

# A beautiful mind (fuck): Hollywood structures of identity.

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## A beautiful mind(fuck): Hollywood structures of identity

by [Jonathan Eig](#)

It has been more than sixty years since Toto tore the cover off the Wizard of Oz and more than forty since Sam Loomis unmasked Norman Bates. Narrative surprises about the identity of major characters are not new in Hollywood film. But three characteristics distinguish movies like *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, *Memento*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Donnie Darko* from past, more typical, Hollywood identity-surprises. First, in these films the character with the surprise invariably is the protagonist, as opposed to a supporting character who affects a more “normal” hero. The next two characteristics work in tandem. The hero in question does not know the true nature of his identity and so is not simply keeping a secret from us. And the audience does not know the backstory either. We are not let in on a secret the hero does not know. A sudden boomlet of movies intentionally lie to the audience and manipulate viewers’ emotional investment in the heroes. In critical circles, these movies have developed a trendy name: mindfucks.

The two Davids-Lynch and Fincher-are the modern-day champions of the mindfuck film, but they certainly owe a large debt to Luis Buñuel, who made a career out of yanking the rug out from under his audience. From the avant-garde *Un Chien Andalou* and the “is it real?” documentary *Land Without Bread* early in his career, right up until the final shot of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and the double female lead in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, Buñuel played with our perceptions of his characters, simultaneously involving us in fictional lives and reminding us that what we are seeing is flickering light in the image of actors—a representation of a representation.

The current crop of Hollywood mindfucks from 1999-2001 no doubt has been fertilized by several successful “surprise” movies from the recent past. Both Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1992) and Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1994) boasted Oscar-winning screenplays and significant profits; artistic and financial success mark them as more widely seen than previous cult favorites like Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985) and Adrian Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990). But the heavy hitter in this recent history is M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999). The *Sixth Sense* employs a plot device characteristic of all the recent mindfuck

movies. At some point in the first act, after a character's life is threatened, the story is either interrupted for a flashback to show how we arrived at this point (*Fight Club* and *Memento*) or the character appears to survive the threat. In *The Sixth Sense*, we will come to learn that Malcolm Crowe did not in fact survive, that at least part of his subsequent story has been illusory. That will be the big climactic surprise.

Such a narrative device did not originate with Shyamalan. Modern drama has paid plenty of attention to the nature of man's life and death, from the mainstream of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* to the absurdism of Samuel Becket's *Endgame*. Two earlier films employ an identical device: Robert Enrico's Oscar-winning short *La Riviere du Hibou* (based on Ambrose Bierce's story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and initially shown to a large American audience as part of *The Twilight Zone* television show in 1964) as well as Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder*. But neither led to similarly constructed movies nor did they generate \$300 million dollar ticket sales in initial release, as *The Sixth Sense* did. *The Sixth Sense* differs from the other recent mindfucks in having little commentary on social, political, and economic forces affecting us at the end of the 20th century, confining its exploration to its characters' personal journeys (perhaps a major factor in its extraordinary success.) In the entertainment industry, financial success constitutes an essential step forward in the development of a narrative or aesthetic form. *The Sixth Sense* opened up public awareness, and consequently Hollywood's interest, in such constructions.

Another 2001 Hollywood release which certainly merits discussion as a mindfuck, Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others*, has been closely linked with *The Sixth Sense* in critical circles. *The Others* not only shares the mindfuck device of having a character unaware of the nature of her existence, (in this case Grace Stewart and her two children do not realize that they are dead), but it also shares an utter lack of concern with any social, political, or philosophical explanation for the delusion. Though the characters have superficial discussions of religion, *The Others*, like *The Sixth Sense*, has a plot that remains primarily personal. Since its characters do not die on screen, and are, in fact, long dead, the story does not examine the cause of their death. More than any other current mindfuck, *The Others* is a pure ghost story that employs this popular modern device for dramatic rather than thematic purposes.

Today's mindfucks differ from those of Buñuel in two key ways. Foremost, the plots are constructed to hide the surprise and rely on misdirection, or in the case of *Usual Suspects*, outright lying. (It is not simply Verbal Kint who lies in *Usual Suspects*. Brian Singer, the man behind the camera, lies to us as well when he shows us a shot of coiled ropes behind which we assume Verbal is watching the drama unfold.) For Buñuel, the movie was never about the surprise. It was simply one of the devices he used to tell a story. But today, even in movies like *Fight Club* and *Memento*, which elucidate sophisticated social or philosophical points of

view, the fact of the surprise is so big as to overwhelm the rest of the viewing experience. You do not have to be a structuralist to see that these movies owe their impact at least as much to the way they are told as to the stories they are telling.

