other words, because of its illusory nature, *trompe l'œil*, like desire, deceives the eye into taking a non-existent object as really existing. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* resembles the art of *trompe l'œil* in two ways: first, it creates the illusion that dreams are real; and second, its puzzle-box narrative makes the spectators believe that in the deepest level (Limbo) they can witness the projection of the *objet petit a*. At the same time, the broken, distorted images that result from non-linear narrative layers produce the

anamorphic stain: like Holbein's skull, "the inverted use of perspective" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 87) produces an excess, which reveals the Real gaze: the *objet petit a* as an inaccessible surplus that falls beyond the Symbolic Order. In this section, I discuss how *trompe l'œil* and anamorphosis produce a hyperreal and distorted (dreamlike) structure, which is based on the logic of desire: an endless path that promises an eventual obtaining of the object cause of desire but then no fruition at the end. I will elucidate the plotlines of the film to argue how Nolan depicts the workings of ideology through his concept of *inception*.

The central action of *Inception*, i.e., the mind heist, is strongly connected to Cobb's hope of reunion with his children, Philippa (Claire Geare, Taylor Geare) and James (Jonathan Geare, Magnus Nolan).<sup>23</sup> A Japanese businessman called Saito (Ken Watanabe) hires Cobb and his team of highly-skilled professionals to implant, in Robert Fischer's mind, the idea of dissolving his father's company so that Saito would acquire a fair share in the market. As Saito clarifies to Cobb, "We're the last company standing between them and total energy dominance. And we can no longer compete. Soon, they'll control the energy supply of half the world. In effect, they become a new superpower. The world needs Robert Fischer to change his mind" (00:45:01-18). In return, Saito guarantees that he would clear Cobb's charge of murdering his own wife and, therefore, enable him to return to the United States to live with his children permanently. The central action seems simple enough as it is common with a classic heist film: to get what you want, you need to go through a seemingly impossible quest. However, the puzzle-box plot of *Inception* creates an intricate pattern, a complicated story which is in sharp

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<sup>23</sup> The roles of both Philippa and James are played by two actors, each representing them in a different age.

contrast to a classical film in this genre. The arrangement of the events in the plot, which is accomplished through cross-cutting, takes the form of a maze, a labyrinth that leads to no definite destination. The story shuffles between dream and reality in a sense that one cannot find the borders: the film becomes a *trompe l'œil* that raises the curiosity of the spectators because they want to know what is hidden in the deepest level.

The structure of the film is anamorphic. The plot doesn't proceed straightforwardly; rather, it provides us with a non-linear (or broken) narrative time. As it is common with Nolan, the film's beginning is not actually the starting point of the story, but a sequence, which belongs to a plotline that happens much later, nearly at the end. *Inception* starts with Cobb's dream in a weird situation: huge waves of water collide and consume the whole frame. When Cobb is lying on his chest, the camera shows an extreme close-up of his face as he raises his head to see his own children playing at a distance along the shore. The scene is in slow motion (probably signifying the fact that this is a dream), showing Cobb's daughter joining her brother, digging the muddy ground near a cliff. Cobb, then, falls asleep due to exhaustion when one of the children screams and runs along with the other following. As we later learn, this dream happens down in Limbo, in the second dream narrative. This structural anamorphosis plays with our perception of time and reality as it shuffles various plotlines to provide a distorted image of the action of the film. The initial scene is the anamorphic stain as it later reveals to us that we were not actually in control of the image. In other words, while in this particular scene we mistakenly think that we are in Cobb's dream, we eventually find that it was happening in Limbo. Anamorphosis, therefore, has a retroactive function as the spectator only belatedly discovers its truth.

What makes *Inception* an exception in Nolan's filmmaking is the depth in each layer: *Inception* is not simply a layered film; each layer includes several other layers, which makes the structure like a puzzle box. The narrative in *Inception* flows like a fluid as it doesn't clearly distinguish the several layers that run simultaneously through the film. The film consists of two layered dreams, one with a shorter length (around 15 minutes) at the beginning, and the other, a prolonged dream (75 minutes), starting before we reach the second half, and ending nearly at the close of the film. What is common with both dreams is that they include various interconnected dream layers that break into each other without chronological order. There is one more plotline which connects these two narratives. It depicts reality and it takes about 49 minutes of the running time of the film, but it is inserted with several short dreams, and that is why its actual time is less than 40 minutes. The difference between the two dream plotlines, on the one hand, and the reality narrative, on the other hand, lies in the fact that dreams are cut mostly by other dreams (and rarely by external reality), but reality is always intervened by various short dreams. This priority of dreams over reality reminds us of the priority of illusion over the real object in the art of *trompe l'œil*: the illusion presents itself as the real to entice the look of the viewer: it promises more than what it actually does. In this sense, *trompe l'œil* has an ideological function because "every ideological field produces a surplus indicating the existence of more knowledge that can be told from within its frame" (Cho 31). As we reach the second half of the film, the maze-like feature of the dreams intensifies the illusion that by following the path to the deeper layers we should finally be able to find the eventual object of desire, but down in Limbo what we see is not different from what

we witness in the upper levels. In other words, the deepest level shows the same degree of illusive hyperreality that we see in the previous levels.

In *Inception*, the initial plotline (or the first dream narrative) consists of four interconnected layers of which only the last one, which is chronologically the first, takes place in external reality. The first three layers are all dreams that flow into each other through cross-cutting. The reality sequence in this plotline shows that the layered dreams are based on the initial plan (of Cobb and his team) to infiltrate into Saito's unconscious. The three dream levels here are Limbo, Arthur's dream, and Nash's dream. The first level occurs deep inside Limbo with Cobb intending to kill Saito in order to bring him back to the real life. We should remind ourselves that this initial dream doesn't belong to the rest of the dreams in the first plotline: it is the initial scene of Limbo in the second dream narrative. Arthur's dream is the second one, which pictures Cobb and Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) inside Saito's mansion as they plan to steal an important document from Saito's unconscious safe. And finally, Nash's dream shows all the team members investigating Saito to unravel his secrets. This last stage is later revealed to be Saito's audition to hire the team in case they succeed. Limbo level, which serves as the film's introductory sequence, as I mentioned before, is not actually related to the other two dream layers in terms of the story, but belongs to the second dream narrative. To make it more clear, the initial sequence of the first plotline serves as the starting point of deepest layer in the second dream plotline. This complicated structure takes the form of a puzzle: an intricate plot with no clear initial point and constant shifts of perspective. If we see the film with a straightforward logic, we miss the point: like Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (and the anamorphic skull), we need to look awry to make sense of the film.

The first dream narrative in *Inception* is not simply an introduction to the other plotlines, but mostly a tutorial or training for the spectators to familiarize themselves with the basics of the concept of *inception* in order to make sense of the film as they proceed. Such tutorials for the spectators have an anti-ideological function because they serve to demystify and unravel the hidden codes of a complex concept. In Arthur's dream, for example, there is a scene where Cobb and Arthur are clarifying the function of inception to Saito. The three are sitting around a rectangular table, with Cobb and Arthur in the two opposite lengths, talking in turns, and Saito at one end, listening while eating. Here, Cobb uses a metaphor to describe the situation when an idea is ingrained into someone's mind: "What is the most resilient parasite? A bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? An idea. Resilient. Highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold in the brain, it's almost impossible to eradicate. An idea that is fully formed, fully understood. That sticks right in there somewhere" (00:02:46-03:13). During this conversation, the camera cuts several times between close-ups of Cobb and Saito. As Saito continues eating, he curiously asks, "For someone like you to steal?" (00:03:13-15). Arthur resumes what Cobb left unfinished: "Yes. In the dream state, your conscious defences are lowered and that makes your thoughts vulnerable to theft. It's called extraction" (00:03:15-22). Cobb, then, offers his proposal to Saito: "We can train your unconscious to defend itself from even the most skilled extractor [...] because I am the most skilled extractor. I know how to search your mind and find your secrets. I know the tricks and I can teach them to you, so that even when you're asleep, your defense is never down" (00:03:23-42). The way Cobb introduces extraction and inception of ideas into someone's mind is analogous to the way ideology forces itself on the subjects without their knowledge.

At the core of contemporary late capitalism, there exist an inception of the highest degree: by pretending that the next object to reach is what the subject requires to fill his lack, the hyperreal world of capitalism produces a plethora of illusions. To clarify, in the discourse of capitalism objects promise more than what they seem: every object that triggers the subject's insatiable thirst for the *objet petit a* simply acts to prolong desire without ever fulfilling such an expectation. In the film, what makes the idea of inception even closer to ideology is the fact that dream is not simply a dream: the subject conceives this hyperreal or imaginary situation as real but the extractor knows that this is a dream only; the extractor is aware (or conscious) that he is there to implant an idea or extract a very important piece of information, to quote Cobb, from "a safe full of secrets" (00:03:55-56) in the subject's unconscious. This situation reminds us of Louis Althusser's thesis in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus": "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). To expand, although ideology seems to relate the subject to the external reality very straightforwardly, it is in fact nothing but a dreamlike quality, a distortion of reality, or a hyperreality which the subject accepts as truth. *Inception* shows us that ideology works unconsciously in a way that one is always already trapped in it: several times in the film the subjects find themselves in the middle of dreams (or ideological thinking). The idea is that the world we live is surrounded by hyperreal images that contain us without our knowledge.

*Inception* is not simply a film that reflects on how ideology functions through mystification of dream and reality. It moves beyond such a reflective task by calling for rethinking and revision of how our perception is shaped by ideology. The film's sustained

tutorials and trainings (for both the team members and the spectators), which provide “constant exposition” (Bordwell, *Labyrinth* 43), move exactly the opposite of the maze-like formation of the plot. In other words, as we are introduced to the various layers of the narrative, we are provided with more details and explanations about the rules that govern the functioning of inception. If we take the concept of inception as a metaphor for ideology, then the film’s exposition, which is sustained throughout the work, does the opposite: it is revelatory and clarifying.

The exposition, in a way, counterbalances the ideological function of the *trompe l’œil*. It marks the distinction between dream and reality by establishing some rules. Back to the first dream plotline and the workshop, there is an important rule about the workings of inception that is revealed in Arthur’s dream: an extractor would end the dream in case it doesn’t develop as expected. In the scene where Cobb is caught in the middle of opening the safe inside Saito’s mansion, Saito and Mal (Cobb’s dead wife) urge him to put down the weapon and return the envelope he has stolen. Mal (Marion Cotillard) aims the gun at Arthur to make Cobb do as Saito says, but he resists: “There is no use threatening him in a dream. Right, Mal?” (00:08:42-45). Mal’s answer reveals the secret: “That depends on what you’re threatening. Killing him would just wake him up. But pain?” (00:08:46-53). She shoots Arthur in the leg and continues, “Pain is in the mind” (00:08:57-58). Cobb jumps in the air over the table where his gun lies, takes it, and shoots Arthur in order to wake him up. Seconds later, Arthur wakes up in the previous dream layer, which is actually Nash’s dream. The simple lesson here is that one needs to get killed in order to wake up: to regain one’s position in reality, one is always required to die. Whether the dreamer shoots himself or is shot by someone else, this simple fact

reminds us of what Žižek points out in *Looking Awry*: “in our unconscious, in the real of our desire, we are all murderers” (16). To elaborate, even in real life, when we dream, our mind creates a killing scenario in which we either play the role of the murderer or the victim. The sacrifice included in *Inception* is reminiscent of Angier’s replicating Machine in *The Prestige*. The rule is different though: while in *The Prestige* reproduction always necessitates the original to be destroyed, in *Inception* the original remains intact but the copy vanishes whenever required.

