Film Take

Realism as a Political Style
Noir Insights

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> The standard objections are that pluralism gives too little weight to the power of ideas and of social and economic forces, and that it leaves no room for morality. (Pluralism's equivalent in foreign relations is realism, which strikes people who don't like it as having the same flaws.)[1]
>
> — Nicholas Lemann

> Obama was learning that one of the greatest skills a politician can possess is candor about the dirty work it takes to get and stay elected. . . . if there was any maxim from community organizing that Obama lived by, it was the Realpolitik commandment of Saul Alinsky . . . to operate in "the world as it is and not as we would like it to be." . . . Like many politicians, Obama is paradoxical. He is by nature an incrementalist, yet he has laid out an ambitious first-term agenda. . . . He campaigns on reforming a broken political process, yet he has always played politics by the rules as they exist, not as he would like them to exist. He runs as an outsider, but he has succeeded by mastering the inside game.[2]
>
> — Ryan Lizza

1 Realism is an abiding aspect of politics. In aspiration and criticism, practice and theory, deed and word, politics return insistently to facing hard facts, making tough choices, then doing whatever needs to be done — in the conviction that true responsibility requires no less and that the ends will justify the means. Some people take realism to be the whole of politics, some the soul of politics, some their bane or debasement, and some just one perspective among others. But few would (or think they could) banish it altogether from politics. Rather most see realism as present in the origins, prominent in the destinations, and persistent in the machinations of western — even world — civilization. And the same goes for its principal contrary, idealism.

2 Indeed debates between realists and idealists form a defining

problematic of western philosophy. Sophists parry Platonists and Aristotelians. Machiavellians attack Utopians. Marxians as Materialists oppose Hegelians as Idealists. Pragmatists deconstruct Rationalists. Empiricists debunk Theorists. Realists impugn Moralists. And so on. Political science often distinguishes between the local and global or the national and international versions of realism, contrasting pluralism (and company) with Realpolitik (or the like) – as Nicholas Lemann does above. Yet as Lemann implies, there are strong reasons to recognize how much these variants share, meriting the same label in overall contrast to similarly numerous inflections of idealism.

3 The consecutive issues of the *New Yorker* quoted at the beginning of this essay mention many of realism's characteristic tropes: skill, especially at doing dirty work; a peculiar kind of candor; practicality; and rationality in facing "the world as it is and not as we would like it to be." Realism is ambitious politically as well as personally, yet it is mostly incrementalist when pursuing change. It takes politics to need reform, often because corruptions mask themselves in pretty words, debilitating myths, manipulative illusions, or empty dreams. Accordingly realists take themselves to be plain-speakers who talk hard truths in the tough terms required to spur effective action. Seeing through the frauds that mystify others, realists escape the cynicism of using their fallen knowledge for personal advantage. Instead realists debunk the myths that bewitch others, and they appreciate politics as contests among similarly enlightened leaders separated by different interests. Typically they play politics as hardball. This means pushing inventively and vigorously against the rules that define not only fair and honorable deeds but politics of any kind. Realists argue their hardball to be justified by the rampant mistakes and corruptions of others. Yet realists also take their hardball to be enabled in part by their own pervasive manipulations and self-deceptions of others.

4 Realism regards its name as grim but admirable. It is politics for hard bodies and minds, tough enough to confront unsettling truths in troubled times. That is how romances of realism tell its stories: as the muscular and imaginative politics needed by everyday lives as much as imperiled republics. To sample recent editions of these romances in the all-too-imitable style of realist fables pioneered by Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince*, consult *Hardball* or *Life's a Campaign*, the same handbook for realist action written twice by Christopher Matthews.[3] The ethos is evident in rough synonyms for *realism*: not only *hardball* but *authenticity*, *down-to-*

earthness, *genuineness*, *literality* unto *literalism*, *materialism*, *matter-of-factness*, *plain-spokenness*, *practicality*, *pragmatism*, *rationality*, *secularism*, and *worldliness*. Likewise the neighbors in outlook for realism are said to be cynicism, pessimism, and skepticism. We should take care not to conflate any of these with realism, yet we also should resist over-doing distinctions among supposedly contrasting sorts of realism. In terms of style, realism coheres strongly as a network of tropes and dispositions.

5 Much of the distinction-making arises from attempting to render realism (or idealism) as a code, creed, philosophy, ideology, or some otherwise "substantive" doctrine. There are good reasons, at times, to do so. Yet the irony is that this literally *ideal-izes* political realism. As the word *ideo-logy* suggests, this strives to reconstruct realism as a modern, formal logic-of-ideas: a singular, deductively consistent list of propositions that human realists supposedly endorse in (prior, abstract) principle and (subsequently, perhaps merely) apply in practice. Then analysts individuate different kinds of realism into contrasting lists of tenets; and they name each apart, whether or not the names surface often – or in the same senses – within our political practices.[4]

6 Still the kinship among subspecies of realism deserves attention too, because it can be helpful in practicing and apprehending our politics. Especially this holds for inventing and interpreting our political myths: the symbolically charged stories we coordinate our lives by.[5] One good way to do this is to treat realism as a complex of political styles. In effect, this means regarding realism as a loose form of political action.[6] Then we analyze its recurrent figures for their family resemblances rather than their propositional logics, and we identify its instances by their prominent uses of these tropes rather than strict sets of necessary or sufficient conditions.

7 Here let us seek these conventions of realism at popular more than elite levels. This can lead us to popular culture. It is largely of and for, if not always by, ordinary people in everyday life. Concentration on popular culture can steer us to popular media and, in electronic times, to electronic media especially. Media are mythic through and through; and in America for the last century, the electronic medium preeminent in mythmaking has been movies. Their myths help us make sense of our situations, structure our routines, and inform our actions. Media interact incessantly; even so, movies have been particularly potent in

electronic cultures to date. As the British theater critic Kenneth Tynan reflected:

8 The most powerful influence on the arts in the West is — the cinema. Novels, plays *and films* are filled with references to, quotations from, parodies of — old movies. They dominate the cultural subconscious because we absorb them in our formative years (as we don't absorb books, for instance); and we see them again on TV when we grow up. The first two generations predominately nourished on movies are now of an age when they rule the media: and it's already frightening to see how deeply — in their behavior as well as their work — the cinema has imprinted itself on them. Nobody took into account the tremendous impact that would be made by the fact that films are *permanent* and *easily accessible from childhood onward*. As the sheer number of films piles up, their influence will increase, until we have a civilization entirely molded by cinematic values and behavior patterns.[7]

9 The vaunted attunement of realism to reality might suggest that cinema and mythmaking are among the last places to seek political dynamics of realism. As novelist Marge Piercy observes, however, "myth forms reality and we act out of what we think we are." Even as they announce a project to dispel myths as though they were mere falsehoods, realists appreciate their political importance, especially on the levels of everyday lives. So we do well to seek realism in movies.

10 The popular genres of cinema most often regarded as realist in style are documentary and noir.[8] Documentary has not been a prominent mode of cinematic mythmaking since the era of the newsreel. Although the onset of digital moviemaking might be changing this by enabling rapid and inexpensive production of documentary movies by a much greater range of people, a concern for current mythmaking still would lead us instead to noir. As a cinematic genre, it has enjoyed off-and-on prominence since the start of the Second World War; and we are now in the midst of a third straight decade of boom times for noir.

11 Moreover noir is known among movie commentators in important part for the realism of its aesthetics — which is to say, its mythic, visual, and aural styles. In noir, these are everyday styles of political action for some of the stock, focal characters. They also are styles of political mythmaking for the movie makers. Nobody thinks that noir is only realist in style; its look and sound are

widely agreed to be expressivist too, and noir myth often is existentialist even more than it is realist. These complications can be advantages, however, because they can keep us from temptations simply to equate noir style with realist style. Popular forms of our political culture taken by convention to be more exclusively realist in style surely would include news and documentary. Like noir, though, those forms actually participate in political styles beyond realism; even as popular senses of news and documentary as strictly realist can make their other political dynamics harder to recognize, analyze, and take into separate account.

12 The two (somewhat) realist genres of cinema intersect in documentary noir.[9] Yet that has been no more in vogue of late than other kinds of documentary. Still there are other modes of noir that connect in telling terms to politics of realism, with the essay at hand extending a series that goes "on beyond" noir analysis as usually practiced to date. First, the essays in this series join many articles and books by others that reach beyond classic noirs from roughly 1941 to 1958, and even what I call their continuations through 1979, to focus on neo noirs from 1980 onward. Second, the essays in this series follow at least a few others in analyzing neo noir for its mythmaking more than its filmmaking or its philosophizing. Third, my essays emphasize the political myths, styles, and strategies in neo noir more than the its looser artistic or cultural patterns, even though the noir interests in politics of everyday life do keep these essays attuned mostly to troubles and opportunities for ordinary people rather than issues and resources for public officials. And fourth, in attending more to devices of practical action, these essays in this series begin as usual with noir existentialism or realism, but they extend into many other modes of politics as well. All four of these initiatives are prominent projects in the pages at hand.

13 Associated with the expressionism in its aesthetics, neo noir is pervasively existentialist in its politics; and several essays in this series consider the practical politics of existentialism in neo noir films.[10] Yet the cinematic realism also persistent in neo noir often implicates political realism as a style, as the present essay is for probing. Other essays in the series explore further inflections of politics in neo noir. Ultra-violent noir reaches into terror-tories that existentialist and realist noir have deep trouble understanding and resisting.[11] Super noir taps conventions of superhero comics and movies to see how neo noir often vilifies perfectionist (particularly Nietzschean) politics, plus how ordinary people might

resist or even take decent advantage of perfectionist politics.[12] Feminist noir turns neo noir — as one of the most misogynist of popular genres — toward accommodating feminist politics.[13] And the fractal films in neo noir come to practical terms with the political turbulence of nonlinear systems that mystify earlier noir and its linear modes of existentialism. [14] But here we concentrate on noir realism as a political style.

14 We begin, accordingly, with what it might mean to take politics as style. We proceed to sketch a few figures of realism as a style. I say "a few" because the present ambition is not a full inventory of realist tropes but just enough stock characters, deeds, settings, sounds, and looks to start us in analyzing examples that can teach us more. Then we acknowledge the existentialist and expressivist aspects of noir, to provide a sense of the noir surroundings for political realism. And finally we put these figures to work to contrast the political realism of *The Prestige* with the political idealism of *The Illusionist*. These are the only two noir films known to me that feature stage magic, and they were released in consecutive months in 2006. Both are excellent exercises in political mythmaking within neo noir as a film genre highly important in America's popular movies of the part quarter-century. Yet their politics are contraries, and their styles follow suit. Together these two movies enable us to appreciate some features of realism as a political style.