But the most intriguing departure from Buñuel is attitudinal. In the words of David Thomson, Buñuel, despite his reputation for cold misanthropy, remains, “tolerant of human weakness.”<sup>2</sup> Buñuel provides us with tender comedy, which is especially evident in his later work but never completely removed from his anti-church films; his work laughs along with piteous but earnest attempts of men to leave a villa, eat a meal, or understand a woman. In contrast, in today’s mindfucks little human compassion or tolerance can be found. Indeed, these films constitute a new version of the theater of cruelty. Thematically, they uniformly reject any social structure’s ability to save us from our delusions. And in stylistically, in their cinematic technique, they seem to understand our desire to participate in the delusion. Our desire to be lied to.

The fundamental distinction between most earlier “surprise” movies and films like *Fight Club*, *Memento*, *Mulholland Drive*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Donnie Darko* lies in the nature of the hero’s identity. Tyler Durden, Leonard Shelby, Diane Selwyn, Malcolm Crowe, and Donnie Darko are all, to some degree, self-deluded. In the forerunners—*The Crying Game*, *Usual Suspects*, and especially Fincher’s *Se7en* and *The Game*, all of the heroes (and the audience) are surprised to learn the truth about the level of manipulation effected by the other characters. Fergus discovers Dill’s true sexuality. Both Dean Keaton and Dave Kujan are floored by the man they have known as Verbal Kint. In Fincher’s two movies, the respectable heroes’ solid worlds are broken to pieces, quite literally, at the climax. But in each case, the power to delude lies in another’s hands. Each film’s hero in these earlier works may play a key role—often as an enabler for the delusion—but none is the source of the delusion. Things have changed in today’s mindfucks.

Tyler Durden in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* represents a radical departure from the traditional Fincher hero. In Fincher’s earlier work, David Mills (*Se7en*) and Nicholas Van Orton (*The Game*) are successful, competent, aggressive individuals overwhelmed by the surrounding world and each has the confidence to believe that he can put a stop to the “game” that he is playing. Each is decidedly wrong. Mills faces utter destruction and tragedy when his wife—and unborn child, the hope for the future—is brutally decapitated. Van Orton faces literal destruction as his body plummets through a plate glass ceiling. The fact that he does not die can leave a viewer even more depressed than at the end of *Se7en* if we realize that Nicholas has acted as a mere pawn, utterly predictable and therefore utterly devoid of free will. Both Mills and Van Orton have their humanity diminished as each is forced to confront the fact that he is powerless.

Not so for *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden. He is a character of enormous power, able to bend the will of every man he meets. A visionary leader, he has the intelligence,

charisma, and courage to enact his vision. This power, however, comes at the expense of his identity. For though Tyler is all-powerful, Jack (the narrator) remains largely powerless unless he is following Tyler's instructions. And Jack is powerless throughout most of the movie in the most personal matter—he does not know himself. Jack does not know that he is in fact Tyler. In one sense, the ending of *Fight Club* is far more optimistic than the ending of *Se7en* or of *The Game* for it allows Jack to destroy Tyler, thereby attaining a level of power and control that he has never consciously known. But considering the immense psychic and physical cost, it seems a Pyrrhic victory at best. When Jack first learns the truth about his identity, he is not impressed or seduced by what he has accomplished but is terrified, which would be the logical reaction upon discovering your perception of your own identity has been horribly flawed. But at the climax, Jack achieves a rationality in the use of his newly-discovered power. Jack doesn't outfight Tyler, because he cannot. He outwills him.

We do not know whether Jack will die from the self-inflicted gunshot wound he suffers at the climax, but it is clear that Tyler is dead. This fight Jack might win. The final shot—Jack with arm around girlfriend, watching a spectacular display of fireworks—constitutes, to borrow Judith Butler's phrase, "an ironic hopefulness."<sup>3</sup> The "irony" derives from Tyler/Jack's bleeding from a potentially fatal gunshot wound to his head, and the "fireworks" coming from the multiple high rises he and his fascist group have blown up. Still, coming from a director known for his pessimism about our ability to control our environment, *Fight Club* surprisingly represents one of the more optimistic of the modern mindfucks. That optimism in destruction ends up presciently foreshadowing at least one element of the events surrounding September 11th, 2001. As citizens of the United States struggled to understand how the loss of thousands of innocent lives could be celebrated in some circles of the Muslim world, the explanation offered by commentators and celebrants alike was that the shroud of powerlessness had been lifted when the towers came down. *Fight Club* sanitizes this issue by—rather unrealistically—destroying only property, and not taking innocent human life. But its essential point—that if men are not accorded at least some measure of control over their destinies, they will lash out violently, and in the view of the ruling class, immorally, at their perceived oppressors—appears most timely.