In the first dream plotline, Arthur’s level reveals one more feature about dream instability—and ideology as well. If, by any chance, the subject whose mind is going to be extracted becomes aware that this is only a dream, it would become unstable or, even more, it could collapse. Is not this rule a code of ideology in the sense that any form of ideology remains an ideology as long as it is absorbed by the subject unconsciously? If the subject becomes aware of the secret, the sublimity of ideology loses its grandeur and becomes trivial. In Arthur’s dream, when Cobb offers Saito to become his extractor, he smiles mysteriously and leaves the room after saying, “Enjoy your evening gentlemen, as I consider your proposal” (00:04:05-09). Arthur shows his suspicion by saying, “He knows” (00:04:12-13). Seconds later, there is a tremor and everything in the room starts to tremble. Here, the camera cuts several times between close-ups of objects in the room (lights or the glass on the table) and the individual subjects (Cobb and Arthur) as their faces show extreme anxiety. Later on, when Cobb kills Arthur to wake him up (because he is in pain), the dream starts to collapse even further and everyone wakes up abruptly. The extractors (here, Cobb and Arthur) would face the consequences if the dream fails. Of course, ideology doesn’t fall apart completely when it is revealed. However, the

message is clear: if the subject figures out the unconscious codes of ideology, it loses its grandeur and the subject could act against it.

The idea of inception depends significantly on the art of *trompe l'œil*: the hyperreal world that Cobb and his teams create for the subjects needs to seem as realistic as possible. It should also seem quite familiar to the subjects. It is the responsibility of the dream architect to design the dreamspace so close to reality that it would be impossible for the target to tell the difference. If such a trick works, then the subjects would give away their secrets; otherwise, the subjects would suspect the situation and everything would fail. In the first plotline, we can witness such a problem in Nash's dream. The team has made a hyperreal, quite familiar world for Saito (his apartment) and he is about to be deceived into taking it as reality. Almost deceived, Saito still resists and does not provide them with the information they demand. Excited, Cobb leaps forward and grabs Saito on the back of his neck and pushes him downwards. Saito's face hits the carpet on the floor. Cobb angrily shouts, "Tell us what you know. Tell us what you know, now!" (00:13:25-27). Suddenly Saito starts to laugh, saying, "I've always hated this carpet. It's stained and frayed in such distinctive ways, but very definitely made of wool. Right now, I'm lying on polyester, which means I'm not lying on my carpet in my apartment. I'm still dreaming" (00:13:31-14:05). Cobb, Nash, and Arthur look at each other blankly. When they wake up in reality, Arthur angrily accuses Nash of designing the dream improperly. Nash answers, "I didn't know he was going to rub his damn cheek on it!" (00:14:48-50). In presenting the subject with an almost exact copy of the real world, Cobb and his team create illusions that seem to be real. Such an imaginary world is reminiscent of the function of ideology as it always gives the subject an image which

seems to be true and too close, yet biased and too far if it is looked at from a specific angle.

The film's exposition and training for the spectators continues as we enter the second major plotline or simply the reality narrative. Here, we are introduced into the idea of inception as a chance to create objects that might seem impossible in reality. In the reality plotline, Cobb visits his father-in-law, Miles (Michael Caine), who is a professor of Architecture, on the chance that he might be able to find him a dream architect to replace Nash (Lukas Haas). Throughout the conversation, we figure out that Miles was once Cobb's mentor and the one who taught him how "to navigate people's minds" (00:22:59-23:01). Here, Cobb describes inception as "a chance to build cathedrals, entire cities, things that never existed, things that couldn't exist in the real world" (00:23:38-46). Cobb's description clarifies the essence of the theory of inception. In this sense, he reminds us of what Baudrillard indicates in his *Simulacra and Simulation* that in today's world, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Inception, in fact, is a dreamspace where the subjects could experience fantasies, it is where they could dream infinitely. It is, in fact, the art of *trompe l'œil* that makes such simulacra possible.

Designing a dreamspace by a dream architect is similar to the art of *trompe l'œil* because it creates a simulacrum of the real world and presents it to the dreamer as reality. During Cobb's training for Ariadne, there is a scene which shows both as they are walking along the street. Ariadne tells Cobb, "My question is, what happens when you start to mess with physics of it all?" (00:29:45-49). The very moment that she finishes her

sentence, something impossible happens that makes her perplexed. The street starts to fold from a far distance until we witness a complete symmetrical pattern: the city looks like a cube. The newly-shaped structure becomes a cubicle on which movement is possible in all directions. There is no gravity, and that is why the people and cars move in all dimensions. This way, as Cobb reveals to Ariadne, dream becomes the reality of the subject. In “Dreaming Other Worlds: Commodity Culture, Mass Desire, and the Ideology of *Inception*,” Martin Danyluk argues that “The film’s spectacular suspension of natural laws works to obscure its tacit endorsement of hegemonic social meanings and values” (602). For Danyluk, Nolan’s “playful sense of space and time” as well as “[the] radical uncertainty about the nature of reality” lead to nothing but “a utopian current” that shall account for the film’s “mass appeal” (607). The basic problem with such a criticism is the fact that it posits that the relationship between the spectators and the film is a matter of identification: the spectators imagine themselves as living the life of the characters. In fact, Nolan’s art of filmmaking makes it impossible for the spectator to simply identify with the image; the broken narrative that Nolan provides creates space for both identification and distance. Nolan doesn’t simply suspend natural laws to justify the status quo; he, in fact, unravels how ideology functions, and, in a way, dismantles it by providing us with the way that an ideology works to mesmerize its subjects.

The level of exposition in *Inception* is not limited to the first two plotlines. In the second dream narrative, the spectators confront an exception regarding the rule of getting killed in order to wake up. Initially in this plotline, Saito is shot in the first dream level as the team members are spotted by projections from Fischer’s unconscious. When Eames (Tom Hardy) gets there, he aims the gun at Saito in order to kill and wake him up. Cobb

excitedly stops him. When Eames describes his intention by saying that “He’s in agony. I’m waking him up,” Cobb says, “It won’t wake him up” (01:08:23-27). Yusuf (Dileep Rao) explains the reason: “We’re too heavily sedated to wake up that way” (01:08:32-34). If someone uses a very strong sedative, killing her or him wouldn’t wake her or him up. Instead, it would push her or him into the deepest dream level known as *Limbo*. When Ariadne (Ellen Page) asks for clarification, Arthur explains that Limbo is “[u]nconstructed dream space” or, to put it another way, “[r]aw, infinite” unconscious (01:08:40-45). Located in the deepest level of the unconscious, where everything seems topsy-turvy, Limbo is the Real of the subject’s psychic life, it is where one loses complete connection with reality. Arthur resumes, “Nothing is down there except for what might have left behind by anyone sharing the dream who’s been trapped there before” (01:08:46-51). As Yusuf says, only when the sedation ends, it might be possible for someone to come back, and this could take “decades” or “it could be infinite” (01:08:59-09:01). In this particular scene, the way everyone takes turn in clarifying hidden rules, in another level of exposition, is an indirect address to the spectators to familiarize them with the essentials of inception.

The last plotline in *Inception*, which is actually the longest, records the events happening in the dream during the ten-hour flight from Sydney to Los Angeles. We are told that Robert Fischer’s father is dead, and he is accompanying his body for the funeral. This ten-hour flight would give Cobb and his team the opportunity to incept the idea of dissolving his father’s company into Robert Fischer’s mind. The second dream narrative is where the art of *trompe l’œil* works better than the first dream plotline. First, it provides a complicated dream including three levels plus Limbo. The simulation of space

in all three levels works flawlessly and the target subject (Robert Fischer) doesn't find out that it is all a dream. In this second dream narrative, each level leads to another, promising both the dreamer (Robert Fischer) and the spectator that there is more knowledge down there. It moves exactly along the path of desire because in the deepest level there is Limbo only: an infinite space without clear answers. Second, we are introduced into another form of *trompe l'œil*: impersonation. Eames impersonates Fischer's godfather, Browning (Tom Berenger) to get closer to him and access his secrets. It is nearly at the end of the film that Nolan confides in spectators that Eames was impersonating Browning all the way through the second plotline. As Browning (impersonated by Eames) and Robert Fischer are sitting on the shore, the latter tells the former that he is going to dissolve his father's company: inception has worked. Now Eames realizes that there is no need to keep his identity secret. As the camera pans to the back, Browning turns into Eames. This is how *trompe l'œil* creates an illusion of objects and human beings: reality and illusion are so close that one cannot easily tell the difference.

In *Inception*, *trompe l'œil* erases the boundaries between dreams and reality in order to depict the ubiquitous discourse of capitalism. Capitalism has created a non-ending world of objects which are only shadows of the *objet petit a*. The endless network of illusions contributes to machinations of desire by telling the subjects that by following the path of objects they would be able to find the eventual object of satisfaction. In the film, the art of *trompe l'œil* acts mostly as an ideological tool that deceives the subjects (and the spectators) by making them accept a shadow as the real object. The anamorphic structure of the film, however, is revealing. The fact that the initial

sequence of the film that depicts Limbo is an episode that occurs later, breaks the plot into pieces and demands careful attention from the spectators. The empty space of Limbo is the anamorphic gaze as the *objet petit a*, which the spectators only retroactively comprehend. Moreover, the sustained exposition serves as Nolan's anti-ideological strategy, which unravels the truth about the deceptiveness at the heart of *trompe l'œil*.

### 5.3 Traumatic Encounters with the Missed Reality

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan provides us with his interpretation of a dream known as *The Burning Child*, which appears in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. The description of the dream, as it is narrated by Freud, is as follows:

A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (*Interpretation of Dreams* 513-14)

Freud indicates that this dream serves to fulfill the father's wish to see his child alive again because what is most evident in the father's dream is the fact that his child has physically returned to life:

And here we shall observe that this dream, too, contained the fulfilment of a wish. The dead child behaved in the dream like a living one: he himself warned his father, came to his bed, and caught him by the arm, just as he had probably done on the occasion from the memory of which the first part of the child's words in the dream were derived. For the sake of the fulfilment of this wish the father prolonged his sleep by one moment. The dream was preferred to a waking reflection because it was able to show the child as once more alive. (*Interpretation of Dreams* 514)

For Lacan, unlike Freud, dreaming is not necessarily "a phantasy fulfilling a wish" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 59); rather, it is "an act of homage to the missed reality—the reality that can no longer produce itself except by repeating itself endlessly, in some never attained awakening" (58). The missed reality that Lacan mentions above, occurs on the part of the father in two ways: first, he could have done better in order to avoid his child's death; second, he could have appointed the right man to watch over the child's body. Therefore, when the child says, 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?', he is reproaching the father for neglecting his duty as a father: the father's sense of guilt is the Real of his desire. As Slavoj Žižek confirms,

The subject does not awake himself when the external irritation becomes too strong; the logic of his awakening is quite different. First he constructs a dream, a story which enables him to prolong his sleep, to avoid

awakening into reality. But the thing that he encounters in the dream, the reality of his desire, the Lacanian Real - in our case, the reality of the child's reproach to his father, 'Can't you see that I am burning?', implying the father's fundamental guilt - is more terrifying than so-called external reality itself and that is why he awakens: to escape the Real of his desire, which announces itself in the terrifying dream. (*Sublime Object* 45)

Lacan relates this dream to trauma by indicating that "the insistence of the trauma" is a way to make us "aware of its existence" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 55). He insists on the repetitive function of the trauma in a clearly exposed form: "The trauma reappears, in effect, frequently unveiled" (55). Although the traumatic event might seem repressed (or non-existent) in the subject's reality, it would "emerge repeatedly" to prove that "it is still there behind" (55). In Nolan's *Inception*, Cobb's traumatic encounter with his deceased wife, Mal, occurs several times and it is not resolved until nearly at the end of the film. Cobb's 'missed reality' is Mal's suicide for which he feels remorse. As Cobb confesses to Ariadne, he was somehow responsible for Mal's death because he incepted in her mind the idea that her world was not real: she decided to kill herself to wake up in reality ignoring the fact that her world was already real. Mal's appearance in Cobb's dreams, I claim, is both a traumatic encounter as well as a support for desire: Mal signals the missed reality in Cobb's life and takes the form of a partial object that seduces him to move along the path of desire in order to find the real cause of his desire.

