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Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design

In narrative, plot exists on two levels: the plotting of the author, who creates the storyline; and the plotting of the characters, who set goals, devise plans, schemes and conspiracies, and try to arrange events to their advantage. The plotting of both author and characters is meant to exercise control: for the author, control over the reader, who must undergo a certain experience; for the characters, control over other characters and over the randomness of life. But sometimes the goals of the author are at odds with the goals of characters. The author needs to make the characters take particular actions to produce a certain effect on the reader, such as intense suspense, curiosity, or emotional involvement; but acting toward this situation defies narrative logic, because is not in the best interest of the characters, or not in line with their personality. In this article I propose to investigate two types of aesthetically deficient plot twists that arise from this conflict between author and character goals. One involves an active intervention by the author, an attempt to fix the problem through hackneyed devices; I call this “cheap plot tricks” (henceforth CPT). The other results from ignoring the problem, or covering it up, a strategy (or omission) that leads to what is known among film writers as “plot holes” (henceforth PH). Through this emphasis on the kind of events that makes the sophisticated reader groan, I will be breaking away from the almost exclusively descriptive tradition of both classical and postclassical narratology, and I will adopt an evaluative stance closer to the prescriptive spirit of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

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In his treatment of tragedy Aristotle sketches a catalog of good and bad ways to construct plot. He posits as pivotal to the tragic plot two types of event: reversal of fortune and scenes of recognition (*anagnorisis*), through which characters pass from ignorance to knowledge. (Plots are even better when both events occur at the same time, as in *Oedipus Rex*.) In Aristotle's examples of inferior plotting, recognition is achieved by means of tell-tale objects and external tokens, such as the scar on Ulysses' face that reveals his identity, or they are "contrived by the poet" (*Poetics* 26); in truly artistic plotting, recognition is brought by inferences drawn by the characters, by memory, or, in the best case, it arises "from the events themselves," this is to say, from actions that are probable within the circumstances set up by the plot. A prime example of this kind of motivation is Oedipus's decision to launch an investigation of the murder of his father, and discovering as a result that he is the culprit. One can generalize from these examples that good plots are propelled by the inner disposition of characters and by their logical reasoning, while bad ones are steered by *ad hoc* external circumstances which bear the stamp of the author's fabrication. A CPT is an event that is poorly prepared, that looks forced, that seems to be borrowed ready-made from a bag of tricks and whose function for the plot as a whole is too obvious; in short, it is a narrative cliché. This is why I call it a *plot trick* rather than a *plot twist*.

The vulnerability of an evaluative stance lies in the subjectivity of the readers' judgment. What I label a CPT, you may find very acceptable. If what passes as cheap was entirely a matter of personal judgment, it would make no sense to attempt a taxonomy of CPTs: every type of event could be used for good or bad plotting, depending on the reader's opinion of the skills of the author. The opposite stance consists of saying that there are some kinds of events which represent bad plotting, no matter what the context is. A compromise can be achieved between the relativism of the first position and the essentialism of the second by regarding some plot twists as inherently cheap, while recognizing that they can be redeemed by being put in the service of a good story. But the most favorable reaction these plot twists will elicit is to be judged "excusable," that is, to be assigned to the valleys and not the peaks in the contour of the plot.

In the reader's aesthetic evaluation, plotting devices range on a continuum from cheap to brilliant, with a middle occupied by events that do not provoke strong reactions. In this article I will focus on CPTs and PHs rather than on brilliant plot twists (BPTs), because their identification, having to do with faulty logic, implausibility, or a sense of *déjà vu* is much less dependent on the reader's personal taste, and they are therefore much easier to collect and classify. Unlike CPTs, BPTs are deliberately created effects that do not follow a fixed formula, cannot be repeated without losing their punch, and require a much more specialized environment. This is not to say that BPTs do not present common features—if they did not, they would be totally impermeable to narrative theory. But while they aim at the standard narrative effects of suspense, curiosity and surprise, and rely on proven principles of efficient narrative design, such as sudden turn, *anagnorisis*, or directing the reader's suspicion toward the wrong character, their brilliance resides in a unique contextualization of these features which can only be studied individually. Eventually, a theory of plot design

will have to collect readers' personal examples of BPTs, and investigate the principles that produce these effects; but it is much easier to start the theory with the weeds of the narrative flora than with the rare flowers whose sighting constitutes a memorable event. For the weeds, too, are narrative species from which we can learn something about plot design.

CHEAP PLOT TRICKS

The most productive (if I may say so) source of CPTs is the disregard of what Aristotle's regards as the function of the poet, namely, "not to say what has happened but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability and necessity" (*Poetics* 5.5, 16). Most of my examples of CPTs involve coincidence, which, by definition, is a phenomenon of low probability, since it is the product of an accidental intersection between two independent causal chains (Richardson 26). The degree of probability of a coincidence is inversely proportional to the size of the pool of events that are possible in a certain situation; hence the "small world" effect when the coincidence occurs: it is as if a large world had shrunk, leaving fewer possibilities. As Hilary Dannenberg has shown in her fascinating book *Convergence and Divergence: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*, narrative has never really outgrown the plot device of coincidence. If we decided to expurgate events of low probability in the name of artistic plotting, we would deprive ourselves of the main source of tellability, namely the report of unusual situations, and very few stories would survive. But our tolerance toward extraordinary coincidence has grown lower through the ages, as the demand for realism has grown higher. Few of us are still fascinated by the highly contrived tales of shipwrecks and reunion of long lost lovers that delighted readers in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. This evolution in taste explains why so many of my examples will come from the 17th century; but nowadays, CPTs are still widely found in popular culture, especially in film.

CPT 1: Extraordinary coincidence: being at the right place at the right time

My first example of CPT, from Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, ignited a memorable literary controversy. Shortly after publication, in 1678, the periodical *Le Mercure Galant* asked readers to express their opinion of this particular episode. The question generated a storm of responses that anticipates the lively discussions of books, movies and videogames that one finds today on the Internet.