The Pledge: We See Politics as Style

> Are you watching closely? Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird, or a man. He shows you this object; perhaps he asks you to inspect it, to see that it is indeed real — you know, not out of the normal. Of course, it probably isn't. The second act is called the turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it into something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough: you have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act: the hardest part, the part we call

the prestige.

— Ingenieur Cutter as *The Prestige* starts

15 A favorite theorist of politics, Hannah Arendt, once argued that the western tradition of political thought and action from the ancient Greeks to the twentieth century could have done politics as public action far better had the Greeks complemented their notions of doing good and telling truth with a sense of "doing beauty."[15] At the time, she was working on what was to stay an unfinished trilogy on thinking, willing, and judging as *The Life of the Mind*.[16] Although Arendt connected doing beauty with thinking, we would do well to appreciate political action and judgment with doing beauty-in-style. This pun can be complicated, since the republican-rhetorical tradition where we could locate Arendt tends to construe doing beauty *as* style.[17] No less relevant, too, is the American version of virtuosity as doing almost anything "with style."

16 To educate a sense of style is to cultivate "taste" in experience and "touch" in action. It avoids fixing an exclusive, determinate set of specific standards for distinguishing good from bad, right from wrong, apt from not. Yet to analyze taste in philosophical terms is notoriously difficult, and to analyze touch has yet to be tried at all.[18] This is why, as Arendt was beginning to intuit, aesthetics – as practices and studies of beauty or, in a larger compass, experience – turn out highly relevant to prudential judgment. Studies of political style can become substantive when we attend to aesthetics in action.[19] This is a major reason that aesthetic forms – such as popular genres of films and other current devices of mythmaking – deserve sustained scrutiny as enactments and accounts of our politics.

17 If and when political studies pay better attention to political action, a signal result can be more stress on political style. "In brief," writes Robert Hariman, "a political style is *a coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect*."[20] Thus figures that comprise a political style can "account for the role of sensibility, taste, manners, charisma, charm, or similarly compositional or performative qualities in a particular political culture."[21] Kim Stanley Robinson, who does savvy political theory in the popular genre of science fiction, writes that "Beauty is the promise of happiness. And the only happiness is action."[22] Iterated, sustained action is performance; performance is style; style is

doing beauty: that's the proposal.

18 As a literary matter, many who comment regularly on their contemporary politics soon develop distinctive styles of perception and expression. Indeed commentators from Joe Klein and Jeff Greenfield or Lou Dobbs and Bill O'Reilly to Anna Quindlen and George Will or Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are more readily identifiable by performance styles than by any other features of their political contributions. Knowing this, some pundits and reporters have described themselves as striving first and foremost for distinctive styles of thinking, talking, and writing. Yet styles as distinctive modes of political performance hold for doers as well as commentators.[23] Some forms of political action are styles as well as ideologies or strategies or utopias or campaigns or reactions or codes or movements or myths or stances or such. And some forms of political action are more styles than otherwise. That is the larger argument about political realism: we appreciate it better as a family of styles than as any other form of political action prominent in our times.[24]

19 As literary critics know, aesthetics or styles are not only favorite standards of judgment and evaluation. Nor are they just distinctive types of rhetorical tropes and tricks of the trade. Styles are not merely identifying features of interest and imagination, not simply special sets of political questions and positions, not even characteristic personal predilections of inference and extrapolation. Styles of political interpretation and action are all these. Nonetheless such styles typically are more subtle and pervasive than any short, discrete selection of analytical elements can convey. Whether through comments or deeds, styles are the main political marks of many contributors to politics. Styles are their distinctive stamps on our languages, perspectives, and practices.

20 If political interpretation is closer than other academic projects of political theory to our political practices, and if styles are especially central to political interpretation, then we might infer that styles are especially important in politics per se. Perhaps it is more a comment on the peculiar pluralisms of our times than on politics generally, but this inference is hard to resist. At a minimum, it seems to follow for our historical moment that political theory for everyday lives in electronic times should concentrate on studying politics as styles and styles as politics.

21 Styles are apt for appreciating the diffuse (but potent) packaging of

units like languages, perspectives, and practices. Increasingly these are the analytical tools and cultural realities on which theorists rely for interpreting political acts, texts, and institutions. We can no longer find in standard ideologies, nor even in the sheer form of ideology, enough of the general shapes of our own politics to account for evident cleavages or obvious occurrences. Approaching politics as styles encourages us to recognize how styles of speech, action, and life sometimes constitute and often contribute to the arrays of agreements, disagreements, and events that configure our political affairs.

22 By reorienting attention to questions of political form, criticisms of ideologism converge with criticisms of old dichotomies between means and ends. Once we refuse to relegate means to merely instrumental goods, we can recognize that means are not empty forms for achieving contents in the end. In turn, we can celebrate our participation and performance as meaningful contents of our action and potential goods in themselves. Few may want to go as far as Arendt, who found the sole essence of politics in performance, in styles of action rather than – and to the exclusion of – its effects. Yet many do want to make more room for virtues of performance than has been allowed by western instrumentalisms. What we may seek, then, are ways of resisting reductions of politics to pure performance while still celebrating participation and performance for their considerable worth. Seeing how politics are styles can encourages us to appreciate that performance is crucial in politics.

23 Similarly seeing how styles are politics can encourage us to recognize the importance in politics of other substantive aspects of action: conditions, aims, instruments, effects, and more. As politics, styles are both arenas and objects of political struggles or – more broadly – actions. When no longer regarded as mere ornamentation, styles matter politically. They cease to be sheer forms, utterly alien and indifferent to contents. They become parts of the substance of politics, blending with other components of action. All these (analytical) aspects of action limit, relate, and lead to one another so intimately, so completely, that specifically political contrasts among them can only be posed contextually and pragmatically. Accordingly styles of action can be characterized only along with their conditions, aims, instruments, effects, and the like. That is, actions can be performed only with conditions, aims, instruments, effects, and so on. To treat styles as politics is to emphasize that these "substantive" concerns enter into our styles and thus our performances. It is to say that not even

defining politics as action as performance can keep out the concerns of "society" and "economy" which Arendt sought to confine to sub-political activities of "making" and "labor."[25] This is not to deny Arendt ample justification and credit for her arguments, considering their contextual, pragmatic, rhetorical force. It is to turn Arendt's brilliant hint about "doing beauty" into doing effective truth and goodness in politics.

24 At issue here are two forms of political action, hence two complexes of political style, that routinely connect in the United States since the onset of the Second World War. Realism is a prominent style of domestic and international politics in this period. The theory as well as the practice of American politics are rife with pluralism, Realpolitik, and other versions of realism. In fact, political science reinvented itself throughout the twentieth century as a family of realist takes on politics, especially politics in America.[26] From 1940-41 onward, film noir becomes for the popular cinema centered in Hollywood a persistent and successful genre for realist concerns and sensibilities that arise in the politics of everyday life, reach into the politics of celebrity, and eventually range into nearly every region of American existence.[27] The proposal for these pages is to treat realism and noir as intersecting styles of political action, in part through mythmaking.

25 If the interest is in political action as doing-beauty-in-style, why focus an analysis on the political style (of realism) in popular culture, especially in popular movies, and particularly in the popular genre of noir films? Among our premier venues for ordinary people to participate in making our political myths as our political realities, popular media are superb places to see and do political styles. So we do well to study the political myths in popular genres without accepting the prejudicial suppositions that they are popular falsehoods, romantic mistakes, or other species of political error to be overcome by academic analysis. The need is to approach film, television, and other popular media in electronic times as cultural practices and political realities with varying dynamics in terms of truth and power.

26 Rational-choice and other "formal theorists" of politics take depth interviews, surveys, and thick institutional descriptions as behavioral information about legislators, lawmaking, and campaigning. Then they try to save the appearances, by explaining how various details cohere into the patterns of politics that sustain themselves in practice.[28] Here the approach is similar. As theorists of politics in everyday life, we can turn to thick

descriptions in novels, films, ads, and TV shows. Our task is to explicate the patterns and consequences of politics that appear in our vernacular cultures.

27 Addressing some of the same problematics as formal theorists, although with different principles about the dynamics of politics, we can look for targets of analysis with the similar density of detail in the other arenas of action that come to the fore when interests shift to our political myths and styles. What personal information and institutional accounts could provide rich textures for comprehending politics of western civilization in general and American life in particular? What would tap the telling detail of myth-making crucial for postmodern politics in electronic times? What might trace the operations of political cognition and communication in myths – taken as associative networks shared by ordinary people in our postmodern situations? Especially good sets of answers come in the conventions of popular fiction, film, and television, where the political myths of our times make some of their most significant appearances.

28 Therefore popular genres in mass media are good places to theorize about post-modern and post-western politics. These genres are modes of practical action, because they remake the political myths we live every day. The theories articulated in popular genres are often as good or better than political theories in more scholarly form because they are more vivid in evoking present phenomena, past sources, and future prospects. They are better, too, because they can attain greater accuracy, insight, and effectiveness for politics in the everyday situations where most of us live the rest of our lives, political and otherwise. The overall method here is to move back-and-forth among contrasting genres, to parse their politics through myriad comparisons among their conventional characters, settings, and events. The essay here arises from sustained attention to popular genres such as horror, news, noir, and satire, plus comedy, documentary, drama, and romance. To remain manageable, though, this essay focuses on neo noir only – due to its affinity for politics of realism, particularly at levels of style. The purpose is to engages us where we live, bringing to the fore our own experiences of the unofficial but pervasive politics of our everyday lives, politics where we participate first-hand.

29 But we cannot analyze the politics of noir, thrillers, or any other popular forms without gaining a decent sense of how several of these genres operate politically. We need to compare the families

of conventions that comprise horror to the sets of stock figures that form romance or noir or documentary — and more. A key to appreciating political styles is to respect them as vernacular forms of action, and a way to do this is to analyze the political styles that emerge from works in popular genres. An important part of this analysis is learning from subgenres, especially where they share territories or boundaries with subgenres in other genres. Political insights spring from appreciating how the horse opera as a subgenre of westerns overlaps with the space opera as a subgenre of science fiction. Likewise it helps political analysis to consider how super noir blends conventions of the superhero saga with figures from noir realism.[29] This looms large in the forthcoming comparison of *The Prestige* to *The Illusionist*.

30 A last consideration is that we as political analysts are addressing popular genres rather than academically defined ones. Popular genres, like popular styles, get defined independently of us analysts. The conventions addressed in this essay form genuinely popular genres — of noir and of realism — instead of categories only in scholarship or types just in theory. Thus you can find popular headings like comedy, documentary, drama, and horror in sites for movie rentals. Admittedly you won't find "neo noir" as a section in your neighborhood Blockbuster, but you do see it on the Internet Movie Database. Like realism, noir has been increasingly popular as a form of political mythmaking in the United States from the Cold War onward.[30] Noir is not just a collection of stories, films, videos, and ads that analysts put together even as we promote arguments about the shared features. Instead we attend as closely as we can to how noirs get configured by their authors, directors, producers, actors, and as myths by their popular audiences. The argument here is that analyzing noir films can help us explore political dynamics of realism as a family of styles in our everyday lives.