*Inception* is where the impact of non-existent objects on the real life is felt more than everywhere else in Nolan's cinema. As I discussed in the previous section, the art of *trompe l'œil* in *Inception* is mostly used to present illusory (or non-existent) objects as

real in order to implant a certain idea into the subject's mind. The return of the repressed, in the form of Cobb's traumatic encounter with hallucinatory images of Mal, is another way in which we witness the influence of the non-existent on real life. For Todd McGowan, the "real focus" of the film is "the subject's relationship to trauma, a relationship that the dream often facilitates and reality enables us to avoid" (*Fictional* 149-50). In this section, I will discuss the role of Mal, whose over-presence in the form of trauma (nightmarish memories and hallucinations) significantly affects Cobb's life. My argument is that Mal's appearance is the return of the Real because it portrays Cobb's most hidden desires. But we should keep in mind that, according to Lacan, "The real has to be sought beyond the dream—in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 60). Mal is not the Real or the object cause of desire: rather, she represents them by providing Cobb with a traumatic encounter with the missed reality that he is desperately trying to change. The more Cobb gets closer to her, the more he feels the imminence of *jouissance*. However, she is only an image representing the distorted gaze on the side of the *objet petit a*. I claim that although Cobb initially imagines that he could probably be able to reunite with Mal, he ultimately finds out that she is only a "shade" (02:08:20) of the *objet petit a*; that is why he decides not to invest in an inaccessible object and opts for reunion with his children. Cobb, in this sense, is the first subject in Nolan's films who learns that he is unable to access the object cause of desire. Therefore, he doesn't remain a slave to the infinite path of desire.

For Todd McGowan, Mal is “the object-cause of Cobb’s desire” or simply “the obstacle that bars the realization of his desire” (*Fictional* 158). In other words, Mal stands as a barrier between Cobb and his children. McGowan goes further to point out that

Throughout the film, Mal plays the part of obstacle that prevents any realization of Cobb’s desire, but the film reveals that the obstacle is the real object. Cobb’s guilt stems not from his failure to attain the object of desire but from his betrayal of the obstacle. The obstacle is the subject’s real object, the object that demands the subject’s fidelity. (*Fictional* 167)

Contrary to what McGowan says, I claim, Mal isn’t the *objet petit a* (or the object cause of desire); rather, I consider Mal as a partial object whose traumatic emergence reminds Cobb of the missed reality for which he feels remorse. We should keep in mind that Mal was once living in material form; in other words, she was all too human. She was married to Cobb when she was still alive: for each side of the relationship (Cobb and Mal) the other side was supposed to serve as the *objet petit a*: the object that would give them ultimate satisfaction (that desire promises). But then they both came to the realization that the other part was only a partial object soon after they got married (partial objects lose their sublimity soon after they are obtained.). Mal and Cobb became dissatisfied with reality and decided to reside in Limbo. How could then a bodily image serve as the *objet petit a*? As McGowan himself points out in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, the *objet petit a* “lacks any substantial status” and “doesn’t fit within the world of language or the field of representation” (6). Nearly at the end of the film, when Cobb decides to deal with the trauma, he calls Mal “a shade of [his] life” who is “not good enough” (02:08:21-29). It is only retroactively that the subject comes to know that no object could

be counted as the *objet petit a*. In this particular scene, Cobb's disappointed face finds that it is impossible to access Mal in reality (see figs. 42-43). Mal stabs Cobb with a kitchen knife to prove the impossibility of the fantasy. Mal, in a way, reminds Cobb of a lack that is essential to every subject: she acts as a mirage or a shadow which carries the gaze of the *objet petit a*. Mal's presence is the same as the emptiness that is characteristic of the discourse of contemporary late capitalism. The subjects are told to follow the path of desire to get the ultimate pleasure (or *jouissance*). The very moment that the subjects find themselves at the threshold of enjoyment, they encounter its impossibility. That is why today's subjects are obsessed with a plethora of objects on the illusory promise that they would eventually get what they want, but in vain.



Figure 42. *Inception*: shot 1



Figure 43. *Inception*: shot 2

Mal is specifically present when Cobb's projections are involved in a dream. She mostly interrupts dreams and destroys Cobb's plans. At times, however, she depicts herself as a caring mother and a passionate lover. In her first appearance, she tells Cobb, "Tell me, did the children miss me?" (00:06:20-24) or "I thought you might be missing me" (00:05:52-53). Throughout the film, Cobb shows mixed feelings of desire and avoidance towards Mal. For example, when Cobb goes into a dream inside Yusuf's underground facility, he finds Mal. What we see is an extreme close-up of the left side of Mal's face as she is laying her head on a rail-track. When we are presented with a very

close shot of the railway and the sound of coming train, the camera once again cuts to Mal's face, now in full: the right side of the face is shown in low-key lighting. There is then a flashback to a scene (again in low-key lighting), where Cobb and Mal are sitting close to each other. Once again, Mal's face on the rail-track, then the camera cuts to the scene where they are sitting together. Mal tells Cobb, "You know how to find me. You know what you have to do" (00:43:49-55). Cobb suddenly wakes up from the dream. The fact that Cobb desires Mal and, at the same time, evades her confirms the idea that he is divided between the past and the present. Mal's repetitive presence in Cobb's unconscious acts to trigger desire: however, the more Cobb follows Mal, the less he finds satisfaction: behind Mal's image, there is the gaze of the *objet petit a*, which is returning the look of the subject. Cobb once imagined that Mal would give him the ultimate enjoyment that he was looking for but now her presence, in his unconscious mind, resurfaces as a missed reality that haunts Cobb's mind.

Cobb deals with the missed reality as trauma in three levels. In the first level, he opens his mind to Ariadne (in the second dream plotline) and provides the details of Mal's obsession with reality and her decision to escape it:

We were working together. We were exploring the concept of dream within a dream. I kept pushing things. I wanted to go deeper and deeper. I wanted to go further. I just didn't understand the concept that hours could turn into years down there, that we could get trapped so deep, that when we wound up on the shore of our own subconscious, we lost sight of what was real. We created. We built the world for ourselves. We did that for years. We built our own world [...] It wasn't so bad at first, feeling like

gods. The problem was that none of it was real. Eventually it just became impossible for me to live like that [...] She had locked something away, something deep inside her. A truth that she had once known, but chose to forget. Limbo became her reality [...] I knew something was wrong with her. She just wouldn't admit it. Eventually she told me the truth. She was possessed by an idea. This one very simple idea that changed everything. That our world wasn't real. That she needed to wake up to come back to reality. That in order to get back home, we had to kill ourselves.

(01:15:59-18:11)

That is why Mal is obsessed with the idea of killing both Cobb and herself to get rid of the illusion. But Cobb doesn't accept to do as she wishes and she decides to commit suicide by jumping down from the windows of the hotel room, where they had planned to celebrate their anniversary. The hotel scene is repeated a couple of times in the film, signifying the impact of the traumatic encounter on the subject (Cobb).

The second level of Cobb's dealing with the traumatic encounter occurs when Ariadne urges him to confront Mal once and for all. In another dream, Cobb remembers what happened that made Mal like that. Cobb and Mal are sitting face to face around a table; the setting is low-key lighting and each of them is shown in single shots, implying their impending separation. Cobb tells Mal that he was responsible for her situation: "I feel guilt, Mal. And no matter what I do, no matter how hopeless I am, no matter how confused, that guilt is always there reminding me of the truth that the idea that caused you to question your reality came from me" (02:02:30-52). Although Mal insists that he can still join her, Cobb tells Ariadne, as he is face to face to Mal, that "I can't stay with

her anymore because she doesn't exist" (02:07:52-55). Then he tells Mal that "I can't imagine you with all your complexity, all your perfection, all your imperfection" (02:08:08-13). Therefore, Cobb is eventually able to let Mal go and free himself from her bonds. Cobb's success results from that fact that he understands that Mal is only an image of the past or simply a shade which has lost its sublimity.

The third level of Cobb's management of the trauma occurs in the last sequence of the film. Throughout the film, Cobb uses his Spinning Top to know if he is in dreams or reality. The rule seems simple enough: If Cobb spins it and the rotation never ends, then Cobb is dreaming; if it stops rotating after a few seconds, then Cobb is in reality. Once Cobb departs with Mal, he sets off for home. When he arrives at his home, he pulls out the Spinning Top and spins it on a table in the room. As it is rotating, the camera tilts to a medium close-up of Cobb. He is anxiously staring at somewhere, which is revealed to be his children playing outside in the garden. Cobb doesn't wait for the Spinning Top to see if he is dreaming or not. In other words, he doesn't wait for an object (or an Other) to dictate if what he is looking at is real or imaginary. He runs towards James and Philippa and they do the same. The camera, then, pans to a long shot of the Spinning Top on the table. As the camera starts to zoom on the Spinning Top, we hear James telling Cobb that "[w]e are building a house on the cliff!" (02:20:33-36). The Spinning Top is still rotating until the film ends, highlighting the fact that this is most probably happening in reality. This way Cobb ignores the role of objects, solves the trauma, and returns to his children. Cobb gets the true message from his encounter with the gaze of the *objet petit a*: to move from one object to another (as desires dictates to the subject) would ultimately result in a traumatic encounter which is beyond the limits of the subject.

#### 5.4 Paradox as a Hole in the Symbolic Order

Although in *Inception*, the art of *trompe l'œil* is mostly used as a way to deceive the subject into taking illusion as reality, it simultaneously shows the limits of the Symbolic Order. When the design of a dream employs paradox, the spectators encounter moments which are impossible through the logic of the Symbolic Order. Paradox, in this sense, disrupts normal perception because it doesn't fall within the field of representation. In this section, I elaborate on some of the paradoxical moments that occur in the film in order to show the impact of the Real on the Symbolic Order. Although the Real doesn't exist in material form, it can be felt once the senseless core of the Symbolic Order is portrayed.

The first instance of paradox in the film is observed in one of the rules of inception: in order to wake up from the dream, the dreamer needs to die. Such a statement cancels out a rule in the real life: if you want to stay alive, you need to avoid death. In the middle of the film, there is a scene in Mombasa, where Eames takes Cobb to Yusuf who, he says, "formulates his own versions of the compounds" (00:36:50-52). Yusuf owns an underground facility where people come to dream. This is a spacious place which is shown to the spectators in low-key lighting. There are a dozen people, each in their individual beds, connected to each other to "share the dream" (00:42:47-48). When Eames says, "They come here every day to sleep?" (00:43:18-20), and old man answers, "No, they come to be woken up. The dream has become their reality" (00:43:23-29). The paradox here lies in the fact that these people have based their lives not on reality but on dreams. They only occasionally return to reality. While there seems to be a paradox here according to the rules of the Symbolic, it makes sense if we consider the rules of the

Real: you get closer to your psychic reality only in dreams. If you wake up from the dream, you will get too far from reality.

