Your Cheatin' Art: Double Dealing in Cinematic Narrative

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Narrative, Volume 13, Number 1, January 2005, pp. 11-28 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/nar.2005.0006

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Your Cheatin’ Art: Double Dealing in Cinematic Narrative

Have you ever gone to a film showing and, as the end titles roll, heard from the hostile audience in different parts of the hall not only catcalls but the shouted word “cheat”? Obviously there is something here greater than mere disappointment. To claim that a film cheats is to imply that there is a tacit narrative contract between the film and the viewer, and that the film in some way breaches that contract. This essay explores a variety of film cheats, seeking not only to offer insight into the workings of particular films but also to identify kinds of cheating and, thus, some clauses in that contract between film and viewer. The essay takes its cues from my own responses, those personally communicated to me,1 and ones I have found in published reviews, both professional pieces and amateurish displays on Internet message boards (i.e., I looked into those films that people told me “cheat big time”). But I must admit from the start that the question of cheating actually provokes a lot of disagreement in the real audience. People writing in to a message board that they are outraged by some aspect of a film are often told, “Get over it, it’s only a movie.”

In general a cheat is what fraud is in the world at large, a dishonest effort to get something for nothing: in aesthetic terms, an effect that one hasn’t earned. For example, unless a film has defined itself as being in some “anything goes” mode of comic fantasy, for a surprise ending to work it has to be both surprising and probable, and so the groundwork of the probability has to have been previously filled in. More later on this.

We talk about films that cheat much more often than about novels that cheat.2 It may be that, to the extent that films present the “reality” of a narrative with clarity, specificity, and apparent objectivity in ways that prose fiction cannot match, cheats...
become a more serious problem. This may be only another way of saying that films
make stronger and less ambiguous claims about the world they show. These claims
may be less nuanced partly because film is a much younger medium than prose, with
techniques and conventions that are still in the process of development.

There are prose fictional texts that pull the rug out from under the reader’s ex-
pectations in a shocking way, such as Ambrose Bierce’s “Occurrence at Owl Creek
Bridge,” but they are usually written so that, on a second reading at least, we can see
how we were misled, helped to choose the wrong one of two possible ways of con-
figuring the narrative. Ian McEwan’s _Atonement_ (2002) is a contemporary text that
does something similar to Bierce’s story. That is, the events of the first three sections,
which we have been constructing as features of the fictional lifeworld, are redefined
in the fourth section as events within an imagined fiction created by a character
within the original lifeworld—and we are told that the “actual” outcome was very
different. Here the reader’s outrage at having been gaslighted may be soothed by the
steely rigor of the narrator’s concluding meditation on the relationship between life
and art, on the motives artists have for rewriting in fictional form their own lives and
the lives of those they have known and touched. In both the Bierce story and the
McEwan novel we ignore hints we are given about the actual state of affairs within
the fictional lifeworld, having been drawn in to the false version by the pleasure prin-
ciple. We are thus made aware of the power of our own fantasies, either about escap-
ing our fate or about wrongs that magically right themselves, and so we are hardly in
a position to criticize, much less demand back the price of admission.3

To return to film, breaches of the reality effect here create at least a momentary
loss of coherence. To use James Phelan’s terms, the mimetic component of the film
fails in ways that make us more aware than we ought to be of the synthetic compo-
nent (Phelan 131–62). That is, our attempts to naturalize the anomalies thematize the
fact that we are processing a film and the rules, mostly tacit, by which we “read” and
thereby construct cinematic texts. And unless this attention to the synthetic compo-
nent has a payoff elsewhere, it destroys in whole or part the impact of the film.

Now of course breaches of the reality effect can be relatively minor, extending
down to minor lapses in continuity (sequences where an actor’s cigarette seems to
get longer rather than shorter, or flopped shots such as those in Mel Gibson’s _Passion
of the Christ_ where the injury to Jesus’s eye moves from the right eye to the left and
back again). Inadvertent lapses, with no attempt to extract unlawful gain, are classi-
fied as mere goofs. Directors can’t afford to reshoot to correct every mistake the
script girl makes, and where the loss of reality–effect is minimal, one allows for fi-
nancial constraints. New Yorkers aware of the enormous expense of shooting on its
streets tend to be forgiving when, after an establishing shot in the Big Apple, the
streets shown are those of Toronto.

Attention to the synthetic component may indeed be part of the intended effect
in films as well as in novels like _Atonement_. What in other films might be a mere
goof can rise to an artistic effect when it is done with playful malice aforethought, as
in the opening sequence of Peyton Reed’s comedy _Down With Love_. You don’t have
to be an expert in the geography of Manhattan to notice that Renee Zellweger comes
out of Grand Central Station at 42nd and Lexington, checks the cab line, then strides
across the street to grab a taxi being vacated by protesters in front of the UN build-
ings—which are half a mile away. As she enters the taxi, we see that it is now facing uptown on Sixth Avenue from around Greenwich Village, and as it moves into traffic, a second later, the streets are those of Fifth Avenue up in the Fifties. This added sequence, like the opening titles and the film as a whole, is an homage—maybe it should be called a dommage—to the Doris Day/Rock Hudson comedies of the late fifties and early sixties.

