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Frames, Cons, and Double-Crosses

The Theatrical Cinema of David Mamet

The terms “theatrical” and “theatricality,” when used in conjunction with film, usually have negative connotations. An actor's film performance, for instance, tends to be denigrated by being qualified as “theatrical.” Underlying the semantics of such a use of the term is the idea that the medium film is characterised by an essence completely distinct from that of the theatre. Thus, to call a film performance, or worse, a film as such, theatrical, is to point out its having missed the medium's true nature. In classical realist film theory, as best exemplified by Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, the ontogeny of film is tied to its base in photography, and both theorist-critics come up with a clear sense of what separates the cinema from the theatre. Hence, for Kracauer in his *Theory of Film* the cinematic essence is photography's penchant for openness, unboundedness, the material specifics of the everyday, the very small (as in a large close-up) and the very large (as in a long shot); Kracauer's ideal film, fulfilling the medium's properties to the utmost, would be a semi-documentary, episodic narrative with a contemporary setting, and featuring lots of “real” people (lay actors playing themselves). Both films set in the past, such as the genre of the historical film, or speculative fiction, such as fantasy and science fiction, are necessarily bounded, the costumed actors and fabricated or controlled settings giving off an “unfilmic” air of artificiality and theatricality.¹

Bazin, for his part, while allowing for cinema as an impure art – which it undoubtedly is –, and certainly not as averse to the theatrical as Kracauer, sees cinema's essence nonetheless in the indexical nature of photography mummifying the fleeting moments of reality and bringing them back to life. In one of his best-known essays, he compares the theatre and the cinema in opposition, concluding that the former is essentially characterised by a frame bounding its world to the stage, by being centripetal and anthropocentric – the actors real human beings in the flesh, whereas their environment and its objects are artificial, symbolic; whereas the cinema is like a window onto the world, unbounded and open, not privileging the human over any other object, and hence essentially centrifugal. In his best-known essay, Bazin distinguishes two traditions in ci-

nema history: on the one hand that of filmmakers whose main interest is the image (e.g. German Expressionism and Russian Formalism), and on the other hand those cineastes who are mainly interested in reality as such (Renoir, Wyler, *CITIZEN KANE*, and, of course, Italian neo-realism). Whereas the former will create closed, bounded worlds, the latter reveal the (democratic) openness and unboundedness of reality. Hence also, Bazin's interest cannot lie in montage, but in *mise-en-scène* and depth of field (deep focus), encouraging us as viewers to interpret reality rather than having its meaning imposed on us by the filmmaker.² Thus, like Kracauer, Bazin's realist position strongly favours what Leo Braudy calls the *open film*, as opposed to the *closed film*.³ Of course, the problem with both Kracauer's and Bazin's realist positions, as with classical film theory more generally, is their normative essentialism – to overcome which one would, ultimately, have to give up the very idea of there being something “filmic” or “unfilmic.” Not least it was Hitchcock who, as is evident in his famous interviews with Truffaut,⁴ conceived of the medium fundamentally in terms of silent cinema. The filmic is hence thought of what can be narrated in moving images, without dialogue, and ideally, without language as such. This is an illusion. Because what is usually meant when the term “filmic” is used, is simply *effective*. Take Alan J. Pakula's Watergate thriller *ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN* (1976), in which there is an abundance of phone conversations, interviews, and secret discussions: a film may be as wordy as it likes; if it is effective, if it makes an impact, if it is exciting, no one will accuse it of being “unfilmic.”

But if this is so, what is at stake regarding theatricality is not a question of cinematic essence, but of realism or naturalism, whether on stage or in film; and then it should also be pointed out that in terms of film performance (that is, performance in films) there are – apart from “naturalist” acting theories, the dominant one of which is based on Stanislavsky and its psychoanalytically inspired offspring, method acting – long-standing traditions of “anti-naturalist” acting: think of Meyerhold's acrobatics informing the use of actors in Eisenstein's silent films; or of the way Bresson uses lay actors as *models*; or of how Straub/Huillet have their performers deliver their memorised lines in a very distinctive mode of diction.⁵ These filmmakers, far from being mainstream for sure, reveal that the “theatrical” performance in film cannot simply be associated with the idea of over-acting, but often, and in contrast, is realised through a very formalized, in Bresson's case extreme form of under-acting, a refusal of letting a performance turn into a genuine character, let alone, to use E. M. Forster's terminology, a “round” one, with all the interiority associated with the latter “bourgeois” concept.⁶ And could it not be argued, also, that it is only

within film that the “truly” theatrical can fully emerge and express itself as supremely *effective* against the background of cinema's photographic realism, in other words, as fully self-conscious, self-reflexive “theatre” ?