Mademoiselle de Chartres, a virtuous young beauty, arrives at the court of Henri II, King of France. The Prince de Clèves falls in love with her and asks for her hand. The princess, who has no experience of love, accepts, despite her lack of special feelings for him. After the wedding, she meets M. de Nemours, the most eligible bachelor at the court, and they fall instantly and passionately in love. But Mme de Clèves is determined to fight her passion, and she never

gives evidence of her love to Nemours. To avoid temptation, she retreats to her country house. Nemours learns about her whereabouts and goes hunting in the area. He gets lost, and suddenly finds himself near a pavilion on the Clèves estate. Soon the princess and her husband walk by and sit on a bench right in front of him. From his hiding place, Nemours hears the princess confess to her husband that she is in love with another man, and that she needs to stay away from him. Though she never names the object of her love, the ecstatic Nemours understands through circumstantial evidence that he is the one she has in mind. (331–36)

The focus of the controversy was not, as one would expect, the presence of Nemours on the scene, but the fact that Mme de Clèves confesses her love for another man to her husband, when nothing forces her to do so, since she is not guilty of any infidelity. According to the contemporary responses (Goldsmith 1998), the majority of readers believed that no woman in her right mind would make such a confession. Today's readers are much more understanding of Mme de Clèves' action, because it is well prepared within the text, both through the character of the heroine and through certain declarations of M. de Clèves that suggest his appreciation of honesty. But if my response is typical, modern readers are troubled by the highly improbable spatial and temporal convergence of life paths that allows M. de Nemours to be present on the scene and to eavesdrop on Mme de Clèves' confession. Lagarde and Michard, authors of a popular textbook of French literature, call it "an artifice qui nous gêne aujourd'hui" ("an artifice that bothers us today" [362]).

The artifice of the overheard confession allowed Mme de Lafayette to solve a thorny design problem. She wanted her heroine to be consumed by love, but she also wanted her to maintain the highest moral standards. These standards prevented the princess from giving any deliberate sign of love to M. de Nemours. On the other hand, the plot could not proceed toward its tragic conclusion (and celebration of Mme de Clèves' fortitude) without M. de Nemours acquiring firm knowledge of the private feelings of Mme de Clèves. The CPT not only solves the problem of the transmission of information from a private to a public domain (for Nemours will gossip about it, creating a rumor that will eventually reach the unfortunate husband), it also kills two birds with one stone by awakening in M. de Clèves a jealousy that will make him die of a broken heart, through the literalized metaphor of another CPT. This death makes his widow free to accept M. de Nemours marriage proposal, but for a secret reason which has been variously interpreted as guilt, heroic self-control, resistance to social pressures, exceptional character or fear of love, the princess turns down her suitor, and chooses instead a life of penitence.

The episode of the overheard confession blatantly serves the interests of the story and the goals of the author at the expense of verisimilitude. It was also in the name of verisimilitude that seventeenth century readers criticized Mme de Clèves' action, though they did not object to the presence of Nemours. The standards obviously differ: for the seventeenth century reader (as for Aristotle), verisimilitude meant integrity of character and conformity with an idea of human nature, while for the modern reader, who has been taught to distrust this notion, and consequently

cannot rely on models of “natural” behavior, the idea of verisimilitude is transposed from the realm of psychological motivations to the realm of the statistical probability of external events.

CPT 2: The tell-tale (lost and found) letter

This device is found in another episode of *La Princesse de Clèves*:

A gentleman of the court gives a letter to the *reine dauphine*, Mary Stuart, that supposedly fell from the pocket of M. de Nemours. The *dauphine* then gives it to Mme de Clèves. It is a love letter written by an unnamed woman, and it arouses feelings of jealousy in the princess. But it turns out that the letter was lost by another gentleman, who wants to retrieve it to avoid compromising his mistress. He writes a note to Nemours asking him to get it back from the *dauphine*. After the *dauphine* tells him what she did with the letter, Nemours visits Mme de Clèves and gossips about the note, to the great relief of the princess, who now understands that her jealousy was unfounded. (319–25)

Plots are heavily dependent on the circulation of information, especially on the interception of information by the person from whom it should be kept away. Lost and found private letters constitute an overly convenient way to make information fall into the wrong hands. In this passage the author faced the problem of making the princess experience jealousy—a proof of her love—while preserving the “innocence” of M. de Nemours, who, since the day he met the princess, has completely given up his philandering habits. After giving the princess ground for jealousy, the author had to clear Nemours in her eyes. Mme de Lafayette does so through a convoluted scheme that invalidates the information inferred by the princess: the letter, after all, did not fall from the pocket of M. de Nemours, and the man who gave it to the queen was mistaken about its origin, though we never learn why.

This scheme illustrates another common plot device: making characters act or think on the basis of false information, and gratuitously withdrawing this information once the reaction of the character has taken place, because it is not compatible with the planned development of the plot. In the case of *La Princesse de Clèves*, the purpose of the false information is to allow a strictly private event of self-understanding, but in my next example it has much more open, and damaging consequences.

CPT 3: The false news

From Racine’s tragedy *Phèdre*:

Phèdre, the second wife of Theseus, is madly in love with her stepson Hippolyte. Ashamed of feelings considered incestuous, she decides to die. Just in time, however, a messenger arrives with the news of the death of Theseus. In the ensuing scene, Phèdre reveals to the horrified Hippolyte her consuming passion

for him and asks him to kill her. His refusal to do so gives Phèdre some desperate hope. But these hopes are shattered when news arrive that Theseus, far from being dead, will soon return home (so soon, indeed, that he will be on stage in the next act).