Another form of paradox, again in the realm of dreams, could be seen in the difference between existence and nothingness. During Ariadne's training in a dream in the middle of the reality plotline, as Cobb and Ariadne are walking, a wooden bridge appears suddenly and they climb on it. When they reach the end of the bridge, they face two enormous mirrored doors, created by Ariadne's mind. Ariadne moves towards them, closes both doors to make them face each other. Now Cobb and Ariadne stand between the two mirrors to create the illusion of infinity: there are infinite same images of Cobb and Ariadne along a straight line. The infinite path then suddenly breaks as Ariadne touches the mirrors: the infinite turns into nothingness in the blink of an eye (see figs. 44-47). Although the thousand images seem to have depth, they prove to be a shade in less than a second. Is not this infinite path the same as the path of desire which leads the subject to nothingness although it promises too much at the first glance?



Figure 44. *Inception*: shot 3



Figure 45. *Inception*: shot 4



Figure 46. *Inception*: shot 5



Figure 47. *Inception*: shot 6

Perhaps the best instance of paradox in *Inception* is the Penrose Steps (or the impossible staircase). There is a scene where Arthur takes Ariadne along to show her “some paradoxical architecture” (00:39:51-53). He tells her that she would need to learn a few techniques to “build three complete dream levels” (00:39:55-56). They start climbing up the stairs, move into all four directions without actually going up; wherever they go, they reach the same starting point. As they move, Arthur says, “In a dream, you can cheat architecture into impossible shapes. That lets you create closed loops, like the Penrose Steps. The infinite staircase. See?” (00:40:01-14). Arthur’s last word is simultaneous with a crane shot that starts from above their heads but then cuts to a low angle to highlight the real distance between the starting point and the ending point of the staircase. Arthur continues, “Paradox. A closed loop like this helps you disguise the boundaries of the dream you’ve created” (00:40:19-24). Like the Penrose Steps, desire never aims for a final destination, it moves to and fro, but there is no actual movement. Desire never looks for an eventual satisfaction; that is why with the passage of time the subject doesn’t find the object that would fill the lack. The Penrose Steps doesn’t exist in reality, but it shows the vulnerability of the Symbolic Order by showing the absurdity of its laws. The paradoxical structures in dreams, as Arthur says, “have to be complicated enough that we can hide from the projections [...like] a maze. And the better the maze...” (00:40:31-37). Before he continues, Ariadne says, “Then the longer we have before the projections catch us” (00:40:37-39). Later on, Arthur uses the trick of Penrose Steps to deceive a projection (a man with a gun) into believing such an illusory structure (see figs. 48-51). In this scene, as Arthur is running with the projection chasing him, he opens the door, takes the steps which seem to be going down, while in fact it folds back upon itself. As the

projection opens the door and takes a few steps forward to shoot at him, Arthur appears from behind him and pushes him down. While a high angle shot creates the illusion that the steps to downstairs are located right in front of the door, a low angle shot reveals the truth: there are no steps in front of the door; the steps are far lower and there is only a wide crack when we open the door. Such an optical illusion repeats the lesson of Lacan in talking about the anamorphic image: we, as subjects, need to better situate ourselves in order to find the truth of the image. Looking awry would be the only way to find the truth.



Figure 48. *Inception*: shot 7



Figure 49. *Inception*: shot 8



Figure 50. *Inception*: shot 9



Figure 51. *Inception*: shot 10

The last important object with paradoxical features is the Spinning Top. Several times in the film we are presented with this object as a totem that reveals something about Cobb's experience of dreams. As I mentioned in the previous section, the rule seems simple: once Cobb spins it, if it stops rotating after some time, then he would make sure that he is awake (or at least, in his own dream). Otherwise, he finds out that he is

dreaming. The first time that the Spinning Top appears in the film is in the workshop. Arthur explains to Ariadne that she would need a totem to tell if she is in her own dream or in someone's else: "So a totem. You need a small object, potentially heavy, something you can have on you all the time that no one else does [...] That way when you look at your totem, you know beyond a doubt that you're not in someone else's dream" (00:33:51-34:16). Later on, Ariadne tells us something different: a totem is "an elegant solution for keeping track of reality" (00:48:35-38). For Ariadne, therefore, a totem would tell the difference between dream and reality. While Arthur is talking to Ariadne, there is a cut to the next room where Cobb spins his Spinning Top to see what happens. Here the totem is shown alternatively with close-ups of Cobb's face. It stops after a few seconds, confirming that Cobb is in reality. Cobb closes his eyes in relief. We are told that a totem is a unique object that should be never touched by anyone other than the owner; otherwise, it would not be reliable. Later on, it is revealed that Cobb's Spinning Top originally belonged to Mal. Therefore, Cobb's Spinning Top proves to be a paradoxical object in the film. It is an unreliable object that hides the limits of the Real and the Symbolic, or dreams and reality. That is why it is the most recurrent object of the film.

Nolan uses paradox to ask the spectator to examine every image closely not only in the theater but also in reality. As I discussed above, paradoxical objects in *Inception* serve to show several important facts. First, the field of the representation, or the Symbolic Order, is too limited although it might not seem so at first. In the example of the Penrose Steps, we witness how a two-dimensional shape can turn into a three-dimensional object through optical illusion. Second, one doesn't find the truth about

ideological discourse by looking straightforward; one always needs to look awry to uncover the void at the core of ideology. And finally, desire is too paradoxical to be relied on: desire promises more than what it can actually do. It tells the subjects that they would be able to find the *objet petit a* by moving from one object to another; however, the more the subjects are obsessed with objects, the less they can get. As Žižek points out, “it is in desire that the positive object is a metonymic stand-in for the Void of the impossible Thing; it is in desire that the aspiration to fullness is transferred to partial objects” (*The Parallax View* 62).

To sum up what I have elaborated on in this chapter, *Inception* shows the shallowness of the discourse of capitalism by using the art of *trompe l'œil*, which eliminates the boundaries between reality and illusion. Contemporary late capitalism makes the subjects take illusion as reality and misleads them by telling them that behind the veil of illusion, there is much more to discover while there isn't. The structural anamorphosis in *Inception* reveals the truth albeit retroactively: the spectators find the truth about the deceptiveness of *trompe l'œil* only when they put the different pieces of the plot together. The initial sequence of the film depicts Limbo: the empty space that has nothing to present to the subject. Only at the end of the film we find the truth about the emptiness of Limbo. Also, *Inception* shows the deceptiveness of the path of desire through the gaze of the *objet petit a*: the more Cobb follows Mal, the more he becomes disillusioned to access the object cause of desire. Cobb's traumatic encounter with Mal indicates the fact that if the subjects get too close to the *objet petit a*, they feel too much anxiety because they are unable to endure *jouissance*. That is why Cobb decides to reunite with his children rather than killing himself to join Mal, who seems to promise

ultimate pleasure. And finally, the paradoxical objects and images that appear in *Inception* are a means to show the senselessness of the Symbolic Order and the deceptiveness of desire. Paradox is a means to persuade the spectator to examine the Symbolic Order closely to discover its emptiness. Such an understanding would help the spectators not to invest in desire which is the essence of the discourse of contemporary late capitalism. If, like Cobb, the spectators know the limits of desire, then they would be able to live a free life.

In the next chapter, which will be the last chapter of this dissertation, I will elaborate on Nolan's *Interstellar*. *Interstellar* follows the lead of *Inception*, I will argue, to show one more example of the subject(s) who is not slave to the path of desire. I shall particularly focus on the relationship between the subject(s) and the big Other to show how the characters in *Interstellar* shatter the promised illusions of the capitalist discourse.

## Chapter 6: The Blurred Vision of the Real in *Interstellar*

### 6.1 Introductory Statements

*Interstellar* (2014) provides us with a picture of the universal subject: the subject travelling from Earth to space for a certain purpose. If we track Nolan's filmmaking chronologically, we notice a gradual expansion in the locale of the subject. As I noted previously, in his earlier films, starting with *Doodlebug* (1997), Nolan portrays the subject in a limited locale but then shifts to the global subject with *Batman Begins* (2005). In *Interstellar*, Nolan expands the locale of his film to space. This change in the portrayal of the subject produces a considerable difference in the way the subject relates himself to desire and its object. As I discussed in Chapter 5, in *Inception* we can witness the way that the subject (Cobb) ignores the non-ending path of desire and finds the truth of the *objet petit a*. The basic argument of this chapter is that *Interstellar* moves in the direction of *Inception* in its portrayal of the subject by showing that the only way to escape the endless path of desire is to lose hope in the *objet petit a*. Also, it highlights how capitalism alienates subjects by reducing them to cogs in the machine in order to achieve its ambitious goals: under the guise of NASA, the capitalist system induces several astronauts to sacrifice their intersubjective relations for the supposed future of humanity.

In the first section of this chapter, I will elaborate on the return of the Real, which appears as an external traumatic force, namely the Dust, which devastates life on Earth: the Dust, similar to the birds in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), is an omnipresent, massive force, which severely damages the ecology and agriculture of the world. It impairs visibility and appears as a stain in the picture; it is a surplus that keeps telling the

spectators that they are not in control of the scene: the Dust is in fact the anamorphic gaze that demands careful attention from the spectators.

As the argument goes on, I will expand on the ideological role of NASA, especially in the image of Professor Brand (Michael Caine), a scientist and a father figure, who tells a big lie to make the interstellar mission possible. Professor Brand hides the truth and implicitly asks Cooper and the rest of the crew members to ignore their desire. Also, he fabricates an imaginary *they* or *other(s)* to provide significance for the space travel: this illusory Other, as I shall explain, is Lacan's master signifier (or *point de capiton*), which is an attempt on the part of ideology to fill the lack in the subject. The role of this absent Other is to ignite the desire to know in the subject. However, the subject ultimately finds out that this Other was nothing but a human construct.

The last part of this chapter highlights how Nolan creates anamorphosis in terms of time (the part that sticks out in the plot), space (dead body as a tiny spot in horizon), and sound (the image that is incongruous with the sound). I will discuss the ways through which Nolan provides us with a surplus which facilitates our encounter with the gaze. The spectators' encounter with the gaze is significant as it shows them the limits of the Symbolic Order: it includes a moment that reveals the impossibility of the fantasy (of obtaining the *objet petti a*) promised by desire.

## **6.2 The Dust as a Stain in the Picture**

In the post-apocalyptic world of *Interstellar*, the Dust, as a natural disaster, paralyzes every aspect of human life. It is presented as an overwhelming, life-shattering event, more destructive than any other catastrophe ever to occur on Earth. The Dust is caused by an all-encompassing blight, which destroys corn and other agricultural

products over the years throughout the world. In this sense, the blight and the Dust are what Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects”: ecological disasters, “massively distributed in time and space, exhibiting nonlocal effects that defied location and temporality, cuttable into many parts without losing coherence” (*Hyperobjects* 47). In this section, I will elaborate on the Dust as the anamorphic stain with two important functions: first, it tells the people in the film and the spectators in the theater that they are not in control of the scene; in other words, it implies that the look is always already preceded by the gaze. Second, it proves to be an abrupt traumatic force that produces fear in people by instilling the idea that they are in the imminent danger of being consumed. The Dust, therefore, is on the side of the Real because it creates moments which are not expressible through the logic of the Symbolic Order.

