Real Mysteries
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In Chapters 1 and 2 I addressed textually induced experiences of noncomprehension that occur when the mind is directed toward an unimagi-
nable unknown. I called these experiences the cognitive sublime and argued
that they aroused a state of unknowing that is available to us not only in our
experience of certain texts but also in our condition as human beings. In other
words, whether they come upon us or we actively seek them out, the experi-
ence is of an unknown that abides with us in our daily lives.

In this chapter, the unknowable is entirely fabricated and as such differs
from what is unknowable in the narratives examined in the other chapters
of this book. It derives from a form of “neural sport”—a deliberate jamming
of our mental circuitry whereby we are cut adrift from deeply embedded
ways of knowing and enter states of syntactical and narrative impossibility
that abide only in our transaction with the text. The result is an epistemo-
logical breakdown that is palpable. It lets us know through experience, rather
than through abstract discourse or representation, one way in which our
minds need “to make sense” of a represented world. “Sense” in this context
is a kind of order that in turn confers a kind of comfort. Its willful violation
is disturbing and, with regard to the works we’ll look at in this chapter, has
often been condemned out of hand. Understandably so. But reader/viewers
who don’t withdraw from this neural disturbance, enter into an experience
of impossibility registered in the overworked synapses of their minds. They feel how deeply they depend on the syntactical and narrative leashes that tie the mind to its cognitive moorings. And for this reason alone it is a salutary experience.

But this chapter also serves two other functions. One is to introduce a useful alignment between syntactical and narrative expectations. The principal template I’ll use to make this alignment is the garden path of a garden-path sentence (this will come clear below). The other function is to lay the groundwork for chapter 4. The tools of analysis that I deploy in this chapter will help me in the next where I take up a more complex artistic challenge in dealing with states of inexpressible mystery. Though these latter states are unknowable in the sense of lying beyond the reach of our means of expression, they are, like the cognitive sublime and unlike the neural sport I deal with in this chapter, states that are available to us in the natural course of our lives.

To accomplish my goals in this chapter I have put together two artists, the writer Gertrude Stein and the filmmaker Michael Haneke, who would appear on the face of it to be strange bedfellows. Yet, in the two very different works I have selected, they have produced versions of the same effect, one at the molecular level of syntax and the other at the molar level of narrative. As with all the works dealt with in this study, these two works can also yield a handful of credible intentional readings (along with, as always, an infinitude of readings ranging from the somewhat credible to the absurd). And again, as was the case with my treatment of works by Beckett and García Márquez, I will be showing a way in which these authors replace, in whole (Stein) or in part (Haneke), an art of representation with an art of induced cognitive states.

1. Depending on one’s definition of narrative, the sentence is where one finds either a building block of narrative or its most minute example. There are some scholars who grant narrative status to even the most minimal sentences with a subject, a transitive verb, and an object (Genette 1980; B. Smith 1981; Prince 1987; H. P. Abbott 2008. Prince was to complicate his basic definition of narrative in the second edition of his Dictionary of Narratology 2003). Someone said somewhere that where the verb introduces time, narrative simply extends it. But I do not intend to revive here the goal of structural narratologists like Svetan Todorov to analyze the structure of narrative as a kind of extended sentence. Of course, a sentence can present a complete narrative (“After leaving the smoking ruins of Troy, Odysseus had many adventures until at last he arrived in Ithaca, slew Penelope’s suitors, and with the help of Athene enjoyed peace thereafter into his old age”). But without invoking a structuralist framework, it is still possible to see in the syntactical expectations aroused by much shorter and simpler sentences, the operation of narrative expectations at a molecular level of action.
GARDEN PATHS

To get to my subject, let’s first clarify what a garden-path sentence is. Here’s one:

Fat people eat accumulates.

This is a perfectly grammatical sentence. But by inviting us at the outset to apply an inapplicable syntactical template, it reads like nonsense. We are led down a garden path (hence the term) that dead-ends and it is only by a recursive effort (going back and finding the right syntactical path) that we find its meaning. On first reading, customary usage will invariably read the word “fat” as an adjective modifying “people.” But doing so will then require “accumulates” to be read as a noun (what fat people eat). The only way to restore “accumulates” to its proper status as a verb is to read “fat” as a noun. Then it makes sense. Garden-path sentences usually rely on words like “fat” that can have more than one grammatical status (or meaning), but also, and often crucially, on a little bit of grammatical discourtesy as well. The writer has left out a couple of helper words that any editor would note: “The fat that people eat accumulates.” Here are a few more:

The man who hunts ducks out on weekends.
While the boy scratched the big and hairy dog yawned loudly.
The daughter of the king’s son admires himself.
They told the boy that the girl met the story.
All women who like a man who paints like Monet.
The old man the boat. ²

The term “garden-path sentence” was coined by the linguist Mitchell Marcus (Marcus 1974, 1980) as central evidence for “the incremental parsing of natural language” or “discourse-as-process.” The argument is that, to some extent at least, we understand a sentence incrementally, that is, word by word, rather than exclusively as a whole. This is still an area of some contention, but garden-path sentences do foreground a challenge in the field of computational linguistics and particularly in the development of computer-

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² Many of these were taken or adapted from www.site.uottawa.ca/~kbarker/garden-path.html. A quick Google search will give you other sites with fine examples. For a good general discussion of garden-path sentences and the challenge of disambiguating them, see Pinker 1994: 207–17.
ized translation programs, which generally rely on whole sentence reading. At the same time it underscores how much the disambiguation of sentences can be assisted by an understanding of context—something that it is very hard to train a computer to do. On your PC, you often see this inability to disambiguate even mild garden-path effects when Word, trying to be helpful, warns you with green underscoring that there is a problem with your grammar when in fact there isn’t.