The collapse of the reality effect, in the interest of making the viewer see the film as a constructed experience, can involve aspects of film considerably more important than visual continuity. Adaptation (written by Charlie and Donald Kaufman) begins as an ironic narrative about a hyper-refined screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman frustratedly trying to figure out how to adapt a brilliantly written but totally uncinematic book (The Orchid Thief by Susan Orlean). During this struggle, Charlie's agonies are highlighted by the ease with which his untalented brother Donald, who has no desire to be original, swiftly makes a million dollars writing a thriller after attending a Robert McKee screenwriting seminar. It ends by subjecting the audience to a wrenching dislocation of story logic in which the book's issues—about eccentric flowers and the eccentrics who grow and sell them in Florida—are entirely shelved. The comic narrative about a blocked artist morphs instead into a standard action flick whose melodramatic story points are all about divided loyalties, sex, drugs, and violent death. The collapse of narrative logic makes us conscious of the film as a constructed artifact, especially its devices of disclosure, as it dawns on the audience that the two parts of the film—the ironic narrative about screenwriting and the melodramatic action flick—correspond to the respective screenwriting styles of the twin brothers Charlie and Donald, who themselves represent two Hollywood approaches to adaptation. In other words by a kind of metalepsis the thematized approaches are represented as characters and exemplified in the two halves of the screenplay of the film itself.

To return to goofs now, the goof rises to the level of a cheat when we are asked to respond emotionally to an episode that outrages the probability scheme of the world portrayed in the film. For example in a scene from Peter Howitt’s Sliding Doors, Helen (Gwyneth Paltrow) is shown making breakfast for her lover Gerry (John Lynch), who is meanwhile having an affair with Lydia (Jeanne Tripplehorn). Howitt goes for a piece of comic business with the windowshade in which Lydia is suddenly outside the flat looking in, provoking from Gerry a sudden exclamation, which he is then forced to integrate, awkwardly, into his ongoing conversation with Helen. When Helen raises the same windowshade a few seconds later, Lydia has disappeared, having moved a few steps out of Helen’s sight line while telephoning Gerry on her cell. This is what Aristotle might call a “possible improbability”: the director is counting on the viewer not wondering exactly how long Lydia might have been waiting outside that window—could she have been there all night?—and what she is there for. Since Lydia’s purpose is only to make a date with Gerry for the following day, she could just as easily have telephoned him from the comfort of home. The plot of Sliding Doors is difficult to rationalize as a whole, like any film that contains the plot feature of “alternate realities.” But this scene is set firmly within one reality, the one in which Gwyneth Paltrow is a brunette, and is therefore guilty with an explanation. I would like to classify cheats like this—the fraudulent extraction of
small change from the viewer—as a “cheap thrill,” the misdemeanor version of the cheat.

Let me go on to a clear example of the felony cheat, with the sort of dealbreaker that has members of the audience lining up for their money back. The screenplay of Greg Hoblit’s *Fallen* is about a police detective, John Hobbes, who discovers after the execution of Edgar Reese, a serial killer he has brought to justice, that the actual murderer was not a human but a fallen angel or demon named Azazel who inhabits one human host after another. Hobbes learns that a demon can pass at will from one human being to another through touch but will die if the host dies before he can escape to another host. In Aristotle’s terms this is a “probable impossibility”: texts can offer authoritative rules about killing demons even though demons do not exist. But those rules have to be followed. In the denouement Hobbes lures the demon and his human host (Hobbes’s partner Jonesie) to an isolated cabin. After smoking a poisoned cigarette that will rapidly kill him, Hobbes shoots Jonesie, forcing the demon to inhabit him, Hobbes, for the minute or two till he dies. The film’s contract with the audience is broken when we see, at the last minute, that the demon can soar through the air from the dying man and pass into a stray pussycat a considerable distance away. Hobbes has played by the rules we were given but the screenwriter, Nicholas Kazan, has only been playing with us.6

In this case, this story-logic cheat in *Fallen* is compounded by a second cheat violating film conventions of representation. The entire film is framed as a flashback: it starts at what is almost the last moment of the fabula, showing John Hobbes, played by Denzel Washington, running through snow and thrashing about for reasons we cannot yet understand. Denzel Washington’s voice then delivers in voice-over the lines that return us several months from this scene to the beginning of the fabula at the execution of the serial killer Edgar Reese: “I want to tell you about the time I almost died. . . . I never thought it would happen to me. Not at this age. Beaten. Outsmarted. How did I get into this fix, how did it all begin? No, no, no, if I go back to the beginning that’ll take forever. So let’s start more recently. Somewhere. . . . Anywhere. Reese.”

We assume, listening to the voice of Denzel Washington that these words belong to Hobbes. But at the very end, as the film returns to the snow scene, the audience is instructed to reassign those words to Azazel, temporarily inhabiting Hobbes’s body, as the voice continues: “So. Like I said at the start. I was beaten. Outsmarted. Poisoned. By detective John Hobbes. Can you imagine what it feels like to be alive for thousands of years and realize you’re actually going to die? Because some self-righteous cop decided that he was going to save the fucking world? Yes, a demon can die. And Hobbes figured out how to beat me at my own game. . . . So what? The war isn’t over, I promise you, not by a long shot. [Cat appears, sniffs at Hobbes’s now still body.] Oh, you forgot something, didn’t you? At the beginning I said I was going to tell you about the time I *almost* died. . . . See you around.”