Here again the CPT allows the author to resolve a contradiction. Phèdre may have “incestuous” feelings (or what passed as such in the seventeenth century), but she has an acute sense of her honor, and would not commit adultery. Racine needs Theseus to be dead for Phèdre to declare her love to Hippolyte, and Racine needs Theseus to be alive for Phèdre to be guilty of improper conduct. By operating a complete reversal of situation, the CPT of the false news coming out of the blue allows Racine to take advantage of two mutually incompatible situations without violating the laws of nature by making Theseus return from the dead, and without turning Theseus into a human version of Schrödinger’s cat: dead and alive at the same time.

CPT 4: The calumniator credited

The resolution of *Phèdre* involves a classic CPT known as the convention of the calumniator credited.

When the news of the imminent return of her husband reaches Phèdre, she is afraid that Hippolyte will denounce her. To avoid punishment, she lets her confidante, Oenone, falsely accuse Hippolyte of sullyng her honor. Furious against his son, Theseus banishes him from Thèbes. Overcome by guilt, Phèdre decides to clear Hippolyte’s reputation by telling the truth to Theseus, but she changes her mind when she learns that Hippolyte is in love with another woman. In the end, Hippolyte is killed by a sea monster, and Phèdre commits suicide.

Why did Theseus believe Oenone without giving Hippolyte a chance to defend himself? The convention of the calumniator credited, named in 1934 by the Shakespeare scholar Elmer Stoll, asks the audience to bracket out this question. Martin Steinmann defines the convention as follows: “If X, Y, and Z are characters in Elizabethan drama [or French classical, as my example shows], if X calumniates Y to Z, and Z, without proof or serious investigation, credits (that is, believes) X’s calumnies, then we may not interpret Z’s crediting them as a . . . natural sign.” (288). If the act of crediting were interpreted as a natural sign, we would attribute it to a mental feature of the character. We would, in other words, infer that Theseus (or Othello) is either naïve or stupid, judging him by the same criteria we would use with a real-world person who behaved in this way. Instead we suspend judgment, and we assume that Theseus is made to act in the interest of the plot. As Steinmann writes, “The convention serves the specific purpose of providing interesting complications. It is the usual trade-off: we accept lack of realism for an artistic reward” (255).

The convention of the calumniator credited lies on the borderline between CPTs and PHs (a category to which I will return shortly). Like all CPTs the convention consists of an easily recognizable and frequently used type of event that solves a

standard narrative problem (in this case, making characters take actions that are not quite in line with their moral features) but in doing so it creates a plot hole, because it opens a gap in the psychological motivation of the characters' actions.

CPT 5: Amazing symmetry

One of the most extreme forms that extraordinary coincidence can take is symmetrical events. The prime example is O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi":

Della and Jim are a young couple deeply in love with each other, but they are very poor. To give Jim a Christmas present Della cuts and sells her beautiful hair and buys a chain for Jim's watch, while Jim sells his watch to buy an ornament for Della's hair. When they discover what the other has done, Jim and Della recognize that love is the most precious gift they can give to each other.

Symmetry is generally associated with beauty, and its presence in narrative contributes to our aesthetic appreciation, especially when we detect it behind apparently dissimilar events. But in O. Henry's story it is too forced, too obvious to give the reader the pleasure of discovery. The popularity of "The Gift of the Magi" shows, however, that for many readers, the emotionally charged scene of *anagnorisis* that constitutes the climax of the story is sufficiently rewarding to forgive the heavy hand of the author in constructing the events that lead up to it.

In "The Gift of the Magi," symmetry occurs between simultaneous events, and the effect of this simultaneity is to undermine each character's goal: the loss of Della's hair and of Jim's watch make the presents useless. But symmetry can also operate between successive events. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, Romeo commits suicide because he believes that Juliet is dead; then Juliet commits suicide when she sees the dead body of Romeo. While the parallelism of "The Gift of the Magi" is entirely due to random coincidence, this is to say, to the plotting of the author, in *Romeo and Juliet* it is caused by the failure of a plot designed by the characters themselves: Juliet was not dead, but under the influence of a narcotic which she had drunk in the hope of escaping from her family and be reunited with Romeo, but Romeo was not informed of the scheme in time. It is of course the author who ultimately plots the plotting of characters, but in the case of *Romeo and Juliet* there is a causal relation between the two symmetrical events that justifies their co-occurrence within the fictional world, while, in "The Gift of the Magi," symmetry occurs between simultaneous events that cannot cause each other, since causes must precede their effects. This is why I find the parallelism of *Romeo and Juliet* better motivated than the symmetry of "The Gift of the Magi."

The distaste of certain readers for the facile effects of symmetry is such that Umberto Eco, in his celebrated reading of Alphonse Allais' "Un Drame bien parisien," prefers regarding the story as illogical than as a riddle that can be solved by postulating symmetrical coincidence.¹ The story concerns a young married couple, Raoul and Marguerite, who plan to attend a costume party. The day before the event Raoul receives an anonymous letter telling him that Marguerite will attend the

ball, dressed as a Pirogue, and will be “in a gay mood” (= elope with a lover). At the same time, Marguerite receives a letter warning her that Raoul will do the same thing under the disguise of a Templar. They both find excuses to stay away from the ball. On the night of the party, a Templar and a Pirogue sneak away together, but when they lift their masks, they are surprised to find out that their partner is not the person they expected—he is not Raoul and she is not Marguerite. The only coherent explanation for their reaction is that, by an extraordinary coincidence, Raoul and Marguerite had arranged to meet their respective lovers under the same disguise and decided to stay away for fear of confusing their spouse with their lover, since both would wear the same costume. Eco briefly considers this explanation, but rejects it as “repugnant to our sense of narrative etiquette” (67) because the story never states explicitly the existence of the lovers. He prefers interpreting the story as a “textual trap” that lures the reader into expecting, against all logic, that the Templar at the ball is Raoul, and that the Pirogue is Marguerite. In Eco’s reading, the text then defeats this expectation by staging an even more illogical outcome, since without assuming similar arrangements by two Templars to elope with a Pirogue, the Pirogue and the Templar who attend the ball have no reason to elope together nor to expect the other to be Raoul or Marguerite. According to Eco’s interpretation, the story sacrifices its own consistency in order to expose the reader’s faulty reasoning. I personally find this sacrifice more repugnant to narrative etiquette than the CPT of amazing symmetry, especially since the story already presents two undeniable examples of symmetrical events: the two anonymous letters, and the separate decisions by Raoul and Marguerite to find excuses to stay away from the ball. In the reading that I am proposing, the point of the story is not to create an absurd situation—accepting absurdity should be a last-resort interpretive move—but to make the reader imagine an event that caps the escalation of the plot toward more and more incredible parallelisms. In other words, “Un Drame bien parisien” redeems the CPT by turning it into the solution of a logical problem.