*Mulholland Drive* uses death at its climax for a different effect. Like Jack, Diane Selwyn puts a gun into her mouth and blows her head off at the end of the film, not to defeat an unwanted part of her own personality but to relieve the unrelenting pressure that her own delusional madness has created. At this moment, she is attempting to escape an elderly couple's frantic attention. They possibly represent surrogate parents, although they look more like grandparents, and they predicted her stardom when she first arrived in Hollywood. Diane plays dual roles (throughout most of the movie we have known her as the would-be starlet, Betty), and she is never given parents in the film. She has come to L.A. to live with an absent aunt and supposedly knows no one in town, but as Betty, she

has no trouble making friends and winning support from the people she meets. People are genuinely nice to her at virtually every turn, but something ugly always follows her—an image literally visualized in an early scene behind the diner.

In the end, we learn the “truth” about Diane/Betty: she is one of countless anonymous actresses who deals daily with the humiliation of not being the star she was supposed to be. In Diane’s fantasy of a life as Betty, the responsibility for this failure is attributed to nameless old white men of power; they manipulate careers for their own profit and amusement, and they destroy beauty and art and personal freedom in the process. We never know if Betty’s impressions are correct—Diane only offers the information that directors “didn't care for me.” But this vision of a woman’s mental breakdown and its social causes certainly has been dealt with in feminist film theory. As an exemplar of that idea, *Mulholland Drive* goes farther than any movie since Marleen Gorris’ *A Question of Silence* in suggesting that madness is the only logical option for a normal woman in such a destructively patriarchal society.

In Diane and Tyler we get both sides of the gender problem. Tyler—like Frank T.J. Mackey in *Magnolia*—appears to be sticking up overtly for men castrated by modern culture. (Many reviews of *Fight Club* alluded to Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed*) Diane appears to be speaking up somewhat less overtly for women who have their media-inspired dreams of glamour and happiness routinely squashed. Unlike the heroines in Jacques Rivette’s *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), who find a measure of liberation in their trips into dramatic and romantic fantasy, Diane finds only madness.

The common component that ties together Diane and Tyler (when he is in his more realistic “Jack” persona) is that both are powerless characters who resort to extraordinary self-delusion to bestow power upon themselves. They both live in the world of the anonymous extra, each serving as fodder for enormous corporate monoliths—the insurance industry in Tyler’s case, and the Hollywood film industry in Diane’s. Their solutions again recall Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble*, essential text of Queer Theory, analyzes gender identities as performance. Since society’s overriding structures are so powerful, the best individuals like Tyler and Diane can hope for is to parody their traditional roles—Diane as the spunky starlet and Tyler as the man’s man—and thereby achieve a small measure of freedom.

In *Memento*, the protagonist Leonard Shelby is by no means powerless but is defiant of that which has damaged him. Whereas the hatred displayed by Tyler and Diane appear to be directed at their social and economic superiors, Leonard’s hatred, such as it is, appears to derive from a much more personal injustice. He wants to find the man who raped and murdered his wife. On one level, Leonard appears more innocent than even Jack or Betty. He has suffered short-term memory loss, and consequently he suffers pathetic humiliation at the hands of virtually everyone he meets.

We are inclined to root for Leonard's vengeance, not just on the common criminals who murdered his wife, but also on the common people who abuse him for amusement and convenience. We are also apt to admire the way he has chosen to cope-by removing emotion and intuition and relying on fact and logic. As the story progresses and develops its mindfuck theme, we come to understand that Leonard is not as innocent as we have been led to believe since he willfully ignores fact when it suits him. He can erase his own past in an act of outrageous audacity and will. As viewers, we may conclude that Leonard is not simply an evil person and has committed murder various times motivated by something more than the desire to do harm; if so then we will most likely find that motivation in Leonard's guilt. But the script leaves it unclear whether Leonard feels personal guilt relating to his murder of his wife, or some larger socio-economic guilt over the ruthless service he provides to his employer.

The script finally merges two stories, that of Sammy Jankis (Leonard's institutional guilt) and Leonard's wife (his personal guilt); finally the two storylines are inseparable. Leonard has made a career out of rejecting the claims of people who entrusted his company with their health insurance. He functioned largely with impunity, just one small piece of a large beast. But the residue of his insurance investigations have left their mark on his personality. His demons seem as powerful as compelling Tyler Durden to subject himself to brutal physical and psychic beatings. Each protagonist has earned their living working behind the scenes to rob people of basic human rights. And each, like Diane Selwyn, has resorted to self-delusion in order to cope. What separates Leonard, and what makes him ultimately scarier than the others, is that he is better at fooling himself. Unlike Tyler and Diane, Leonard allows the delusional side to win.