While it is deceptive to use Denzel Washington’s voice at the beginning making the audience think that the character speaking is Hobbes rather than Azazel, at least that move is consistent. But there are other points throughout the middle of the film where the character speaking the voice-over cannot be Azazel and can only be John Hobbes:
Sometimes I think the basic job that human beings have is just to figure out what the hell is goin’ on. Example: Greta Milano. What was she like? What the hell was she so scared of? And then her question about God. What the hell was that all about? . . . Ya never know. Down to the smallest thing. The man who passes you on the street, catches your eye. Who is he? Does he know you? Did you go to school together? Is he a homicidal maniac who hates you on sight? Or is it nothing, nothing at all?

Now there aren’t a lot of hard and fast rules about voice–over. In *Sunset Blvd.*, it is all right for Joe Gillis, seen floating dead in Norma Desmond’s swimming pool, to provide retrospective voice–over throughout the narrative. Similarly, in *Reversal of Fortune*, Glenn Close can do voice–over exposition while playing the comatose Sonny von Bulow. Indeed, the playful quality of this choice enhances the thematic component of a film that contrasts issues of law and issues of truth, the courtroom tussle over the niceties of criminal evidence and proof with the undecidability of what really happened in the von Bulows’ Newport mansion. But film seems to have a rule that a voice can represent only one character. Here in particular Denzel Washington’s voice cannot give retrospective commentary both as Hobbes and as Azazel, for if he is Hobbes he has survived the end of the story, and if he is Azazel then Hobbes has not. *Fallen* may also have violated a durational rule: it seems hardly fair for a demon who inhabits a person’s body for less than a minute to do retrospective voice–over using that voice for a two-hour film. Certainly Azazel, after he has made his final appearance as a cat, should have been restricted to variations on “meow.”

*Fallen*, in short, shows two kinds of felonious cheating: with story logic and with conventions of representation. In what follows, I will explore these kinds of cheating in some other films and move on to consider cheats involving three other aspects of film: real-life laws, ethics, and unreliable narrative.

### 1. VIOLATIONS OF STORY LOGIC

One common problem of story logic is exemplified in *Arlington Road* (1999). Here a gang of terrorists led by William Fenimore (Tim Robbins) wants to blow up the Hoover Building in Washington DC and arranges matters so that the bomb is carried into the underground parking lot of the FBI Building by a crazed academic, Michael Faraday (Jeff Bridges), who has a grudge against the Bureau. Faraday is manipulated into thinking that a delivery truck he spots on a Washington street contains both a bomb and his kidnapped son. But the bomb is in fact smuggled into the trunk of his own car during an interval in the chase when he is briefly engaged in fisticuffs with Fenimore.

The terrorists seem to have unlimited resources and manpower, but the plot—to take out the building while making it seem to be the work of Faraday—depends on their victim noticing precisely what they want him to notice, and doing precisely what they expect him to do, including driving onto sidewalks and into oncoming traffic without being stopped by a traffic cop or having an accident that might cripple the car. Prospectively, as we watch the sequence unfold, Faraday’s actions, moving
from stage to stage in the pursuit to the endgame beneath the Hoover Building, seem entirely probable as responses to what he sees and hears. It is only at the denouement that the plot becomes incoherent, as the film leaves Faraday’s point of view and shifts to that of Fenimore who, standing on a bridge, observes the explosion and says, “Boom!” This drives home the plot point that Faraday’s every action had been programmed by Fenimore, but it is here, as the claim is made, that we are likely to become conscious of how improbably contingent Faraday’s actions have been all along. That is, we can accept the events as ones that might possibly happen but not as the probable outcome of a careful plan.

A complementary cheat can be found in the story logic of The Sixth Sense (1999), written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan. In expiation for being unable to help a young schizophrenic patient who commits suicide after attempting to murder him, a psychiatrist, Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), has been giving therapy to a similarly disturbed child, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who “sees dead people.” So Crowe thinks and so we think, but it is revealed at the end that Crowe died of the gunshot wound we see him receive at the beginning of the film, that Crowe is one of the dead people Cole feels “want something” from him.

The Sixth Sense does not break any rules about ghosts; in fact Shyamalan’s ghosts obey the standard script that ghosts appear to the living because they are pursuing unfinished business and retreat into the Great Beyond once that business is completed. The cheat involves the breach of a narratological rule. Normally the syuzhet of a film is a subset of the fabula, a dependent variable: it represents a sequence of scene, dialogue, and summary crafted so that we fill gaps in ways that optimize the potential impact of the fabula. But here the fabula seems to depend on the syuzhet; there are no gaps to fill because Crowe’s awareness is apparently limited to precisely what the audience of the film is supposed to know.