There can be a pleasure in reading garden-path sentences, and one might make the same kind of evolutionary argument for this pleasure that Lisa Zunshine makes for the way novels hone our mind-reading capability: they “test the functioning of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading while keeping us pleasantly aware that the ‘test’ is proceeding quite smoothly” (Zunshine 2006: 18). With garden-path sentences, what is pleasurably sharpened is our ability to disambiguate challenging sentences. They fine-tune our language motors. This is, no doubt, why jokes often deploy the garden-path effect:

Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana.
Take my wife, . . . please!

It is fun to play like this with language, and I think the pleasure is sharpened by the way such a sentence tempts linguistic chaos in the split second before we parse the sentence correctly and restore linguistic order. When you get the joke, chaos is brought under control by your own acuity. It is one of the ways to achieve the excitement of living on the edge. The risk is not as great as taking a curve at high speed on a motorcycle, but losing control of one’s language can be hard on the mind. How painful it is anyone knows who has struggled with a language poorly understood amid a group of native speakers.

**IMPOSSIBLE SENTENCES**

In one’s own language, a struggle with garden-path effects is usually provoked by the incompetence of the would-be communicator or the challenge of meeting economies of space, as in news headlines (“Officer shoots man with knife”). But sometimes it can be inflicted intentionally by a writer of certified competence. Here’s a sentence, one of many, by a canonical modernist:

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3. Changes of usage over time can also introduce garden-path effects where contemporaries would have had no problem. Modern readers no longer familiar with the expression that begins the following sentence from *Barchester Towers* might find the sentence incomplete: “Some few years since . . . a liberal clergyman was a person not frequently to be met” (Trollope nd.: 19).
Any little thing is a change that is if nothing is wasted in that cellar. (Stein 1998: 350)

In this instance, the garden-path effect takes hold in the phrase “that is if” at which point readers must abandon the expectation of some kind of modifier of “change” (e.g., “Any little thing is a change that is welcome”). Instead they must retroactively insert a different grammatical understanding of “that is” that leaves “change” unmodified and introduces a contingency that in the world of the sentence would abolish change altogether. The grammatical discourtesy in this case is the absence of two commas that would signal the sentence’s altered course (“Any little thing is a change, that is, if nothing is wasted . . .”). What makes this sentence different from other garden-path sentences is that this substitution does not deliver the relief that ordinarily comes with “getting” the meaning. And this is because there is insufficient information through which we can establish full confidence in our reading. The nouns and the verbs are in this regard referentially impoverished.

Context gives us some help. The sentence comes from the section of Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons titled “Rooms,” and a cellar is a room, so in this limited sense it belongs. But the deictic modifier (“that”) points to a specific cellar that we know only through this sentence. Context also helps somewhat in figuring what qualifies as “any little thing.” “Any” is a repeated modifier of things in the neighboring paragraphs (“any smile,” “any coat”) amid an abundance of other things, though some not so little (“a can,” “a cape,” “a hill,” “a curtain,” “a package and a filter and even a funnel”) and some not so concrete (“a measure,” “a success,” “a religion”). We also learn that “when there is a shower any little thing is water” (348). But all this does not help (me, at least) to understand what it is in the cellar that might be “wasted,” nor how the presence of waste would keep things from being (making?) “a change.” The lexical strangeness of this sentence is so deep that it might even elicit a third path in the mind of a reader desperate to bring some kind of closure (“Any little thing is a change that is as if nothing is wasted . . . ”). But it doesn’t help.

So, whatever pleasure we may take in the sentence’s grammatical and lexical swerves and indeterminacies, it is not the same pleasure as that of a joke. The pleasure of the joke depends on the small triumph of getting it. But here there is nothing to get without serious under- or overreading. Instead, for the mind that refuses premature closure, the pleasure of the text is necessarily threaded with a feeling of anxiety or frustration in the face of the indeterminable. Stein has certainly taken her lumps for all this linguistic havoc, even from sympathetic critics. David Lodge claimed she went too far in violating “the very essence of her medium, language.” It is all “exhilarating,” he wrote, but “the treatment is so drastic that it kills the patient” (Lodge 1977:
154). Wendy Steiner made pretty much the same criticism when she blamed Stein’s botched syntax for robbing her of even a minimal chance to make a significant modernist contribution (Steiner 1978: 156). By contrast, those who defend Stein (and their number continues to grow) stress the way she liberated language from the “real world” constraints of reference, practical usage, and the generally accepted order of time and space. In Neil Schmitz’s words, “the denotated world collapses,” nouns float free from any “clarifying knowledge of the nature of things, and . . . nothing can be named and then classified, given as real” (cited in Perloff 1983: 101). This comports with Stein’s own view that in *Tender Buttons* she was “doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns” (Stein 1971: 138). In rough agreement, Brian McHale described her style as “words disengaged from syntax” (McHale 2009: 153).