Situated in his approach between realism and anti-naturalism, but without going to the extremes of deliberate estrangement, David Mamet is widely recognized as one of the most brilliant and distinctive playwrights in America today. Winning the Pulitzer prize for his play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which he also adapted for James Foley's screen version (1992), he has written numerous screenplays, including the court-room drama *THE VERDICT* (Sidney Lumet, 1982), the Al Capone gangster epic *THE UNTOUCHABLES* (Brian De Palma, 1987), or the cynical political satire *WAG THE DOG* (Barry Levinson, 1997). Starting with *HOUSE OF GAMES* (1987), he has also scripted and directed numerous films of his own, including *THINGS CHANGE* (1988), *HOMICIDE* (1991), *THE SPANISH PRISONER* (1997), *STATE AND MAIN* (2000), *HEIST* (2001), and *SPARTAN* (2004). The latter body of work, as this essay aims to show, constitutes a genuinely *theatrical cinema*, in which a stage idiom of self-conscious role-playing, typically with streetwise argot and slick one-liners, is looped back into a diegetic world full of role-playing, deception, and dangerous games, and which in its reflexivity is exemplary of crucial postmodernist concerns.

Mamet's formalist approach to acting

Besides writing plays, screenplays, and works of fiction, Mamet has also outlined his ideas regarding the work for stage and film in a number of nonfiction books; among these, we will look at some of his concepts put forward in *On Directing Film* (1991) and *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (1997). From these two texts, we can outline a number of Mamet's basic artistic tenets, work procedures, and convictions. A word of caution is appropriate, however. While repeatedly claiming the universal validity of his views on what acting is and should be, and how plays and films really work and affect their respective audiences, Mamet's beliefs are far too dogmatic to be taken at face value; he aspires to a universality which is, in effect, unwarranted. What his ideas *do* illuminate, though, is the poetics of his own work. The reason for this is, simply, that as normative manifestoes they are not so much metatextual theories of acting and directing, but themselves, in their mantra-like repetition of crucial axioms, with sentences ham-

mered out in iconoclastic diatribe and poetic aggressiveness, *an extension* of Mamet's work for the stage and the screen. They are themselves works of critical poetry in the form of *aperçus*.

The first crucial concept is that *characters are entirely defined by, and exist solely in and through their actions*: “The truth is, you never have to establish the character. In the first place, there is no such thing as character other than the habitual action, as Mr. Aristotle told us two thousand years ago. It just doesn't exist. Here or in Hollywood or otherwise. They always talk about the character out there in Hollywood, and the fact is, there is no such thing. It doesn't exist. The character is just habitual action. 'Character' is exactly what the person literally does in pursuit of the superobjective, the objective of the scene. The rest doesn't count.”⁷ And elsewhere: “The actor does not need to 'become' the character. The phrase, in fact, has no meaning. There *is* no character. There are only lines upon a page.”⁸

This strongly *performative* and *behaviouristic* sense extends, as we will see, right through Mamet's entire creative approach. Applied to “character,” this conception fundamentally entails a basic instability and shiftiness of its fictional identity, as it is always possible to act otherwise. Devoid of any real interiority, we are far removed here not only from the 19th century's realist novel's conception of character, but also from the currently prevailing dogma of *method acting*: “Sense memory. Substitution. Emotional memory. The 'Fourth Wall.' The creation of auxiliary 'stories' which are just as difficult to 'perform' as the script but lack the merit of being about anything other than ourselves. The Stanislavsky 'Method,' and the technique of the schools derived from it, is nonsense. It is not a technique out of the practice of which one develops a skill – it is a cult.”⁹ So what is the real work of the actor? Above all, he is not an amateur, not a literary scholar involved in textual interpretation, but *a professional performing for pay* whose task it is to *please the audience*, the only purpose justifying his making a living: “The actor is onstage to communicate the play to the audience. That is the beginning and the end of his and her job. To do so the actor needs a strong voice, superb diction, a supple, well-proportioned body, and a rudimentary understanding of the play. [...] There are lines of dialogue meant to be said by the actor. When he or she says them simply, in an attempt to achieve an object more or less like that suggested by the author, the audience sees an *illusion* of a character upon the stage. [...] The magician creates an illusion in the mind of the audience. So does the actor.”¹⁰

The emphasis on the *illusionary* character of theatrical personages has already a strong self-conscious subtext, and it will not come as surprising that in the diegetic world of Mamet's thea-

trics, illusions and the self-reflexivity of *mise-en-abîme* should play a crucial role. Because effectively, the actor on stage is always already part of a scenario written by someone else, always already written: “The 'work' you [the actor] do 'on the script' will make no difference. That work has already been done by a person with a different job title than yours. That person is the author. The lines written for you should be said clearly so that the audience can hear and understand them. Any meaning past that supplied by the author will come from your *intention toward the person to whom they are said*.”¹¹ Thus, acting, stripped of its idealistic aspects of character interiority, and always self-consciously performing pre-written scripts, has a deliberately mechanical quality: “It is the job of the actor to show up, and use the lines and his or her will and common sense, to attempt to achieve a goal similar to that of the protagonist. And that is the end of the actor's job. [...] Actors must be trained to speak well, easily, and distinctively, to move well and decisively, to stand relaxedly, to observe and act upon the simple, mechanical actions called for by the text.”¹² Hence Mamet can say: “Invent nothing, deny nothing, speak up, stand up, stay out of school.”¹³