The director attempts to deceive the audience into thinking that Crowe is alive by carefully setting up the scenes in which he appears, using storyboard and camera angles to give the illusory impression that Crowe is interacting with people other than Cole without actually showing any such interaction. For example, Crowe is seated in a chair identical and opposite to the one on which Cole’s mother sits when her son walks in after school, so that the two adults appear to have been conferring with each other about Cole even though they never actually exchange a word or even a glance. Later, we see Crowe with Cole on a bus that passes the graveyard of Cole’s grandmother. We do not see Crowe get onto the bus, though, because if he were to pay his fare there would be ghostly movement others in the scene might notice, but if he walked onto the bus without paying and without anyone noticing, both Crowe and we would be forced to deal with that anomaly. It is all right for us viewers to be deceived by these tricks; the problem is in the implicit assertion that Crowe is deceived by these things as well, that he has not noticed that no one ever speaks to him but Cole, or that taxis aren’t stopping for him any more. In The Sixth Sense, as we can see, the problem is exactly the reverse of Arlington Road: the fabula about Crowe helping Cole deal with his strange spiritual gift makes sense, but Crowe’s experience, if we ever let ourselves think about it, does not.
2. VIOLATIONS OF THE CONVENTIONS OF REPRESENTATION IN FILM

A visual version of the voice–over cheat already explored in *Fallen* occurs in Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). As they watch the film for the first time, most viewers will presume that the blue–eyed elderly man in the opening frame visiting with his family the graves by the Normandy beaches, falling to his knees and breaking down in tears, is the older self of Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks. They will make this assumption by following the syntax of classic Hollywood film. As the man gazes at the graves and as the camera zooms in to tight close-up, the sound of waves breaking on beaches rises in volume to be heard over the background music, and the scene dissolves to tank–traps on the beaches. The date “June 6, 1944” appears on screen, several landing craft are seen, and then the camera cuts to the nervously twitching hands of Captain Miller, preparing to land with his troops on D–Day. The use of subjective camera in the following sequence of the landing confirms what we have already surmised through the careful syntax of that transition: that Miller, the point of view character in the landing, must be the younger version of the elderly man visiting the graves (played by Harrison Young). We make this identification even if we are not conscious of having done so, and so are likely to be shocked when Miller is mortally wounded in the last reel while helping to defend the bridge where he and his men have found the elusive Private Ryan. The final 1944 scene repudiates the identification, as we see the face of Matt Damon, playing Ryan, morph into that of the elderly man of the frame. But of course that makes nonsense of the frame, since Private Ryan never saw those beaches or heard those waves because he had been parachuted inland on the night before D–Day.

By misleading the audience, Spielberg seems to be trying to increase the shock and sense of loss at the death of Captain Miller, who by the generic conventions of war movies as well as the assurance of the frame, had been guaranteed to survive basically intact. Spielberg is an exceptionally manipulative director, although usually his shameless bait-and-switch tactics involve happy surprises rather than unhappy ones, such as the resurrection of E.T., or the tyrannosaurus–ex-machina in *Jurassic Park*, or the suspenseful sequence in *Schindler’s List* in which the Jews who are sent from Schindler’s factory in Plaszow to a new camp at Brinnlitz are forced to undress and get into a shower, and stand waiting terrified until the moment when from the shower heads comes water rather than cyanide gas.8

3. VIOLATIONS OF CIVIL LAW AND OTHER ISSUES OF MIMESIS

Can the story logic of a fiction film taking place in a world that hasn’t been defined as different than our own reasonably be allowed to depend on a breach of how civil law works in a fairly common situation? The movie here is *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), directed by Vadim Perelman and written by Perelman and André Dubus
III. The house in question originally belongs to Kathy (Jennifer Connelly) but it has been forfeited for nonpayment of a $500 tax bill which she may not actually owe but which she did not effectively contest in time to prevent her eviction. The house has been sold at auction by San Mateo County, for $45,000, to an Iranian immigrant, Col. Behrani (Ben Kingsley). Behrani’s plan is to fix the house up, sell it for about $200,000, and use the money to change his family’s status in their adopted country, so he scoffs at Kathy’s pleas that the house is rightfully hers. After the sale, Kathy becomes romantically involved with Lester, the sheriff’s deputy who evicted her from her house, who threatens to cause the Behranis serious immigration trouble. To forestall him, Behrani comes up with a complicated plan: If Lester will lay off, Behrani will allow the county to rescind the sale; the house will go back to the county, which will return it to Kathy. After which Kathy will trade Behrani the title to the house in exchange for his $45,000, and Kathy and Lester will go off to northern California with the money and start a new life.

On the courthouse steps the situation unravels and a massive tragedy ensues, but the point lies elsewhere. No one in the film seems to have noticed that the elaborate triple deal proposed is a complicated way of achieving what would happen in the world we live in without anyone doing a thing. When a house is forfeited for nonpayment of taxes, the proceeds of the auction go to the former owner of the house, minus the back taxes owed, minus the cost of running the sale. In real life, Kathy’s lawyer would have told her from the outset that, if she bothers to open her mail, she should expect to receive a check for something like $44,000. And in real life a sheriff’s deputy like Lester would certainly know the applicable law better even than most lawyers would, because property forfeitures and evictions are what he does for a living, day after day.9

The more general question I am raising is about mimesis, and the extent to which rules we follow in the real world can be violated with impunity in films that don’t present themselves as occurring in a hypothetical world with different laws. None of the reviewers that I read pointed out this absurdity of the plot, or saw this feature of the movie as a cheat, so I am unsure about my own reactions here. Can Dubus create a plot with a big legal hole in it as long as most people, those who are not lawyers or sheriffs or people who have been subject to a property forfeiture, are unlikely to spot the hole? Could he have included a baseball game in which there were four outs to an inning? Could he have had Behrani invent a perpetual motion machine?