Leonard, Tyler, and Diane are, on some level, destructive characters. However, and this is vitally important, all are presented in sympathetic terms. Their specific actions and motivations allow us to identify with them, indeed, often to root for them. The side of Tyler who is Jack protests the destruction that Tyler preaches. Jack attempts to rescue Marla. Even the destructive persona Tyler is very clear about not wanting to hurt any people. The fifth rule of *Fight Club* is that when one fighter gives up, the fight is over. The part of Diane that is Betty also acts nobly. Though anonymous extra Diane, we come to find, actually dreams of hurting the star Camilla, the Betty part of Diane actually walks away from a potentially career-making meeting in order to help save Rita, the helpless amnesiac who serves as Camilla's alternative personality. Leonard's victims, except for his wife, are all of shady morality, if not outright criminals. Maybe the petty criminals and con men Leonard comes across did not deserve to be murdered, but none are completely innocent. You could certainly draw the conclusion that Leonard has done far worse deeds in the past as a claims adjuster when his victims were innocent.

The psychiatrist protagonist, Malcolm Crowe, in *The Sixth Sense* is a different sort of hero. He faces no internal battle for control over his heart and soul. Although

depressed by his line of work and haunted by his failures, he remains well-intentioned, even desperate in his quest to help innocent people. And if Tyler Durden, Diane Selwyn, and Leonard Shelby can be identified with the broader social or economic structures of masculinity, feminism, and corporate consciousness, Malcolm Crowe's identity remains entirely personal. He is there to help kids, specifically one troubled kid named Cole Sear. In spite of this, Malcolm does share one overriding trait with Tyler, Diane, and Leonard: delusion about the nature of his identity.

The *Sixth Sense* concerns itself with personal relationships, not broad social truth. Prior to the twist in which Malcolm discovers he is in fact dead, the most terrifying moments come in the scenes depicting people's utter inhumanity, especially the scene in which Cole is locked in the closet by his abusive classmates, and the scene in which a mother uses her nurturing authority to poison her own daughter. The evil presented in the movie does not derive from the child Cole's supernatural ability to see dead people, though that certainly scares him. The cruelty which the film presents, it is suggested, would exist regardless of any special talent on the part of the child. In fact, it is Cole's talent which becomes his salvation, as well as the salvation of the girl he saves.

At the end of the film, Malcolm's delusions have an enormously beneficial impact owing in part to screenwriter M Night Shyamalan's twist on an established device. As previously noted, *La Riviere du Hibou* and *Jacob's Ladder* also place a hero in danger at the beginning, then go on to construct a plotline resulting from his survival. At the end of *Jacob's Ladder*, as in *The Sixth Sense*, we discover the hero did not in fact survive. It was an imagined life. (A "life not lived" to quote the final sentence of Anita Shreve's novel *The Last Time They Met*, a book which demonstrates that narrative plotlines based on mindfucks are not confined to celluloid.) Shyamalan's invention of Cole Sear allows Malcolm to continue to do good works, even after the psychiatrist's death. The horror with which Malcolm reacts to learning the truth does not diminish the value in his work.

In the film of the same name we do not learn how the protagonist Donnie Darko reacts to his "truth." Of all the films I discuss here, this mindfuck film by first-time director Richard Kelly is possibly the most disturbing—and not coincidentally, most postmodern—because it can have the most interpretations. *Donnie Darko's* plot device is similar to that of *The Sixth Sense*. The teenage hero Donnie suffers a near miss with fatality early in the story. At the end of the story, the script suggests that perhaps he did die in the accident, as in *The Sixth Sense*. However, we could also argue that Donnie has traveled back in time to change his "good" fortune at surviving—some sort of mind over matter suicide. Another interpretation is also suggested by the film's final shots, which offer evidence that Donnie did in fact die in the first draft of time, and that the subsequent drama has been imagined by his mother, unable to cope with her part in her son's tragedy. So many conflicting indications are suggested in *Donnie Darko* that film

virtually defies standard textual analysis of plot, character and theme.

Donnie differs from the other deluded heroes in two significant ways. First, the audience learns early on that he is a schizophrenic subject to a regime of both analysis and medication. At the story's outset he has ceased taking his medicine, which information gives viewers a logical explanation for the hallucinations Donnie hears and sees. Donnie is also a child, the only hero in the films under discussion who has parents. None of the other protagonists had a mother who could dream up a fantasy for her child, and thus contribute that kind of plotline.