CPT 6: Deus Ex Machina and irrational events

All the CPTs discussed so far have a preparatory function: they complicate a situation, and they steer the plot toward a climax. A standard metaphor describes this process as tying the plot into a knot (French: *nouer l'intrigue*). The knot must be eventually disentangled for the plot to reach a proper conclusion; but as Aristotle observes, “Many poets are good at complication but handle the resolution badly” (8.6, 30). A facile way to conclude a story, when the author has painted the characters into a corner by producing a situation that cannot be resolved by natural means, is the classic device of the *Deus Ex Machina*. The term refers to the habit in ancient Greek drama of lowering down a god with a crane onto the stage. Aristotle’s objection to the device stems from its irrational and arbitrary character: “Clearly . . . the resolution of plots should also come from the plot itself, and not by means of a theatrical device, as in the *Medea*, or the events concerned with the launching of the ship in the *Iliad*” (*Poetics* 8.1, 25). In the *Medea*, the heroine is saved by a chariot from heaven after she murders her children, while in the *Iliad*, it takes the interven-

tion of the goddess Athena to force the Greeks to resume fighting, after they took at face value Agamemnon's ironic suggestion that they should abandon the siege of Troy.

Nowadays the term *Deus Ex Machina* is extended to any unexpected event that brings a happy ending from the outside when the characters have exhausted all possibilities of improving their own fate.² The god could be replaced by a messenger from the king who saves the hero and his family from being evicted from their house, after the hero has given all of his property and promised the hand of his daughter to a swindler who poses as a deeply religious man (Molière's *Tartuffe*); by an attack of microbes that saves the earth from Martian invaders (H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*); by a teletransportation device that allows characters to escape when they are in danger (the TV series *Star Trek*); by a timely solar eclipse that saves the comic book hero Tintin from being sacrificed to the Sun god (Hergé's *Prisoners of the Sun*); or by a bird that distracts the attention of the villain as he is holding the heroes in the cross-hairs of his gun (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*). In the better cases, the *Deus Ex Machina* effect can be justified by thematic considerations: for instance, Molière's use of the device, by stressing the artificiality of the ending, could be interpreted as a way to tell the spectator: all ends well in this play because it is a comedy, and comedy is supposed to make you laugh; but the *Tartuffes* of this world would succeed, because in real life, hypocrisy reigns supreme and controls society. In the worst cases, the device is nothing more than a convenient way to satisfy the reader's need to see the hero suffer and then triumph. In these cases, the particular nature of the rescuing action, or the personality of the *Deus* character do not really matter.

The avoidance of the *Deus Ex Machina* effect is a particularly acute problem in fantastic narratives that rely on magic. When used without restraint, magic is the ultimate CPT, since it can take characters out of any situation, dispensing the author from constructing materially and psychologically credible solutions. If a character can solve any problem through magic spells, how can he or his *protégés* ever fall into serious trouble, and how can the plot create conflict, the primary source of narrative interest? Alternatively, if a character has supernatural powers and fails to use them to get out of trouble, how can this be justified? Authors generally avoid the two pitfalls of overuse and unexplained nonuse of the supernatural by treating magic as resource that exists in limited supply (as it does in video games). As Patrick Colm Hogan observes (219), even in the most fantastic worlds, narrative uses the supernatural very sparingly. Magic is not a force that allows its masters to do anything they want, but a specialized weapon whose efficiency depends on an understanding of its proper handling. Its use may be limited to certain places and times, and it must respect certain rules which may override, but never totally cancel the laws of nature. Most importantly, magical abilities are distributed among many characters, and they exist in many varieties, so that every effective use of magic must take into consideration the supernatural resources of the antagonist. For instance, when Harry Potter fights Voldemort, he must be able to disable his enemy's spells through his own magic tricks. Thanks to this game-like, rule-governed character, magic remains compatible with the rationality that Aristotle regards as an essential condition of artistic plotting.

CPT 7: *The interrupted action*

An alternative to the *Deus Ex Machina* ending that shares with it a random character is the sudden, logically unmotivated interruption of action. In the milder cases, the story ends in a flat period in the lives of characters, with no urgent conflict and no current plan of action; in more brutal interruptions, problem-solving actions are suspended, and the plot is left dangling in the middle of a narrative arc. André Gide inaugurated the device in his novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, about which he casually wrote in his diaries after completing the last chapter “pourrait être continué” (could be continued) (Lagarde and Michard, *XXème siècle* 284). A recent example of a plot that just stops is the ending of the wildly popular TV series *The Sopranos*. The long-awaited last episode does not conclude with a spectacular event that brings the “mother of all closures,” as would the death of the main character, Tony Soprano, but with an ordinary family meal at a nondescript diner. The screen turns black just as the Soprano daughter, Meadow, arrives late at the gathering after having trouble parking her car, and after a delay the credits appear. Some spectators were so surprised to see the episode end on this scene that they believed they had lost their TV signal. Opinions were divided as to whether this ending represents a brilliant comment on the lack of closure of life, and consequently on the disparity between narrative form and reality, or a cheap cop-out demonstrating the author’s inability to tie the strands of the plot in a satisfactory way. (It is interesting to note that in narrative matters, the metaphor of the knot is used in two opposite ways: in one interpretation, conflict creates a knot and resolution unties it; in the other, plot is compared to a rug, and the ending must tie the loose ends together, to prevent unraveling.) One thing is however certain: the lack of closure leaves the door open for a revival of the series.