Contrary to the realist school of “characters expressing themselves,” Mamet in a reflexive mode folding back on itself conceives of illusionary characters, characters-as-actors, in effect, actors *seen* to be acting; rather than probing their – in his view nonexistent – inner depths, their actions are *externalized* and fundamentally *antagonistic*: “it is the progress of the outward-directed actor, who behaves with no regard to his personal state, but with *all* regard for the responses of his antagonists, which thrills the viewers. Great drama, onstage or off, is not the performance of deeds with great emotion, but the performance of great deeds with no emotion whatever.”¹⁴ This conception of performance – both on stage and in film – is characterised by an innate *aggressiveness*, in the original Latin sense of the word, as *purposefully, decisively, and energetically moving towards a goal*; hence also the importance throughout of Mamet stressing the importance of the actor's willpower to become extroverted. This is another instance of his admonition to be *outward-directed*: “The more you are concerned with yourself, the less you are worthy of note. The more a person's concentration is outward, the more naturally interesting that person becomes. [...] The person with attention directed outward becomes various and provocative.”¹⁵

Again, this ties in with the view of acting as being a craft, physical work, like that of the boxer, the dancer, or the singer, not intellectual insight or interpretation, and good acting consisting of the actors' communicating to the audience in the simplest and clearest form the play, the

interest and meaning of which is not their concern, as it has already been established as such (or not) by the author. Thus, the actor who feels stage fright, is afraid of not being fully prepared for her or his role, must learn to be more aggressive, to physically act and, above all, be brave: “The skill of acting is like the skill of sport, which is a physical event. [...] Like sports, the study of acting consists in the main of getting out of one's way, and in learning to deal with uncertainty and being comfortable being uncomfortable. [...] The truth of the moment is another name for what is actually happening between two people onstage. That interchange is always unplanned, is always taking place, is always fascinating [...]. When the actual courage of the actor is coupled with the lines of the playwright, the illusion of character is created.”¹⁶ The falsity of Stanislavskian method acting, according to this approach, consists in trying to consciously predetermine the meaning of the actor's confrontation with the lines of the play and with the other actors on stage, whereas an outward, externalized attitude towards “character” will activate the unconscious, allowing it to speak out in a moment of truth – a truth effectively none other but *performance as such*. To this end, the actor must not *believe* himself to be the scripted personage, as method acting would have it, but merely to *pretend*, to *imagine* being that “character,” and act out the only thing that is real, namely, clearly speaking the lines of the script and performing simple physical actions in pursuit of a straightforward objective, the objective being *what the imaginary character wants*. Hence an effective play should be like a well-told joke: “In a well-written play, and in a correctly performed play, everything tends also toward a punchline. That punchline, for the actor, is the *objective*, which means ‘*What do I want?*’ [...] To free ourselves from having to decide whether something is *effective*, *beautiful*, or *germane*, we ask the question ‘*Is it essential to the action?*’ and all else follows. [...] If we devote ourselves to the *punchline*, all else becomes clear. The punchline is *the action*.”¹⁷

A juxtaposition of uninflected images: antagonistic functionalism in film

The meaning of character is action, and the action is determined by the objective of what the protagonist wants; the overriding objective of the entire play or film is called by Mamet the *superobjective* or *throughline*. The play, however, is broken down, taylorized into the actual unit of work for the director, the scene, governed by an auxiliary or scene objective, one building block among

many leading to the final superobjective, which is ultimately either realized (positive outcome, happy ending) or decisively thwarted: “The boxer has to fight one round at a time; the fight will unfold as it is doing so. The boxer takes a simple plan into the ring, and then has to deal with the moment. So do you. The correct unit of application is the scene.”¹⁸ As before, we note the aggressive machismo underlying Mamet's fundamentally *minimalist* dramatic conception, a minimalism precisely in that everything inessential to the action is omitted, the latter consisting solely of willful actions to bring about a desired goal. There is, we sense, a profoundly utilitarian, Hobbesian view of human activity and life at work here, with all its inherent hostility, and as much a symptom of aggressive, “go-getter” American capitalism, as its critique.