In *Interstellar*, the Dust is taken twice in extreme long-shot, as an enormous grey and black mass with considerable speed. Early in the film, it interrupts a game of baseball: as Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), Murph (Mackenzie Foy), Tom (Timothée Chalamet), and Donald (John Lithgow) are seated in the stadium and watching the game, the Dust appears suddenly. Before the arrival of the Dust, the scene shows several medium close-ups of the family as they are chatting about everyday matters with occasional cuts to the game. However, in one particular cut to the baseball game, the ball is shown as it lands in front of a player. The camera shows only the lower part of the player’s body until he lets the ball pass between his legs. Until now, the people in the stadium and the spectators of the film imagine that they know exactly what is happening because they trust vision and consciousness. All of a sudden, this imaginary knowledge turns into its opposite: when the player is shown in full, he removes his eyeglasses and

looks at something distant in wonder. The direction of the player's eyes towards the sky implies that something with a gigantic height is approaching. The next shot is an over the shoulder of the same baseball player which magnifies the impending Dust: it is a massive combination of brown, grey, and black colors (see figs. 52-55). Here, three shots function to reveal the fact that the characters in the film and the spectators are under the gaze of the Dust: first, the shot that shows the lower part of the baseball player and the ball that



Figure 52. *Interstellar*: shot 1



Figure 53. *Interstellar*: shot 2



Figure 54. *Interstellar*: shot 3



Figure 55. *Interstellar*: shot 4

passes between his legs; second, the tilting up of the camera to show the dumbfounded face of the player as he removes his sunglasses; and finally, the over the shoulder that depicts the abrupt emergence of the Dust. It is here that we understand that we were never fully in control of the scene; although, as spectators, we might think that we know more than the characters in the film, in this particular scene we are as ignorant as they are. In this sense, the Dust is the not different from skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*:

it is a stain in the picture, with the retroactive functions of reminding us that our look is contained by the gaze; as Lacan points out, the gaze “circumscribes us” as it “makes us beings who are looked at, but without showing this” straightforwardly (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 75).

In the above-mentioned scene, when people become aware of the looming Dust, they start to leave the stadium in excitement and haste. The next shot shows that the whole city is covered with dust, making people wear special eyeglasses and masks to prevent health problems. In such close-ups, the Dust seems like a ubiquitous storm: as Cooper, his children, and the grandfather are driving through the dust-ridden city, visibility is significantly reduced in a way that nothing is seen except for a few people who are shown as they run for shelter. What is most significant in these scenes is the fear of being swallowed up by the Dust. The Dust is not simply a lifeless form of soil; rather, it is an uncanny monster, a hyperobject “more real than reality itself” (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 130), which is able to contaminate and destroy life on Earth. It is a surplus with mysterious origins which creates unthinkable moments that cancel the functioning of the Imaginary and the Symbolic Orders in the subject; in other words, it is a traumatic encounter that arrives suddenly and makes the subject wonder.

Shortly after the end of the dust storm, we are presented with several shots from the interior and exterior of Cooper’s house showing the accumulation of the dust over the floor, the rooftop, the truck, and the corn. The house is in absolute silence, although the entire Cooper family is awake. Close-ups of Cooper and Murph signify their perplexity and mental devastation. Such a massive natural event would never find a clear explanation with the logic of the Symbolic Order precisely because although the law, as

Lacan says, “superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature” (*Écrits* 229), it always lacks the required material to describe it. It is precisely in such moments of speechlessness that the trauma of the Real appears. Post-traumatic moments in Christopher Nolan’s films (and certain other directors) are the best scenes to record the Lacanian Real. In the instance of the Dust, the Real is not the Dust in itself, but actually the impotency of the play of signification, or simply the Symbolic, to clarify its massive presence for the subject. It is this lack at the heart of the law that creates certain blind moments in the existence of the subject. The fact that the Dust impairs visibility signifies that we are looking at things through the lenses of the anamorphic Real.

It is precisely because of the emergence of the Real that the subject notices that there is a lack at the core of the Symbolic Order. This essential lack within the Symbolic accounts for the subject’s desire to know. In other words, the anamorphic Real raises the curiosity of the subject to decipher its secret. It is only because of this curiosity and the thirst for knowledge that Cooper embarks on the interstellar mission. Early in the film, as Cooper and his children accidentally find and chase the Indian Air Force drone, we are introduced very briefly to modelling of the interstellar mission. Their following of the drone is a harbinger of the overall course of the film’s story. It is by following this unmanned aerial vehicle that Cooper is directed to the NASA hidden facility. When Cooper tells Murph that talking about ghosts is “not very scientific” (00:03:58-04:00), she answers, “You said science was about admitting what we don’t know” (00:04:00-03). The pace of the film moves around this thirst for things that we don’t know. The Dust, then, triggers such a curiosity and the search for a better planet to replace Earth.

The functionality of the Dust is not restricted to trauma only. Shortly after the massive dust storm in the stadium, when Cooper and the rest of the family return home, Murph finds her father in her room. He is sitting cross-legged, with a coin in his right hand, which he tosses on the floor, where a few lines of dust run parallel to each other. The way the coin moves in the air to fall on the floor suggests that there is a magnetic force in the room. Cooper, shown from behind in subdued lighting, says, “It’s not a ghost” (00:20:55-56). He smiles, turns his head back towards where Murph is sitting, and resumes, “It’s gravity” (00:21:02). Here, the Dust serves as a guide, as the object that leads Cooper to the NASA facility by providing the required coordinates. This is the only time in the film that the Dust has a positive significance: it leads the subject to the whereabouts of NASA’s hidden facility, where he is persuaded to go on a mission to save the world. However, as the narrative goes on, the Dust appears as the most threatening, formidable force of the film, which endangers the very fundamentals of human existence.

Later on, as we reach the second half of the film, there are several brief cuts to the life on Earth amidst the dominant interstellar-travel plotline. In almost all of these accounts, the Dust appears as a ceaseless, frightening reality that has created famine and depopulation. There is one more instance of the redoubtable arrival of the Dust about halfway in the film. The significance of this scene is that we witness the absence of a point-of-view shot. In this scene, the Dust appears from far behind Cooper’s house, again in a gigantic, formidable shape. The target of this scene is the spectator because there is no sign of any human being when the Dust consumes the frame. Although the spectators are not physically present in the scene of a massive presence like this, they get involved indirectly. The Dust is shown in extreme long shot, as it moves towards Cooper’s house.

What makes such an arrival even more overwhelming is movement of the camera: as the Dust gets closer, the camera steps back, signifying the resultant fear of the spectators (see figs. 56-59). Therefore, the Dust is not simply a traumatic force for the characters in the film; rather, it haunts the spectators because it provides an encounter with the impossible Real.

The Dust sustains its impact throughout the film. When we reach the end of the film, the Dust is no longer an unexpected phenomenon. It is part of the everyday reality of the world. As several years pass with the interstellar mission taking too long without any sign of progress, the Dust continues storming into the cities. There is one particular scene in which the grown up Murph (Jessica Chastain) is shown driving along a street, where there is no sign of a living object except for a long queue of cars, piled high with belongings, intending to leave. The visibility in this scene is considerably reduced, and it



Figure 56. *Interstellar*: shot 5



Figure 57. *Interstellar*: shot 6



Figure 58. *Interstellar*: shot 7



Figure 59. *Interstellar*: shot 8

is almost impossible to find people in the streets. There is a tiny moment when Murph stops the car, then starts talking to Getty (Topher Grace), who is seated beside her. As she is talking, she looks out of the windows where there are a couple of children in the back of the truck on top of their belongings as they try to remove dust and dirt from their faces. As later sequences show, with the prolonged trauma of the Dust, the Real starts to become the reality of the life on Earth.

### **6.3 Science as an Accomplice of Capitalism**

In *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan raises a critique of the discourse of science by claiming that although it promises to shed light on the mysteries of light, it “does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause” (742). For Lacan, capitalist discourse has had “curious copulation with science” (*Other Side* 110) and has made science no more than an ideology “for the repression of the subject” (qtd. in Tomšič 187). Lacan points out that “the discourse of science leaves no place for man” (*Other Side* 147) because “Any order, any discourse that resembles capitalism leaves aside what we will simply call the things of love” (qtd. in Venheule 8). In Nolan’s *Interstellar*, we witness how science as a discourse in the service of capitalist system ignores subjectivity and love. This section focuses on the ideological role of NASA, which is specifically manifested in the character of Professor Brand. My argument is that Professor Brand is a father figure who demands too much from the crew of the *Endurance* by telling them a big scientific lie. I claim that Professor Brand neglects the basic feelings of Cooper and other crew members of the *Endurance* and attempts to turn the whole team into cogs in the machine of the capitalist system.

Once the irruption of the Real immobilizes everyday life, NASA, which has already been working several years in preparation for the advent of the blight, decides to send a team of astronauts to space in order to save the world. As Professor Brand informs Cooper, there are two plans: Plan A and Plan B. The objective of Plan A is to find another planet which is as habitable as Earth, then a mass exodus to the target planet. Plan B, on the other hand, serves as an alternative in case Plan A is no longer workable. The purpose of Plan B is to carry a certain number of fertilized eggs to a target habitable planet in order to save the human species from extinction. It is only with the promise of Plan A that the reluctant Cooper accepts Professor Brand's offer to pilot the spacecraft. In order for Plan A to become viable, Professor Brand should solve an equation. Dr. John Brand tells Cooper that he would have solved the gravity equation when Cooper comes back. There is a very large blackboard in Professor Brand's office on which he has written some mathematical formulas:

Cooper: How far have you got?

Professor Brand: Almost there.

Cooper: You're asking me to hang everything on an almost?

Professor Brand: I'm asking you to trust me. Find us a new home, and by the time you return, I will have solved the problem of gravity. I give you my word. (00:35:19-40)

Professor Brand encourages Cooper to forget about himself and his children by going into the space to save thousands of children like his own. When Cooper tells him, "I've got kids, professor," John Brand says, "Get out there and save them" (00:31:18-22). As the narrative proceeds, it dawns on both Cooper and the spectators that Professor Brand

kept one important piece of information from them: that there was no answer for the equation right from the start, that Plan A is a signifier without signified, and therefore, there is no possibility for Plan A to work. In other words, Cooper sacrifices his relationship with his children for nothing. In this sense, science provides no more than an empty signifier which is far from what it promises to be. The fact that only one of the two plans seems feasible signifies the unreliability of science and confirms Lacan's point that "the closure of science" is "a successful paranoia" (*Écrits* 742).

Not only does John Brand tell a big lie to send people into space travel, but also he supports the ideology of capitalism under the name of human values. He is the father figure and the perfect representative of the law in the film. Several times in the film, Professor Brand proves to be the voice of patriotism and sacrifice. Earlier in the film as he is trying to encourage Cooper to pilot the *Endurance*, he tells him that they sent some of the very brave, sacrificial astronauts to a related *Lazarus* mission ten years ago. In the conference room inside NASA facility, as Cooper, Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway), Doyle (Wes Bentley), and Romilly (David Gyasi) are seated around a table, discussing the possibilities of the interstellar travel, Professor Brand stands up and walks towards a set of twelve pictures hanging on the wall, saying, "Twelve possible worlds, twelve *Ranger* launches carrying the bravest humans ever to live" (00:32:38-44). Each picture shows a smiling astronaut with helmet held in both hands, and the flag of the USA in the right. Later, we discover that all these people perished during the *Lazarus* missions (except for Dr. Mann, who is killed during the action of the film). What the pictures present is in sharp contrast with the tragic deaths of these scientists: the destruction of subjects under the ambitious projects of the capitalist discourse of science. The way that

Professor Brand plays with words signifies the way that ideology promises a better future but demands too much from the subject.

Professor Brand's fatherly figure steps inside once more in the second half of the film. In this specific scene, which occurs many years after the start of the interstellar mission and right after the sub-mission to the Miller's planet, as we hear the voice of Amelia's father, we see the dazzling light of the video spread over her face intermittently as she is sitting desperately on the floor: "Stepping out into the universe, we must confront the reality of interstellar travel. We must reach far beyond our lifespans. We must think not as individuals but as species" (01:25:08-25). The spread of the shadow of Amelia's father over her face signifies one more fact about Professor Brand: although he knows that his daughter is in love with Wolf Edmunds, he sends each to a different planet, thus ruining the possibility of a future relationship between them. Later in the film, when Amelia lands on Edmunds' planet, she finds that it is too late as she finds out that he perished alone several years ago.