But I don’t believe it is possible to disengage from syntax—that is, when sentence or sentence-like expectations are cued. Certainly there are moments in this text when Stein makes rhythm and sound so predominate that the reader is truly released from the prison house of syntactical constraints.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird. (1998: 341)

A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no since. (1998: 344)

This way of writing dominates a poem like “Susie Asado.” But not *Tender Buttons*. And when sentence structure begins to take shape, as it does almost always in *Tender Buttons*, the quality of Stein’s lexical swerves takes on a different coloration. Commonly the syntax of her sentences can be quite clear:

A can containing a curtain is a solid sentimental usage. (1998: 348)

Yet it is the syntax that elicits a feeling of “wrongness.” Without the perception of sentence structure, Stein’s semantic disorder is much more purely a lexical romp, as it is in “Susie Asado.” With the perception of sentence structure, you feel a syntactical resistance as the nouns pull away from your expectations.

Almost very likely there is no seduction, almost very likely there is no stream, certainly very likely the height is penetrated, certainly certainly the target is cleaned. (1998: 349–50)
A change is in a current and there is no habitable exercise. (1998: 351)

Stein’s irresolvable garden-path sentences, then, are simply another hard, sharp turn of the screw in this gallery of disturbing affects. In these sentences, the conflict between syntax and semantics is compounded by a conflict in the syntax itself.

Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. (1998: 313)

A season in yellow sold extra strings makes lying places. (1998: 322)

That choice is there when there is a difference. (1998: 329)

Releasing the oldest auction that is the pleasing some still renewing. (1998: 349)

There is no avoiding an intimation of chaos when cued syntactical expectations are redirected, and, even more, the discomfort when, in the end, the syntactical uncertainties fail to resolve. In short, our cognitive grooves are too deep. Stein must have been aware of this and in fact depended on it. However much her writing may resemble the chaotic speech of aphasics suffering from Jakobsen’s “contiguity disorder” and “contextual deficiency” (Lodge 1977: 148), Stein herself was no aphasic. This is an important point. From her earliest years, she was, like her readers, irreversibly stamped with linguistic competence. So she must have known what she was inflicting on her readers and depended on it as an integral part of the effect she wanted. Perhaps this is what she meant by the words “losing,” “refusing,” and “betraying” cited above. If syntax can be considered a restraining (paternal?) hand, then that hand is felt almost everywhere in the reader’s transaction with this text. It is there in the sensation of its resistance. In fact, the feelings of liberation and play are inseparable from the feeling of syntactical constraint. To put this another way, the sensation of wildness in the nouns’ constant attempts at flight is a result of what constrains them—we only know their weird excess by the syntactical tether that wants to hold them back.

4. It is interesting to compare Stein’s sentences with Chomsky’s famous example of a syntactically grammatical yet semantically meaningless sentence: “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” (Chomsky 1957: 15). My feeling about Chomsky’s sentence is that it pulls at the reader less than Stein’s because the referential anarchy is so extreme it prevents the syntax from gaining any semantic traction at all.
Tender Buttons is a strange text. Well beyond paraphrase, it can only be known by entering into it. And once in it, you know it, whether you want to or not. This may be what Stein meant in “Composition as Explanation,” when she wrote paradoxically of “everybody in their entering the modern composition” that “they do enter it, if they do not enter it they are not so to speak in it they are out of it and so they do enter it” (Stein 1998: 521). In Tender Buttons, she immersed her readers in a constant warfare of nouns and syntax, of which the unparsable garden-path sentence was ground zero. By so doing she went much further down the line than Oscar Wilde ever did in fulfilling the standard that “all art is quite useless.” She takes us to a kind of evolutionary dead-end, where strategic adaptation is displaced by an art that succeeds at the expense of our survival skills. In this it accords with Stein’s aestheticism and the value of “the art that lasts”: such an art “is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity;” The masterpiece, she wrote, “has nothing to do with human nature or with identity, it has to do with the human mind” (Stein 1971: 358). And this is my focus: she brings us into a space in our minds that we rarely visit. We may enjoy this or we may detest it, but it lets us feel the enormous power of syntax, to know something of how deeply our minds are invested in it, and the vertigo we experience when its power is challenged.

Wars of the Worlds

In an ingenious essay, “Speak Friend and Enter,” Manfred Jahn has expanded the applicability of garden-pathing from sentences to narrative. His narrative examples are James Thurber’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and Ursula Le Guin’s “Mazes,” both of which start out by leading the reader down a narrative garden path in one kind of world only to require that world’s recursive reconstruction as another kind of world. As with garden-path sentences, there is a range in the way the effect takes hold and is exposed: quickly in “Walter Mitty,” gradually in “Mazes.” In works like Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926), John Lanchester’s The Debt to Pleasure (1996), William Golding’s Pincher Martin (1956), Flann O’Brien’s The Third Policeman (1967), Ian McEwan’s Atonement (2002), and films like Alfred Hitchcock’s