Mamet's approach also applies to the specifics of *film* work, where the scenes with their sub-throughlines are further broken up into individual shots. While claiming to have been inspired by Eisenstein's montage theory – shot A followed by shot B produces meaning C in the mind of the spectator –, Mamet in actual fact does not and cannot aspire in his cinematic work to the latter's intellectual montage in its political and ideological ramifications, which are, fundamentally, avantgarde and nonnarrative in producing abstract metaphors; rather, he is closer to Pudovkin's pared-down and more conventional approach to montage, which remains in the service of narrative progression; indeed, as Mamet repeatedly points out, the only thing that counts for the viewer is the expectation of what will happen next: “The story is the *essential progression of incidents* that occur to the hero in pursuit of his one goal.”¹⁹ In this respect, he is not at all far from Eugene Vale's (or other screenplay theorists' such as Syd Field's) conception of suspense deriving from an anticipation of future events, and the need for narration to be constantly moving forward.²⁰ Still, it is noteworthy that Mamet distinguishes two kinds of approach in the American cinema, the most frequently employed supposedly consisting of “following the actors around” – i.e. entailing a Bazinian emphasis on the realism of the single shot and of *mise-en-scène* (as in Gregg Toland's deep-space and deep-focus cinematography in *CITIZEN KANE* or *THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES* [William Wyler, 1946]) –; the other taking its cue from Eisenstein (and the Russian Formalists of the 20s), and relying on editing: “This method has nothing to do with following the protagonist around but rather is *a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience.*”²¹ Each shot contrast, even if far removed from Eisenstein's jolting “cinema-fist,” produces a small idea as part of a larger one.

It is crucial, however, that the individual shot be as straightforward as possible, i.e. *uninflected*, just as the actor should deliver her lines in a simple, clear manner without adding to them or inventing anything, because it is only through the aggressive, antagonistic relationship of contrasting images that narrative meaning and propulsion is created: “The shots make up the scene. The scene is a formal essay. It is a small film. It is, one might say, a documentary. Documentaries take basically unrelated footage and juxtapose it in order to give the viewer the idea the filmmaker wants to convey.”²² One can sense in these lines, tellingly consisting mostly of main clauses without sub-clauses, the pared down, skeletal narrative of essentials of, in Roland Barthes' narratology, *cardinal functions* or *nodal kernels* based on decisions (dominant actions) without the fleshing out of *catalyst functions* (minor activities).²³ The film director here is the great manipulator of meaning, like the playwright, while the images just as the actors are subjected to a grand design not of their making, always already situated in pre-written scenarios, with “the mechanical working of the film [...] just like the mechanism of a dream.”²⁴ Little surprise, then, that manipulation, machination, and conspiratorial plotting should play such a prominent part in narratives concerned largely with the reflexive performance of role-playing and games: “it's all make-believe. The question is, how *good* make-believe is it going to be?”²⁵

Cons, games, and the musical-chairs narrative

Mamet's approach to film, particularly his emphasis on cutting and on the primacy of action, entails that we do not get strong but weak situations, that we are in fact often placed *in medias res* of actions and that the definition of a situation really only emerges in hindsight; not being unequivocally *framed*, situations thus tend to be shifty and unstable, with expositional information spread out potentially over the entire narrative. This, of course, ties in with questions of reliability, or rather unreliability, with narrative self-consciousness and restricted communicativeness (to use David Bordwell's terminology²⁶), surprising plot points and reversals, and the possibility of one frame of action giving way to yet another, larger frame. Hence, conspiratorial films with a noirish sensibility are ideally suited and fertile ground for a filmmaker interested in performative role-playing, and games, cons, and frames in the widest sense of the term, because in film noir, as always, nothing is what it initially seems.

Little surprise, then, that Mamet's first and critically acclaimed directorial effort should have been the stylized neo-noir thriller *HOUSE OF GAMES*, which also established the paradigmatic tenets of his subsequent film work. Focalized almost exclusively through the point of view of the female protagonist as amateur sleuth, Dr. Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse) is a prosperous, ambitious, and overworked psychoanalyst who has made a name for herself with a newly-published self-help book on obsessive behaviour. She is introduced to us immediately in the first scene, a daytime exterior setting amid what appear to be office buildings, as a young woman in a startlingly red dress, holding a copy of the bestseller and as compulsive as the book's title *Driven*, approaches her for an autograph. Mamet's straight-shooting, slightly stilted dialogue and the slick aloofness of the main character (wearing sunglasses) already become evident in this exchange:

[The young woman:] – Are you Doctor Margaret Ford?

— Yes.

– Could I ask you, would you sign my book?

— Yes, of course.

– I recognised you from your picture. I hope I'm not inconveniencing you.

— Not at all.

– It's for a friend. It's the second one I bought.

— Then I'm doubly pleased. [Beat.] Thank you for buying it.

– You've helped me very much.

— [Steadfastly looking at the young woman:] I'm very glad I have. [Beat.] Thank you. [Beat.] Goodbye. [Turns and walks away.]

The overemphasized pauses (beats), lasting just a bit too long, and the protagonist's intentionality, her long, immobile and intent, but expressionless look at the other woman at the end of the brief exchange, lend the interaction a formalist theatrical effect, ever so slightly pointing to the *gap* between the body of the performer and her fictional character. The effect is underscored by the ascetic camera work, beginning the scene with a tracking shot from a wall to the woman holding a copy of the book in her hands, in an allegorical expression of the title *Driven*. The following shots have an insistent character, as though the static camera were staring at Dr. Ford, and waiting for something to happen. In effect, the camera operates just like Mamet's short main clauses, within a system of pure functionality in which everything has a purpose, an intent.