The Turn: We Recognize Realism as Style

Magician Borden to Magician Angier on Magician Su hobbling to a cab: This is the trick. This is the performance: right here. This is why no one cand etect his method: total devotion to his art, real self-sacrifice. You know? It's the only way to escape all this. . . .

Angier to Julia, his assistant and wife, on Su above: He's been pretending to be a cripple for years! . . . Any time he's in public, any time he goes out. It's unthinkable!

Borden saw it at once. But I couldn't fathom it: living your whole life pretending to be someone else. . . .

Julia to Angier: You *are* pretending to be someone else.
— as *The Prestige* turns

31 To many a realist, it is surprising, paradoxical, even perverse to treat realism as style – particularly in politics. The pledge of political realism is to face actualities without distraction or distortion. It is to see through styles, myths, words, hopes, utopias, illusions, ideas, pieties, pretenses, and other manipulations to the bare facts and interests beneath. Realism takes itself, in other words, to be anti-style – even *the* anti-style. When realism turns out to be (presentable primarily as a) style, Americans sense something uncanny occurring. Is the demonstration one of stage magic, a rhetorician's feat of misdirection and sleight-of-hand, as realists might insist? Is it a theorist's way of taming danger and doing good, as idealists might imagine? Or it is, as realists might dread, an exercise of dark but real arts by enemies who unravel our realities to unhinge our rationalities? Is it, in other words, some realists outdoing others? Instead it is, I suggest, a more realistic and politically intelligent sense of realism in politics. (But maybe that just *is* some realisms trumping others . . . ?)

32 The first trick, nonetheless, is that to recognize realism as a political style is to disappear realism as most have regarded it politically. To turn true realism into tropes is to make it vanish from the usual view. With a wave of the wand, realism as substance becomes style? Where did the real realism go? With a snap of the cloth, realism as rationality is now art? What happened to the hard-headed, hard-hearted, hard-fisted, hard-charging realism that was just there? With a twist of the wrist, realism as deeds and consequences becomes words and gestures? How is the true realism to return? As Cutter says, realism remains; but we don't exactly see it, because we don't actually look, because we don't really want to see. As Cutter intimates, we dread the unknown but suspected implications of what we might see. And as Cutter concludes, we "want to be fooled." Fools for firm and settled realities are we, even as we tell ourselves that realism faces the hard facts that people with less courage or calculation contrive to miss. Realism of every kind, even epistemic, as a political style is something that we modern westerners would rather not see.

33 Analyzing Machiavelli's texts, Robert Hariman offers an early treatment of realism as a political style. Hariman shows how Machiavelli's writing "crafts an aesthetically unified world of sheer power and constant calculation."[31] Even as Machiavelli mobilizes words to perform his politics, though, he denies their importance, their legitimacy, their power in action. "The realist style radically separates power and textuality," says Hariman, "constructing the political realm as a state of nature and the political actor as someone either rationally calculating vectors of interest and power or foolishly believing in such verbal illusions as laws or ethical ideals. Since this style operates as the common sense of modern political theory, its deconstruction removes a major obstacle to developing alternative conceptions of politics, particularly accounts – such as this one – that highlight artistry."[32] In masking the roles and powers of the words, Machiavelli conceals his reliance on them, making his rhetoric – his style in action – all the more powerful as political realism. Time and again, his words declare a no-spin zone of hard truth, plain speech, and pure rationality. Learn to look past words to deeds, the realist says, and past appearances to interests – for deeds and interests do not lie. Fortune can frustrate even the clearest vision and the coldest calculation, so success is not assured. But that is what makes success especially sweet, and success can be cultivated through political arts of realism.

34 Hariman focuses on rebutting realist arguments against style and realist claims to escape it. His main argument is *that* realism is a political style, so he gives some attention to *how*, but it remains introductory. "The gist of {Machiavelli's] innovation is that he repudiated the genre's [the princely mirror's] most basic assumption – its belief that politics is circumscribed by words. Thus, an interesting sign of the break is his omission of the one element of the genre that most signified the metaphysic of textuality: the frequent citation of prior writers."[33] From this crucial turn, arise the figures that Hariman takes to endure in realism as a political style.[34]

reality rather than textuality,
where reality is materiality;

strategy rather than prudence,
where strategy is self-control of temperament and
sovereign control of historical memory;

experience rather than reading,
where experience includes observation;

originality rather than tradition or common sense,
where originality is the source of authority;

action as self-assertion,
where self-assertion is audacity or boldness and
ambition for survival and glory is honorable;

politics as war,
where war involves force, fraud, and fortuna; and

calculation of interests,
where a sovereign self abstracts from the world and
the ends justify the means for survival and glory.

To this roster, Sheldon Wolin has added another important figure: **economy of violence**, where bold force and fraud can nip escalation in the bud to minimize the violence that people suffer to some extent inevitably in a turbulent world.[35] These tropes do not exhaust realism as a style of politics, but they serve well for a start.

35 Yet notice how limp and logological items can seem in such a list: a mere academician's summary in abstruse canons, concepts, definitions, or propositions of what (Hariman correctly maintains) should instead – for a "style of conduct" – be "performances."[36] After rebutting the realist pretense to escape style, Hariman turns in his next chapter to the courtly style, and there he repeatedly tells stories to evokes performances. Since the goal here is to augment Hariman's account of realist style, particularly for analyzing political realism in popular films, let us go on to realist figures more overtly suited to stories, dramas, and movies. These realist tropes could resemble an inventory of standard figures for a political genre of films: stock characters, deeds, settings, sights, sounds, and themes. And that's exactly the point: realism *is* a popular form of politics in America. This means that realism operates in important ways as a mode of action, which is to say, a style of performance. (It also means that popular forms such as westerns and noirs, which plainly are styles of performance, work in significant ways as modes of action too. One of these action projects of popular cinema is what I call political mythmaking: shaping the meanings that we take from – and give to – our shared lives.[37])

36 Again the aspiration is simply to get started, with stipulations in this section to be given initial evidence by the analysis of specific films. Something to notice right away about realism, something resonant with noir, is that the mythic repertoire of characters is strongly gendered. Realist accounts of politics mostly have males for their movers and shakers. Their characteristic celebration of hardball with hard truths, hard choices, and hard deeds makes the realist ethos macho. Machiavelli is an easy example. He portrayed the realist prince as a male who must go boldly where moralists, idealists, utopians, and especially Christians hesitate to tread. He must "learn how not to be good." He should prefer being feared to being loved. He should master force and fraud. He should do whatever it takes to stay in power and stabilize the principality. Violence will be needed at times, so the realist should not flinch from the effectiveness of early use, both to maximize prospects of success and to minimize amounts of violence required. In our real world, fallen and difficult, this is to show the realist's sense of political responsibility. The idealist hope and pursuit of no-violence, by contrast, is really apt to multiply our need for force as well as fraud to maintain decent order.

37 Satire relies on exaggerating genre conventions, so notice how *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* spoof the masculinist realism of American news and punditry. As a pretend pundit, Colbert uses Lord Byron looks to enact egomaniacal narcissism and sexism. As fake reporters of fake news, Rob Corddry, Rob Riggle, and sometimes Jason Jones have played super-macho men in the field – by telling contrast with John Oliver as the mild-mannered and thus vaguely effeminate Brit or John Hodgman as the Resident Expert, who both seem more often at home in the studio. These caricatured man's-man roles are rough, tough, gritty, profane but otherwise blunt and plainspoken. They mock any measures short of force and fraud as sissified in their civilization – and insufficient in the severity of their effects.

38 The masculine Prince should beware the ineliminable, disordering dynamics of fortuna, Lady Luck. She foils the best-laid plans; and though she ensues from unpredictable interactions of ambitious males, she stays a female principle that can unman even the best of realists. Hence she should be wooed and subdued as an audacious man might court but take a woman who is far from entirely willing.[38] In the dramatis personae for political realism, the other females are mostly idealists or deceivers. The idealists might be good, but they usually are weak or undone early in the story, which nearly never turns on them. The deceivers typically are charming

but destructive, at least to the realist and likely to the regime. In the colorful language of noir, they are simply — without any need for translation or qualification — spider women. The audacious realists should drive the action, but spider women — like fortuna — can turn events in directions that nonetheless disadvantage or defeat the men of realist virtues. For the realist actor, a female in either mode is seldom the enemy but often the nemesis.

39 Realists develop their skills as bulldozers and debunkers in the school of hard knocks. Rather than the mentors prized by republicans and martial artists from the Mysterious East, the western realists at most have models that they admire and imitate from afar. Put macho realists and their ambitious models in the same room, and butts get kicked or heads will roll. Realists also learn from tellers of hard truths. What they learn is to distrust words and manners, which mislead even when they are not meant to. They also learn to tackle troubles early and head on. As a realist character, the debunker is literally of-(a)-bunker mentality, under siege by enemies seen and unseen as well as fortunes unforeseeable. The realist does not want to get his hopes up: any realistic assessment of almost any situation sees hopes as recipes for disappointment.[39] The realist works in the world as it is, not as he might want it to be. To practice this maxim, the realist armors himself against feeling too much in one way or another, because sentiment just interferes with calm, cool, accurate calculations of his interests and the means to realize them. The realist injunction, as Matthews says, is "Don't Get Mad; Don't Get Even; Get Ahead."[40]

40 Princes have advisors rather than mentors. Machiavelli detailed how realists must take advantage of skilled advisors but keep them at arm's length or more. Never trust them much, he instructed, and always assess their advice in terms of their own interests — which are bound to dominate their recommendations. Never ever let an advisor come to the fore, save to take a fall for the realist who needs to punish a failure or a perpetrator, even when the person fingered is transparently a scapegoat. With the idealist, the scapegoat brings to a revealing total of two the count of characters shared by realism and Christianity; and these might only be two faces of the same figure for the realists, who seem relentless in scapegoating idealists above all.

41 There is a fourth female character for realism, at least of late. This is the professionalized or otherwise masculinized woman. She strives and even succeeds as a realist by cultivating in herself the

masculine virtues of the realist prince. Unlike the prince, the realist female often has a mentor, who often is a male rather than a female. The mythos of realism implies that female and male realists could share a room without butting heads, but the further implication is that the female is apt to remain deferential and inferior — as a realist — to the male. Possible cases in point are the title character (Keira Knightley) in *Domino* (2005), Madeline White (Jodie Foster) in *Inside Man* (2006), and Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton) in *Michael Clayton* (2007). By contrast, a bold and tough Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is undoubtedly an idealist; yet that film reinforces most points here about realism as a political style by showing it as mostly evil, especially in its sexism. Audacity and toughness alone doth not a realist make.