Should we regard an interrupted ending as a CPT? Those who object to the device can point out to the fact that it can be used to terminate any plot, regardless of the particular circumstances. It does not grow bottom up out of the events that make the narrative world evolve, but is applied top down, as a seemingly arbitrary decision of the creator. Those who find the ending of *The Sopranos* a stroke of genius might reply that no plot twist is inherently objectionable, and that the sudden interruption of action is redeemed by its existential significance. But what ideas can an author express through this device, besides the rather predictable message “life goes on”? This overly general lesson admittedly does not prevent readers and spectators from finding more specific meanings in the particular details of the scene that interrupts a narrative. In the case of *The Sopranos*, the Internet is full of speculations about what the author was trying to say by having Tony play a particular song on the juke-box or by making a man wearing a “Members Only” jacket walk past him on his way to the bathroom, and about whether the prolonged darkness that follows the last frame means that Tony has died. Interrupted endings manage to be at the same time the refusal of the inherent trickery of plot, and the ultimate CPT.

PLOT HOLES

If you ever had the annoying experience of watching a movie and not quite understanding why the characters are acting the way they are, you may have missed crucial information, something easy to do with a streaming medium that controls the pace of its display, and that distributes attention among many channels. Alternatively, you may have noticed a plot hole. While in CPTs authors play god to ensure a proper narrative arc, in plot holes they ignore or fail to notice logical inconsistencies that should normally prevent the progression of the plot toward its outcome. From the reader's point of view PHs are much more disturbing than CPTs, because the latter are immediately recognizable, while the former arouse the suspicion: Am I stupid? Have I missed something? It is a relief for readers to be able to attribute the inconsistency to the author's ineptitude, rather than to their own mental deficiencies.

In the common use of the term, "plot hole" designates an inadvertent inconsistency in the logical and motivational texture of a story. This situation must be distinguished from ontological paradoxes that drill holes through the intelligibility of a fictional world. Certain narratives, such as Kafka's "Metamorphosis," or Emmanuel Carrère's *La Moustache* (a story in which the past of the hero is constantly changing) are built around fantastic events that defy understanding, even though their world is consistent in all other respects. While realistic narratives construe the fictional world as an apple, this is to say, as a fully filled sphere of rational events, and narratives with plot holes construe it as a wormy apple into which readers may bite without noticing the worms, narratives with ontological paradoxes construe their world like a Swiss cheese, with zones of irrationality clearly delimited from areas accessible to logical inferences, so that they do not throw the entire fictional world into cognitive chaos.

Inadvertent plot holes are particularly frequent in film because the medium's emphasis on visible action, its time constraints, and its allegiance to highly dramatic effects require a tightly plotted storyline. The more action one squeezes into a limited temporal frame, the greater the need for logical (i.e. causal or motivational) connections, but also the greater the probability that some of these connections will be overlooked by the scriptwriter. It is also easier to get away with plot holes in film than in print narrative because of the streaming nature of the medium. The spectator of cinema is much more focused on the present than the reader of a novel, who can interrupt reading to think about past events, or re-read earlier passages. If movie spectators give too much thought to the plot holes of previous scenes, they will be unable to keep up with the current developments.

The classic movie *Citizen Kane* offers a relatively harmless example of plot hole:

In Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, a group of reporters is trying to discover the meaning of Kane's dying words "Rosebud." However, Kane dies alone. When Welles was informed of this, he reportedly stared for a long time before saying, "Don't you ever tell anyone of this." ("Plot Hole")

In *Citizen Kane*, the plot hole is a minor oversight which could have been easily fixed, if the scriptwriter had been aware of it. For instance, Kane's last word could have been heard by a servant, and he could have died alone several hours after uttering it. Moreover, of the two incompatible events that create the hole, only one—uttering “Rosebud” as a final word—implicates the future development of the story; the fact that Kane died alone, a comment on his life and character, has a symbolic rather than a causal function and it would be easier to delete without damaging the logical integrity of the plot.

The truly unbridgeable plot holes involve strategic decisions from the characters that blatantly violate common sense. While characters may not always act in the same way we would if we were placed in the same situations, we expect of them a minimum of rationality, unless, of course, they suffer from impaired mental abilities. Consider the character's motivation in these two examples:

A mother tells her daughter, Little Red Riding Hood, to go through the forest and to bring some food to her ailing grandmother. She warns the little girl not to talk to strangers. On her way, Little Red Riding Hood meets a hungry wolf and tells him about her mission. The wolf runs to the grandmother's house, eats her, and takes her place in bed. When Little Red Riding Hood arrives she mistakes the wolf for the grandmother. After a conversation during which he pretends to be the grandmother, the wolf jumps out of the bed and eats Little Red Riding Hood.

Question: Why didn't the wolf eat the little girl on their first encounter, if he was really hungry? By delaying his repast, wasn't he running the risk of losing her to another wolf? Answer: he does not eat Little Red Riding Hood on the spot because it makes a better story. As I have argued in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (Chapter 11), most narratives are created not prospectively, but retrospectively. Rather than charting the evolution of an initial situation, the storyteller imagines a climactic scene, a situation of high tellability, and constructs a causal chain of events that leads to the target situation. Here the target was the highly dramatic, slightly comic, and visually appealing scene of the encounter of the heroine with the wolf disguised as the grandmother.