Also, our sympathy for Donnie is manipulated. Before the accident affects him, Donnie is not particularly sympathetic. He is rude to his family, and he calls his mother a "bitch." He is not pleasant at the school bus stop. Our reaction to him at this point is apt to be mixed. We may not condemn him for such actions: teenagers in an audience may in fact admire his audacity and the parents of teenagers may see a sharply observed, realistic character. Donnie remains largely impotent and frightened.

That all changes after the accident. Donnie becomes far more sympathetic. He reveals his intelligence, bravery, and passion. He gets a friend in Frank and a girlfriend in Gretchen. He even seems to find that time travel may answer the questions of morality and free will which plague him. (This almost idealized version of Donnie's post-accident life, combined with his parents' ready acceptance of the virtue of those offering to help—the government which provides lodging after the accident, and the therapist who provides aid to Donnie—seem to support the interpretation of the plot that it is a mother's fantasy for her son.) Even his death is shown as positive. "When the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief because there will be so much to look forward to."

*Donnie Darko* contains discussions about time travel, God, free will, education, and mental illness, and it also makes clear thematic references to child abuse, ageism, body type, and cultism. The film nearly collapses under the weight of its numerous ideas. At its thematic core is an issue most appropriate for a movie about a teenager-hypocrisy. Donnie is living through the last days of relative freedom in which he can explore the social world with impunity. Karen Pomeroy, an adult, gets fired for challenging the school system while Donnie merely gets suspended from after-school activities. Donnie experiences freedom from compromise, not having to surrender or be a hypocrite.

In the most astonishing sequence in the film, Donnie commits a supposedly evil and destructive act—burning down an innocent, albeit pompous and disingenuous, man's home. He commits this arson while his mother and father are with other school parents lavishing praise on Sparkle Motion, Donnie's younger sister's dance group. That grade school performance, with spandex and lipstick, comes as close to societally-accepted kiddie porn as we are going to see this side of Britney Spears. Later, the seemingly innocent man turns out to be an

actual purveyor of child pornography, which plot development may strike some as too neat. In sum, Darko's plot indicates there is often little distinction between what we perceive as good and what we perceive as evil.

Each of these movies may stimulate a range of emotional reactions from its audience, but the most typical audience reaction to any mindfuck movie is confusion. Given an audience's tendency to empathize with the hero, viewers likely experience confusion tinged with helplessness. Why, then, would popular films of the turn of the century elicit confusion and helplessness as such dominant emotions? It is easier to trace the cause and effect relation of, say, Watergate and Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View*, one of the great paranoid films in American cinema and a movie which even has an abstract short film within it intended to serve as a diagnostic mindfuck. It is easier to draw a link between the McCarthy hearings and Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, filmed by John Frankenheimer in 1962. But no such obvious social event explains the current fascination with mindfuck plotlines. Social critics on the right consistently point out the breakdown in traditional values and loss of religious faith; on the left, critics examine the soul-devouring effects of capitalism and big-business. But the decline in religious faith and the power of wealth in the United States are hardly new conditions. They may be contributory, but they cannot be primary.

Over the past several decades, philosophical debate over the nature of identity has taken on significant political and scientific dimensions. Questions about the moral implications of abortion, gene therapy, and cloning spotlight not only the question, "What is human life?" but also, "Who controls that life?" In this vein, Andrew Niccol has dramatized such questions in his film *Gattaca* (1997), as well as in his script for Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). In particular, *The Truman Show* develops a hero fundamentally deluded as to the very nature of his identity, a man who believes he is in control but is sadly mistaken. The fundamental difference between *The Truman Show* and the mindfuck films which have followed is that the former lets the audience in on the deception early on, making us identify more with the manipulators than the manipulated.

Jean Baudrillard has written,

The disappearance of the referential universe is a brand new phenomenon.[4](#)

In writing about the skyrocketing debt facing the United States, Baudrillard supposes that we have begun to invent "parallel universes"; such universes are merely virtual representations of reality. Baudrillard finds that "virtual reality" has been one of the defining technical achievements of the late 20th century and now is a narcotic coping mechanism.

