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by Robert Cetti

The Fine Art of Cinematic Con-Artistry

One of the more intriguing developments of the post-modern emphasis upon cinema as constructed text (correspondingly needing deconstruction by the viewer) is the examination of the very means cinema uses to manipulate its viewers into an empathetic, emotional experience within what film theorists refer to as “the safe darkness” of the cinema (or home viewing location in the case of the DVD revolution). The Art of Make Believe. Or, as Peter O’Toole as maniacal director Eli Cross in the critically acclaimed but barely released film-on-filmmaking *The Stunt Man* put it: “If God could do the things we could, he’d be a happy man.” But just what is Hollywood’s greatest trick?

There are various means within cinema of drawing the viewer’s attention to the fact that what they are watching is a film, a manufactured “product” as much an artwork or piece of entertainment. However, to bring to the viewer’s attention the fact that they are watching a film detracts from the very escapist immersion in film (what theorists term the diegetic effect) and is antithetical to classic Hollywood filmmaking, where the creation of a sustained and immersing diegesis (the sum total of the film’s surface imagery and plot hold on the viewer) is paramount. It is commonly held that the successful film holds its artistry as “invisible” and never draws attention to the nature of constructed reality, let alone of cinematic artifice itself.

In Europe however, making the viewer conscious of the fact that they are watching a created work is a time-honoured tradition dating back to the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. It can be described as “alienation theory” and although abhorred by traditional Hollywood has been deployed within American film to unusual effect since the late 1960s when a generation of American directors began looking to the French New Wave for inspiration. In the voyeuristic and controversial 1980s thriller *Body Double* (with Melanie Griffith) for instance, director Brian DePalma stages a scene set to music where a man is led by attractive women into a room where he is to indulge his fantasies, with Griffith. He enters the room and the door swings shut. On the door is a mirror and in the swinging mirror can be seen the reflection of the camera crew filming the scene.

In this moment, the cinematic illusion is gone and the viewer is suddenly confronted by the realization that what they are watching is not real no matter how drawn into the plot they may have become by that time. DePalma in this case alludes to the work of Alfred Hitchcock but similar games contrasting filmic, constructed reality from an objective reality in films about filmmaking have infiltrated the likes of Francois Truffaut’s *Day for Night*, Dennis Hopper’s *The Last Movie*, Richard Rush’s *The Stunt Man* and even the ambitious Arnold Schwarzenegger film *The Last Action Hero*. Tellingly, however, *The Last Action Hero*

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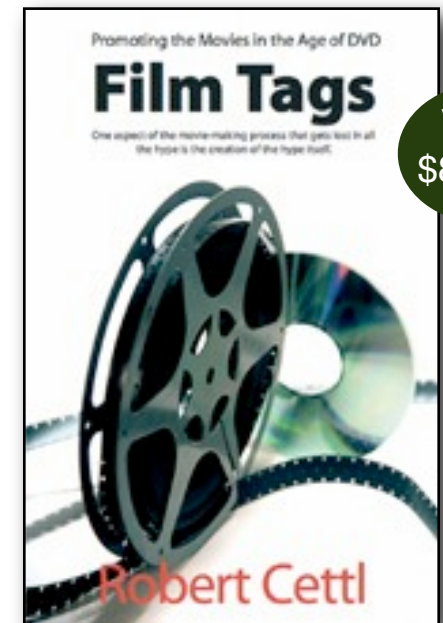


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was Schwarzenegger's only flop, and indeed films about filmmaking are rare in American film for the very reason that they expose the illusion that Hollywood cinema craftsmanship holds sacred.

The theme of illusion vs. reality and the exposure of cinema's means of manipulation through narrative construction has nevertheless influenced American film, recently seen in films about magic, such as *The Prestige*. One older, specific genre to embrace this dialectic is the con-artist film. Popularized in the mid 1970s by *The Sting*, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford, the con-artist film was self-consciously about the manipulation of truth and the appearance of trustworthiness. Nothing was quite what it seemed in these narratives in which dastardly clever individuals constructed a façade of reality in order to lure an "innocent" and defraud them of, usually, their savings. No one could be trusted and what the film presented as a reality was consequently exposed as an artifice, a semblance, a construct.

Newman and Redford had a rogue-ish charm and only conned those who seemingly deserved it (rugged gangster Robert Shaw) but by the late 1980s, the charming conman was a decidedly more ambiguous figure in the films of David Mamet. Mamet was an award-winning playwright who took to directing film with *House of Games*, a clever look at the art and appeal of confidence trickery, con-art. In this, he was assisted by Ricky Jay. Jay was a sleight of hand expert turned character actor whose beguiling charm counter-balanced the addictive smarminess of Mamet's other frequent compatriot, Joe Mantegna. Here, it was almost

as if film itself was a con, a game to manipulate the viewer into believing a deceitful and wholly constructed façade of reality – a movie.

House of Games centered on psychiatrist Lindsay Crouse. A cold, unemotional and aloof woman, Cruise here becomes enamoured of the risk and danger involved in con-artistry after she exposes a well-presented con involving a poker game (which had also featured to clever effect in *The Sting* and would feature later amidst card sharks Edward Norton and Matt Damon in *Rounders*). Mamet's concern here was psychological – the nature of human trust and the dynamic appeal of risk and danger to otherwise rational individuals when in the thrall of a wholly misplaced and manipulated trust – people could be led to believe any construct the con-artist wished. The con-artists here were charming and rogue-ish, their plans as elaborate as the best of American playwrights could concoct, but were – at core – amoral human beings.

Gone was the good-naturedness of the conmen in *The Sting*, replaced by a dastardly lack of compassion, a resolute desire to ruin and exploit the innocent and gullible. Trust was a mistake in Mamet's film and as a director he was interested in exposing the shallow facades of the appearance of trustworthiness. Thus, in scene after scene, people who appeared as sympathetic and trustworthy were revealed as deceptive and fraudulent. Similarly, what one took as the reality of a situation was merely a clever ruse erected by confidence tricksters. This notion of the appearance of reality as essentially manufactured construct (an illusion) led Mamet to begin to undermine audience faith in reality to the point of subtly stressing the

awareness of film narrative as construction, as artifice, in *The Spanish Prisoner*.

Though not ostensibly about film "magic" as were the overt films about filmmaking, Mamet used the dissonance between his visual style and the elaborate, labyrinthine plot mechanics to both allude to Hollywood tradition and question the nature of trust. Indeed, the brilliance of Mamet's work in *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and to a lesser extent *Heist* is the tightrope walk between immersion in the con-artistry within the narrative and awareness of that narrative drive itself as something of a con. It's a post-modern dislocation, an emphasis on artifice to question the very nature of truth, trustworthiness and illusion when dealing with the appearance of manipulated circumstance in film form.

It's a difficult task to bring such Brechtian themes into American film, and Mamet in his con-artist films does it with such sly grace as to be invisible. Indeed, Mamet is one of the few directors who can create, manipulate and question diegesis at the same time, making the diegetic effect of his work on the viewer (especially in *The Spanish Prisoner*) a distinctive experience – the hyper-awareness of manipulation as fabricated plot construction – narrative itself as being the art of plot fabrication. While films that usually wish to expose Hollywood trickery do so by exposing one special effect after another, Mamet tackles head on the ultimate Hollywood trick – narrative and the construction of a believable cinematic reality. ###