Another example of defective motivation comes from Dan Brown's mega-best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*:

The curator of the Louvre is murdered in the museum. Before he dies he draws a strange symbol with his blood, together with the message “Get Robert Langdon.” The police summons Langdon, a professor of symbology, to the scene, where he is joined by Sophie, a cryptologist and the granddaughter of the victim. Langdon soon realizes that the police suspect him of the murder and want to arrest him. This sets in motion a hectic manhunt during which Sophie and Langdon escape the police through a series of daring moves, as if their life depended on it, while attempting at the same time to decipher a chain of riddles devised by the dead man. In the end however the

very same cop who initiated the chase arrives like a *Deus Ex Machina* to arrest the real murderer, who had just been disarmed by Langdon and Sophie.

In the course of their attempt to escape from the French police, Langdon and Sophie perform many daring actions that put their life at risk: using a Da Vinci painting as shield in a move to disarm the cops, driving a jeep at high speed through rough terrain with the cops breathing down their neck, boarding an airplane and flying away just as their pursuers are catching up with them. But since there is no solid evidence against them, what did Langdon and Sophie have to fear from being arrested, besides being interrogated and released? Moreover, by attempting to flee, aren't they incriminating themselves? The author is aware of this inconsistency, and builds rather unconvincing arguments to justify the behavior of both the police and the heroes: the cop is motivated by religious faith and a need for promotion; Langdon flees in the hope of taking refuge at the U.S. embassy, where he believes he will be protected by his government. The novel treats French police as if France were some kind of sinister dictatorship where innocent people can be arbitrarily arrested, summarily tried and sent to rot in jail, rather than a modern democracy that presumes people to be innocent until found guilty. But a more rational behavior on the part of Langdon and Sophie (or on the part of the police) would have deprived readers of a breathtaking chase that maximizes dramatic effect by giving the heroes the double task of deciphering a chain of riddles while trying to escape from their pursuers.

EVALUATING PLOT DEVICES

Literary taste is historically variable, and, as the example from *La Princesse de Clèves* demonstrates, so are judgments of what constitutes a CPT. It is always dangerous for critics to take their own reactions as typical of a wider reading public, but here I will indeed assume that my evaluation of the devices described above as cheap is reasonably shared among at least a certain class of readers—let's call them "academic." This does not necessarily mean that we dislike the stories that make use of these devices; on the contrary, we may enjoy them *cum grano salis*, as an example of literary kitsch; or we may decide that the narrative situation toward which they lead was well worth the cost of a CPT. Our aesthetic evaluation of plot devices can be captured by a simple economic principle: if a device defies our willingness to suspend disbelief, was the reward worth the sacrifice, and could the reward have been obtained at a cheaper cost, or at no cost at all? In other words, can we think of a better solution to the plotting problem, one that gives the impression of growing from within the narrative situation, rather than depending on the intervention of too freely created external events?

The idea of a trade-off raises the question of what is to be gained and what is to be lost by using CPTs. The advantages are obvious. All my examples of CPTs and PHs allowed the story to reach a situation of intense dramatic tension. In *La Princesse de Clèves*, the CPT of the extraordinary convergence of life paths leads to the highly emotional situation of Nemours realizing that he is loved; in *Phèdre*, the

false news incites the heroine to compromise her reputation; in *The Gift of the Magi*, the contrived parallelism leads to the moving scene of Jim and Della's deepened awareness of the priceless nature of their love for each other. The list is endless. Now that the emotional impact of narrative has regained favor among literary critics (after an eclipse under New Criticism and deconstruction), it would take a Cartesian curmudgeon to dismiss without trial the violations of narrative logic and the conventional devices that lead to heartrending scenes. Besides preparing situations of great emotional impact, CPTs also steer the plot on a course that leads to a satisfactory climax and resolution, while plot holes allow the narrative to jump over potential logical obstacles. If they are so beneficial, why do we object to them?

The rejection of CPTs by some audiences is symptomatic of their distrust of plot as an adequate way to represent reality. As the historian Hayden White argues, stories impose on reality a form that is alien to it: "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see the end in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the form that the annals and chronicles suggest [i.e. as a list of events that leaves out causal relations]" (23). White's implicit suggestion that "how the world presents itself to perception" constitutes the goal of historical representation, and that annals and chronicles—notoriously plotless forms of narrative—are more true to life than emplotted stories rests on a questionable belief in a "raw" perception untainted by narrative interpretation, as well as on an elimination of mental phenomena from reality. If history is made of events, and if most events are the result of actions performed by thinking human beings, historiography must take minds into account, and the content of these minds must be inferred, since it does not present itself to perception. (One of the major concerns of cognitive psychology, known as "Theory of Mind," is indeed our ability to construct other people's thoughts.) Still, White's distrust of emplotment as an adequate mean of representation has been very influential on the practice of historiography. Though his critique does not target fiction—his point, rather, is that narrative history is no more truthful than fiction, because it imitates literary forms such as tragedy, comedy and farce—its relevance extends to any literary work whose aesthetic and ethical goal is to present an image of what could happen in the real world. Plot, in this perspective, is a form imposed top-down on reality, rather than growing out of it. As stereotyped devices borrowed from literary tradition, devices that have traveled, virtually unchanged, through countless fictional worlds, CPTs are the worst culprit and the most blatant evidence of the artificiality of plot.

The reader's acceptance of CPTs hinges on many factors. As the example of *La Princesse de Clèves* demonstrates, one of them is the historical variability of literary taste. After flourishing in the Renaissance and Baroque age, CPTs saw a sharp decline in the nineteenth century. Though Dannenberg observes some examples of coincidence—the main source of CPTs—in Austen (151–52), Brontë (154–55), and Dickens (155–57), these situations, which involve characters discovering that they are related or have common acquaintances, appear to be much less contrived than the CPTs of the Baroque novel, because they take place in a much more restricted social and geographic environment. For instance, given the closed world of the British gen-

try in which Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* take place, the odds against Elizabeth Bennet's cousin Collins being the rector of the parish presided over by Darcy's aunt Lady Catherine are much lower than the odds against Nemours eavesdropping on Mme de Clèves' confession. Small world effects are phenomena that do occasionally occur in the real world, and when they do, we feel an irresistible urge to tell stories about them. Their presence in the novels of realism goes with the territory of social reality.