It is simple enough to enter an exponential or virtual mode to become free of any

responsibility, since there is no reference anymore, no referential world to serve as a measuring norm.[5](#)

This sense of artificiality and a virtual universe shaping a character's life certainly seems to define the worlds that Tyler Durden, Malcolm Crowe, Diane Selwyn, Leonard Shelby, and Donnie Darko inhabit. Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum, the representation which has blurred ordinary "true" reality, finds astonishing voice in the worlds set up by these new Hollywood mindfucks. Fascinated by the escapism of U.S. theme parks, Baudrillard writes,

Disney, the precursor, the grand initiator of imaginary as virtual reality, is now in the process of capturing all the real world to integrate it into its synthetic universe...At Disney World in Orlando, they are even building an identical replica of the Los Angeles Disneyland.[6](#)

In the age of 24 hour-a-day news coverage, in the age of computer animation, in the age of "plausibly live" Olympic coverage—in an age in which anyone with a computer and a modem can run an internet search on himself and find any number of unknown identities—is it any wonder we find ourselves confused as to what is real and what is imagined? We are under siege from images. In what experiences can we place our trust?

Deconstructionism is a useful theoretical prism through which to view these questions of identity for it blurs the lines between supposed opposites. Whereas traditional narratives make it tempting to think that one conclusive truth must exist—e.g., that Malcolm Crowe is either dead or alive—deconstructionism suggests the possibility that neither is true and both are true. We often believe that what is real occupies a superior position over what is imagined. To a certain degree, past films also explored this issue; for example, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, highly controversial in its time, appeared to suggest that fantasy was superior to reality. What is remarkable about current mindfuck films is that they do not seem to assign primacy to either reality or illusion; thus, they take fledgling steps toward a possible postmodern template for identity. Both the real and the imagined exist as fundamental conditions of modern life in the United States. Donnie Darko explains the philosophy quite succinctly when discussing Graham Greene's *The Destructor*: "Destruction is a form of creation." In social terms, the late 20th century has witnessed more destruction and creation than any other historical period, and now, in contemporary narratives, fiction has captured this process on film, tape, and disk.

Film may be uniquely qualified to explore this anxiety about what is real since it is the medium which authenticates "truth" today: Things are no longer true if we read them in a book or hear them from a friend—they are true if we see them on film or tape. In addition, excepting those working in a Brechtian way, scriptwriters often use the characters' emotion states to create emotional reactions within audiences. In this way, film provides a second generation for

Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage." The French psychoanalyst identified a crucial step in an infant's development occurring when the child first looks into a mirror and thinks, "That is me." This confusion between the child's identity and the mere representation of identity as seen in the mirror is similar to, and perhaps the basis of, later identification with a fictional protagonist. On some level, we are apt to respond, "That is me." This is the basis for catharsis. We enjoy any displeasure we have experienced in following the film plot because we survive what we have experienced on screen, so that on some level, we have survived it in our "true" identities. If the characters on screen are deluded as to their identities, the mindfuck movies provide us with an opportunity to work out our own similar fears about self-delusion.

But who do we trust to help us with this identity-affirming work? These films no longer pose questions such as, "Who can I trust to tell me the truth about society, or God, or my wife, or the Kennedy assassination?" Now the films make audiences ask, "Who can I trust to tell me the truth about my own identity?" Seemingly we no longer can generate self-knowledge. Thematically, these films assume that we have ceded that responsibility-to politicians, doctors, Hollywood image makers, high priests on the pulpit, or advice texts on TV or in the self-help section of the bookstore. In this sense, what Baudrillard analyzes as the deletion of the referential universe results in our deleting our own identity.

Image-makers fill the resulting void, and these are the monsters hiding behind the dumpster behind the diner in *Mulholland Drive*. And film may an art form especially appealing to a fascistic artist, to a director or screenwriter who seizes the responsibility for psychic definition by controlling the viewer's eye and the ear, who manipulates what we believe and what we trust, who creates characters for us. I believe the monster behind the dumpster behind the diner in *Mulholland Drive* is someone like film director David Lynch. I also believe that Donnie Darko finds a portal to another dimension from a screen projecting the movie *The Evil Dead* because movies have the power to impress a new reality onto our brains in ways unsurpassed by any other medium.

Although film can "deconstruct" character quite easily, at best it can only flirt with a postmodern template for character. Baudrillard's claim for the disappearance of a referential universe in fact does not explain the mechanisms of audience response to mindfuck films and their development of their protagonists. In fact, most viewers of fiction film will arrive at some comfortable interpretation of what motivated the protagonist or of what happened in the plot. If Diane Selwyn is not Betty, then she is Diane. Malcolm Crowe is either alive or dead. This either/or construction on the part of viewer response presupposes some identifiable center; in viewing the film, at a certain point in the plot, perhaps at the end of the film, we find some reference point allowing us to accept that we have been fooled and to move forward in our interpretation confident that the opposite of what we had believed is true.