5. The deep cognitive commonality that is central in the alignment of sentence structure and narrative structure may be best characterized as the “predictive process.” For a fascinating defense of the incremental nature of this process in the predictive mapping of linguistic “event structures” see Altmann and Mirković 2009. It is hard not to see the same process guiding readers and viewers of narrative event structures.
Vertigo (1958), Brian Singer’s The Usual Suspects (1995), David Fincher’s Fight Club (1999), M. Night Shyamalan’s The Sixth Sense (1999), and David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive (2001), exposure of the garden path comes quite late in the narrative and with little warning so that these works almost demand rereading or re-viewing in order to understand the extent to which the world the reader/viewer had accepted as the actual world of a traditional mystery or novel or film was in fact another kind of world. This need to go back and immerse oneself in the world of the narrative constitutes a significant parallel between the effect of a narrative garden path and that of a grammatical one. In The Third Policeman and Atonement, the entire narrative world is discovered to be one in which the narration itself is a sustained act of misleading—a false path that is revealed as such near the end.6

In Shyalaman’s The Sixth Sense, the garden path requires an even more radical revaluation in that it requires a revised understanding of the way the world itself works. A psychiatrist, Malcolm Crowe, discovers late in the

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6. These examples all deploy in an extreme form what Genette, dealing strictly with prose fiction, called “paralypsis,” a strategy of narratorial belatedness in which information is deliberately withheld in order to release it, together with its impact, at a later point in the narrative (Genette 1980: 51–53). In these cases, the device conceals and then reveals what has been called variously a “hidden frame,” a “terminal frame” (Nelles 1997), or a “missing opening frame” (Wolf 2006). Monica Fludernik uses the ending of Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow as an example, though one that works as such only if we agree that the entire narrative is here revealed to be a film Slothrop has been watching (Fludernik 2009: 28–29). I am indebted to John Evans and others who contributed to an on-line discussion of hidden frames, as I am to David Richter, who used the term “revealed frame” in the same on-line discussion and produced as an example the beginning and ending lines of Milton’s “Lycidas”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more} \\
\text{Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-shear,} \\
\text{I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,} \\
\text{And with forc’d fingers rude,} \\
\text{Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.} \\
\text{...} \\
\text{Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th’Okes and rills,} \\
\text{While the still morn went out with Sandals gray,} \\
\text{He touch’d the tender stops of various Quills,} \\
\text{With eager thought warbling his Dorick lay:} \\
\text{And now the Sun had stretch’d out all the hills,} \\
\text{And now was dropt into the Western bay;} \\
\text{At last he rose, and twitch’d his Mantle blew:} \\
\text{To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new. (Milton 1957: 40, 44; ll. 1–5, 186–93)}
\end{align*}
\]

The transition in Milton’s poem is quite gentle, a shift that causes little disturbance. And though I would say it gives us a subtly altered world, it requires none of the arduous retroactive world-remaking that a film like The Sixth Sense does. The example indicates that the garden-path or concealed frame strategy allows for a wide and variegated range of effect.
film that he had not survived an attack that we witness at the film’s outset. Ever since that early point in the film, he, along with most first viewers, had assumed he had survived the attack. But in the actual world of the film he does not survive the attack and from that point on has been a ghost, visible and audible only to the audience and a clairvoyant child, Cole, whom he has been trying to help.\(^7\) As such, *The Sixth Sense* is an instance of what Edward Branigan has called breaking the frame of “world knowledge” by “passing through to a world that has new laws” (Branigan 2006: 288 n.64). But unlike other instances Branigan cites (*Through the Looking Glass*, *Dracula*), the break in *The Sixth Sense* returns us to the world we thought we knew, but now reconstructed.\(^8\) In its world-recreating radicalism it makes vivid what is true in the other examples above: that garden-pathing in fictional narrative is a matter of “worlds” or more precisely, “storyworlds.” These worlds are what correspond to the syntactical alternatives—the two different possible sentences—in a garden-path sentence. And just as in the garden-path sentence a grammatical crisis is brought on by the pressure of grammatical impossibility, in a garden-path narrative an ontological crisis is brought on by the pressure of an ontological impossibility—an impossible world—which must give way to the actual world of the story for the narrative to be coherent. For *The Sixth Sense* to maintain its narrative coherence, the world in which Dr. Crowe appears to be alive must give way to a different world in which he has died, an enlarged world governed by different rules. Much has been written in the last twenty years about the ways in which narrative is not just a matter of linear action but of worldmaking (Hernadi 2002, Ryan 1991, Doležel 1998, Gerrig 1993, Herman 2002), but few narrative moves make us so vividly aware of this than a narrative garden path with its necessary cognitive recalibration of worlds.\(^9\)

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7. One problem with writing about garden paths in recent narratives is that, of necessity, one “spoils” the garden-path surprise by revealing what is exposed and how it is done. I have tried in this chapter to keep such spoiling to the minimum needed.

8. For an even more complex and disorienting reading of the garden-path complexity of *The Sixth Sense* see Branigan (2002: 110–111). Though I don’t (yet) go all the way down the path he suggests, I want to thank Edward Branigan here for a very helpful reading of an early draft of my chapter.