The confrontational character of interactions postulated by Mamet is more explicit in the subsequent scene, a therapy session, with Dr. Ford taking notes and a young female patient sitting opposite her, in a room, with the background wall covered by a white sheet. Here we almost get the impression of a stage rehearsal:

– [Patient dressed in white:] And I saw the face of an animal. [Addressing the camera frontally:] And I said that we all try to run from experience – from experience, do you understand me? – but that it will seek us out. You think that you're exempt? I'm talking to you. Do you think that you're exempt?

[Dr. Ford:] — Do I think that I'm exempt? That I'm exempt from what?

– Experience.

— No, I don't think that I'm exempt.

– Well, you'd better be assured you're not.

— What is the animal?

– The animal?

— You said in your dream, you saw the face of an animal.

– I don't know how to say it. It was...

— Yes?

– It was a... I... I want to say... I don't know how to say it.

The confrontational mode is emphasized by mantra-like repetition – “Do you think you're exempt?” –, and by questions which are, in true psychoanalytic fashion, bounced back in mirrored repetition, and again we get the impression of the role distance observed above. Prose is tending towards poetry. It is almost as though, from a Lacanian viewpoint, the film itself were suffering from a linguistic disorder of dissociation between actor and part. There is a subtle slippage of the signifiers, sliding over the signifieds, and of stable ground giving way to displacement. This is treacherous territory in which the performers appear *as if they were in a script already written*, part of a design grander than themselves. In effect, they are framed. Mamet's far too apodictic assertion that there is no such thing as a character, but only words in a script, is true in so far that the characters in his films often appear quite functional, even mechanical, literally acting out a script. This impression is also fostered by the frequently slick one-liners of the dialogue, which are as much part of the confrontational style as is the crisp visual design: with sparse camera movements, the often insistently static shots frame characters frontally, or at right angles in profile, with the additional use of straightforward shot/countershot editing. As elsewhere in the film, settings, costuming and props are realistic, and Mamet's characters are still fictional characters,

and certainly not deconstructed; but they are flat rather than round characters, lacking in interiority precisely because they are defined by their external actions and hence mostly externally focalized, making them somewhat enigmatic – particularly in the case of the main protagonist, with Lindsay Crouse's face expressionless during much of the film. Above all, it is the pared-down functionality of all elements that adds to this effect of the *closed film*: a skeletal action consisting almost solely of “main clauses” (cardinal functions rather than catalysts) subservient to the narrative forward-drive and its demands; settings and spaces either closed (as in interiors) or controlled, environments and objects strictly functional with nothing superfluous; and a very limited number of main and supporting characters, especially when appearing in one setting.

After ten minutes of screen time of scenes set during the daytime with clear, evenly lit shots, the narration switches to neon-light nighttime settings, self-conscious signifiers of noirishness, and beautifully photographed in lush, saturated colours and deep blacks by Juan Ruiz Anchia, who would also go on to shoot most of Mamet's later films. In trying to help one of her male patients, a compulsive gambler apparently owing 25,000 Dollars and threatened to be killed if he doesn't pay up, and accusing his shrink of her work being a con game and not being able to solve his problems in the “real world,” Margaret Ford decides to go to the “House of Games” and talk to the debtor in question, a man called Mike. In this, she is already heeding the advice given by an elderly friend and psychoanalyst-mentor Dr. Littauer (Lilia Skala), to work less and enjoy herself more. The psychoanalytical inflection of confrontational dialogue bouncing back to and fro is evident in the protagonist's first face-to-face encounter with Mike (Joe Mantegna) in a quiet and slightly seedy pool hall. In a reversal of traditional noir gender roles, a *female* protagonist-detective is suckered in by a seductive male, a veritable *homme fatal*:

(Mike, off, from a back room:) What the fuck is it?

(Margaret Ford:) I'm looking for Mike.

– Mike isn't here. What do you want?

— A friend of mine...

– Cut to the chase. I'm very busy. Why do you want Mike?

— I'm telling you, and you're Mike. You threatened to kill a friend of mine...

– Is that what I did?

— That's exactly what you did, Mike. That behaviour doesn't go. Whether you mean it or not, and it's irrelevant to me, cos you aren't going to do it. This is a sick kid. He's a compulsive gambler...

– Wait. What is this? What are you gonna do to me? If I'm this bad dude, why don't I take out some gun and blow you to bits?