It is only in his deathbed that Professor Brand tells the truth to Murph. As he is laying in the bed, he tells Murph, "I let you all down [...] You had faith. All those years I asked you to have faith. I wanted you to believe that your father [Cooper] would come back [...] I lied to you. There was no need for him to come back. There's no way to help us" (01:31:39-32:56). As Murph asks him in disbelief, "But Plan A. All this. All these people. And the equation" (01:32:58-33:05). John Brand shakes his head in disappointment and regret. Right after Professor Brand's death, the dejected Murph sends a video message to the crew on space, telling them that Professor Brand's ambitious promise was "all a sham," accusing them of abandoning the people on Earth "to

suffocate, to starve” (01:41:11-22). Startled, Amelia Brand tells Cooper that “my father dedicated his whole life to Plan A. I have no idea what she’s talking about” (01:41:52-59). Here, Dr. Mann (Matt Damon) reveals that there was no Plan A right from the start. As Amelia shows signs of rage over why they didn’t tell the rest of the crew, Dr. Mann answers, “He knew how hard it would be to get people to work together to save the species, instead of themselves or their children. You never would’ve come unless you believed you would save them” (01:43:12-23). It is in such instances that one could find how ideology works in general: it works towards creating a society around an abstract concept or a certain imaginary purpose. The way that Professor Brand robs Cooper’s team of one important piece of information, and the inability of the crew to find the truth reminds us of how magic works in *The Prestige*: as Cutter says,<sup>24</sup> “But you won’t find it [the secret of magic] because of course, you’re not really looking. You don’t really want to work it out. You want to be fooled” (02:04:42-57). The crew of the *Endurance* are not so much different from the audience, who watch the magic tricks in *The Prestige*.

#### **6.4 The Illusory Other and the Doomed Promise of Desire**

Professor Brand’s strong attachment to the realm of the law is also seen in his attempts to instill the idea that there is an *Other* or, as he himself calls it, a *they*, who are watching everything on Earth, and, who are capable of doing actions beyond human understanding. Several times in the film, there is an indication of the unknown they who seem to have planned everything for the mass exodus of the inhabitants of Earth. This absent Other is important for two reasons: first, it serves as the Lacanian master signifier

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<sup>24</sup> The roles of Cutter in *The Prestige*, Miles in *Inception*, and Alfred in *The Dark Knight* are all played by Michael Caine.

or *point de capiton*, which fills the lack by providing meaning for the empty side of interstellar travel; second, it shows that one's desire "*is the desire of the Other*" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 38). As we see throughout the film, it is this mysterious Other that shapes the desire of the subject: the desire to know. "The [Lacanian] Other," as McGowan points out, "appears to know something that the subject itself does not" (*Capitalism and Desire* 35). In this section, I discuss the way that this illusory *they* or *others* triggers the subject's desire and shapes the lives of the crew members of the *Endurance*. I will finally argue that Cooper finds a way to break free from the chains of desire by understanding that the Other doesn't exist.

It is Professor Brand who first mentions the others to Cooper. In the scene where he is encouraging Cooper to pilot the *Endurance*, he tells him that he has been chosen by them. Cooper and Brand are shown face to face in close-ups as they are standing inside the NASA facility:

Cooper: There's not a planet in our solar system that could sustain life, and the nearest star is over a thousand years away. And that doesn't even qualify as futile. Where'd you send them?

Professor Brand: Cooper, I can't tell you anymore unless you agree to pilot this craft. You're the best pilot we ever had.

Cooper: I barely left the stratosphere.

Professor Brand: This team never left the simulator. We need a pilot and this is the mission you were trained for.

Cooper: Without even knowing it? An hour ago, you didn't even know I was alive. You were going anyway.

Professor Brand: We had no choice, but something sent you here. They  
chose you.

Cooper: Who's 'they'?" (00:30:22-31:04)

Professor Brand's reaction is only silence as he is shown in close-up with a blank face. After another few words, Cooper repeats the same question but once again no answer. Professor Brand ascribes everything to the absent others as the only way to answer Cooper's questions. The *they* serves as the signifier that answers infinite questions raised by Cooper and the rest of the team members. It is what Lacan calls *point de capiton* or the "button tie [...] by which the signifier stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification" (Écrits 681). The *point de capiton* "magically turns confusion into a new Order" (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 149) by providing a temporary fixed meaning to several related concepts; in *Interstellar*, the related concepts are those that don't find a clear meaning through the discourse of science; however, the imaginary *other* is the only signifier that brings the unanswerable under its own name.

In the next sequence, as Romilly discusses some anomaly in our galaxy in the conference room, once again there is a mention of the *they*:

Romilly: We started detecting gravitational anomalies almost 50 years ago. Mostly small distortions to our instruments in the upper atmosphere [...] But of all these anomalies, the most significant is this: Out near Saturn. A disturbance of space-time.

Cooper: Is that a wormhole?

Romilly: It appeared 48 years ago.

Cooper: And it leads where?

Professor Brand: Another galaxy.

Cooper: A wormhole's not a naturally occurring phenomenon.

Amelia Brand: Someone placed it there.

Cooper: They?

Amelia Brand: Mm. And whoever they are, they appear to be looking out  
for us. That wormhole lets us travel to other stars [...]

Doyle: They've put potentially habitable worlds right within our reach.

(00:31:27-32:27)

Professor Brand and Romilly instill the idea in Cooper's mind that this *they* is the force that has chosen him to embark on the interstellar mission. Cooper agrees to pilot the Endurance. Later in the film, when Cooper decides to pilot the Endurance, he comes to Murph's room to say goodbye. Murph gets angry with him and accuses him of abandoning her. Here, there is once again an indication of this *Other*. Cooper tells Murph that "They chose me. Murph, they chose me" (00:38:36-39). This *they* which is an invisible, external, all-present abstract entity, who watches the world from an invisible place, remains a force with an unknown origin. It has an ideological function as it provides meaning for the inexplicable questions of the subjects: it is a master signifier which holds meaning together by filling the empty spot in human existence: it is "the point of convergence" (Lacan, *Psychoses* 268), which creates "a unified field" of meaning (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 95).

In our discussion of the role of the invisible *they*, focusing on two objects clarifies important facts: the bookshelf in Murph's room and the Tesseract in the fifth dimension. The bookshelf and the Tesseract are the key objects that define the action of the film.

These objects contradict each other in the sense that while the former piques curiosity and triggers the desire to know, the latter retroactively provides answers and quenches the thirst for knowledge. The bookshelf, in line with Professor Brand, boosts the idea that there is an inaccessible hand behind the wall. The Tesseract cancel out this idea by revealing that there is no ghost or any *others* behind the wall. The initial scene of the film, which takes 14 seconds, is probably the film in miniature as it foreshadows what the spectator should expect to see on the screen. An extreme close-up, pan shot shows a couple of toy spacecraft next to a row of books in the bookshelf while grains of dust fall gently. The bookshelf serves as a curtain that obstructs vision by blocking the eyes from seeing behind it, therefore, covering the truth of the so-called ghost mystery, and postponing the obtaining of the *objet petit a*. It, in fact, serves as the wall between reality and the invisible realm of the fifth dimension. Since Murph is unable to see behind the bookshelf, she claims that there is a ghost in her room. While his father and brother reject her claims time and again, Murph insists that she can feel the presence of the ghost. This invisible force, as we reach the last minutes of the film, is revealed to be Cooper himself trying to communicate with Murph from inside the Tesseract. Therefore, while the bookshelf creates the sublime Other, the Tesseract trivializes it by showing what lies behind the wall.

The bookshelf in Murph's room is shown several times in *Interstellar*. Our first full grasp of it occurs earlier in the film as Murph and Cooper enter her room. The reason that Cooper enters Murph's room is because of the fact that while he is walking along the hall, he hears the sound of something strange from inside her room, which is later revealed to be a book falling from the bookshelf. When Cooper enters the room, he

inspects everything suspiciously. The scene is in low-key lighting with Murph standing behind Cooper. The camera cuts to a single shot of Cooper's face, half in the dark. While Murph desperately attempts to convince her father, he does not accept what she says:

Murph: Nothing special about which book. I've been working on it, like you said. I counted the spaces [between books in the shelf].

Cooper: Why?

Murph: In case the ghost is trying to communicate. I'm trying Morse.

[...]

Cooper: I just don't think your bookshelf is trying to talk to you.

(00:14:52-15:15)

Despite Murph's further attempts, Cooper believes that there is a scientific reason behind this ghost-book story.

When Cooper informs Murph that he has decided to embark on the interstellar mission, she gets angry with him, imploring him not to go, yet Cooper doesn't change his mind. Before leaving, he tries to get things right with Murph, but all in vain. Cooper walks along to exit the room. When he gets at the door, a book drops on the floor from the bookshelf. As we discover later in the film, the ghost is Cooper himself who attempts to communicate with Murph from the fifth dimension. In other words, it is the future Cooper who desperately tries to make the past Cooper stay: this contradicts Professor Brand's idea that the others chose Cooper for the mission. The past Cooper is simply the desirous subject, who is looking for knowledge, and that is why he sets off to space. The future Cooper knows retroactively that Professor Brand's plan was only a sham and that is why he desperately tries to prevent the past Cooper from space travel. The bookshelf

misdirects the subject by directing him to an imaginary object, which doesn't exist. It resists the look, hinders desire, and demands more from the subject. The subject does not really know what the desirous bookshelf wants. Like the relationship of the subject with the Other, the subject imagines that the Other needs him to do something, while in actuality the Other doesn't want anything specific from the subject.

During the interstellar mission, the role of the *they* becomes even stronger. When the *Endurance* gets closer to the wormhole, Cooper asks, "The others made it, right?" (00:59:18-19), to which Doyle answers, "[a]t least some of them" (00:59:21-22). After Doyle's death in the Miller's planet, Cooper asks Amelia Brand, "The beings that led us here, they communicate through gravity, right?" (01:15:24-29). When she confirms, Cooper continues, "Could they be talking to us from the future?" (01:15:31-32). Amelia says, "Maybe" (01:15:33), to which he responds "[i]f they can..." (01:15:34-35). Amelia Brand interrupts him to say, "*They* are beings of five dimensions. To them, time might be another physical dimension. To them, the past might be a canyon that they can climb into and the future a mountain they can climb up but to us, it's not" (01:15:37-53). The *others*, in this sense, is an impossible, inaccessible force which falls beyond human understanding.

While the bookshelf delays the object of desire, the Tesseract moves exactly in the opposite direction; because of its backward movement in time, it trivializes desire by revealing that the *other* behind the wall never wanted Cooper to embark on the interstellar mission. When Cooper jettisons TARS and himself towards the black hole known as Gargantua, he finds himself in a dark world, where the only visible objects are the floating parts of the exploded *Ranger 2*. He is shown as he is moving downwards with

his body upside down. The surrounding outside world is completely silent until when we see a sphere which is exactly the direction that Cooper has plunged in himself. The only voice we hear is that of Cooper: a combination of slowed-down breathing and violent gasping caused by shivering. As he gets inside the Tesseract, we feel the rapid pace of his downward movement, the dazzling light over his face and body; his yelling comes to a halt when he finds himself suspended in the air as he produces a grunting sound accompanied by several deep breaths. This Tesseract is actually beyond our four dimensions in the sense that it incorporates all moments in time simultaneously; in a way Cooper exists outside of time. Because of such an atemporal experience, as Kip Thorne says,<sup>25</sup> “Cooper can move far faster than the flow of time in the bedroom extrusions, so he can easily travel through the tesseract complex to most any bedroom time that he wishes” (260). That is why when Cooper moves vertically down the Tesseract, he finds himself behind the bookshelves in Murph’s room.