9. Current work on the worldmaking character of narrative was anticipated by Nelson Goodman’s groundbreaking and still useful *Ways of Worldmaking* in 1978. Another groundbreaker is Brian McHale’s 1987 book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, in which he identified the obsessive world-making (and unmaking) of postmodernist narrative as a way of bringing into the foreground the arsenal of slight of hand and unexamined assumptions that traditional realistic narrative has relied on in its world-making.
AN IMPOSSIBLE WORLD

Central to Jahn’s expansion of garden-path effects is his adoption of Ray Jackendoff’s (1983, 1987) concept of “preference-rules”: that hierarchy of probabilities or “non-necessary conditions” packaged in frames or scripts that give them their efficiency and “cognitive power.” The frame of a restaurant or the script of a waiter’s behavior contains certain data that are always true (“necessary conditions”) but they are also packed with assumptions of varying degrees of probability (“non-necessary conditions”).10 Michael Haneke’s award-winning 2005 film, Caché, for example, starts with a short garden path: a street-level view of apartments that most first viewers take for a conventional establishing shot in the film’s storyworld. But the credits come and go, and still the scene persists. The camera remains fixed and nothing happens except for the passing of four pedestrians and a bicyclist. After two full minutes have passed, we hear the sound of intermittent comments of indeterminate import by people who cannot be located anywhere in the scene (“Well?” / “Nothing.” / “Where was it?” / “Out front in a plastic bag.” / “What’s wrong?”). Finally, after just under three minutes, the camera shifts to a different angle in the same locale to follow the TV culture-journalist, Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil), as he emerges from the apartment, crosses the street, points in the direction from which the first shot was taken and says to his wife, Anne (Juliette Binoche, now visible in the doorway), “He must have been there.” He then goes back into the apartment, after which, what seems to be the cinematographer’s camera reverts to the fixed scene it began with. More dialogue ensues, and, eventually, a fast forward puts it beyond doubt that we have been watching not what is happening in the present but rather what happened in the recent past, recorded on tape.

Here, what corresponds to syntactical expectations generated at the level of the sentence are world-making expectations generated at the level of narrative by the cognitive frames and scripts (including, crucially, those belonging to the special language of film) that are cued as the narrative begins. In terms of Jackendoff’s preference rules, any sustained street shot includes a high probability, though not a necessity, of pedestrians and a bicyclist. Voices without perceivable speakers are lower on the list of probabilities, yet they are still possibilities. Such voices loud enough to sound as if they are quite

10. Jahn accepts the common practice of using “frames” to refer to “states and situations (seeing a room, making a promise)” and “scripts” to refer to “stereotypical action sequences (playing a football game, going to a birthday party)” (Jahn 1999: 174; see also Albelson 1980; Stockwell 2002).
near the camera are lower still, but conceivably coming from people beside or immediately behind the point of vision. The cognitive tension increases with the improbabilities: the speakers fail to appear, they continue to make mysterious references, and, perhaps most disturbing, the scene itself grows unconventionally tedious with its lack of significant action or camera movement. Perceptive film veterans may make the “naturalizing” leap before Georges appears, grasping that the scene itself is the subject of the discourse. For some the appearance of Georges going out front on the heels of Anne’s answer to his question (“C’était où?”) will do it. As for the stragglers in the audience, still crushed under the weight of improbabilities, liberation comes with impossibility: the actual world cannot go on fast forward, complete with the tell-tale streaks of a VCR tape.

As Jahn writes, garden-path effects challenge our overriding preference for “maximum cognitive payoff”: “What [leads] one astray is one’s anticipation of good sense, and this is itself a consequence of a human understander’s unwillingness to consider nonsense, of a general horror of semantic emptiness, of a craving to make satisfactory sense of a discourse, in short, of preferring what makes sense or even most sense” (Jahn 1999: 177). Correlatively, a minor pleasure of Haneke’s opening strategy comes when the viewer understands how the opening belongs to a coherent filmic universe. As in the garden-path sentence, the pleasure depends on there being an initial resistance to sense.11 Another interesting innovation in the film is the recurrence of this (increasingly vexed) pleasure in different variations, each with its small payoff of surprise and recovery. A close approximation of the first tape turns out to be actually in the filmic present. But then a sequence seemingly in the filmic present, first through the window of a moving car, then down the hallway of a seedy apartment building to a certain door, turns out to be another tape in the filmic past. Later still, the same sequence down the hallway turns out to be in the filmic present when Georges moves into the frame to knock on the same door. A scene of Georges anchoring a discussion of Rimbaud on his television book-program turns out to be a tape that Georges is editing. In other

11. The makers of The Sixth Sense took considerable pains to anticipate the viewer’s search for inconsistencies in the revised world. At one point Cole lists the rules that govern ghostly behavior, including “They don’t know they’re dead” and “They see what they want to see,” which explains why Malcolm, up to the last scene, fails to recognize all the clear evidence that he is a ghost. In this regard, a considerably more ragged example of garden-pathing in film is the 2003 horror mystery Identity, in which a collection of travelers, stranded at a motel in a rainstorm, are mysteriously murdered, one after another. Late in the film, we discover that they are each a separate personality of a convict afflicted with multiple personality disorder. In order to escape his imminent execution, he has been frantically contriving to have them kill each other off with the exception of his one decent personality (John Cusack).
instances, exactly the same fixed-camera surveillance technique for minutes at a time will turn out to be continuations of the filmic present.