Factual issues of this sort used to come up with some frequency in the realist Victorian novel, whose authors were at some pains to get things right, or at least to claim that they had, against counterclaims that their novels had depicted impossibilities. The best known of these claims may be in the preface to Bleak House, in which Dickens insists on the possibility of a drunkard going up in smoke in a case of spontaneous combustion (against readers who had apparently written in to question the Krook episode) but there are many others. Wilkie Collins was to insist on the scientific plausibility of the odorless poison gas with which Lydia Gwilt attempts to end the life of one of the Alan Armadale in Armadale, and of the method of recovered
memory by which the theft of the jewel in *The Moonstone* is reconstructed. Charles Reade’s sensation novels are often backed up by entire files of documentation, from which Reade worked, and he took pains in both the press and in prefaces to his novels to establish at least the possibility of his plots. In the case of *Hard Cash*, in which a sane man is incarcerated in a private madhouse by unscrupulous heirs, Reade showed evidence that he had saved a young gentleman from that fate in a previous year.

Anthony Trollope, on the other side, defended the right of novelists to get things wrong. After the *Saturday Review* had taken him to task about a legal question that he had fudged in *The Three Clerks*, Trollope ironically suggested in *Doctor Thorne* that there should be established an inquiry office, funded by subscription, for novelists needing legal advice for their fiction about wills and such matters, but that until and unless such an office came into existence, novelists should be allowed with impunity to get these matters wrong.

The issue here is a complicated one because it depends on two things: what the audience knows, and what the audience cares about. *House of Sand and Fog* is not a courtroom drama, like *Reversal of Fortune*; the focus is not primarily on the legal complications of the tax and the ownership but the relation between the different meanings of the house for Kathy on the one hand and the Behrani family on the other, and how these meanings change as they become involved with one another. Those who don’t understand the legal error in the representation are not going to be bothered by it, of course, but even those who do may feel that the tragic momentum of the story has an emotional payoff that makes the factual error worth bracketing, as we bracket today Dickens’s pseudoscientific assertions about spontaneous combustion. It is at the point where the ownership issues are most nakedly used to advance the progression of the plot—the scene in which Behrani and Lester agree on the complicated sequence of transfers of property and cash to resolve the impasse—that the greatest danger occurs, where the mimetic illusion may collapse for some viewers in ways that sabotage the intended emotional effect.

4. ETHICAL CHEATING

*Road to Perdition* is about the hit man as family man. It centers on Michael Sullivan Sr., whose wife and younger son are shot dead at the behest of a rival, Conor Rooney, and the ferocious revenge that he exacts for those murders with his surviving son’s assistance, killing Conor, his own boss John Rooney, and dozens of their henchmen. Director Sam Mendes tastefully prevents us from seeing the corpses of Sullivan’s wife and child, but fills out the odyssey of his revenge with balletic, almost pornographic renditions of violent death. Mendes’s aesthetic technique—perhaps intentionally—echoes that of the perverse hit man Maguire, whom the mob sends after Sullivan; Maguire brings a camera to the scene of his crimes because he likes to pose his corpses and sell the pictures.

The film begins and ends with voice–over spoken by the surviving son, Michael
Sullivan, Jr. At the end of the film, he tells us: “I saw then that my father’s only fear was that his son would follow the same road. And that was the last time I ever handled a gun.” Given that the line is spoken in the pre-adolescent treble of the twelve–year-old actor, Tyler Hoechlin, we may wonder approximately when we are to assume the sentence is uttered and what it signifies. Until his voice changed a year later? Or never, as long as he lived? Would there be any point in speculating on the likelihood that Michael Jr., a teenager in the thirties, could have avoided handling guns while serving in World War II? But the bigger question was not about the accuracy of Michael Jr.’s claim, but about the ethical claim it makes for both him and the viewer. The voice–over explicitly compartmentalizes as another life (“a lifetime on the road in those six weeks of the winter of 1931”) the time young Michael spends helping his father take his revenge, a life walled off from the more innocent growing up he did before and does afterward. Those words tacitly respond to the dialogue late in the film between his father and John Rooney the crime boss:

Rooney: There are only murderers in this room. Michael, open your eyes. This is the life we chose. The life we lead. And there is only one guarantee—none of us will see heaven.

Sullivan: Michael could.

Rooney: Then do everything that you can to see that that happens.

Michael Jr. is not present for this dialogue, but his closing monologue accords with his father’s passionate insistence that his son, unlike himself, see heaven. And just as Michael is miraculously granted another innocent life, this voice over gives the audience plenary absolution for its vicarious enjoyment of the gory spectacle. We, like Michael Jr., can go on with our saintly lives and never handle a gun again—at least till the next film that allows us to enjoy gangland murder presented as aesthetically triumphant ballet, such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*.

Many films are hypocritical about combining a professed ethic that violent crime does not pay with spectacular cinematic representations of violence that the filmmakers hope will pay very well indeed. But *Road to Perdition* seems to go out of its way to thematize its own hypocrisy without going the final step, which would involve satirizing it. The kind of satire that can make an audience aware of its own doublethink can be found in the 1992 comedy *The Player*, whose “Hollywood ending” finds studio executive Griffin Mill in full artistic charge of his studio. Having brilliantly outmaneuvered the police and a murder charge as well as smarmy rivals and highminded subordinates at the studio, Mill can return home to his lovely wife, now pregnant, whose first husband Mill murdered in a parking lot brawl. One of the devices by which Altman incriminates the audience is to juxtapose against this icily cynical conclusion the denouement of the latest film Mill has produced, an outrageously travestied thriller (Bruce Willis heroically saving Julia Roberts from the gas chamber) that had begun its life as an earnest anti-capital punishment tract. The film-
as-art we have been enjoying, courtesy of Altman’s suave direction and of Michael Tolkin’s hilarious script, joins hands with the film—as—popular-trash that Mill creates and that we feel pleasantly superior to, leaving the viewer with the uneasy sense of having been implicated in the sleazy business of turning fantasies into films.