The last mention of the *they* occurs inside the Tesseract. As Cooper is trying to send binary data to Murph, TARS communicates with him from somewhere else, telling him that it was saved by *them*:

Cooper: You survived.

TARS: Somewhere, in their fifth dimension. They saved us.

Cooper: Yeah? Who the hell is *they*? And just why would they want to help us?

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<sup>25</sup> Kip Thorne (b. 1940) is the renowned American physicist, whose scientific advice helped Christopher Nolan in making *Interstellar*. He wrote *The Science of Interstellar* (2014), which sheds lights on the more obscure, difficult to understand concepts that we see in the film.

TARS: I don't know, but they constructed this three-dimensional space inside their five-dimensional reality to allow you to understand it [...] You've seen that time is represented here as a physical dimension. You've worked out that you can exert a force across space-time. (02:26:55-27:25)

The mystery of the *they* gets resolved by the end of the film. Cooper's last words reveal something about the relationship between the subject and this imaginary Other(s): "they didn't bring us here at all. We brought ourselves" (02:28:38-45). The Other is no more than a human construct, a master signifier created by the ideological discourse of capitalism to contain the subject. It is only when Cooper finds the non-existence of this ubiquitous Other that he frees himself from its chain, that he enables himself to do something beyond the Symbolic, namely to communicate with the three-dimensional space.

Inside the Tesseract, Cooper is shown mostly in medium and long shots. However, since he is suspended in a time continuum, he is shown from all directions including from above or beneath. He is able to see inside Murph's room while she is only able to see the falling of books on the ground, caused by her father on the other side. Cooper shouts Murph's name three times but she simply doesn't hear him. Because the Tesseract gives an unlimited time continuum, Cooper is able to see Murph in different time periods, from childhood until the present time. The Tesseract enables Cooper to see inside Murph's room in all directions along a continuum. In other words, inside the Tesseract, wherever he looks, he is able to see Murph's room and the bookshelf. As Cooper looks inside the room, he sees the past version of himself on the other side,

opening the door to enter. Murph tells him, “If you’re leaving, just go!” (02:23:31-32). Despite the future Cooper’s shouts, which urge him to stay, the past Cooper leaves. Cooper uses a set of dots and dashes and throws books on the floor to send a message: S-T-A-Y. Inside the room we see crosscuttings to Murph as a child and Murph as she is now. Cooper is unable to change the past. He is only able to send a message to the present Murph to help her solve the equation. In “About Time Too: From *Interstellar* to *Following*, Christopher Nolan’s Continuing Preoccupation with Time-Travel,” Jacqueline Furby argues that

Whereas the past often contains an irreconcilable traumatic loss for many of Nolan’s protagonists, Cooper’s past is not finished, not closed-off from the present, and he is able to communicate with his daughter in the past, and visit her in the future (or rather her future) at which time he receives forgiveness and is able to move on with his life (253).

Unlike what Furby claims, it is not actually the past, but the present time that Cooper is able to change. He is unable to change his past, namely his decision to get involved in the mission to save the world. What he is able to change is to provide a solution to Professor Brand’s equation by sending a message to Murph. In a moment of revelation, the grown-up Murph discovers that it was her father who was sending messages from behind the bookshelf. Cooper sends the required binary data to Murph’s watch and she solves the equation eventually. Cooper is saved, brought to a hospital, and eventually visits his daughter for a few minutes, but then again sets off to another mission, now to find Brand in Edmunds’ planet. Cooper figures out the truth behind the bookshelf: it was his own desire, in the form of an external drive, that ignited the thirst for knowledge in him. Like

Cobb in *Inception*, Cooper resolves the missed reality that haunted him throughout the space travel by giving a visit to Murph.

The scene of Cooper's eventual visit to Murph is a sad one as she has reached the end of her life while her father, due to the fact that time ran more slowly for him, seems young. The over the shoulder shots of Cooper and Murph in the hospital show their tearful faces with Hans Zimmer's sad score, as they both regret the missed reality that would never come back: Murph is getting too close to death, which is too disappointing for her seemingly young father. As Cooper walks towards the exit, there is a cut to Amelia Brand as she mourns the death of her beloved Wolf Edmunds: She is shown in medium shot from behind as she is looking at TARS excavating operation digging out for the remains of Edmunds' camp, where she is supposed to execute Plan B and create a new human colony. Both Cooper and Amelia confront the traumatic encounter of the missed reality of their life: they sacrificed important people in their life only because of an illusory Other which was based on a fake scientific plan. Although, as the film clarifies, one can do nothing about the past, one can understand the truth of desire. This understanding is important as it reveals the fact that the subjects don't need to invest in the impossible promises of desire; rather, they should take pleasure from the more ordinary things in life.

### **6.5 The Anamorphic Surplus: Rethinking Consciousness**

In Nolan's *Interstellar*, there is a surplus, which acts anamorphotically to grab the spectators' attention. It appears in the form of an anomaly in the picture, affecting time, space, and sound. The function of this surplus is to question consciousness and the way we perceive the surrounding world. To clarify, it produces pauses in the spectators'

minds regarding concepts that they have taken for granted for a long time. This surplus evades perception because it seems trivial at first sight. In this section, I focus on this anamorphic surplus to highlight it as a way to reconsider the way that we look at our world. In my discussion, I consider specific moments as the encounter with the gaze: an encounter that warns the subject that desire would lead to no eventual object.

In *Interstellar* the manipulation of time occurs in two specific ways: narrative time, or the arrangement of the events in the plot in a certain artistic form, and time warp, which is a scientific term signifying the relativity that occurs along the space-time continuum. While we can certainly find films by Nolan in which narrative time has been arranged much more radically than *Interstellar*, in none other we might locate time warp. Time warp is to be considered as the agent of the Real because it creates a prolonged trauma, a threat, or, to be more exact, a fear of imminent death. As we witness, the effect of time warp is sometimes boosted by narrative time in certain spots in the film.

During the first twenty minutes of the film, the exposition occurs through interviews with some very old people talking at intervals about how the arrival of the Dust affected their life many years ago. The first old woman who appears in front of the camera is Murph (Ellen Burstyn), who is shown in close-up in a dark background: “Well, my dad was a farmer. Um, like everybody else back then. Of course, he didn’t start that way” (00:01:14-24). The spectators will find only belatedly that this speaking woman was actually Murph. At the end of the film, right after Cooper is saved, he is brought to his (preserved) home. Outside, there are several monitors broadcasting the same old people talking about the massive dust. One of these monitors is located near the corn field. The very moment that Cooper passes it, along the way to his home, we see Murph’s

face, saying the same words: “Well, my dad was a farmer. Um, like everybody else back then. There just wasn’t enough food” (02:37:44-51). We know that several decades have passed and, because of time warp, Cooper remained almost the same age just because time passed much slower for him than it passed on Earth. Narrative time, therefore, remains harmonious with time warp because it is arranged to reflect how time slippage works for the subjects. The beginning of the film, therefore, is its ending: the narrative, in this sense, is an ouroboros, eating its own tail. Here, the surplus is the ending of the film, which appears in the beginning, in the image of Murph as a very old woman. The function of this surplus is to reveal the sad truth about desire: right from the start, we, as spectators, are provided with the destructive consequence of desire. Cooper’s interstellar mission, and his moving across time warps, brings nothing but separation from his daughter. However, the spectators only belatedly come to understand that Cooper’s desire to know was doomed to fail: the film’s ending which functions as a surplus at the beginning of the film is the spectators’ encounter with the gaze. In Nolan’s films, structural anamorphosis occurs when the initial sequence sticks out from the rest of the narrative because it belongs to a set of events that chronologically occur much later. The spectators figure out this chronological anomaly only belatedly: as the film reaches a certain point, we understand that this surplus was staring at us right from the start without our knowledge. This surplus is the gaze that reveals retroactively a bitter truth about the subject in the film. The sad truth that the initial sequence in *Interstellar* reveals is the impossibility of the moving backwards of time.

Time is not the only dimension in *Interstellar*, which provides us with a surplus to reconsider perception. Spatial distortion is another form that furnishes us with the

anamorphic Real. The incredibly huge waves of water in Miller's planet, which cause Doyle's death, produce a surplus which is not pleasant to look. When Amelia Brand, Doyle, and Case start walking on the watery surface of the Miller's planet, Amelia mistakes the huge approaching waves of water for mountains. These gargantuan waves are simply overwhelming not only because of their towering height but also because of their seeming motionlessness. They are mostly shown in extreme long shots, but once we see a low angle shot, we understand the fear and speechlessness of the crew of the *Endurance*. However, this colossal shape by itself does not provide an encounter with the Real; rather it is the way it causes Doyle's death that we encounter the gaze. As massive waves of water get closer, Cooper shuts the entrance of Ranger 1, which results in Doyle being swept away by the floods of water. When Ranger 1 leaves Miller's planet in a rush, on the monolithic watery surface of the planet there is a spot, a surplus, which is actually the half-visible body of Doyle. The dead body floats on water, in the middle of the frame, but at a distance there are gigantic waves coming closer to wash away Doyle's body. It is here that the anamorphic Real appears to magnify not the gigantic waves but actually Doyle's dead body: it is the traumatic effect of death that haunts the spectators during this scene of space distortion. To expand, Doyle's body is the waste produced by the ambitious interstellar project. His death is the starting point of a number of other human sacrifices that appear later in *Interstellar*. The scene is the ruin of the fantasy which was promised by Professor Brand early in the film.

Besides time and space, sound is also manipulated in *Interstellar*. The film is perhaps the most significant work created by Nolan in terms of sound because of its experimental approach. When *Interstellar* was released in 2014, there were so many

complaints about the sound quality and the fact that in some scenes it was almost impossible to hear the conversation due to the heightened background music. One of the major theaters in which the film was shown, made an announcement to the audience: “Please note that all of our sound equipment is functioning properly. Christopher Nolan mixed the soundtrack with an emphasis on the music. This is how it is intended to sound” (McClintock). And one viewer complains: “I noticed right away that there were parts where the music totally obliterates the dialogue” (Leopold). While it is true that *Interstellar* is a science-fiction film, Nolan never forgets that it is the human reality that matters most. As he himself says, “We feel human presence in every sound. And I think that was very important to keep in the film [...] not just the space they will look at, but the people in that space” (Elegyscores 00:04:07-18). The score, composed by Hans Zimmer, which accompanies scenes in space and overshadows dialogue, represents the tiniest emotions of the characters much better than dialogue. As Nolan points out, “Many of the filmmakers I’ve admired over the years have used sound in bold and adventurous ways. I don’t agree with the idea that you can only achieve clarity through dialogue. Clarity of story, clarity of emotions —I try to achieve that in a very layered way using all the different things at my disposal —picture and sound” (Giardina). By inserting certain moments when silence overcomes sound, and music overshadows dialogue, Nolan directs us to a better understanding of the psychic reality of his characters.

In *Interstellar*, spectators are occasionally provided with images that do not correspond with sound. This no-sound experience takes place several times, and only after the launch of the *Endurance*, beyond Earth’s atmosphere. In some scenes, while we hear the crew’s conversations inside the spacecraft, cross-cuttings to the outside world

make a sharp contrast because silence permeates everywhere. However, these scenes are not those that provide us with the anamorphic surplus. The encounter with the gaze in the form of anamorphosis occurs in the scenes that portray the deaths by explosion of Romilly and Mann.