In most of these little garden paths, there is the play of probability, improbability, impossibility, and resolution that delivers the small pleasure of successful parsing. Thematically the device works very well, since much of the film is about the perils of certainty. The palpable tension of the film is in large part a product of Georges’s adamant refusal to acknowledge the guilt he feels for lies he told as a child. These lies had terrible consequences for Majid, the Algerian orphan his parents had loved and might have adopted. Georges’s persistent denial, dissembling, and belligerence are clearly meant to parallel the way France as a nation has failed to address its own collective feelings of suppressed guilt over its treatment of Algiers and Algerians. Haneke’s garden-path editing, then, recreates this theme of the perils of certainty, but now as a condition of viewer response by repeatedly reminding us how easily we can go wrong in our assessment of what it is we are seeing.

“Every path leads to nothing,” Haneke has said in reference to Caché, “The truth is always hidden” (Haneke 2006). Well, yes and no. On the one hand, there is extraordinary truth at the level of mimesis in Auteuil’s performance of a man with his kind of professional success, harried out of the blue by anonymous tapes and pictures insinuating judgment and threatening who knows what consequences. It is a highly skilled performance, and for it Auteuil was awarded Best Male Actor in the 2005 European Film Academy Awards. In fact, across the board the acting in this film is exceptionally convincing. It is what gives the film much of its power and to this degree the film is clear. On the other hand, what is not clear is the question of guilt and how to deal with it. Terrible things were done, both in French-Algerian relations (Majid’s parents died in a historically documented massacre in 1961 when a rally called by the FLN was broken up by the police and two hundred French Algerians were thrown into the Seine to drown) and in Georges’s relations with Majid when his lies led to Majid’s expulsion from his family. But Georges was only six at the time, and by keeping us close to him as he struggles with his literal and figurative nightmares, Haneke also keeps us from any easy judgments.

Similarly, with regard to Haneke’s garden-path filming, one can say that it is not entirely true that “every path leads to nothing.” Repeatedly, as the examples above show, we find the right path. Film or tape, we make our mistakes and we successfully correct them. Where we do lose our way lies not (with one significant exception) in navigating the issue of film present or taped past, but in figuring out who is doing the taping and sending the pictures. The chief suspects, Majid and his son, are pretty convincing in their denial of having anything to do with it, but, much more critically, their participation would involve
major contradictions. This is a drama of attribution that we share with the Laurents and that could conceivably go on forever. Compounding this mystery is the final shot in the film, which is also the major exception with regard to answering the question: Is it in the filmic present or is it another surveillance tape (perhaps even another installment in the harassment of Georges)? It serves as a bookend with the opening shot, but with this difference: where we were allowed to recognize the opening shot as a garden path, we are not allowed to determine whether this one is. It is a shot of school steps at the end of classes with young students doing all the probable things students do at such a time, milling about, chatting in groups, getting in cars. But it is also, like the opening shot, a fixed, “unprofessional” piece of camera work, stretching through the credits, and seeming to go on forever. In this it violates both what would normally be the preference rules for conventional film and also the garden-path expectations to which we have become accustomed.

Compounding this difficulty, the Laurents’ son, Pierrot, and Majid’s unnamed son meet in the upper left hand corner of this scene (something missed by many first-time viewers). They descend the steps in animated and seemingly amicable discussion and then finally part, Majid’s son leaving to the right, Pierrot going back up the steps to join other classmates before his own exit. This is the first we learn that these two boys even know each other. How long have they known each other? Are they friends? Are they perhaps accomplices? Have they been involved together in the plot against Pierrot’s father? Or is Majid’s son cultivating Pierrot in order to visit upon the son further vengeance for the sins of his father? There is simply no way to answer these questions. Haneke has said of an earlier film that it “should not come to an end on the screen, but engage the spectators and find its place in their cognitive and emotive framework” (Wheatley 2006: 33), and viewers at Cannes did their best to oblige. According to Mark Lawson, “this sequence proved to be a sort of Rorschach montage in which viewers saw what they expected or wished to see. Different observers believed that they had detected evidence of a death, a divorce or a dispute over paternity. A critic who is a conspiracy theorist saw a clue to the involvement of the French secret service” (Lawson 2006).

All this frenetic activity is interpretation by supplementation (creating meaningful coherence through strategic alterations of the text as given). And though this may be a sign of intellectual vigor, I think the better part of wisdom is not to give in to it: that is, to accept our ignorance. At the level of representation, there is much powerful material in the film that we do grasp, but there is also much that we don’t. We don’t know what the boys are up to, we don’t know whether Anne Laurent is having an affair with one of the Laurents’ friends, we don’t know much at all about Majid or what else may have
contributed to the grotesque and ingenious vengefulness of his suicide. After all, to accept that we don’t know what we can’t know, that there will always be unconnected dots, does in fact harmonize with the central theme of the film: the danger of premature judgment, of assuming knowledge of what is hidden.