There may be a temptation to seek ethical cheating when one is offended by a film’s ethical stance, and on the subject of earnest capital punishment tracts, one needs to consider the film that had reviewers frothing at the mouth last year, *The Life of David Gale* (2003). In this fiction a group of anti-capital punishment partisans, willing martyrs, successfully conspire to stage the murder of one and to frame another for the crime so that, after the latter has been executed, they can reveal exonerating evidence and argue that the legal system is flawed and that the innocent are executed. Obviously it would not dissuade those who believe in capital punishment to demonstrate that the legal system can be gamed by clever liberals. And those who believe, as I do, that the legal system is flawed and that the innocent are executed will feel that their real-world arguments about lazy police and incompetent defense lawyers (such as the one made implicitly in Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line*) have been undercut by the fiction. They may also feel tainted by association with the smug fanatics in the film who represent their position. This accounts for the hostility voiced by liberal reviewers, but I couldn’t find any serious ethical “cheating” going on in the film, which I read as in effect, and as far as I know in intent, a pro-capital punishment film. The final shot—showing one of the anti-death partisans watching with ecstatic enjoyment the scene in Puccini’s *Turandot* in which Liu martyrs herself for the love of Calaf—would seem to nail home the idea that those most involved in the controversy are merely addicted to the strong emotions found in a death scene. A cheap shot, perhaps, but one that struck home, at least with this liberal Puccini—lover.

Two issues stick out about ethical cheating that may differentiate it from the other forms. The easier issue is exactly what version of the “something for nothing” or “unearned satisfaction” is involved here. In a sense ethical cheating is different, because it isn’t an unearned emotion, like surprises that violate story logic. It seems rather to be a defense of the pleasure principles as they operate within film against our higher centers, which may understand the story issues in a far more complex way. We enjoy violent films for dark and primitive reasons, and those reasons might come to our awareness and destroy our pleasure if the violence were not defined as necessary, and if the hero’s opponents were not defined as evil criminals, as in the Dirty Harry movies, or corrupt police or politicians, as in *The Godfather*. Romantic films defend *erōs* just as violent ones defend *thanatos*.

The other difference is just how common this form of cheating is. It is nearly universal, and if we are bothered about it at all we are likely to tell ourselves to get over it, it’s only a movie. Because of how expensive film-making is, studios are ever willing to make generic romances, thrillers, and gangster movies. But they are usually reluctant to bankroll a film that does not contain an ethical cheat, that stages an ethical and spiritual conflict in a way that does something like justice to the complications of an issue like capital punishment, one that transcends both cheap shots and easy forgiveness—like Tim Robbins’s *Dead Man Walking*. 

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5. UNRELIABLE NARRATIVE

My final version of cheating is, like the last two, only ambiguously a breach of contract. It has to do with the differences between fiction and film in presenting a narrative that may not be veracious. The famous case is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright* (1950), which has been analyzed by many film theorists including Kristin Thompson, Seymour Chatman, and Gregory Currie. *Stage Fright* begins with Eve Gill and Johnny Cooper (Jane Wyman and Richard Todd) rapidly motoring toward the English coast, escaping from the police. Less than forty seconds after the film begins, Johnny begins an explanation of why the police are hot on his trail for a murder he did not commit, and the film fades to a flashback over thirteen minutes long, explaining what he did to help his lover Charlotte Inwood cover up her murder of her husband and how he by mischance became the object of police suspicion himself. Toward the end of the film, however, we learn that this explanation is untrue, that Johnny murdered Charlotte’s husband, has murdered before and gotten away with it, and that he intends to murder Eve, who only escapes by her quick wits.

In a print narrative, there would be nothing very uncommon about a suspect’s story proving untrue; in murder mysteries, explanations are usually self-serving and alibis made to be broken. What was unusual, and thought dishonest at the time, at least, was that Hitchcock filmed the flashback exactly as if Johnny’s story were true. Most shots express Johnny’s point of view, but by no means all; one shot places Charlotte in the foreground putting on a dress, while Johnny at the far end of the room has his back to us as he peers out the window. And we frequently see with the ocular perspective of the police frustratedly chasing him, rather than of Johnny as he escapes. There is no expressionistic camerawork suggesting subjective narration. The audience of 1950 took the flashback not just as a dramatization of Johnny’s story but as an endorsement of his falsehoods, and in part because the detective story genre has a convention of fair play, “many viewers have expressed disappointment at being tricked” (Thompson 141).