Although in the occasion of Doyle's death the surplus is the body that floats in water, the explosion of Romilly and Mann doesn't leave any leftovers. Romilly and Mann die within a few minutes: the explosions that cause their deaths take less than seconds. There is a contrast, however, in the way that the explosions are portrayed. While in Romilly's case the explosion seems to be accompanied by diegetic sound, Dr. Mann's death is shown without sound. Romilly and Mann die in the same manner. Mann arranges for KIPP to explode in case anyone attempts to access its information. When Romilly attempts to obtain KIPP's archive, which contains the true data of the planet, it explodes and Romilly perishes in less than a second. Dr. Mann's death occurs in the same way. As he is trying to take control of the Endurance, Cooper, far away inside Ranger 1, warns him several times through radio messages: "Do not attempt docking" (02:02:38-39) or "Do not open the hatch" (02:06:03-04). Mann doesn't do what Cooper asks. When his Ranger is trying to dock, which is shown in aerial view and extreme long shots, Dr. Mann attempts to open the hatch of the Endurance. As he hears Brand's voice asking him not to open the hatch, Mann tells her that he is taking control of the Endurance: "This is not about my life or Cooper's life. This is about all mankind. There is a moment..." (02:07:14-22). Before he finishes this sentence, a massive explosion occurs with no sound. Perhaps the explosion is so overwhelming that it is impossible to record its voice. Brand and Cooper watch the scene from a safe distance, their faces show extreme fear

with protruding eyes, as the light of explosion falls on their faces. The anamorphic surplus is, therefore, the incongruity between the image and sound. This scene provides an encounter with the gaze: the dejected faces of Amelia and Cooper show the ruin of fantasy that Professor Brand promised. The Real of the psychic life should be seen exactly in such moments when there is a discrepancy in the Symbolic Order. In Mann's case, the silent explosion, oxymoronic as it may seem, represents the truth of the witnessing subjects, which, in this case, are the dumbfounded faces and protruding eyes of Amelia and Cooper; in other words, when the subject watches such a tremendous scene, her or his psychic reality is filled with pauses and silences, and it is in such moments that we hear the Real of our existence.

The anamorphic surplus, therefore, in all its three forms (time, space, and sound) serves to undermine the fantasy at the core of human desire. Like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, it shows the futility of earthly endeavors and the object that desire promises. It is presented as a spot in the picture, which forces itself on perception. The spectators might experience such encounters in real life, but they simply ignore it. Christopher Nolan, however, facilitates our encounter with the gaze through his anamorphic art. This experience, which is at the heart of Nolan's cinema, is the key to reconsider our surrounding world. It tells us how our desire makes us obsessed with obtaining objects, which are illusory and impossible.

## Conclusion

This dissertation covered a long 15-year time span (2000-2014) in the career of Christopher Nolan, a period which started with *Memento*, his breakthrough into Hollywood, and ended with *Interstellar*, his latest film at the time of completion of this project. I provided a chronological reading of his films and focused on his portrayal of the subject through the lenses of Jacques Lacan. Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrated that the subject, as presented by Nolan, is the subject of desire: the endless quest to fill the essential lack is the pivotal feature of Nolan's characters. As Lacan clarifies, "desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 214). Desire, in other words, produces a labyrinth and promises that there would be an eventual object that fills the lack of the subject. The subjects of desire, therefore, mistake every object that they crave as the *objet petit a*. The *objet petit a* is the lack in every human object, but it itself is lacking, too. In Lacan's words, it "is no being" but "the void presupposed by a demand" (*Feminine Sexuality* 126). The lack of the lack is the root of the subject's desire. In his films, Nolan provides the spectators with the subject's obsession with the search for the *objet petit a*.

The direct consequence of obsession with the *objet petit a* is that intersubjective relationships are affected. As we witnessed in the previous chapters, in Nolan's films, subjects sacrifice other subjects in order to obtain what they want. Rivalry, hatred, and the thirst for revenge are the major features that define the characters in Nolan's *Memento*, *The Prestige*, and *The Dark Knight*. The characters in these films look for *jouissance* or the ultimate pleasure that they can get in their actions. They are unable to see the void at the core of desire, that the *objet petit a* is inaccessible. The ultimate

consequence of looking for the ultimate pleasure is that the subject is destroyed; even more, he sacrifices other subjects in his futile attempts. In Nolan's later films, there is a change: the subjects better understand the truth of desire and, by doing so, they can manage the traumatic encounter. In *Inception* and *Interstellar*, the subjects are emancipated because they know that the object as promised by the Other is not attainable. Although they encounter the bitter truth that total pleasure is impossible, they handle the trauma and improve their relationships with other subjects. Now the question is: how do the later subjects in Nolan's cinema come to know the truth about the deceptiveness of desire?

The answer to the above question is that in the encounter with the (anamorphic) gaze, these later subjects understand the inaccessibility of *the objet petit a*. The gaze, in this sense, is an experience that shatters the fantasy of an eventual moment of completion or total satisfaction. The gaze helps the subject uncover the truth about desire. The only way to resist the desire of obtaining the impossible object is to find pleasure in the more common things of life. As Slavoj Žižek points out, "instead of running after the impossible, we must learn to consent to our common lot and to find pleasure in the trivia of our everyday life" (*Looking Awry* 8). In his films, Nolan shows us that to be obsessed with the impossible object of desire leads to destruction.

The major contribution of this dissertation to existing knowledge is its focus on the concept of anamorphosis. I provided instances in the cinema of Nolan, where anamorphosis appears to show the limits of the Symbolic Order. The paradoxical two-dimensional Penrose Steps in *Inception* that creates the illusion of a three-dimensional space shows the limits of the Symbolic Order and its insufficient laws to portray objects

that are beyond its logic. Also, the Joker's amateurish videos in *The Dark Knight*, which appear as stains in the film's narrative, are to be considered as a surplus that reminds us of the essential distortion in vision. This anamorphic spot, which might seem trivial, opposes itself to the sublime art of filmmaking to show how distorted is the view provided by the filmmaker.

In this project, I discussed how the encounter with the anamorphic gaze reveals the impossibility of fantasy at the core of desire. In *Memento*, I argued, Leonard's Polaroid that projects his desire on certain objects (such as the dead bodies of the victims), shows that he is seeking *jouissance* in every action that he performs. The gaze as *objet petit a* appears in Leonard's face nearly at the end of the film: an extreme close-up of his chest, which he has tattooed with the words "I'VE DONE IT" promises that his impossible quest has eventually worked; however, as the camera tilts up to his dejected, indifferent face, it dawns on us that his fantasy is doomed to fail. This titling up of the camera is the encounter with the gaze as it shows the impossibility of obtaining the *objet petit a*. At the end of *The Prestige*, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, when one of the Borden twins shoots Angier, the latter's sudden realization of the fact that the twins' transportation show was a simple trick is accompanied by a moment of disbelief and agony, as he remembers the impossible quest that he went through to find the *objet petit a*. As Angier dies, the spectators watch his body on the floor. The spectators, who imagine that they are in control of the image, suddenly encounter a shot that shatters their illusion. The panning of the camera to the left shows original Angier's frozen body inside a water tank: his dumbfounded look and protruding eyes signify the suffering he underwent to find nothing but death at the end. At the same time, this abrupt emergence

in the scene shows that the spectators were being looked at all the time. In *Inception*, the anamorphic gaze appears in Cobb's occasional encounters with the image of his dead wife. In every encounter, the impact of the trauma is so massive that Cobb becomes speechless and distracted. Mal appears as a stain in every picture that Cobb sees because it points to a missed reality that he could have avoided. In the last encounter, we see how Cobb loses hope in the impossible *objet petit a* as he discovers that it is impossible to change a moment in the past.

In my discussion of *The Dark Knight* and *Interstellar*, I pointed out that anamorphosis may also occur when there is an incongruity between the image and sound. In *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent who was the best citizen of Gotham, and who once fantasized the future romantic relationship with Rachel, loses everything in an explosion set up by the Joker: Rachel dies and his face is harshly disfigured all of a sudden. Although he is saved, once he figures out these bitter facts, he screams as he is lying on his bed in the hospital. We cannot hear his voice because the agonizing pain in his voice is too much to be heard normally. Dr. Mann's scene of the sudden death by explosion in *Interstellar* is similar to what we witnessed in *The Dark Knight*. As he informs the team that he is about to take control of the Endurance, his error causes a massive explosion resulting in his death. As Cooper and Amelia are watching this scene from afar, their sad, dejected faces show the impact of the traumatic encounter on the subject. We cannot hear the explosion once again because it is not within the range of our hearing. Such instances show the massive impact of the traumatic encounter as a moment of non-hearing in the subject's psychic reality.

Throughout this dissertation, I argued how narrative time would provide us with the anamorphic gaze. I proposed the term *structural anamorphosis*, or the gaze as a temporal point in the plot of the film. Structural anamorphosis as the encounter with the gaze occurs when a certain part of a later plotline appears early in the film: the function of this surplus is to shatter the spectators' fantasy belatedly. In other words, this cuttable piece is a stain, like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, with two functions: first, it tells the spectators that they were not in control of the scene from the start; second, it reveals the futility of the subject's quest for the inaccessible *objet petit a*. Structural anamorphosis, therefore, is on the side of the gaze as it questions perception as a straightforward or conscious process and shows the *objet petit a* as impossible. It is, in fact, time as a stain or surplus that undermines our conception of narrative and reality. Structural anamorphosis is not simply a non-linear arrangement of the narrative events; rather it is a temporal dislocation in the film that only belatedly betrays its significance: the futility of the expected fantasy.

In my critique of the deceitful path of desire, I related it to the functioning of ideology, especially that of contemporary late capitalism. Desire is the essence of capitalism: the cunning path of desire produces an obsession with objects and asks the subjects to seek ultimate pleasure in every form. In no ideology other than capitalism do objects obtain such a pivotal importance. Capitalism promises that the passage of time will bring the *objet petit a*, the fetishist object, "as something substantial that the subject has lost through a traumatic event" (McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire* 26). It asks subjects to move from one object to another to get what they want eventually. The

essential problem of the capitalist's obsession with objects is the fact that it damages intersubjective relations through commodity fetishism.

In my critique of the ideology of capitalism, I pointed out that Nolan's anamorphic art is a space for revision. In his films, Nolan provides the spectators with an opportunity for looking awry; he slows down perception by creating puzzles out of narratives in order to make the spectators rethink (conscious) perception and (taken-for-granted) ideological views of life, and implicitly asks them to transfer this view to life. By inviting the spectators to reconsider their worldviews, Nolan implies that ideology, and capitalism in particular, require re-examination.

Nolan's cinema is an example of ideology as unconscious, subjectivity as an interaction with the Other, and desire as an endless loop, with fantasy as fruitless for the subject's existential lack. His films are both a reflection on ideology and a demand for revision and rethinking because, as he attempts to show in all of his films, perception is not reliable. The sentence "Are you watching closely?", which is repeated several times in *The Prestige* tells us most about the cinema of Christopher Nolan. Nolan tacitly asks the spectator of his films to question the authenticity of the picture they are being presented with. In a way, his films "acknowledge our limitations in knowing and seeing" (Detweiler 85). From *Memento*, in which spectators are deceived into believing that Leonard Shelby is actually looking for the murderer of his wife, to *Interstellar*, in which Professor Brand hides the truth about Plan A, the films of Nolan question the way the spectators watch things in the theaters.

The spectators are expected to expand this critical view of the motion picture in the theater to the world outside, asking very essential questions about the codes that are

unconsciously defining their existence. The spectators are not supposed to constantly suspecting their reality (as did Mal in *Inception*), trying to escape it by killing themselves; rather, they are being asked to question things in their surroundings that that they have taken for granted. Certainly, there are (anamorphic) moments in real life in which the Symbolic Order is revealed to be a groundless construct, one world among the many other possible ones. The Real that occasionally forces itself on the mundane reality through anamorphosis, provides opportunities for subjects to reconsider their straightforward view of life.

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