42 We do well to notice that, mythically, the machiavellian or realist prince is not the only kind by political style. The dark prince is the perfectionist nightmare, exemplified by Dracula as a vampire in the Byron mode.[41] William Shakespeare's Hamlet is "the sweet prince," please remember; and this makes him a republican by political style, even though he is a prince and even though Friedrich Nietzsche analyzed him as a Dionysian man more akin to Dracula.[42] *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is conservative in political style, more or less in the mode of Edmund Burke.[43] The game of comparison could even continue through Will Smith's television character of *The Fresh Prince*, Francis Hodgson Burnett's *Little Princess*, *The Princess and the Pea* by Hans Christian Andersen, (the Artist Formerly Known as) Prince, and so on.

43 Another important character for political realism is the people, the public, the crowd, the mass, the nation: in short, the tertiary targets for realist manipulations and audiences for realist performances. The realist's primary target and observer is himself, whom he manipulates and monitors incessantly. The realist's secondary targets and witnesses are the other competitors in the arena, players on the stage, or the like. Some are realists, some are idealists, and some are otherwise by style. The same goes for the background people who line the arena or turn toward the stage, and they are significant if individually intermittent and weak actors in realist dramas. (Republicans differ from realists in part by insisting that all other participants, no matter how momentarily distant or inattentive, can and should enter at times into public action.) It is as the people, the nation, or the like that these third-level participants in realist politics gain power as a

kind of collective character. This sideline character is crucial as the diffuse arbiter of realist reputation. As Thomas Hobbes joined Machiavelli in reminding us, reputation is reality and power in realist politics. 'Tis a maxim fundamental for the hardball celebrated by Christopher Matthews too.[44] Paradoxically realism emphasizes that what the people "know" about politics, whether materially true or not, matters immensely in making realities for realist politicians.

44 Yet what the people don't know can have decisive effects as well. This leaves backroom operators – such as advisors, pleaders, specialists, and sometimes even their bosses – second in realist importance only to the politicians more or less "in public." Realist stories take us behind the scenes to view more of what is really happening than can be seen by usual audiences. There we see that backroom operators often work as conspirators whose roles and contributions never (should) come onto the stage and into the light. Denied satisfactions of associating themselves with public successes, these operators must be moved and supported in other ways to serve the people and especially their favorite politicians. Often the operators glory quietly in pulling the strings of publics and politicians, making them all the more dangerous as cynics. To me, police elders in *Training Day* (2001) epitomize not only backroom bosses and counselors but the nearly cynical operatives off-stage in other capacities too. They delight in their own tiny "publics" of the few other realists "in the know" who appreciate their genius while taking their counsel and fronting for them in the larger arenas of police and political endeavor.

45 We find these characters of realism in settings where the times are troubled, the stakes are high, and the tactics are hardball. The realist stress on strategy and tactics turns into a craft of political moves, gambits, tricks of the trade. Advisors to realist politicians, like the politicians themselves, see themselves as continually recalling apt devices from earlier situations in order to invent variations of these tried-and-true moves that might fit the specifics of new challenges.

46 Outlooks are cloudy for realists, who face fortuna as well as knowable troubles. Hence realist settings look worn and gritty, dark and grainy. Once recognized, troubles can come into strong and disturbing focus, as objects with obdurate solidity but sometimes unnaturally sharp edges. Often the scenes are shadowy, with realist landscapes bleak and cityscapes occasionally in grayscale. Colors typically come bleached, washed out, or

otherwise distorted.

47 The sounds of realism arrive in layers. Ambient noises initially establish attunement to the real situation. This sometimes happens with one distinctive tone, voice, or effect added at a time until the individual sounds merge into a mood — more or less as a melody, a harmony, and an overarching arrangement. This holds especially for realism's third-level participants, largely spectators, since what they sound or hear establishes a sense of expectation for events to come.

48 Then whispers or their functional equivalents might come into notice, as though drifting from backstage or slipping under closed doors. These might say quietly what the über-realists who operate behind-the-scenes are advising and why, or trying to arrange and how, even doing and hearing as they go. Eventually we hear a focal actor or two emerge on-stage. They might narrate the backstory in hardbitten voices, they might announce the times in portentous tones reminiscent of a news reel, or their deliveries might sound more matter-of-fact or ingratiating.

49 Generally their words or other sounds guide participants on levels three and four, with the fourth and outermost "ring" for us as analysts who begin by observing some third-level audiences seemingly more within the realist dramas. What we hear steers us and others into the ongoing action, directing observations and structuring experiences. And at last, the realist contests among several deeds or voices commence, often with thriller music that is pot-boiling: troubled but energizing, at once agitated and a little forlorn, yet steeled to action and evoking changes to come. At any rate, this is how I have been experiencing realist dramas and movies — as well as realist episodes of "real-world" politics in person or on television — in recent decades.

50 As a mythos, political realism amounts to inventions informed by stock stories that meld the genre's conventional doers, deeds, situations, sights, and sounds. As a philosophy, realism typically resists the idea of a mythic inventory of standard tales. It holds, in effect, that there are more than eight million stories in the naked city. It takes these to be susceptible to anticipation or summary only at the level of realist method, whether scientific or philosophical, where doers calculate arrays of interests for each incipiently unique situation. Yet if this echoes the stance of act utilitarians who doubt the existence or the efficacy of any rules beyond the one injunction to account for particular pains and

pleasures, it also admits of comparison to the approach of rule utilitarians who rely in practice on rules and institutions rationalized by in-general, in-principle accounts.[45] In other words, realists work from a repertoire of stylized, schematized narratives that trace specific plots, each evoked by a rule for action that maximizes prospects for success.

51 Would-be counselors from Machiavelli to Matthews popularize realism in guidebooks, accordingly, and these articulate realist rules through anecdotes that make the rules into punch lines for their respective stories. These resemble republican-rhetorical handbooks in the service of prudence; and the two distinguishable kinds can overlap, as they do in works by Machiavelli and Matthews.[46] As Hariman observes, however, the realist turn from republican prudence to interest calculation makes for distinct sets of tales and rules (technically, myths and epimyths).[47] From Hobbes to Kissinger and Morgenthau, moreover, realists as often produce more scientistic texts that downplay intermediate maxims and stories of action, meant for individual realists in particular settings, in favor of demonstrating chronic truths about human nature and national interest in world-historical conditions.[48] Still the Machiavelli-Matthews form evokes many of the specific plots that comprise a repertoire for political realism. The present project is not to rehearse a large number but merely to remind us of a few familiar from recent political news.

52 In domestic settings, Pluralism as a drama of cross-cutting interests is a realist myth – evoked among many others by Arthur Bentley, David Truman, Robert Dahl, and (noted here at the start) Nicholas Lemann.[49] Hardball is a second standard plot for national politics, telling the needs for it and the disasters in departing from it.[50] Realpolitik as a stock realist story of grand strategy conducted on- and off-stage is a familiar form for international politics.[51] Working the intersections of national and international affairs are realist accounts of State Origins, complete with states of nature and sovereign enforcers from Hobbes and Locke to *Hero* (2002).[52] Also at the intersections of national and international politics are realist dramas of Dirty Hands, such as *24* on television, with their recent (but unrealistic?) bent for torturing terrorists to save cities.[53]

53 If there is an Ur myth for realism, it might be the Realist Awakening. And if the label reminds us of America's "awakenings" that were periods of mass religious conversions, the resonance can be defended, because both brands of awakenings share a sense of

eyes opening or scales falling away — so that people can see clearly for the first time the basic realities of their human conditions. By contrast with Paul on the Road to Damascus, though, a realist awakens not all-at-once and beatifically but in painful steps of compromising his former ideals in order to confront urgent challenges and act effectively enough to survive. Yet as with Paul, almost paradoxically, the awakening might simultaneously blind the realist step-by-step to previous complexities and compunctions that he prized as an idealist but learns as a realist to disregard as distractions and distortions which have hidden the real troubles and opportunities at hand.

54 Some awakening realists don blinders that keep them focused on what really matters; others just remove their eyeglasses. *L.A. Confidential* (1997) taps genres of hardboiled detection and film noir for a tale of Realist Awakening. This is one of three storylines interwoven well by a nicely complicated novel then superbly dramatized by the ensuing movie.[54] Each skein turns on problematics of realism and idealism faced by a leading character. Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) is the one who undergoes a Realist Awakening; and he might be the movie's single most central figure, even though he is not the most sympathetic of the three leads — who must overcome big antagonisms and sinister obstacles to ally into a team. Only two survive, realistically enough. The sympathetic lead, Bud White (Russell Crowe), ends exiled and grievously injured but with the girl; while Exley as the new realist ends momentarily wounded but with another promotion — and well on his way to running the police department.

55 Exley's version of the Realist Awakening involves resisting but eventually meeting three tests for hardball policing. These come at Exley from his police superior, Captain Dudley Smith (James Cromwell), in the film's first scene at the Hollywood Station. It introduces both figures:

Smith: I saw the test results on the lieutenant's exam: first out of twenty-three. What'll it be then? Patrol Division? Internal Affairs? What?

Exley: I was thinking Detective Bureau.

Smith: Edmund, you're a political animal: you have the eye for human weakness but not the stomach.

Exley: You're wrong, sir.

Smith: Would you be willing to plant corroborative evidence on a suspect you knew to be guilty in order to insure an indictment?

Exley: Dudley, we've been over this.

Smith: Yes or no, Edmund.

Exley: No.

Smith: Would be willing to beat a confession out of a suspect you knew to be guilty?

Exley: No.

Smith: Would you be willing to shoot a hardened criminal in the back in order to offset the chance that some lawyer . . . ?

Exley: No.

Smith: Then for the love of God, don't be a Detective. Stick to assignments where you don't have to make those kind of choices.

Exley: Dudley, I know you mean well; but I don't need to do it the way you did or my father.

Smith: At least get rid of the glasses. I can't think of a single man in the Bureau who wears them.

In ensuing events, Exley repeatedly and specifically turns away from each of Smith's acts of hardball realism. In the short term, each moral, idealistic counter-course seems to impose heavy costs on Exley and others. (But in the middle and longer terms surveyed by the drama, Exley actually turns out to be prospering and his realist capacity to protect citizens from crime seems to be increasing.) Yet the corruptions coming to his attention swell rapidly; and as Exley flails to keep his head above them, he manages moments of cool reflection for changing course, step by step. First he plants evidence to clinch the indictment of a man he knows to be guilty. Next he browbeats then he literally beats confessions from suspects he takes to be guilty. Finally he shoots a hardened criminal in the back to keep that man from lax justice. Thus Exley awakens to realism, with each of Smith's three tests posed as cases where good ends justify bad means.