But there is one more twist to this film and to what constitutes a full response to it. This brings us back to the question of who is making the tapes and sending the pictures. It also brings us back to my main theme. So far, we have been dealing with questions of what is knowable in this narrative and what remains a mystery. And certainly the question of who is doing the taping would seem a preeminent mystery. Watching the first tape, Georges and Anne see Georges as he leaves for work in the morning. He walks right toward the camera, passing to its right. “How come I didn’t see him?” he asks. Maybe the camera was in a car? No, it doesn’t look like it was filmed through a window. “It’ll remain a mystery.” But actually our problem is not that we know too little about the taping, but too much. For we have here an agent who influences the course of events; who is aware of intimate details from a past known only to one, possibly two, characters besides Georges; who has a capacity to tape very close up without being seen; who can catch a key event at a time impossible to predict and from a spot that is clearly visible during the scene’s enactment; who can deliver a tape through a closed security gate; and who can post drawings that not only depict intimate details of what has happened in the distant past but also strongly suggest what will happen in the future (Majid’s suicide). In short, we have been garden-pathed not in our serial assumptions about who is doing the taping but in the assumption that it is being done by someone at all, that is, by a human agent who belongs to the film’s storyworld. Rather, given the set of details we have to work with, such a participant must be something else altogether. A supernatural agent capable of intervening in a storyworld sufficiently enlarged to accommodate the supernatural? An extradiegetic agent not wholly a part of the film’s world but capable of making metaleptic forays into the film’s storyworld? We simply will never know.

This is an altogether different kind of mystery from those belonging to the storyworld in which the rest of the action takes place. In such a world, the preference rules consistent with that world would have to govern any taping by a human agent, however hidden. When Haneke violates those rules, he

12. It is worth bearing in mind that the chain of events set in motion and sustained by this hidden daemon, including the humiliation of Majid’s being jailed with his son, is quite possibly the trigger that brings on Majid’s suicide.

13. Catherine Wheatley settles for the director himself: “‘Whose idea of a sick joke is this?’ Georges asks his wife after the second tape arrives. Well, it’s Haneke’s. The stalker’s camera is the director’s camera. And the person who is really ‘sending’ the tapes can only be the director himself” (Wheatley 2006: 35).
creates a different kind of mystery from the one Georges had in mind when he said “It’ll remain a mystery.” It is an ontologically disorienting mystery, a garden-path sequence that can’t be “gotten” the way the garden paths of Roger Acroyd or Vertigo can. ¹⁴ Even while the tapes and pictures and the manner of their delivery are doing their efficient and chilling work in opening up the psychological and ethical dimensions of this film, they also introduce an eerie extradimensional element that runs crosswise to the grain of this otherwise powerfully realistic film. It also gives new meaning to the title of the film, Caché (Hidden). The often ingenious hiding of other kinds of information in this film is, like the ethical issues it raises, basically an extension of the realistic tradition in film. Even when Haneke the modernist calls on his viewers to take over the job of completing the film, filling in where he has left gaps, and in the process wrestling with the ethical questions of the film, he is asking them to join with him in a basically humanistic project.¹⁵ But with regard to the agent behind the tapes and pictures, the viewer cannot proceed in the same way without seriously underreading. To respond fully to this aspect of the film with its manifest impossibilities is to experience a jamming of cognitive schemata that leaves the viewer stranded between worlds.¹⁶

¹⁴. Caché falls within the large and growing number of nontraditional experiments in storytelling that Warren Buckland has classed as “puzzle films” (2009; for more limited classes of filmic manipulations of time and space, see Cameron 2008, Laass 2008, and Elsaesser 2009). But the kind of unresolved ontological puzzle that Haneke achieves through a failed garden path structure puts the film in a much smaller subcategory. Christopher Nolan’s Inception (2010) is arguably a candidate depending on whether it is impossible to conclude that there is a level of reality within which the multiple layers of dreaming occur. Michael Caine, for one, asserted in a BBC interview that the confusing ontology of dreams within dreams does resolve into a single coherent storyworld: “[The spinning top] drops at the end, that’s when I come back on. If I’m there it’s real, because I’m never in the dream. I’m the guy who invented the dream.” http://screenrant.com/michael-caine-inception-ending-batman-3-benn-80670/. In written narrative, a possible, if less disturbing, candidate is Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook (1962) in which one cannot tell whether the novel Free Women contains the notebooks or the notebooks contain the novel.

¹⁵. In an interview with Richard Porton, Haneke stresses that Caché is a “realistic film” (Porton 2005: 50). “Hyperrealistic” might be a better term, since much of the focus of the film is on the degree to which reality has been obscured by its simulacra. Haneke said as much in another interview: “Today we are surrounded by images that we take for reality, which is dangerous because we can be manipulated. That’s why we filmed Caché in high-def video, to create a ‘video look.’ What the viewer often takes for reality isn’t reality, it’s just another representation of it” (Ng 2005).

¹⁶. Has Haneke’s device, then, marred an otherwise excellent film? On the one hand, we have a powerful narrative, delivered in a progression that artfully builds from one intense moment to the next. The alignment of guilt and denial, both personal and national, is immensely effective. On the other hand, our attention is diverted by a stubborn mystery threading its way into the narrative, deepening as the impossibilities accumulate. In the terms I’ve developed, a drama of representation is increasingly made to share the same filmic space with a cogni-
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_Caché_ is an excellent demonstration text for my purposes because it includes narrative versions of both kinds of garden path: those that can be parsed and those that can’t, the latter a narrative version of the jammed garden-path effect that I dealt with in the sentences of Stein. It is not hard to find much more thoroughgoing narrative versions of unparsable garden paths in postmodern literature. There are many in a novel like Alain Robbe-Grillet’s _Dans le labyrinthe_ (1959), including the oft-cited scene in which the minute description of a nineteenth-century etching, “The Defeat of Reichenfels,” almost imperceptibly transforms into a continuation of the narrative that has preceded it. Critical response to _Dans le labyrinthe_ has not uncommonly attributed this and other narrative impossibilities to narrator exhaustion. But in Brian McHale’s words, “this is an 'expensive' reading, in the sense that it requires us to smooth over a good many difficulties and to repress the text’s own resistance to being read this way” (McHale 1987: 14). In the same way, readers of J. M. Coetzee’s _In the Heart of the Country_ (1977) have at times sought to “naturalize” its wealth of impossibilities as instances of narrator insanity.