- I'll tell you why. I think you're just a bully.
- “Just a bully”? What? You're not gonna let me carry your books? Aren't you a caution?
- Let's talk turkey, pal. One, you threatened to kill my friend. You aren't going to do that. Cos if you do, you're going away for life. Two is the money. He hasn't got it.
- Who is this friend?
- Billy Hahn.
- Billy Hahn. He lost how much to me?
- Come on. 25,000 dollars.
- 25,000 dollars Billy Hahn has lost to me. [Beat.] Excuse me one moment, will you? [Beat.] You say Billy Hahn lost 25 large to me? [Beat.] I'm showing you this cos I like you, OK? Cos you got blonde hair. You're looking at Billy Hahn's IOU. OK? Billy Hahn owes me 800 bucks.
- (man, off, in the back room:) In or out?
- (Mike:) Deal past me. (To Margaret:) OK? How did you size me up so quick, that I'm not some hard guy who's gonna rough you up?
- (Margaret:) I don't know. In my work...
- What work is that?
- It's none of your business.
- (Man, off, in the back room:) In or out?
- (Mike:) Out. (To Margaret:) Oh, it's none of my business? OK. Then I stand corrected. Here's the thing. I want something from you.
- What do you want?
- I want you to do me a favour.
- Why should I do you a favour?
- If you do, I'll forget the 800 your friend owes me.
- What do you want?
- Let's talk for a minute.

A powerplay of dialogue, this exchange of short-clipped sentences, analogous to Mamet's montage theory of brief uninflected shots, could almost be called non-realist prose as *realist poetry*, streetwise, slick, like a ping-pong game. In the symbolic exchange taking place here, and as the power of positions shifts towards the end, with Mike asking for a favour, Margaret Ford has already been pulled into a complex game, and a game within a game, which will turn out to be way over her head. What is being prepared here is the triumph of the social game, the *social system* over individual *psychology*, in homology to Mamet's anti-psychological approach to dramatic action. In Mamet's popular wish-fulfillment fantasy, there is a reversal of power positions in which the professional superiority of the shrink towards her patients is turned upside down, the psychoanalyst placed in the position of the victim – at least, as far as the second act is concerned. This is, of course, what distinguishes the thriller from the classic detective story: while both are

defined by Todorov's triangle of detective, criminal, and victim, in the classic detective story – usually featuring a professional investigator – the story is narrated from the secure and aloof point of view of the detective ratiocinating the narrative leading up to the crime; whereas in the much more forward- and action-oriented thriller with its emphasis on the plotline of investigation the story is predominantly told from the vantage point of the potential victim, who may simultaneously be an amateur sleuth attempting to unravel a mystery, but who is, at any rate, him- or herself personally subjected to danger;²⁷ that the female protagonist in *HOUSE OF GAMES* ultimately is not only detective and duped victim, but also takes on the role of criminal, is characteristic of Mamet's darkly ironic, paranoid penchant for what I call the *musical-chairs narrative*. In this, the “corpse” turns up not at the narrative's beginning, as is typical of classical detective fiction, but is produced at the end, after a series of enjoyable and relatively innocuous games: as is also the case in *GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS*, the deceptions and scheming efforts end with a real victim, thereby changing the tonal register for the film audience from fun game-playing to the serious and tragically ironic. Someone ultimately *will* have to pay the price, namely the scapegoat required by the system.

As the female protagonist is drawn into the seedy and shady underworld of gamblers by her own curiosity, and seemingly allowed a privileged insight into the secret tradecraft of a group of tricksters and con men, what at first appears to be, in linguistic terms, a meta-discourse of knowledge, is revealed to be an object-discourse: as the narrative progresses, unframed action is shown to be an element of yet another larger frame, a frame both in the sense of a confidence game and in terms of a new situational definition. Asked by Mike for a favour she cannot reject, Margaret Ford agrees to second him in the round of poker players and to watch out for his “Las Vegas” opponent's “tell,” an indication of bluffing involuntarily given off. The smoke-filled, dark room with pools of black shadows in the corners, is, of course, another closed setting, with a game being played in which deception is proverbially an integral part of the action. These are wisened, seasoned, cool players around the table, communicating almost in code through slick one-liners: “A man with style is a man who can smile,” “You wanna win the hand, you gotta stay in till the end,” “Everybody stays, everybody pays,” “I can't stand it. South. I'm going south,” “South Street Seaport, the man says. He can't stand the heat. He can't stand it.” This is the poetry of the street-wise, macho and criminal underside revealing that there is a fissure between the signified and the melodious signifier, that there is something else going on from what superficially appears to be

the case. It is noteworthy that Mike's opponent, a vulgar, coarse type in shirt sleeves, is played by Ricky Jay, a former magician and card player out of just this kind of milieu.