56 The eyeglasses that the Police Chief (John Mahon) joins Captain

Smith in telling Exley to lose evoke four aspects of political realism. They suggest the masculinism of hardball realism: look macho, not like a sissy. They symbolize the acute sensitivity of hardball realism to public relations and appearances: look heroic, strong, and self-sufficient, like a clear-eyed visionary who sees far without aid. They mark the moral myopia of realism: only when Exley does not even try to see distant details in the lives of others and he handles the big things close at hand does he advance. And the pocketed eyeglasses suggest that realism blurs vision at a distance, into the future, thus diffusing and softening a realist's detailed sense of the bad consequences to come from bad deeds done with only crude objects in the foreground vaguely into focus. With glasses gone, Exley can only see well what is close at hand, and precision shots are impossible; to shoot effectively at a distance, he must use a shotgun, blasting big holes in or only near his targets. The eyeglass motif implies that the advertised acuity in realist style is largely a lie, with the main gains in effectiveness coming from magnified firepower rather than precise targetting.

57 On the whole, therefore, the novel and film ironize realism. (Few Hollywood products directly endorse it.) The third lead, who dies mid-movie, is Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey). He is the only lead who begins the film as a full-fledged realist: always calculating the angles. The irony is that he is the one who fails to survive, implying that realism is not adequate to its own bottom-line tests of survival and success. White begins as a moralist avenger who punishes bad men, especially for abusing women; so he breaks plenty of eggs but makes no omelettes. That's why he needs to learn the rational and relational aspects of realism; and they help him survive, but barely and far from L.A. policing. The rest of the police mistake Exley for an exclusively self-interested realist, with little sense of police solidarity or personal honor; they miss that his honor and solidarity reach beyond policemen to the larger community that they are to serve. A step-by-step descent from his moral high-horse, down to a realist republicanism, lets him retain his personal honor and enhance his community service. Another irony is that learning realism lets Exley be the one lead who succeeds, not just survives, yet he does it by limiting his realism.

The Prestige: We Return Neo Noir as Realism

Losing still tears him up. This is his greatest asset and his greatest albatross all at once. Bob [Knight] thinks he can

> beat the game. Nobody can beat the game. If you could, there would be no game. But Bob keeps trying to beat it anyway and when he doesn't he thinks of it as failure, *his* failure, and it tears him apart.[55]
>
> — Al McGuire

58 One way to analyze political realism in everyday life is to articulate its mythos; and as we have just seen, this can amount to specifying realism as a popular genre of politics. When we do this, we see realism operating more emphatically as myth than style, more insistently as style than strategy, and more effectively as strategy than philosophy. As the limited use of *L.A. Confidential* might suggest, a complementary way to analyze the popular politics of realism is to find them in performances of the (somewhat) realist genre of neo noir. A bonus for us is that this can help spotlight the stylistic aspects of political realism, especially because neo noir is so highly and self-consciously stylized.

59 A focus on style lets us appreciate political realism in (and as) the everyday aesthetics of looks and sounds. These "looks" and "sounds" are not merely instants or accidents of visibility and audibility, whatever their sources or significance. Instead they are carefully composed and persistent complexes of visual and aural meaning: the gothic look of a cathedral by comparison with the streamlined look of a bullet train; the lush sound of a symphony orchestra by contrast with the grunge sound of a garage band. In political terms, this approach to style is principally republican-rhetorical. Then the stylistic components of deeds are *gestures* (of performance) by contrast with the strategic components of deeds as *moves* (in competitions).[56] Since realism as a political style makes strategy one of its most prominent tropes, or gestures, there is no need to fear that the resulting takes on realism will lack prominent attention to strategy. But there is a need to keep in mind that strategy is even more a gesture than a move for political realism as a style of conduct in everyday life. (Yes, politics can be complicated; and realist politics are never exceptions, even when they claim a simple adherence to reality or necessity, as they sometimes do. But none of this is news, let alone a distinctive fault — or insight — of rhetorics, aesthetics, or any other aspects of the present analysis.)

60 Commentators continue to debate whether the classics of noir, during the two decades that bracket 1950, comprise a "series," a "cycle," or a "genre" in the special senses most useful for theorizing cinema. But there is no doubt that the neo noir of the last two or

three decades constitutes a popular and considerably self-conscious genre.[57] Although the smallest of starts, the independent account just ventured of realism as a political mythos can let us learn further about realist style in popular politics by analyzing the political aesthetics of neo noir as a popular genre of cinema. For the trick is to coax each into teaching us about the other without slipping into a virtual identification of the two. An additional assist comes from tapping prior accounts of neo-noir politics that begin as existentialist. This enables us to side-step any vicious circularity that could come from relying on an initially realist take on neo noir.

61 In a sentence, the existentialist politics of neo noir involve awakening to resistance of a corrupt system. This is consistent with existentialism in philosophical terms, but it relates more specifically to the conduct of our everyday lives. In addition, it recognizes and explains more of the conventions that characterize neo noir through family resemblance and generic recurrence. At most, even recent books on neo noir acknowledge twenty or thirty major conventions, and that is probably because they work with abstrusely philosophical takes on existentialism. Again let a single sentence suffice: "This philosophy [of existentialism] emphasizes contingency and chance, a world where there are no values or moral absolutes, and which is devoid of meaning excepts those that are self-created by the alienated and confused 'non-heroic hero'."[58] The more philosophical the sense of existentialism, the less concrete and practical the implications. When we articulate the politics of awakening to resistance of a corrupt system, we get twice as many prominent complexes of conventions: forty going on sixty. Explaining them all can wait for a different occasion, but we can get acquainted with enough to follow their political logic — and learn more about realism — by considering such neo-noir topes in *The Prestige*.[59]

Neo Noir as Realism: *The Prestige*

62 Christopher Nolan's film between *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008) is neo noir, like the two blockbusters. These Batman movies are super noir, of course, and *The Prestige* intersects that subgenre somewhat as well. Distinguished by archetypal plots, neo noir as a set of political exercises in existentialism has seven of these subgenres. If the Ur Myth for political realism is the Realist Awakening, the originary mythos for neo noir is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

A. The Hamlet Drama displays how the noir protagonist awakens to a system so rotten that the protagonist cannot figure out what to do. Neo noirs often make a change in Shakespeare's model for the protagonist, then they let the difference produce happier turns than Shakespeare's premise can promise.

B. The Faust Myth traces how a human overreaches in seeking fame, fortune, charisma, or other power that the protagonist cannot gain without doing evil and cannot handle without messing up. Even Goethe finds salvation for Faust in the end, so it is not surprising when neo noir eventually lets a Faust figure off the hook that classic noir usually twists home in the end.[60]

C. The Quixote Quest examines how a solitary champion of justice comes to tilt nobly but foolishly at windmills. Classic noir finds catastrophe in the folly, but neo noir sometimes plays the foolishness for fun.

D. The Chinatown Tale considers how a pervasive yet inscrutable system of corruption can overwhelm a more or less well-meaning protagonist long before this lead character even figures out what is happening. Again neo noir is more likely than classic noir to find the humor in such a situation: *The Big Lebowski* (1998) is a case in point.

E. The No-Exit Narrative shows how the protagonist learns the hard way that there is no way out of a system seen almost from the start to be corrupt. In neo noir, this plot sometimes turns sunny at the last moment, but a sudden escape at the end still mires the film's overall ethos in gloom and doom.

F. The Payback Plot explores how the protagonist is undone by a campaign of cold-blooded vengeance. Neo noir occasionally lets the lead triumph instead, as the audience revels in pleasures of vicarious revenge. *Payback* (1999) with Mel Gibson exaggerates the pains and pleasures into parody.

G. The Superhero Saga invents superhuman powers to symbolize how the surprising resources of emerging movements can help a protagonist resist, escape, or even overthrow a totalitarian system of social control. This kind of tale appears with the Batman in American comics at the same time that noir films are taking shape, but it does not truly claim the big screen until Tim Burton brings the *Batman* (1989) onto the silver screen as neo noir.

The Prestige is a chaotic, fractal film of enormous complexity in plot.[61] This fits the often endless machinations of political realism. Depending on how we count, the film provides between two and four focal characters, and they produce several interacting dramas. Their overall mythos is arguably Faustian, and that might be a surprise. For the Faust Myth is an idealist (not a realist) drama that demonstrates why we should not make the realist mistake of embracing evil means to allegedly good ends: because the devil is in the details of any such contract or strategy, and we humans never manage to see or think through all the crucial details, even when they stay in plain view. Yet this mythic matrix makes the film's stylistic attention to political realism all the more engaging, and its critical attention to awful consequences of realism as a political style all the more telling.

63 If you have not already seen *The Prestige*, I hope you soon will, and I do not want to spoil it for you. There is no way to analyze its complexities without providing information that the film long conceals from first-time viewers. To be sure, these details typically lurk in plain sight; but the filmmaker distracts us from them, exercising the illusionist's craft throughout the movie. *The Prestige* is an excellent film, and it might engage you even more in further viewings, as you understand it better and can look for how its tricks of attention and perspective operate. But do not miss the chance to experience its manipulations in the absence of backstage knowledge. So please consider your reading done for now unless you have viewed *The Prestige* before. And in any event, you need to have seen *The Prestige* in order to assess the plausibility of the following approach, let alone any insights that this essay might offer into the film. Similar considerations hold for *The Illusionist*, to be discussed in a comparison that concludes the essay. If you have yet to watch either movie but might in the future, therefore, this is the place for you to call a halt.

64 *The Prestige* pits two illusionists, two stage magicians, against each other in what turns tragically into a competition to the death. Almost magically, both these figures are doubled in the movie. Rupert Angier (Hugh Jackman) has not wanted to be recognized as Lord Caldlow, at least initially to spare his family an unwanted association with the unsavory world of theater. Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) has a deep secret that he will do whatever it takes to keep: he is sharing life interchangeably and in every respect with his identical twin Bernard Borden. They trade everyday performances between Borden as magician and Fallon as

ingenieur. This is the basis of their greatest feat of stage magic. In "The Transported Man," Borden disappears into a doorway that can be seen to lead nowhere, whereupon he instantly exits a distant door visibly unconnected to the first. It is Alfred entering door one, and Bernard exiting door two, or vice versa. In a rivalry that springs from Borden's early role in the death of Angier's beloved wife, Julia, Angier becomes determined to outdo Borden by improving on this trick. But how does Borden do it? Angier does not know. So he steals Borden's diary of magic, commissions better equipment that does the trick differently, outshines Borden on the stage; and further tragedies ensue.