Postmodernism suggests that no such center exists, a disquieting and frightening notion. Interestingly, the very physical process by which film creates its illusion of realistic motion provides an apt metaphor for the same philosophical problem. When those unacquainted with moving pictures see a film, their assumption is that the film stock itself must have a free-flowing collection of images which, when projected, create an image of continuous motion. People must be taught that film is indeed comprised of discreet static images, or frames, which are frozen on screen for a split second before being replaced by the next frame. They must learn about persistence of vision. Frames provide a physical structure for film. The frames themselves can be manipulated, or deconstructed, but they remain frames. They can split into sections, as in Jim Cunningham's "Fear/Love" motivational tapes in *Donnie Darko*, or be subliminally inserted into other texts, as in *Fight Club*. But they always remain frames. A more aptly postmodern, mindfuck script for *Fight Club* would not reveal that Jack and Tyler Durden are one in the same. It would reveal that the character we have come to know as Jack is not recognizable as anything or anyone. The plot would offer no underlying structure to clarify identity.

Perhaps the most postmodern image in recent film comes in the final shot of Vincenzo Natali's 1997 thriller *Cube*. After all the debates the characters, and the audience, engage in about the nature of the world and the power structures that control it, a door opens onto a vast terrain of blinding white light. An overwhelmed innocent steps out into this all-encompassing "reality." It can be a terrifying image. At least the Starchild from Stanley Kubrick's *2001* promised rebirth. *Cube*—like the most prophetically postmodern of classic tragedies, *Macbeth*—appears to promise nothing. But *Cube* has a plotline concerned with the structure of society, not with the structure of identity. Viewers may find it easier to accept that they cannot identify social forces than to accept that the "individual" cannot be identified. In a sense, our desire to recognize ourselves makes a truly post-modern identity film more difficult.

It might be argued that another film from 2001 achieves this more fully than any of the five films thus far discussed. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* appears to be concerned with all of these issues around identity. The plotline very clearly follows one of the mindfuck templates described earlier. An unnamed hero suffers a possibly fatal accident early on, then awakens into a dream world of philosophical conversation and exploration. This hero begins to assume late in the movie that this dream state may be death. The closing image in which he floats off into the air like a helium balloon does little to confirm or deny this interpretation.

*Waking Life* has only a philosophical discussion for dialogue, so in that dialogue postmodernism is addressed directly, as is existentialism, lucid dreaming, and a wide range of other concepts of existence. In its scope, the film's themes surpass even *Donnie Darko*. Yet in the way that it treats the characters' emotions or addresses audience processes of identification, *Waking Life* hardly seems concerned with identity but rather treats its characters as mechanisms of

thought. With very few exceptions, its characters do not come close to offering full and complete identities. Though the characters express a passion for intellectual curiosity, scarcely another human emotion is worked in the script.

The few times other emotions are expressed, they tend to be destructive, as with the two gunmen in the bar, or the Red Man in jail. Interestingly, these are among the only narrative scenes in the movie. These characters relate anecdotes and tell stories about what has happened or what will happen. And the characters engaged in narratives all come to unpleasant ends. Virtually every other character speaks about human life theoretically. As a viewer, I found the characters who spoke narratives and their unpleasant fates far more interesting than the basic *Cliff Notes* version of philosophical history spoken by the professors and thinkers throughout the movie.

This is the case even though, as in most of Linklater's compelling work, it his distrust of traditional narrative that gains critical attention for being his most original contribution to feature fiction film. In sum, *Waking Life* may include identity in its characters' broad discourse on existence, but identity is not its chief concern.

*Donnie Darko* comes the closest to presenting a true postmodern conception of character. The plot offers too many possible answers to the question, "Where is Donnie?"—as seen in a note on the refrigerator at the beginning of the story. And the plot give too many possible answers to the question, "Who is Donnie?" The other movies may make us pose questions about how we conceive our own identities, but they seem to provide structures to answer those questions. Of course, the actual meaning of any provided "answer" within the plot development is open for debate.

It should come as no surprise that of all the characters discussed in Hollywood's recent midfuck films, only two, Diane Selwyn and Grace Stewart, are women. Perhaps more significantly, not a single director or writer of any recent mindfuck movie has been a woman. (Sylvia Nasser's book about John Nash formed the basis of *A Beautiful Mind*, but the screenplay was written by Akiva Goldman.) This is not so unusual for Hollywood, where the vast majority of producers, directors, and screenwriters have always been males.