Mike has apparently let Margaret – she hasn't told him her name yet – in on his game: while the Las Vegas player had realized Mike to see through his “tell” (playing with a gold ring), if Mike briefly left Margaret in his place at the table, his opponent would probably unselfconsciously give himself away again, and she could let Mike know the other player was bluffing, allowing him to win the “big hand.” After Mike has excused himself from the game, Margaret indeed sees the opponent fidget with his ring, which she discreetly communicates to Mike after his return. Pulled in by her own desire for adventure and a slice of life so very different from her professional existence, when Mike reveals to the round that he will need to rely on their giving him credit to continue playing, Margaret defies the aggressive challenge of the Las Vegas player and declares she will back Mike up with her own money. But then the cards are laid open and, against prediction, Mike, stunned, loses the game, now owing 6,000 dollars. With the boorish winner placing a pistol on the table, Margaret is forced to write out a check of her own money; she is about to hand it over when she realizes that the pistol is filled with water, a squirt gun, and tears up the check. There's a brief stand-off, but then Mike calls the game quits, and we realize that all the players of this round actually form one single team, one group whose sole purpose was to set up Margaret and rip off her money. Barely having escaped the con, with Mike apologetically telling her that that's what they do for a living and that “it's nothing personal,” after being initially dismayed, Margaret laughs it off; as a good-will gesture, the small group of tricksters let her in on one of the secrets of their “trade.” They are players and actors, a small, and tellingly all-male troupe, each member of which doing his designated part, in a homology of sorts to the small theatre ensemble. The con here is very close to the concerted team effort of a caper, with all actions strictly functional and goal-oriented, here told from the point of view of the unsuspecting victim; while in Mamet's later film *HEIST* the caper-genre's typical “one last coup,” an elaborate airport gold robbery, is narrated from the perspective of a small group of professional crooks (played by Delroy Lindo, Rebecca Pidgeon, and again, in a supporting role, Ricky Jay) masterminded by veteran thief Joe Moore (Gene Hackman). Not only does Moore have to dodge being caught by the police, he is also trying to cut himself loose from the grip of his manipulative, longtime fence Bergman (Danny DeVito) and the latter's scheming nephew Jimmy (Sam Rockwell) – leading to a series of complicated game moves and surprising plot twists.

In *HOUSE OF GAMES*, the con men give Margaret their confidence, the basis, as we later find out, of any successful con. So, what has happened is that the situational frame has shifted, it has been enlarged to reveal that the players are in fact a single group of confidence tricksters and that Margaret's role in the setting was not that of a distanced, uninvolved onlooker on the outside of the game, but an integral and crucial part of a larger game in which she was to be the victim: from her point of view, the situation involved Mike and herself versus the guy from Las Vegas, with the other players more or less neutral, if sympathetic towards Mike; whereas in truth it was Mike and all the others against her. This constitutes a reversal of her usual position in her professional work with patients. The situational frame has shifted from what appeared to be an open game to a closed setting, i.e. the frame has been enlarged to encompass all of those present. The outside of the micro-game (poker) has been shown to be included in yet another bigger frame, a macro-game (the con). The narratological basis of this shiftiness of the situational frame is external focalization, i.e. a restricted range of knowledge, which in turn is based on restricted communicativeness, in which the film viewer in this case is placed in the same position as the innocent protagonist.

To comprehend any game, what is crucial of course is knowing where it begins and where it ends, a clear sense of what is inside the game and what is outside. By shifting the frame reference, however, the narration is deliberately simulating false borders and dissimulating the real ones; and, as Margaret will finally realize, the real con is a much larger one, which had already begun *before* she went to the “House of Games,” the con game there and its subsequent revelation by the tricksters being itself a con in the service of an elaborate overarching plot to relieve her of 80,000 dollars of her own money, as well as leaving her feeling guilty and paranoid about being responsible for the (fake) murder of a (fake) policeman – as is revealed in the third act, at the moment of *anagnorisis*, of both revelation (to the film audience) and recognition (by the protagonist), the greedy businessman, himself apparently double-crossing the con men by appearing to be a cop in a sting operation, is just another player on Mike's team of crooks.

Games within games within games. The narrative mechanism of enlarging the situational frame is a variation of what is known in art theory as *mise-en-abîme*, the play within the play, the image within the image, and of what Luhmann's sociological systems theory (borrowing the term from George Spencer Brown) calls *re-entry*. In principle, situational framing can be enlarged to the point of explicit self-reflexivity, to encompass the whole work. And in *HOUSE OF GAMES* it

will be this mechanism of enlarging the frame which will be Mike's undoing in the final act. Because he has made the small mistake of hubris, of thinking himself to be the ultimate master of ceremonies, as though to demonstrate that he, too, is only a character within the writer-director's design, the master puller of strings being the *author*, Mamet punishes him in a final twist.

Having robbed and sexually taken her – “a small price to pay,” Margaret secretly overhears him quip to his all-male entourage in their hang-out, as she realizes the scope of the entire set-up –, the macho conspirator will be surprised by murderous female revenge. As Margaret has already suffered the guilt of having committed a murder, its being revealed to have been staged now perversely allows her to kill without remorse. Having got wind of Mike's travel plans, and now for the first time being in a position of superior knowledge, she catches up with him at the airport, now elegantly styled as though for a business trip. Pretending to live in the state of perpetual fear the trickster had obviously hoped to instill in her, and telling him she had taken out all her money to leave the country, she lures Mike into one of the cargo holding areas of the airport. Margaret's counter-con, the exact purpose of which we do not yet know, is quickly blown when she gives away a piece of information she could only have obtained by secretly listening in on Mike and his fellow tricksters; but this only hastens the act of revenge. Pulling out the gun her “compulsive gambler” patient had left with her, she has Mike in a corner. Accusing him of having abused, raped and stolen from her, his reply once again is that he does this kind of thing for a living, that “it's nothing personal.” Unmoved, Margaret shoots him. And yet, there is a sense of artificiality about this scene which almost lets us suspect that the film is trying to con us with its powers of illusion. But clearly, Mike is dead, and now there is a corpse for real.