In the terms I have been using, exhaustion and insanity are default probabilities that allow the reader to reframe the narrative as symptom and to relocate its action from a fictional actual world of the narrative to a fictional mental world of the narrator. In other words, naturalizing formal incoherence by inferring an exhausted or insane narrator is basically a way of normalizing incoherence as a kind of coherence, sufficiently recognizable to be labeled a product of exhaustion or insanity. And though, as McHale says, both interpretive moves require strategic reductions of the texts involved, it is certainly understandable why readers should want to make them. Narratives, like sentences, can be intolerable when they can’t be parsed. Our biological and cultural evolution did not give us the cognitive engineering to accommodate them with ease. But if you are going to do justice to a novel like _In the Heart of the Country_.

At the viewer and the film. And, it would seem from the accounts of its first showing that it was the second drama that had everybody buzzing afterward. Nonetheless, I think the really interesting issue is one of logistics: Could Haneke have achieved the success he did in any other way? That is: Would it be possible to resolve the mystery of the agent and maintain the tension that its hiddenness contributes to the moral drama at the center of the film? The answer would seem to be No. Revealing the agent behind the camera and the premonitory drawings would both reduce the nightmarish quality of an all-knowing, irresistible, accusatory consciousness and introduce plot and character complications that would diffuse the focus on George’s crisis of conscience. From this perspective, what I have been calling the film’s ontological conflict, could be seen as an unintended collateral price Haneke was willing to pay in exchange for what he gained.
the Country, you cannot opt, as Coetzee himself put it, “for psychological realism”: that is, “a depiction of one person’s inner consciousness.” In his words, he’s playing “a different kind of game, an anti-realistic kind of game” (cited in B. Richardson 2006: 138).17

My argument throughout this chapter has been that such a game, whether in sentences or narratives, involves a more radical relocation of the action from the fictional actual world of the text to the mind of its beholder. It becomes a drama of cognition and at the same time a much more intimate transaction between creator and audience. Of course, it is not news that much of twentieth-century experimental literature and film has not only abandoned traditional conventions of representation but representation altogether. The idea has been around so long that Brian Richardson in his Unnatural Voices has called for an “anti-mimetic” supplement to narrative theorizing so that we may catch up with this common insight. And certainly the development of a cognitive dimension of such a revised and enlarged theory would help us deal with texts that, in part or in whole, have relocated the intention of the art to what it does to the mind of the reader or viewer: from what art is about to what it cognitively is. But any such supplemental adjunct to theories of the anti-mimetic or the unnatural, must be grounded in our understanding of what comes naturally to us. In short, experiments like those of Stein and Haneke are so disturbing because . . . we are what we are. Our exquisitely evolved hearts and minds are what have given us our craving for narrative and by extension the market that serves it.

There has been no dearth of plausible theories regarding the utility of this craving. But where strictly evolutionary theorizing runs into difficulties is when literature fails to perform what it is supposed to be good for, that is, notably, literature that falls in the alien terrain of these texts and other modernist and postmodernist fiction and film. When scientists like Dissanayake, E. O. Wilson, and Pinker write off these texts as various forms of perverse indulgence, they are accusing their authors of evolutionary misbehavior. In this they echo the outraged arbiters of taste whose disapproving response to works of the avant garde has often been a key part of an intended effect.18

17. Julian Barnes’s The Sense of an Ending (2011) may be an example of a novel that winds up on the edge between, on the one hand, intended permanent bafflement of the reader and, on the other, closure through the retrospective application of a mental disorder to the first-person narrator. The argument for the latter reading is that there is sufficient evidence to see the narrator-protagonist as a case of impaired memory so severe that he can, without knowing it, mentally erase and replace the central event of his life’s story.

18. One could make the case that the production of, and market for, such texts is a case of privileging one survival trait—the “novelty drive” (J. D. Miller 1999)—at the expense of others: e.g., cultural solidarity, the preservation and transmission of knowledge, “a mental catalogue of
There is an underlying assumption in such rebukes that what we are evolved to do is what we should do. But in an age in which we are learning so much about how the mind works, it is valuable to know what it feels like when you are pushed up against the limits of that mind. I think this is one object, perhaps the object, of the kind of neural sport we have focused on in this chapter. These instances of the unresolved garden path may be a narrow kind of art, but it is nonetheless an art that serves a salutary purpose. It is good to take a look over the edge and, in the process, to feel in the protest of our evolved wiring an intimation of how much there may be that we are not, by our nature, equipped to know. In this limited evolutionary sense, all the principal authors I focus on in this book are guilty of misbehavior.

the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them” (Pinker 2002: 543). That such perverse texts appeal to our penchant for novelty is indiscutable. But this does not necessarily mean that they can be written off as novelty for novelty’s sake, nor the elitist racket Pinker has suggested (Pinker 1997: 522; 2002: 407).