Throughout Hollywood history, neither sex has held a monopoly on characters who slide into delusion. Examinations of delusional characters have often been relegated to sub-genres, so we tend to find deluded men like Victor Frankenstein in a horror film (*Frankenstein*, James Whale, 1931) and deluded women like Virginia Stuart in melodrama (*The Snake Pit*, Anatole Litvak, 1948). Traditionally, male characters have been allowed far more latitude in reworking reality to their liking than have the women. The classic Hollywood hero, as defined in countless Westerns and action/adventure films, recognizes some flaw in a social order and then acts to correct that flaw. From John Wayne on, the male hero has been

permitted to step outside the boundaries of society and is recognized as heroic for doing so. Tyler Durden, Leonard Shelby, and Donnie Darko are all destroyers, and each of them achieves some measure of triumph in that destruction.

The same cannot be said for Diane Selwyn. In traditional Hollywood film, women are required to work within the flawed social system, relying on what are seen as feminine wiles to achieve any triumph. Consequently, madness for a woman can never be heroic. Grace Stewart in *The Others* comes about as close as a woman can come, precisely because her madness derives from her resolutely clinging to her family. The ending of *The Others* is by no means happy, but at least Grace has found a place and a purpose. *Mulholland Drive*'s Diane Selwyn, who has no family in the film, is not granted even that level of comfort by the plot.

The preponderance of male heroes in today's mindfucks (in tandem with the preponderance of male directors and screenwriters of such movies) may suggest something beyond institutional Hollywood sexism. Perhaps male protagonists are better suited to this role of facing identity confusion (and male storytellers more interested in narrating this construction) precisely because men have been the traditionally dominant gender. If the underlying idea in these movies is the fear that we cannot trust ourselves to know ourselves, such an idea would strike more acutely at those who have previously had the highest degree of confidence. Film has consistently told women that they are incapable of independence, that they are defined by those around them, by their men and their families. But for men, who have been schooled to believe in their own individual ability to see clearly and act accordingly, the idea of the mindfuck can be all the more devastating.

Finally, all five of these movies seem to suggest that self-imposed delusion may be a valid alternative to reality. Even in *Fight Club*, which ends with the destruction of the illusory character at the hands of the real character, we must recognize the tremendous service that illusory Tyler Durden has provided for the real Tyler. Fantasy has given meaning to the real. But another recent movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, which shares a structural similarity with these five movies states a clear preference for reality over fantasy, a far more palatable conclusion in a culture which elevates reason over imagination. Not surprisingly and perhaps because of that kind of resolution, this movie won an Oscar as the Best Picture of 2001 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.

Although the mindfuck in *A Beautiful Mind* functions differently than the mindfucks in these other movies, it has the same narrative structure. The audience, along with the hero, John Nash, is tricked into believing in a reality which is ultimately proven false. Yet the plot differs in timing and message. We learn the truth about John Nash at the film's midpoint rather than toward the end. (The other movies either reveal the truth at the end of the second act or in the climax.) And John Nash learns to defeat his delusions in a positive manner. Malcolm Crowe, Diane Selwyn, and Donnie Darko appear to be dead at the end of

their movies. The “ironic hopefulness” at *Fight Club*’s conclusion leaves Tyler Durden’s status open-ended. And Leonard Shelby simply allows the delusion to win out. *A Beautiful Mind* offers far more optimism about our ability to overcome our delusions. Perhaps that partially explains why it won such a prestigious award. But it used the same device to reveal its story that these other mindfucks did. It simply left us in a safer, more comfortable place after it was done with us.

Notes:

1 From 1959-1964, Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone* repeatedly employed the mindfuck device. In at least a dozen episodes, concentrated largely in its first season, *The Twilight Zone* offered plots in which characters were deluded about the nature of their existences. In *The Hitchhiker*, a woman believes she has survived an accident only to discover she has in fact died. Similarly, in *Perchance to Dream*, a man has an entire adventure in the space of his last moment alive. In *Judgment Night* and *The Passerby*, (a weaker episode very much like Alejandro Amenabar’s *The Others*), characters do not know they are dead. In other episodes, characters were unaware of their true physical nature, like in *The Lateness of the Hour*, in which a woman discovers she is a robot. In probably the best of these constructions, *The After Hours*, a woman does not learn until the end that she is in fact a mannequin.

2 Thomson, David. *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. pg. 98.

3 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble* (10th Anniversary Edition). New York: Routledge, 1999.

4 Baudrillard, Jean. *Global Debt and Parallel Universe*. Trans by Francois Debrix. Website address: <http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/globaldebt.html>. April, 2003.

5 Ibid.

6 Baudrillard, Jean. *Disneyworld Company*. Trans by Francois Debrix. Website address: <http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/disneyworld.html>. April, 2003.

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