Film theorists have split on the question. Seymour Chatman takes the position that “Johnny is ‘responsible’ for the lying images and words we see and hear” while Gregory Currie argues in rebuttal that it is the cinematic text, not a character within the text, that is speaking in the flashback: “it is not part of [the story of *Stage Fright*] that [Johnny] produced and edited cinematic images in order to convince his fictional fellows (and us) of his innocence” (Chatman 132; Currie 267). Thompson for her part argues that the question is not decideable in terms of whether classical fiction film can or cannot support the feature of character narration. Instead she treats the question of the flashback-as-cheat in terms of this particular film as a whole, particularly in terms of its theme of theatricality, ultimately concluding that *Stage Fright* “makes its own duplicity seem simply a logical extension of its overall meanings” (Thompson 158).12

It is impossible today to rejoin the innocent 1950 audience that watched *Stage Fright* without knowing about the unreliable flashback. But the question of how we configure the fabula when we are told in the last reel that much of the film we have
seen is a complete fabrication is one that is still very much with us, as appears from *The Usual Suspects* (1995, directed by Bryan Singer, written by Christopher McQuarrie). *The Usual Suspects* starts out as an extraordinarily complex crime thriller in which five criminals led by Dean Keaton (Gabriel Byrne), having successfully pulled one heist in New York, are then forced into another in L.A., and finally into a bloodbath aboard a freighter in San Pedro at the behest of a mythic supercriminal known as Keyser Söze. Most of the running time of the film is told in flashback with voice over by the only surviving member of the gang, known throughout as Verbal (Kevin Spacey). The moment of awakening occurs after Verbal finishes his confession and leaves, and as Dave Kujan, the customs agent who had been questioning him, begins to notice with growing horror how details that we have seen on the screen and heard in voice over line up with the random contents of the borrowed office being used for the interrogation. The events that we took to be fact must now be reconfigured as a story of dubious authenticity improvised by Verbal. The question at the forefront of the story is “Who is Keyser Söze?” and we have plenty of information independent of Verbal’s story to feel certain that he exists and that he is Verbal. But as soon as the film is over, we discover we have little solid information about anything else—about who did what and why they did it.

At first the audience is asked to configure the *fabula* in terms of a well–known plot–form, “Getting in over Your Head,” in which each successive heist puts the group more deeply into the power of the mysterious Keyser Söze, whose aim is to kill the one man that can “finger” him to the FBI, even if his five adventurous stooges all get killed in the process. But once we know that Verbal *is* Keyser Söze, it isn’t clear at all why he has done any of it. The initial premise of the film, never contradicted, is that Verbal has been given immunity from prosecution for his part in murder and armed robbery because of that Prince of Darkness’s pull with the Powers That Be. If so, no witness, whatever he might have to say, could possibly endanger a gangster so powerfully positioned, which means that all Verbal has been doing for the two hours of his narrative is having fun with the intense customs agent.

The sort of fun Verbal has is thematically consistent with the portrait of Keyser Söze we get in the flashback. What we are told is unique about the master criminal is that he knows no limits—he is willing to do what others are not, including killing his own family to illustrate how impossible it would be to control him. Verbal’s storytelling performance culminates in a similar total *askesis*: he makes himself out to be a coward, a weakling and a rat who has leaked the entire story of the crimes rather than keeping himself buttoned up. The bravura plot and the bravura of the improvised story connect up so that, instead of considering the story a mere lie, we think of it as a fiction within the fiction of the film as a whole, and Verbal/Keyser as a gifted author, rather than a mere liar.

In effect McQuarrie’s screenplay engineers a successful bait–and–switch. The bait is the gangster movie, the story of the Usual Suspects and their crimes, but that story is not just fed to us in a lump: it is extracted in stages from Verbal by agent Kujan in ways that thematize the relationship between the interrogator and his prey. And that relationship is one whose development we follow in parallel with the story of the Usual Suspects and their crimes. From the outset Kujan treats Verbal with ar-
rogant contempt ("I’ll get right to the point. I’m smarter than you. I’ll find out what I want to know and I’ll get it from you whether you like it or not"), to which Verbal responds with both overt appeasement ("I’m not a rat") and deadpan irony (he sips his coffee and muses “Back when I was picking beans in Guatemala we used to make fresh coffee. Right off the trees I mean. That was good. This is shit, but hey . . . ”). It quickly becomes clear that the story Kujan wants to hear is about Dean Keaton, whom Kujan has been investigating for years, and after resisting for over an hour, Verbal finally gives Kujan what he wants. In the last reel, Verbal breaks down and weeps, admitting “It was all Keaton. We followed him from the beginning.” At which point Kujan smiles with triumphant satisfaction.

What happens in the denouement is that the story and the story of the telling of the story, the figure and the ground, switch places. The heist flick recedes to the background, while the figure becomes the comic narrative of Verbal/Keyser bamboozling the arrogant agent who is sure he is smarter and more powerful than Verbal, using real elements from the scene of the telling to flesh out a series of fantasies that accord with Kujan’s erroneous sense of who in that gang was smart and powerful.

As with Thompson’s thematic take on Hitchcock’s lying flashback, justified as “drama” in terms of the theatrical motifs found in the film, here too lying becomes, as Plato argued 2300 years ago, the principal tool of the gifted artist. The difference between the audience reaction to the two films—hostile to the use of deceptive flashback in Stage Fright, generally enthusiastic about it in The Usual Suspects—partly depends on the complexity of McQuarrie’s double plot, which has no counterpart in Stage Fright. But our ability to follow that dual plot may also suggest that there had been a change in the way the audience has become able to “read” character narration in film in the years between 1950 and 1995. It would seem that the way we mentally take in film stories, our cognitive process, is different today: We are prepared to process flashbacks as we do character narration in prose, as a self-serving story of ambiguous truth value, even when filmed without any of the camera tricks (such as those used for dream sequences) that would signal its subjectivity. Hitchcock’s 1950 audience was deceived, and felt they had been deceived. In that sense we could conclude that Hitchcock’s film cheated, while Bryan Singer’s even more outrageous film did not, because cheating, considered as the breach of contract, depends not merely on form and technique but on the audience, whose evolution affects decisively the civil laws in effect at the time.

