Man’s Desire Exceeds His Grasp – The Prestige as Utopia

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Abstract
This essay introduces the Girardian model of conflictive imitation to explain the rivalry between the two main protagonists of *The Prestige*, Alfred Borden and Robert Angier. Furthermore it will be argued that the protagonists are representatives of two schools of utopian thought. Finally, boundless desire resulting from conflictive imitation can be seen as the reason for the failure of Angier’s pursuit of scientific utopia that consequently becomes a dystopian reality.
The weakness of all utopias is this, that they take the greatest difficulty of man [i.e. original sin] and assume it to be overcome, and then give an elaborate account of the overcoming of smaller ones. They first assume that no man will want more than his share, and then are very ingenious in explaining whether his share will be delivered by motor-car or balloon.\(^1\)

*The Prestige* tells the story of the rivalry of two magicians, Alfred Borden (played by Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (played by Hugh Jackman), in turn of the century London. This rivalry can be understood as what Chesterton calls “the greatest difficulty of man”, when one considers it in terms of René Girard’s mimetic theory. In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Girard uncovers the problem of human desire in the Tenth Commandment’s interdiction of coveting what belongs to one’s neighbour.\(^2\) His anthropological model revolves around the tenet that human beings desire what belongs to one’s neighbour because of a lack of autonomous identity. The object that belongs to one’s neighbour seems desirable because the other seems to possess an identity that the self is lacking. Hence it is not so much the object that is being desired but the very being of the person possessing the object. Human conflicts, according to Girard, are based on the imitation of apparently independent desires of others. For Girard, the fallenness of humanity is a problem of deviated desire. After the Fall the desire for transcendence, for being that previously was met in an imitation of God is directed to one’s neighbour in an act of deviated
transcendency. Or as he has put it in Deceit, Desire and the Novel: “Men become
gods to each other.”

In the course of the film both magicians obtain possession of their rival’s
diary and discover their imitative desire for the other’s being. In the following
example, Borden reads how Angier describes the experience of reading Borden’s
diary:

I saw happiness, happiness that should have been mine. But I was wrong.
His notebook reveals that he never had the life that I envied. The family life
that he craves one minute he rails against the next, demanding freedom. His
mind, his mind is a divided one. His soul is restless. His wife and child
tormented by his fickle and contradictory nature.

Both magicians realize eventually that the imitation of the other’s apparently
superior desire has been an imitation of nothingness, as neither of them possesses
the happiness that they think the rival does.

The relation of imitated desire in the case of the magicians to utopia can be
unraveled, if one examines the nature of the rivals’ profession. Cutter (played by
Michael Caine), Angier’s “ingénieur” (a designer of tricks) explains the role of the
magicians thus: “[They are] men who live by dressing up plain and sometimes
brutal truths to amaze, to shock.” The magician’s role is to simulate a reality that
can never be achieved but appears real because of the magician’s skill to disguise
the plain truth of the trick. Every magic trick is in that sense utopian, as the reality it simulates is nowhere to be found.⁶

Angier’s professional envy is centered on a trick Borden calls “the transported man”, in which he disappears behind a door on one side of the stage and immediately reappears on the other side, by opening another door. Cutter sees through the illusion at once and points out that Borden uses a double – which he indeed does. Angier then replicates Borden’s trick by hiring an out-of-work actor who resembles him. But his trick is not good enough, as Borden, as is revealed at the end of the film, has a twin brother with whom he performs the trick. Because Angier cannot replicate Borden’s trick he suspects that there is more to it than the simple usage of a perfect double. Throughout the film, Borden’s secret is set before Angier’s eyes, like a purloined letter, but he simply does not want to see it.