65 Borden is the better magician by far, but Angier is the better stage performer. Besides that, Angier is rich (as Caldlow). And the vengeful desire to outdo Borden eventually makes Angier as fanatically dedicated to magical success as Borden has always been — or more. But even though the doubling of Borden is an inference plain to the least reflection, said by several characters to be the only way that the Transported Man could be done, Angier does not learn until the end, when it is too late, that Borden has been twin brothers. And even though the film shows us early the hard realism of stage magic by killing birds to make them vanish then using their brothers to bring them back for the prestige, few first-time viewers figure out the Borden trick much — if any — earlier than the desperately corrupted Angier.

66 Many tropes of neo noir surface insistently in *The Prestige*. It includes even the classic-noir loop by starting the film with the trial and incarceration of a noir protagonist, leaping back through the developing relationships among the focal men and women, and then rejoining the bracketing tale with the protagonist in prison where he is condemned to die and coerced to do a desperate deal for his daughter's future. Yet the movie also jumps back-and-forth among many other moments, producing an especially striking example of the more complicated timelines in many neo-noir films. To stay decently concise, the present treatment skips many tropes of neo noir in order to focus on several crucial to the film's fusion of existentialist and realist politics.

67 If there is a single required character for neo noir, it is the noir protagonist. This is the lone champion of justice. Typically he is a little tough guy with a residual code of honor that he is too honorable to admit. Often he carries another's cause into troubles that this hardened but caring character barely senses in advance, unfortunately compounds along the way, and seldom subdues in

the end. Yet every once in a while, a noir protagonist attains some telling triumph. In classic noir, this is partial and momentary; in neo noir, it might be complete and lasting (but still less often than not).

68 The indisputable candidate for noir protagonist of *The Prestige* is Borden. Immersed in the craft and ambition of stage magic, which entails relentless competition, he awakens late to its systematic corruption. Too late? Well, that depends on whether we are talking about Alfred or Bernard. Framing is a major figure in noir, both in pictures and plots; and at the level of plot, Angier frames Alfred for murder. (The film parades visual frames one after another to suggest how stage magic relies on frames to construct — and manipulate — viewer perspectives.) Alfred goes to the gallows, leaving his story a Faust Myth of selling his soul to the devil without fully comprehending the price that he must — and does — eventually pay. Unknown at this time by Angier, Bernard escapes the frame. This leaves him free to avenge his brother by killing Angier, and this also lets him get back Jess, the Borden child, who had been (legally) taken by Angier. Bernard's story is the one reminiscent of a Superhero Saga: as though he has the superpower to survive the execution of Borden arranged by Angier, Bernard emerges to live a full and avenged life of his own. He is reunited with Jess, no longer twinned to Alfred, and able to collaborate at last with Angier's ingenieur — John Cutter (Michael Caine) — in making further magic off and on the stage. In the end, Bernard is Borden free and whole.

69 Yet Bernard has suffered grievously for the realist project shared with his brother. He has lost half his own life in sacrifice to his career. He has lost his beloved wife, Sarah, to suicide induced by her derangement from dealing in ignorance and confusion with one husband who loved her but, on alternate days, a different incarnation of the same husband who did not. He has lost two fingers from the realist duplication of painful consequences of a trick sabotaged in public by a vengeful Angier. As part of the Borden rivalry with Angier, Bernard has dirtied his hands by returning the trick, laming Angier permanently in gait and morality. The humiliation goads Angier toward exceeding the great Borden trick and framing Borden unto death. And so Bernard has lost his brother, too, with whom he shared more life and love than even twins can readily imagine. Bernard's hands are filthy, his realism detailed and discredited. Yet a virtual superpower, a virtual feat of magic, lets him off the immediate

hook: not a surprise in neo noir.

70 Angier even more than Borden functions as a hardboiled detective, another character recurrent in neo noir. Like classic noirs, the newer versions usually include a private eye, a policeman, a journalist, or another kind of investigator who intervenes in some corrupt system while its crimes are ongoing. Typically the detective and the noir protagonist are one, but far from always. In *The Prestige*, both magicians repeatedly investigate the competition to see how their tricks work. But brief observation is usually enough for Borden to figure out the tricks of others. It is Angier whose investigations extend into hardball and the depravity beyond.

71 But Angier as well as Borden do voiceover narration of events in the film, and this often is a device associated with noir protagonists. The film's complications and reversals arise even here, with Angier's voiceover including words from the Borden diary as well as Angier's own responses to what he is reading. Is Angier/Caldlow another set of noir protagonists? The case could be made, with only a slight shift in sympathy and thus perspective. Then this pair would change places, pretty much, with Borden-Fallon. Were this the movie's emphasis, then its noir protagonist would come to an unqualifiedly bad end, because Angier dies for his many mortal sins – not only against Borden-Fallon but also against himself, time and time and time again, as we see unmistakably toward the film's conclusion.

72 With bad ends to this point outnumbering good ends three-to-one, it is no surprise that the overall tone of the film is grim. In a mode conventional for neo noir, as well as classic noir, the pervasive ethos of the movie is the bleak, dark outlook of fate and doom that gives the genre its name: in French, *noir* means *black* or *bleak*. What system dooms most of its protagonists? In *The Prestige*, there are at least two good answers to this question. One is (stage) magic or, more generally, triumph in public performance. Just as good an answer is political realism. Even in their everyday-life rivalry, doing whatever it takes to prevail takes the protagonists into vicious cycles of invention and revenge. Realist styles in competition run away with three or four of the film's candidates for noir protagonists. Yet a further inference available from the film is that the two ways to identify the system themselves turn out to be one and the same. Just as Angier and Caldlow are one, or Borden and Fallon are identical twins, triumphal performance in public competitions is exactly what political realism pursues, and

they share the pervasive corruption of systematically irresistible lures to do whatever it takes to succeed.

73 Yet there are two more characters with voiceovers. The one whose voiceovers begin and end the film – in the fashion standard for noir – is Cutter, the ingenieur. Cutter is important but not central to film, Still this does not disqualify him for consideration as a neo-noir protagonist. Classic noir almost always centers on the protagonist; neo noir usually does, but some instances move the protagonist somewhat to the side. Likewise the philosophies of existentialism focus intensely on the humans adrift in a world where they must make their own meanings, whereas the politics of existentialism focus as much or more on the systems that encompass and corrupt the protagonists. Thus some neo-noir films give more attention to the system bosses, minions, and fixers than to the system sleepers who awaken to resist their systems. Cutter has thought he understood the full commitment required to excel at stage magic, to which he has devoted his whole career and possibly his life. But he only learns through entanglement in the tragedies of the younger magicians how ruthless and disastrous the realist pursuit of success in a strongly competitive enterprise of public performance becomes – and all too readily, almost inevitably. Has Cutter, as a system sleeper and minion who serves the system's corruptions without quite knowing it, awakened to resistance before the film's conclusion?

74 Cutter makes common cause with Bernard to kill Angier, avenge Alfred, get Jess back, and make a better magic with the other two survivors. Cutter is unmistakably a mentor and a wise old man, but neither of those archetypes is a noir identity. As ingenieur, he is too routine a supporting figure for him to act as a system fixer, summoned from afar to save the system in its times of greatest peril. Cutter does not lurk so far on the margins of the system as to be a virtual outsider. The fixer has great powers, or he would not succeed repeatedly as an emergency man, cleaner, or last resort. Distance from the system boss as the symbolic center of power is a source of autonomy for the fixer. Yet this is a further source of the fixer's power within the system, but also of his power over it, and potentially over the system boss as well. In neo noir, the fixer can exceed even a resistant protagonist as a danger to the system boss or even to the system itself. If turned against the boss or the system, a fixer can harm or undo either. In the end, Cutter works with Bernard to undo Angier/Caldlow; but Bernard's astonishing survival – or emergence – is the decisive contribution, and Cutter's role in Angier's demise is more

consistent with Cutter as an awakening sleeper. We do well to respect his credentials as a noir protagonist — and actually the one who might be offered to us viewers for identification. Is Cutter our double in the film?

75 However we answer that question, let us notice that Cutter's is the existentialist myth of neo noir: awakening to resistance of a corrupt system. Does this mean that *The Prestige* is not, as promised, highly realist? No, for Cutter is close to a side show in comparison to Angier and Borden. Especially for Angier but also for the two Bordens, *The Prestige* is exactly a realist myth of awakening to hard realities and harder responses. These realists are the men at the center of the movie. The genius of the film is to interact their mostly Faustian stories with the largely idealist tale of liberation eventually shared by Bernard and Cutter. But when all this is said, it makes decent sense only if we resist the idea that Cutter might be a fixer.

76 As it happens, another figure is a much clearer candidate for system fixer. Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) stays on the geographical margins of the story. He works on a mountain outside Colorado Springs, while the rest of the film occurs in London, then he leaves in haste for places unknown. (At this point, we hear Tesla relate in voiceover his departing letter to Angier. But we have learned that voiceovers are like genre conventions in general: none is a sufficient or necessary condition — in this case, for being a noir progatonist — for they work instead in looser modes of family resemblance, mythic recurrence, and particular importance.) Misdirected by the supposedly stolen diary, Angier has asked Tesla to repeat what he has (not really) done for Borden: build a machine that can teleport people. With the letter, Tesla leaves the result for Angier: a machine that can reproduce people — in their adult and clothed entirety — but only at some distance from the original. Angier learns how to work it, and soon uses this contraption to fool audiences into seeing his teleportation from stage to balcony in the barest of instants. So Tesla is the powerful fixer, called into the picture to save the system — or at least its boss — from the peril of losing to Borden in their realist contest to be acclaimed as the world master of magic.

77 This means, of course, that Angier/Caldlow is better appreciated as a system boss than as a noir protagonist. He is the symbolic embodiment of political realism in style in action. He is the symbolic center of the magical thinking — covertly cultivated by realist expectations — that "doing whatever it takes" will yield

whatever the practitioner wants, and that desired victories will justify conclusively the evil machinations intended to achieve them. In neo noir, the system boss is seldom a dictator or puppeteer whose minions are the means of controlling everybody in the system. In existentialist systems, the ordinary people and other functions work effectively to maintain the system without much recognizing that this is what they are doing. (Thus they do not always recognize that their system is corrupt, that they are perpetuating its corruption, or even that there is a system and that they are part of it in the first place.) Instead the system boss is a striking figure that recurs in smaller or weaker ways throughout the system to model the styles that secure its persistence. These also show its coherence in the absence of any direct puppeteering. Angier has minions, from his magician's assistants to his man servant; and they sometimes include an unwitting Cutter as the magician's ingenieur. As minions, they do help make his acts effective; but these do not control every part of the system in some linear sense. Most others in the corrupt system of stage magic as (paradoxically) political realism coordinate their acts with his out of their immersion in the same, mutually reinforcing, projects rather than any specific responses to his directives. They mostly live in the same style, and that is how their acts coordinate – and not because they share a common dictator at a literal center of the system.