ENDNOTES

1. Thanks here to John Farago, Harold Schechter, North Peterson, and my fellow participants in the 2004 Narrative Conference.

2. Ordinary people and reviewers talk about cheating far more than film historians and scholars do. The only discussion of double–dealing and deception in film studies of which I am aware are the two chapters on Hitchcock’s Stage Fright and Preminger’s Laura in Kristin Thompson’s Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis 133–95.

3. I should admit that my own judgment that the “cheat” perpetrated by McEwan was justified by the truth and wisdom of Briony’s meditation was very controversial with the audience who heard me
make this point in an oral presentation. Some expressed outrage at McEwan’s manipulation of their feelings, while for others Briony’s meditation in Part IV seemed as self-serving as her fictional handling of Part III. I would add that McEwan counts on most readers of *Atonement* to be aware of how many modern novelists, such as Woolf and Lawrence, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, have tidied up their own roles in episodes from life when adapting them into fiction in ways that were far more self-serving than the distortions perpetrated by his protagonist-author Briony Tallis.

A very different sense in which people sometimes speak of novels as “cheating” involves a feature specific to the “classic” detective story. Because there is an implicit contract in such stories that any clues visible to the detective will also be shown to the audience, so that the reader can match wits with the author, breach of this condition would allow the author to “defeat” the reader unfairly.

4. “Donald Kaufman” is a fictitious twin brother of Charlie Kaufman. Despite this, he was credited with the screenplay of *Adaptation* and nominated for a 2002 Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. Both Charlie and Donald are played in the film by Nicolas Cage, who was given two screen credits but only one Oscar nomination for the performance(s).

5. The complex rules of the road that operate in films about alternative realities, such as *Sliding Doors* and Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run*, are explored with great acumen in David Bordwell, “Film Futures,” 88–104.

6. I would not want to claim that one can never play around with rules for impossibilities. We can certainly tell jokes about someone who wards off a vampire by thrusting a cross in its direction, only to be told (in a Yiddish accent) “Lady, have you ever got the wrong vampire!” If only *Fallen* were more playful, one might feel differently about its bait–and–switch on the laws of demon–killing, but the film takes itself very seriously indeed.

7. What rules seem to apply are discussed in Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice–over Narration in American Fiction Film*.

8. This episode is not milked for suspense/relief in the book as it is in the film; see Keneally 300.

9. In the novel, this suggestion is actually made by Lester rather than Behrani (Dubus 278-9), which is even more improbable. If Kathy does not in fact owe the tax (the claim seems to have been made in error), she could sue the county for replevin and, if successful, win up to the true market value of the house. But in most jurisdictions she could not get the county to rescind the sale—the transfer of the property would be final even if the county had seized and auctioned it by mistake (Professor John Farago, private communication).

10. That was not the end of the matter: *The Saturday Review* took Trollope to task about the will in chapter 45 of *Doctor Thorne* as well; see Trollope 632 n 5.

11. Apropos of Maguire, there is also an interesting enigma about the representation of space in the penultimate scene. Near the end of the film we see Michael Sullivan walk into the kitchen of his cousin’s lakeside house, where he watches his son playing with a golden retriever on the beach outside. The camera, from outside, simultaneously shows the father through the window and his son reflected in the window but, because of the lighting and the camera angle, we cannot see the hit man Maguire behind and to the right of the father until after the first shot is fired. (Until it crumples to the floor, Tom Hanks’s body blocks the line of sight between the camera and the corner of the room from which Maguire appears.) Given the size of the room—a picture on the wall above Maguire’s head indicates the distance to the back wall parallel to the window—and given the lack of anywhere to hide, it seems almost inconceivable that on entering the room Sullivan could have missed seeing a man with a gun and a large easel camera only a few feet away from him. The only way to justify this lapse in caution, which is out of character for the father, is in terms of the thematic aspect of the plot, which requires that Sullivan and his last pursuer kill each other in order to give closure to Michael Jr.’s filial/criminal duties.

12. One “theatrical” aspect of the flashback that Thompson does not mention is its avoidance of the standard shot/reverse shot representation of dialogue. Instead Johnny and Charlotte are shown in long
shots with a single camera, the actors turning to face or recede from the camera as the prominence in
the dialogue of each character changes. The effect is more like theatrical blocking than like “classic”
cinema cutting.

13. Not everyone was enthusiastic; to enjoy it you had to be paying attention. Roger Ebert wrote: “When
I began to lose track of the plot, I thought it was maybe because I’d seen too many movies that day. . . .
Verbal lives up to his name by telling a story so complicated that I finally gave up trying to keep track
of it, and just filed further information under ‘More Complications.’” Chicago Sun–Times, August
1995. Ebert’s review was not representative, however: the general critical response to The Usual Sus-
psects, and that of the audience which made it an instant cult film, took the opposite position. See Todd
McCarthy’s review in Variety (January 25, 1995), James Berardinelli’s online review in ReelViews
(http://movie–reviews.colossus.net/movies/u/usual.html)

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