Borden’s trick that fuels the utopian dream of instantaneous transportation comes at the cost of sharing one life with his twin brother. The Bordens have to continually hide the fact that there are two Bordens to the public and to Angier. They have to be happy with sharing one life in order for the trick to work. Their trick in terms of utopia is based on the view expressed in Ancient and many early modern utopias that scarcity of goods is a datum that made the utopias simple and static.⁷ It is instructive at this point to look in more detail at the roots of utopia as a literary genre. The foundational, “classic” pieces of utopia, More’s Utopia,
Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* and Johann Valentin Andreae’s *Christianopolis* were influenced by the classic pagan myth of the Golden Age, the Hellenic ideal city as portrayed in Plato’s *Republic* and the Christian idea of the City of God. But whereas the Golden Age lies in the past and the Hellenic ideal city is more real in Plato’s world of ideas, it is the Judeo-Christian tradition that introduced the idea that a perfect world could be established in the future on earth. As Krishan Kumar explains: “The important thing about the Jewish prophecies, from the point of view of the later utopia, is that they placed the new order firmly on this earth.”

This order, however, as is made clear in the Book of Daniel is brought about “without hands”, i.e. by the hands of God and not by human beings. Likewise, the idea of the Millenium, introduced by the Book of Revelation and developing the concept of an end of history in the Book of Daniel, is introduced through supernatural means through the Second Coming of Christ. For traditional Christian Orthodoxy since Augustine, there could be no additional earthly millenium supervening between the advent of Christ and the Last Judgment. The only institution that functioned as a kind of simulacrum on earth of a divine order was the Church as the body of Christ. Even though throughout the Middle Ages there were numerous heretical Millenarianist movements that tried to bring about the
Millennium by violence, \(^{12}\) “the dominant and decisive teaching of Christianity was that Christ’s kingdom was not of this world.” \(^{13}\)

In the context of *The Prestige*’s magic an exemplification of the bringing about of a new order “without hands” from the Book of Daniel might be useful: when King Nebuchadnezzar asks the Chaldeans to interpret his dream of the statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, he is well aware of the staged nature of all magic, sorcery and astrology. He refuses to be fooled, to enter the contract of deception with the magicians, by not telling them his dream. He thus insists on a true miracle not a staged one. The Chaldeans’ reaction is understandable. If the king does not play along according to the rules of their art, they cannot perform it: “There is not a man upon the earth that can show the king’s matter: therefore there is no king, lord, nor ruler, that asked such things at any magician, or astrologer, or Chaldean.” \(^{14}\) Daniel eventually manages to achieve the impossible and interprets the dream for Nebuchadnezzar. But he is only able to do so with superhuman support, with the help of God, who is the revealer of all secrets. Borden’s transported man on the other hand remains a trick, an illusion on the level of Nebuchadnezzar’s sorcerers. The “miracle” is only a simulacrum of the real miracle that is not possible without the intervention of God.

Like Borden’s trick, Thomas More’s *Utopia* demands a system that restricts human desire and forces human beings to share the scarce resources with their
fellow human beings. More uses the monastic ideal of the City of Man as the body of Christ as a model, which can foreshadow the City of God. Only through restraining desire can a sketch of the heavenly city of God be created on earth. This utopian model, according to Roland Schaer, “unlike millenarian visions and eschatological promises does not call for the intervention of divine providence.”

The goals, however, remain the same as in utopian thought involving divine intervention. It is important to bear in mind, however, that, as for the Bordens, so for More and the early utopians, the utopia remains a magic trick, an illusion on the level of Nebuchadnezzar’s sorcerers that can only be achieved through rigorous discipline and personal hardship. And this is exactly why Angier is not willing to accept the simple workings of the trick. In his version of the trick he has to take his bows under the stage, while his double reaps the appreciation of the audience. Angier is not willing to pay the necessary price of sharing his life with another human being in order for the trick to work.

Jacob Bronowski, in Magic, Science and Civilization, explains that the age of science does no longer suppose the existence of two separate logics of the natural and the supernatural but is trying to form a single picture of the whole of nature including man. Science thus claims to be able to achieve what in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is strictly God’s prerogative and in the early Utopias is achieved as a mere shadow at the price of restricting desire. The scientific utopia that reaches
its apex in the 19th century no longer assumes, as the classic utopia does, that if at all, it is only reachable at the expense of hardship and temperance of desire. While More regretfully observed that utopia was something he may rather wish for than hope for, the claim of the scientific utopia was “that utopia was ultimately, in the foreseeable future, realizable.”