CPTs continued their decline in modernism, together with heavily plotted stories. But as Dannenberg observes, they are presently enjoying a minor revival because their contrived and conventional nature can be used in support of the postmodernist/structuralist view that language constructs, rather than reflects reality, and that thought is conditioned by an arbitrarily configured system of signs. The use of CPTs in late 20th century literary fiction is likely not to be a "naïve" attempt to immerse the reader in a fictional world that takes temporarily the place of reality, but instead a self-reflexive, or meta-fictional device that underscores the textual origin of the fictional world. For the postmodernist, no plot twist is so cheap that it cannot be redeemed by irony. As Julian Barnes writes:

And as for coincidence in books—there's something cheap and sentimental about the device . . . the sudden but convenient Dickensian benefactors; the neat shipwreck on a foreign shore which reunites siblings and lovers. . . . One way of legitimizing coincidences, of course, is to call them ironies . . . I wonder if the wittiest, most resonant irony isn't just a well-brushed, well-educated coincidence. (67)

Twentieth-century examples of ironic, parodistic, and self-reflexive uses of CPT abound: for instance, the rescue in extremis of the heroes of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* through the *Deus Ex Machina* arrival of the king's mounted messenger (an irony also present in Brecht's eighteenth century intertext, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*)³; or the discovery by one of the two protagonists of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* that she is the descendant of the two Victorian poets whose love affair they have been studying—an obvious parody of romantic plots. The ironization of CPTs is in fact so typical of the postmodernist spirit that it threatens to become yet another CPT—or rather a meta-CPT. This could explain why the self-reflexive stance has now percolated from "high" literature to popular culture—which, according to Steven Johnson, is becoming more and more sophisticated as people become more literate in its media of dissemination: film, TV and video games. In this example, from the Wikipedia entry on plot holes, a literalized metaphor is used as a means of tele-transportation:

In *Tiny Toon Adventures: How I spent my Vacation*, a plot hole (portrayed by a physical hole) is used to transport Babs, Buster and Byron back to Acme University. Babs makes the comment "A plot hole. I wondered how the hack writers would get out of this one."

If ironic self-reflexivity can allow contemporary authors to enjoy the benefits of CPTs without paying the price—that is, without being themselves accused of bad plotting—it should work just as well to protect the reputation of authors of the past. In a move typical of deconstruction, the dominant school of literary criticism at the time of the article’s publication, Dalia Judovitz exonerates Mme de Lafayette’s use of CPTs by reading her use of verisimilitude-transgressing events as an allegory of what she regards as the unavoidably “fictional” nature of representation:

The novel’s identification of representation and fiction announces the emergence of the aesthetics of implausibility, for art now becomes the expression of the true character of representation. This new aesthetics is no longer defined by its social or ethical adequacy, by its adherence to some ultimate truth but by its representational character, that is to say its own truth as self-imposed, willed and created representation. (1054–55)

In such a reading, the novel’s literary value does not reside in its presentation of the ethical dilemma of Mme de Clèves, but in its awareness of the allegedly “true” nature of representation, which paradoxically resides in a decoupling from truth. The possibility of truth is thus shifted from the representational to the meta-representational level.

A second factor of acceptability is genre. Historical periods are marked by the predominance of different types of fictional world. These types of world tend to develop into culturally recognized genres, such as pastoral romance and chivalric novels for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the fantastic, science fiction, detective stories, and historical novels for contemporary literature. The more realistic a genre, i.e. the closer its world to our model of everyday reality, the less tolerant readers will be to the use of plot twists that stretch their willingness to suspend disbelief.⁴ CPTs are much more acceptable in gothic novels, horror stories, science fiction, medieval fantasy, and magical realism than in historical novels, psychological novels, postcolonial novels, and detective stories (which must maintain a certain level of cleverness). The same holds of PHs: as the film critic Anthony Lane writes about the Spanish horror film *The Orphanage*, “A scary movie . . . is meant to be infested with implausibilities, and what counts is whether we allow them to nip and needle us throughout or whether . . . we learn to live with them, and even, perhaps, to cherish their power of suggestion” (86). The impact of genre on the reader’s evaluation of plot is illustrated once again by *La Princesse de Clèves*. The readers of the seventeenth century judged Mme de Lafayette’s novel according to a Baroque aesthetics that cherished convoluted plots, stories within stories, extraordinary coincidence and exotic settings. Not only did Mme de Lafayette contribute to the tradition of the seventeenth century romance in her earlier novel *Zaïde*, a complicated tale of romantic love, adventure, kidnapping, and journeys to faraway countries with numerous levels of embedding, she also demonstrates the indebtedness of *La Princesse de Clèves* to Baroque aesthetics through several framed tales that digress from the main storyline. But for the modern reader, *La Princesse de Clèves* is the first

genuinely historical novel of French and maybe of European literature. The episode of Nemours overhearing Mme de Clèves' confession is much more shocking in a work that features mostly historical characters, relates historical events (such as the death of King Henri II in a duel), and relies heavily on documents and testimonies of court life in the sixteenth century than it would be in the pastoral romances and chivalric novels that flourished at the time.⁵

Our acceptance of CPTs is also affected by their location within the narrative arc. A preparatory CPT is partially forgotten when the story reaches its climax, but a *deus ex machina* ending lingers in the reader's memory. A story-ending CPT represents a failure to find a satisfactory resolution to the narrative conflict, while a preparatory CPT at least holds the promise of future satisfaction. Another reason we are more tolerant of conflict-creating than of conflict-resolving CPTs is that we want the characters to (appear to) be autonomous agents who exercise some degree of control over their own lives, rather than the puppets of authorial whimsy. Aristotle sensed the importance of making characters masters of their own fate when he recommended limiting interventions of the gods to the pre-history or post-history of the events shown on the stage: "There should be nothing irrational in the events themselves, or failing that, it should be outside the play, as for example in Sophocles' *Oedipus*" (*Poetics* 8.1, 25).