78 In neo noir, the system boss often turns women into system bait that lures an awakening resister to his doom. Most of the deadly females in classic noir are spider women who act more or less on their own to weave webs of deceit, entrapment, and doom for noir protagonists. Yet many of the femmes fatales in neo noir are less personally culpable: a little like the loved ones taken hostage by super villains to manipulate super heroes, these neo-noir women are used by the system boss to manipulate resisting protagonists. Sometimes the women do not even know that they are serving as bait; and sometimes it is their simple, "sleeping" participation in the system rather than any specific manipulation by a boss, a(nother) minion, or a fixer that makes these women deadly to awakening protagonists.

79 *The Prestige* gives us several variants. Angier's love for Julia McCullough (Piper Perabo) positions him for a fall into a realist campaign of competition (to get ahead) as well as a largely republican campaign of revenge (to get even) when he recognizes that negligence by Borden might have contributed to her early death. Without any intention on her part, she becomes a kind of

bait that lures the rich, willful, and talented Angier into a realist-magical system where he quickly becomes the central symbol of its machinations.

80 Bernard's love for Sarah (Rebecca Hall) lures Borden into marriage and a family life largely incompatible with the realist style taking hold of the twin brothers. In response to her entrapment in the crazy coldness of realism as a system, Sarah kills herself. This is a neo-noir wake-up call for Bernard and even Alfred. Every dirty trick before that point could have and should have awakened all the magicians to their corruption by the systematic practice of realism as a political style; but they do not, and it is Sarah's sacrifice that at least starts to awaken the Borden brothers. The ruthlessness of realist competition and the escalation of republican vengeance are not easily recognized or resisted. By the point of Sarah's suicide, both these dynamics had gone so far — even for the Bordens, let alone for Angier/Caldlow — that the noir trope of a fated doom hangs over just about everybody featured by the film. Bernard survives, along with Cutter and Jess, but without Alfred, Sarah, or even Olivia Wenscombe (Scarlett Johansson), whom Alfred has come to love. The residual guilt for Sarah's death, guilt that realism promises to crowd out in favor of interest calculation, seems to push both brothers further into their vicious competition with Angier. So they goad Angier to even more extreme measures, including the tricky fame that proves deadly to Alfred.

81 As system boss, Angier tries to use Olivia Wenscombe as system bait to undo Borden. But the ruse backfires when she comes to love Alfred. For this contributes to Sarah's suicide. Yet it also leads to Alfred's use of Olivia and the Borden diary as bait meant to mislead Angier into seeking Tesla in Colorado. That backfires, too, when the Tesla machine enables Angier to become "The New Teleported Man" and frame Alfred for murder. Even this backfires as well when these measures induce each desperately realist copy of Angier to murder his prior self repeatedly — before Bernard finally murders the last version of Angier. We might say that all these murders are justified, at least by Mosaic standards, because every one of Angier's earlier incarnations has murdered its predecessor too. Just before the film's coda, we see most of these Angier bodies. Before Bernard burns down the building, each floats still in the locked tank into which that realist has plunged, beneath the stage, even as its copy materialized at the back of the far balcony.

82 And there, argues *The Prestige*, is the awful truth about political realism as a style that practices its figures systematically, relentlessly, ruthlessly. The truth is that the political realist must murder himself almost with every passing moment. It is the realist's style to put aside all attachments to previous people and times in order to calculate advantages for the moment and interests for the future. This is to deny completely any hold on continuation of who the realist has been or what he has done. Neither move is easily accomplished in full, but the realist style insists at least on emphatic gestures in both directions. *The Prestige* literalizes this figural truth about extremities of realist style in the politics of everyday life. Shakespeare observed that the coward dies a thousand deaths, yet *The Prestige* shows that the realist outdoes even this by inflicting the deaths on himself. Teeming with realist tropes, *The Prestige* turns out in the end to provide an idealist lesson.

Neo Noir as Idealism: *The Illusionist*

83 The idealism of *The Illusionist* is, by contrast, evident from the start. The music is a bit of classically inflected pot-boiling by Philip Glass, so the opening credit sequence relies instead on sepia images of Victorian scenes in soft focus to suggest that something of a romance is on the way. And a romance, genred also as neo noir, is exactly what we get. In the manner of popular conventions, everybody knows that there is an elective affinity of idealist politics for romance. So this is not a film where doom overhangs just about every event. It uses the same long plot loop from classic noir that appears in *The Prestige*, with the focal figure shown from the start to suffer deep trouble much later in the movie. But the romantic look gives viewers confidence that he can prevail. *The Illusionist* also uses a few other temporal tricks, but these do not leap around a lot as in *The Prestige*, and we recognize right off that *The Illusionist* is not a fractal film about times too turbulent for protagonists to survive. Still fate appears in this film as a noir trope – not in the film's atmospherics or plot so much as in its dialogue and narration, where a persistent theme of the talk is the possible tragedy of class destinies inescapable from birth.

84 Again, though, the strongest candidate for noir protagonist is not entirely central to the action. The title character is Eisenheim the Illusionist (Edward Norton). This is his stage name, so that there is some doubling in his development. But as a genuine magician, or at least as his own brilliant ingenieur as well as a dazzling performer, Eisenheim can call upon the functional equivalent of

superpowers. This is seldom promising as an indicator that a character should be taken as a noir protagonist, since superpowers diminish a figure's vulnerability to domination by a corrupt system. In the end, Eisenheim acts to liberate not only the love of his life but the entire political system of Prussia from corruption by its Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), an incipient totalitarian. Eisenheim uses stage magic to disgrace and delegitimate Leopold, who kills himself rather than submit to public humiliation or worse discipline by his father's agents. As in *The Prestige*, there is a noir frame for murder. This time, however, the murder is not real. It is instead a real-world illusion staged by Eisenheim and his confederates to free his love and discredit Leopold. Thus Eisenheim is a Liberator, and the neo-noir plot is a Superhero Saga.

85 The charismatic Eisenheim is intriguing, but the noir protagonist holds his own in this film. It is Chief Inspector Walter Uhl (Paul Giamatti). He is a minion of Leopold, who bosses the corrupt system. Uhl has been corrupted in his service to Leopold without quite seeing how much a monarchy is slipping not merely into tyranny but even toward totalitarianism. Yet Uhl is being asked to function more and more as the head of a proto-Gestapo. Eisenheim suspects nonetheless that Uhl is not completely corrupt, and he uses magical craft to manipulate Uhl into parting company with Leopold in a series of crucial steps that leave Leopold dead and Uhl out of the minion business. Most of the "tricks" that Eisenheim pulls on Uhl in particular are tricks of right-direction rather than mis-direction: they point Uhl toward evidence (true or fake) of the corruption of Leopold and Viennese politics. Just as Uhl is Leopold's minion, Uhl has police at his call, also functioning as system minions. They include Jurka (Jake Wood) and Willigut (Tom Fisher).

86 Uhl provides the noir narration in voiceover. Each trick pulled on him by Eisenheim, even the stage magics, works as a wake-up call for Uhl. Eisenheim also calls Uhl repeatedly on his statements, which Eisenheim implies Uhl could not actually believe upon the least further reflection; and these exchanges seem comparable to "calling somebody's bluff" at, say, poker. For example, Eisenheim provides an early test of Leopold's worthiness to lead by calling upon him to lift his sword from the floor, where Eisenheim seems to have stood the sword impossibly on its point. Carefully phrased patter compares the scene to King Arthur's call to demonstrate his right to rule by pulling Excalibur from the stone where Merlin had impossibly inserted it. This spurs the courtiers present for an

evening's entertainment to think about Leopold's right to rule when, in coming years, his father has died. Uhl is prominent among the courtiers who hear — and see — Eisenheim's implication. But at this point, Uhl is not yet thinking hard about Leopold, so Uhl spots Eisenheim as political trouble. As Chief Inspector, Uhl is a detective; and his slide at the urging of Leopold into police-state tactics to deal with Eisenheim marks Uhl as a plenty hardboiled detective.

87 Sophie von Täschen (Jessica Biel) is Eisenheim's love from childhood onward. She has become Leopold's fiancée, although more for reasons of state than her own heart. She is the film's femme fatale because Leopold and Uhl try to use her to manipulate and doom Eisenheim. But she also qualifies because she conspires with Eisenheim to fake her murder at the hands of Leopold. This baits Leopold into revealing his stripes further, and it baits Uhl into recognizing Leopold's political derangement. In alliance with Eisenheim, Sophie literally becomes deadly to Leopold; and we might infer that it takes something of a superhero to use the system's gambits in this way against the system's boss.

88 At the film's conclusion, Eisenheim has a boy with whom he has been working deliver to Uhl, presumably no longer the Chief Inspector, the manual for the Orange Tree trick that Uhl first admired. As this happens, Eisenheim in disguise brushes past Uhl on the street in order to pick his pocket, retrieving the "magical" locket that Eisenheim had long ago made for Sophie and that they had used to frame Leopold for her murder. This is the final wake-up call, alerting Uhl to his manipulation by Eisenheim and others, while suggesting that their interventions into Viennese politics — and Uhl's life — had come to an end, and a good one in each case. Uhl, too, has become at Eisenheim's instigation a free (and moral) man.

89 Here is unadulterated idealism for politics. Especially the film's visual style and its tale of liberation for a whole polity from seemingly inescapable corruption are unusual for neo-noir movies. In a way, we might say that the idealist conclusion of *The Prestige* is hard-earned by the movie's pervasive realism, but also that its final lesson comes only at the end, as a possibly transformative gesture. Let us not say in contrast, however, that *The Illusionist* is idealist through and through. For it is not. The realist style of noir is evident throughout the film, even as it keeps getting trumped by an idealist style familiar from elsewhere but nicely suited — detail by detail — to this film. Both movies show

how neo-noir realism is vivid and instructive but often serves the kind of cautious idealism evident as well in the cautionary tales of classic noir.

The Coda

Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary. The second act is called the turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it into something extraordinary. But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough: you have to bring it back. Now you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to work it out. You want to be fooled.

— Ingenieur Cutter as *The Prestige* ends

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The Notes

[1] Nicholas Lemann, "Conflict of Interests," *New Yorker*, 84, 24, August 11 and 19, 2008, pp. 86-92, p. 87

[2] Ryan Lizza, "Making It: How Chicago Shaped Obama," *New Yorker*, 84, 23, July 21, 2008. pp. 48-65, on pp. 58, 62, and 65.