The film ends on a note of dark, wicked irony. Appearing in the restaurant where she first met her elderly mentor-friend, now in a flowery dress, attractively made up and with a sun tan, Margaret has just returned from a vacation. Addressing her friend's initial concern about her tense and stressful state beforehand, she reiterates her mentor's admonition made immediately after the fake murder of the cop: “When you've done something unforgivable, you forgive yourself.” Margaret, smiling and relaxed, says she's done exactly that. And while, in a reversal of previous situations, it is Dr. Littauer called from the table by a professional call, Margaret seizes the opportunity to divert the attention of a woman sitting across from her, to secretly pickpocket the latter's beautiful gold lighter, holding it in her hands beneath the table cover, and cherishing it like a little girl. Having discovered her dark side, Margaret has fully lost her innocence.

Theatrical cinema, role-playing and postmodernist games

Akin to Erving Goffman's "presentation of self in everyday life" and the playing of roles in social behaviour, of theatrical conceptions of symbolic interaction in reality, Mamet's cinema draws attention to dramaturgical concepts such as proposed by Goffman in his distinction between storefront and backstage behaviour; on the backstage, however, we do not encounter undisguised, "true reality," but only further game-playing.²⁸ In the context of Goffman's theorization of "strategic interaction," focusing on espionage and secret agents,²⁹ and of the frame to analyse different spheres and boundaries of game-like human interaction,³⁰ it would seem that Mamet's films not only lend multiple, fertile meanings to these concepts, but also to illustrate a creative and productive symbiosis of theatre and cinema. His theatrical cinema, non-realist both in the conception of acting as reflexive performance and of narrative filmmaking based on a formalist theory of montage – the "juxtaposition of uninflected images" –, not only self-consciously highlights social role-playing, but envisions human interaction as strategic interaction in a world of simulation and dissimulation, reality as consisting of game-play on various orders. In this, his approach aligns with postmodernism's view of reality as a series of games being played, there being ultimately no accessible reality outside of these games: even death as a liminal event, as *HOUSE OF GAMES* suggests, is not really available to us outside of the symbolic order.³¹ The theatricality of performance in Mamet is thus diegeticised into a filmic reality in which appearances are notoriously deceptive, and frames, cons, and double-crosses inform both the world his characters inhabit and, last but not least, the relationship of his films to the cinema audience. In this Chinese-box world of illusions, we seem to be perpetually stuck in Plato's cave.

Notes

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

² André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray. Foreword by Jean Renoir. New Foreword by Dudley Andrew* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 2004). Originally published as: *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 1962).

³ Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Chicago [etc.]: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 44, 46–47. (First published: Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1977).

⁴ François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967). Originally published as *Le cinéma selon Hitchcock* (Paris: Laffont, 1966).

⁵ On anti-naturalistic performance styles cf. Jeremy G. Butler, ed., *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 51–87 (three chapters dealing with Kuleshov, Brecht, and Bresson).

⁶ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego [etc.]: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 67–78. (First published 1927).

⁷ David Mamet, *On Directing Film* (New York [etc.]: Penguin, 1992), 13. (First published 1991).

⁸ David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York [etc.]: Vintage Books, 1999), 9. (First published: New York [etc.]: Pantheon Books, 1997).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19–21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

¹⁹ *On Directing Film*, xv.

²⁰ Cf. Eugene Vale, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing: An Analysis of the Dramatic Structure of Motion Pictures*. Revised and enlarged ed. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973); and Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screen Writing*. Expanded ed. (New York: Dell, 1984); see also the concepts of “advertising” and “elements of the future” in David Howard and Edward Mabley, *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of Screenwriting*. Paperback ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995) (First published 1993).

²¹ *On Directing Film*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” *idem, Image, Music, Text: Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath* (London: Flamingo, 1984), 79–124. Originally published as “Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits,” *Communications* 8 (1966): 6–33.

²⁴ *On Directing Film*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Reprint (London: Routledge, 1993), 73. First published 1985.

²⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” *idem, The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 42–52. Originally published as “Typologie du roman policier,” *Paragone* 202 (1966): 3–14, and in *idem, Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 55–65.

²⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York [etc.]: Anchor Books – Doubleday, 1959).

²⁹ *Idem, Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

³⁰ *Idem, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York [etc.]: Harper & Row, 1974).

³¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*. Reprint (London [etc.]: Routledge, 2003), particularly the chapter “Chinese-box worlds”, 112–130. (First published: London: methuen, 1987).