Even when they occur early in the story, CPTs bother us through their excess of tellability. By this I mean that if the events that we regard as CPTs happened in real life, they would be interesting enough to form the point of a story, but they fail to convince in a fiction because it is just too easy for the author to make them up. Aristotle viewed the task of the poet as more deeply philosophical than the task of the historian, because the poet must convince the reader of the plausibility of the narrated events, while the historian reports events whose possibility cannot be contested, since they actually happened. (Let's remember that the actual is a subset of the possible.) Our ambiguous attitude toward CPTs and PHs reflects the paradoxical nature of the expectations we bring to narrative: on one hand we want some degree of verisimilitude, otherwise we could never relate emotionally to the characters nor follow their reasoning; on the other we demand the tellability of extraordinary events. We want our stories to be true to life, in the sense that they should record the efforts of humans to adjust to the genuine randomness of destiny, but we also want them to display the purposefulness of narrative form, which denies randomness. The obviously calculated pseudo-randomness of CPTs and the inadvertent inconsistencies of PHs guarantee narrative form and tellability at the expense of credibility. But while the pursuit of narrative excitement at all costs leads to a dependency on CPTs, the *caveat* of the opposite strategy is to fall into an aesthetics of triviality that views life as basically repetitive and boring, and associates "literary value" with the representation of small and ordinary events. An important aspect of narrative art lies in finding the right balance between the conflicting demands of verisimilitude and tellability.

From a literary point of view, the most significant criterion of acceptability for a plotting device is its thematic adequacy and symbolic value. We are not bothered by the highly incredible sequence of catastrophes and miraculous rescues of the he-

roes in Voltaire's *Candide*, because the point of the story is to challenge Leibniz' pronouncement "everything is for the best in the best of possible worlds." Exaggeration is perfectly in tune with the satirical mood of the story. The role of the miraculous rescues is not to demonstrate the workings of Providence, but more plot-functionally to keep the heroes alive and to allow the author to pile up more catastrophes in their life path. Nor do we regard the earthquake that saves a couple of lovers from execution in Heinrich von Kleist's "Das Erdbeben in Chile" as a cheap resort to a *Deus Ex Machina*, not merely because it happens early in the story, but mostly because it contributes to a thematic scheme that demonstrates the endurance of prejudice and hatred in the heart of man. The earthquake is an act of God that gives mankind a second chance at building a society founded on tolerance, charity, and forgiveness, but this chance is squandered when the crowd discovers the identity of the lovers and lynches them in punishment for their illicit liaison. An even more striking example of a thematically grounded transgression of probability comes from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Here the plotting of the author stands for the will of the gods who hold the strings of human lives, and his heavy hand in arranging the circumstances that make Oedipus guilty of parricide and incest can be interpreted as an allegory of the inescapability of fate. In *La Princesse de Clèves*, by contrast, the heroine's refusal to give in to her passion signifies the possibility to remain in control of one's life despite the accidents of fate, and this makes the author's recourse to extraordinary coincidence much less justifiable.

CONCLUSION

The catalog of CPTs presented in this article is only a beginning; it will take the expertise of many readers to expand this rudimentary typology into a more comprehensive theory. I would therefore like to invite readers to submit their favorite examples of CPTs, PHs, and even BPTs to my e-mail address, marilaur@gmail.com. I am particularly interested in examples of CPTs/PHs in otherwise highly respected literary texts.

The point of my investigation is not to castigate the use of CPTs, but rather to gain a better understanding of the mechanics of plot. Narrative is said to consist of story and discourse, but the vast majority of narratological work has focused either on the latter, or, with socio-linguistic approaches, on the pragmatics of narrative communication, leaving "storyology"—the study of the logic that binds events into plots—mostly to scriptwriters and authors of "How To" manuals.⁶ What Jerome Bruner wrote in 1986 unfortunately still holds largely true, despite the attention given in the meantime to the notion of tellability: "In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceeds, we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories" (14). The present study looks admittedly at the opposite of good stories, but as the negative images of BPTs, CPTs and PHs teach us indirectly about efficient plot construction. By asking of CPTs what design problems they are supposed to solve, I hope to have sketched an approach to plot that aims at the heart of narrative logic. CPTs, BPTs, and ordinary PHs are cogs

and wheels in a machine engineered to produce certain effects on the user, and their understanding begins with a fundamental question that was first formulated by Vladimir Propp: what is their function for the story as a whole?

ENDNOTES

1. The complete text of the story, in both French and English, can be found in Eco's book *The Role of the Reader*.
2. It is worth noting that the use of the expression *Deus Ex Machina* implies a benevolent god: there is no such thing as a *Diabolus Ex Machina*, even though it is quite possible for a random event to cause a tragic ending (cf. Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, where the bullet of an assassin kills the wrong person).
3. At the end of the play, the character of the Beggar declares that Macheath deserves to be hanged, but since this is a comedy, and comedy does not tolerate tragic endings, he will be saved from the gallows and reunited with his wife, Polly (actually, one of his wives). The case of *The Beggar's Opera* provides an excellent example of the metafictional tendencies of eighteenth-century literature and of its affinities with postmodernism.
4. A possible exception to this claim are thrillers and hard-boiled detective stories, which take place in the setting of the modern world and are quite hospitable to CPTs, but one could argue that their world is distanced from "everyday reality" though the predominance of extraordinary events.
5. The indebtedness of *La Princesse de Clèves* to the plots of pastoral romance has been noted by Thomas Pavel (128–29).
6. Among the exceptions to this claim are Bremond, Pavel, Ryan, Kafalenos, Dannenberg, and of course the precursors of them all, Aristotle and Vladimir Propp.

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