Francis Bacon, the inventor of the scientific utopia, had made the necessary adjustment by an extraordinary synthesis of Christianity and science. Bacon accepted the orthodox view of the Fall but introduced the idea that it could be overcome through scientific investigation that could create an easier, happier and healthier life.

Although Bacon’s utopias, according to Schaer, are built “on the advancement of knowledge and the power of the learned men”, the aim was still to resuscitate the Kingdom of God by relating his utopias to the prophecies of the Millenium of Daniel and Isaiah. The idea of scientific progress could give rise to a utopia in which the age-old restriction of scarcity was at last overcome.

Angier therefore turns to Nikola Tesla (played by David Bowie) and the promises of science to solve the problem of the transported man. If there were a way of making the illusion real of actually miraculously transporting himself across the stage, Angier, so he thinks, would no longer have to share the appreciation of the audience with anyone. Angier requests Tesla to build a transporting device. Tesla’s machine does, however, not work as expected. Instead of transporting him,
the machine produces a clone of Angier. It is significant that although science does in a sense deliver what it promises, Angier is nevertheless returned to the initial situation in which he has to share his life with a double, another human being. He can no longer complain that his double is not as good as Borden’s identical twin, as his double in fact is even better than an identical twin – it is himself. Angier’s reaction to the creation of an identical double is the same as to the previous double. He is not willing to pay the price of sharing his life with another human being. Instead he repeats the cloning process in each performance of his version of “the transported man” and drowns the old self in a water tank that he places underneath the stage. There can only ever be one version of Angier.

Thus even though science is successful in delivering an abundance of doubles, the initial problem of desire remains: “If the ‘old Adam’ will and must out, if ineradicable greed or aggression will continue to plague utopia, then it is futile to invent it.” The situation of rivalry is recreated every time a new Angier is cloned. The desire for the being of the other leads to the killing of the rival. But this desire is not satiated and a new obstacle is created that again must be killed. In the case of Angier, the creation of the obstacle is effected by Tesla’s duplicating device. Tesla’s failure to build a transporter is not be read as the failure of science to deliver what it promises – science does indeed create a utopia undreamt of in previous
centuries. But in The Prestige it is portrayed as not being able to change the nature of human desire.

Even if through the scientific utopia scarcity can be replaced by abundance, the problem of unfulfilled desire that is a desire for the rival’s position will always turn the abundance once more into scarcity. Once the obstacle in the form of the rival is overcome, a new obstacle has recurrently to be created because the position of the rival does not offer the promised being. This is symbolized in The Prestige by the continuous creation of new Angiers. Having defeated Borden as a rival, Angier becomes his own rival. Nothing material – even if available in abundance – can appease the desire for being that fuels the deviated transcendency. Set at the eve of World War I, The Prestige foreshadows the mechanized horrors to come. The abundance created by science turns the world into a dystopian nightmare rather than a utopian paradise, because, as G.K. Chesterton claims in the initial quotation, the problem of conflictive desire and human greed remains unsolved by science. In a conversation with Angier Nikola Tesla remarks how the phrase “man’s reach exceeds his grasp” is a lie and how actually “man’s grasp exceeds his nerve.” In Angier’s case, however, the phrase has to undergo a further modification: man’s (conflictive) desire exceeds both his reach and his grasp.

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6 The term “Utopia” was coined from the Greek “outopos” meaning “nowhereplace” and “eutopos” meaning “good place. The “u” of “utopia” thus unites in itself the “ou” and “eu” the “nowhere”-part and the “good”-part.


8 Ibid., 14. Kumar argues that utopia appears only in societies with classical and Christian heritage (1987, 19).


10 Kumar (1987), 14.

11 Ibid., 18.


13 Kumar (1987), 22.

14 Daniel 2:10.

15 Kumar (1987), 22.


17 Kumar (1987), 30.

18 Ibid., 29-31.

19 Daniel 2:10
20 Ibid., 28.

21 Girard (1965), 137.

22 See (Nolan 2006), 50:38.