[3] See Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, Robert M. Adams, ed. and tr., New York, Norton, (1975), second edition, 1992. Also see Christopher Matthews: *Hardball: How Politics Is Played — Told by One Who Knows the Game*, New York, HarperCollins, 1988; Christopher Matthews, Life's a Campaign: What Politics Has Taught Me about Friendship, Rivalry, Reputation, and Success, New York, Random House, 2007. And see John S. Nelson, "Prudence as Republican Politics in American Popular Culture," *Prudence*, Robert Hariman, ed., University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp. 229-257.

[4] See John S. Nelson: "The Ideological Connection: Or, Smuggling in the Goods, Parts I-II," *Theory and Society*, 4, 3-4, Fall-Winter, 1977, pp. 421-448 and 573-590; "Ashcraft's Problem of Ideology," *Journal of Politics*, 42, 3, August, 1980, pp. 709-715;

"Stands in Politics," *Journal of Politics*, 46, 1, February, 1984, pp. 106-131.

[5] See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, tr., New York, Hill and Wang, 1972; Henry Tudor, *Political Myth*, New York, Praeger, 1972; H. Mark Roelofs, *Ideology and Myth in American Politics*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1976; James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1980; Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth*, Albany, State University of New York, Press, 1999. Also see John S. Nelson: "Destroying Political Theory in Order to Save It (Or, John Gunnell Turns on the Western Tradition)," *Tradition, Interpretation, and Science*, Nelson, ed., Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986, pp. 281-318; "Orwell's Political Myths and Ours," *The Orwellian Moment*, Robert L. Savage, James E. Combs, and Dan D. Nimmo, eds., Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1989, pp. 11-44; "Political Mythmaking for Postmoderns," *Spheres of Argument*, Bruce E. Gronbeck, ed., Annandale, VA, Speech Communication Association, 1989, pp. 175-183; "Myth Scapes: Essays in Rhetorical Analysis," *Poroi*, August, 2003, http://inpress.lib. uiowa.edu/poroi/ poroi/essaymythscapes.html. And see John S. Nelson and G. R. Boynton, *Video Rhetorics*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1997.

[6] See John S. Nelson, *Tropes of Politics, Action*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

[7] Kenneth Tynan, "The Third Act: Entries from Kenneth Tynan's Journals, 1975-78," *New Yorker*, 76, 23, August 14, 2000, pp. 60-71, entry from October 19, 1975 on pp. 64-65. Also see Bruno Bettelheim, "The Art of Moving Pictures: Man, Superman, and Myth," *Harper's Magazine*, 263, 1577, October, 1981, pp. 80-83; Garry Wills: *Reagan's America: Innocents At Home*, New York, Penguin Books, (1987), second edition, 1988; *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997.

[8] See Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, New York, Limelight Editions, 1999, pp. 67-107; Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir*, London, Pearson Education, 2002, pp. 14-16.

[9] See J. P. Telotte, Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. 22-26 and 134-178.

[10] On expressionism (and expressivism) in noir, see Telotte, Voices in the Dark, pp. 17-22, 32-36, 93-104; Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 20-27 and 46-50; R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*, New York, Twayne, 1994, pp. 32-70; Spicer, *Film Noir*, pp. 11-13. On existentialism in neo noir, see *ibid.*, pp. 22-24; Mark T. Conard, ed., *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2007. And see John S. Nelson: "Noir and Forever: Politics As If Hollywood Were Everywhere," Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, 2001; "Recognizing and Resisting Corrupt Systems: Seven Questions and Seven Plots for Film Noir," Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2004; "What's Noir?" Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, Philadelphia, PA, 2006.

[11] See John S. Nelson, "Perfecting Defenses Against Ultra-Violence: Nietzsche in Noir," Annual Meeting of the Association for Political Theory, Bloomington, IN, 2006. Also see John S. Nelson, "Four Forms for Terrorism: Horror, Dystopia, Thriller, and Noir," *Poroi*, 2, 1, August, 2003, http://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/poroi/papers/nelson030815.html.

[12] See John S. Nelson, "Super Noir: Taming Perfectionist Politics with Two Genres in Tandem," Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, Washington, DC, 2005.

[13] See John S. Nelson, "From Femme Fatale to Femmes Focales? Feminist Protagonists in Film Noir," Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2006.

[14] See John S. Nelson, "Fractal Films: New Rhetorics for Non-Linear Politics," Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, Chicago, IL, 2007.

[15] See Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research*, 38, 3, Autumn, 1971, pp. 417-446.

[16] See Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind -- Volume One: Thinking*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978; *The Life of the Mind -- Volume Two: Willing*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

[17] See John S. Nelson: "Commerce among the Archipelagos: Rhetoric of Inquiry as a Practice of Coherent Education," *The Core and the Canon*, L. Robert Stevens, G. L. Seligmann, and Julian Long, eds., Denton, TX, University of North Texas Press, 1993, pp. 78-100; "A Public Rhetoric for Liberty, with Special Reference to Hannah Arendt," Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 1997; "Reading Films Through Political Classics," *Politiikka*, 4, 1998, pp. 286-296.

[18] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

[19] See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge, 1979; Robert Hariman, *Political Style*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995; Barry Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University, 2008.

[20] Hariman, *Political Style*, p. 4.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[22] Kim Stanley Robinson, A Short, Sharp Shock, New York, Bantam Books, 1990, pp. 15-16.

[23] Make no mistake, though: the realist contrast between merely writing and actually doing should not obscure how thoroughly reporters and pundits play American politics. As New York Governor Mario Cuomo once observed, "The media become more than reporters and recorders; they are players. The reality becomes what they say the reality is."

[24] See Nelson, *Tropes of Politics*, pp. 205-212.

[25] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago, Press, 1958.

[26] See Raymond Seidelman, Disenchanted Realists, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1985. Also see Nelson, *Tropes of Politics*, pp. 99-114.

[27] See Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, London, Da Capo Press, (1981), second edition, 2001; Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*; Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, New York, Henry Holt, 1997; Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*; Alain Silver and James Ursini, *The Noir Style*, Woodstock, NY, Overlook Press,

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[28] See Nelson, *Tropes of Politics*, pp. 108-110.

[29] See John S. Nelson, "Super Noir: Taming Perfectionist Politics with Two Genres in Tandem," Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, Washington, DC, 2005.

[30] See John S. Nelson, "John le Carré and the Postmodern Myth of the State," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 3: Conceptual Change and Contingency, 1999, pp. 100-131; "Four Forms for Terrorism."

[31] Hariman, *Political Style*, p. 13.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-49.

[35] See Sheldon S. Wolin, "Machiavelli: Politics and the Economy of Violence," *Politics and Vision*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, (1960), expanded edition, 2004, pp. 175-213.

[36] Hariman, *Political Style*, p. 73.

[37] See John S. Nelson: "Orwell's Political Myths and Ours," *The Orwellian Moment*, Robert L. Savage, James E. Combs, and Dan D. Nimmo, eds., Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1989, pp. 11-44; "Political Mythmaking for Postmoderns," *Spheres of Argument*, Bruce E. Gronbeck, ed., Annandale, VA, Speech Communication Association, 1989, pp. 175-183. Also see Nelson: Video *Rhetorics* and *Tropes of Politics*.

[38] Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

[39] Keen attention to the sapping power of disappointment helps make the "dismal science" of economics into a realist discipline.

See Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2002.

[40] See Matthews, *Hardball*, pp. 107-116. Also see John S. Nelson, "Ten Takes on Justice: Vengeance in the Movies," Annual Meeting of the Association for Political Theory, London, Ontario, 2007.

[41] See John S. Nelson, "The Dark Prince Stirs at Sunset: Dracula and the Post-Western Politics of Film," Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2000. Also see Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, New York, Signet Books, (1897), with scenes from the Francis Ford Coppola film, 1992.

[42] See John S. Nelson, "A Primer for Republicanism: Two Takes on *Hamlet* for Postmodern Politics," Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 1998.

[43] See Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, Katherine Woods, tr., Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943, especially pp. 64-71. Also see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1961

[44] See Matthews: *Hardball*, pp. 153-226; pp. *Life's a Campaign*, pp. 127-167.

[45] See Bernard Williams: *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1982; *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005.

[46] See Nelson, "Prudence as Republican Politics in American Popular Culture."

[47] See Hariman, *Political Style*, pp. 30-35.

[48] See Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman, ed., Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1996, pp. 31-165.

[49] See Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, (1908), 1967; David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process*, New York, Knopf, 1951. Also see Robert A. Dahl: *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956; *Pluralist Democracy in the United States*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1967; *Polyarchy*, New

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[50] William Galston, "The Obligation to Play Political Hardball," Philosophy and Public Policy, 9, 1, Winter, 1989, pp. 6-9.

[51] See Reinhold Niebuhr: *Christianity and Power Politics*, Hamden, CT, Archon Books, (1940), 1969; *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, Fairfield, New York, Scribner, 1953; *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York, Scribner, 1960; *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, New York, Scribner, 1960. Also see Hans J. Morgenthau: *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1946; *In Defense of the National Interest*, New York, Knopf, 1951; *Politics among Nations*, New York, Knopf, 1954. And see Henry A. Kissinger: *The Necessity for Choice*, New York, Harper and Row, 1961; *American Foreign Policy*, New York, Norton, 1969.

[52] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, C. B. Macpherson, ed., New York, Penguin Books, (1651), 1968; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Peter Laslett, ed., New York, New American Library, 1963.

[53] See Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," Philosophy and Public Affairs, 2, 2, Winter, 1973, pp. 160-180; Jane Mayer, "Whatever It Takes: The Politics of the Man Behind *24*," *New Yorker*, 81, 50, February 19, 2007.

[54] See James Ellroy, *L.A. Confidential*, New York, Warner Books, 1990.

[55] Al McGuire, "Introduction" to John Feinstein, *A Season on the Brink: A Year with Bobby Knight and the Indiana Hoosiers*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986, pp. ix-xiv on p. xi.

[56] See John S. Nelson: "The Republic of Myth," Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, San Francisco, CA, 2001; "From Gesture to Genre: Visual Conventions for Citizens of Electronic Times," Summer Institute on the Visual Citizen, Center for Global Culture and Communication, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2005.

[57] See Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader*, New York, Limelight Editions, 1996, pp. 3-10; Mark T. Conrad, ed, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, Lexington, University Press of

Kentucky, 2007, pp. 1-4. Also see Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, pp. 15-29; Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, pp. ix-31; Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*, pp. 1-6; Spicer, *Film Noir*, pp. 105. And see Nelson, "What's Noir?"

[58] Spicer, *Film Noir*, p. 2.

[59] Nelson, "What's Noir?"

[60] See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Walter Kaufmann, tr., Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1961; Harry Redner, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, University of California Press, 1982.

[61] See John S. Nelson, "Popular Rhetorics for Non-Linear Politics: Movements, Styles, Systems, and More," *Argument and Cognition*, Scott Jacobs, ed., Washington, DC, National Communication Association, 2008, forthcoming.