6. To Look at Him or Read Him: The Confidence Man in Postmodernist Film Noir

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Parodists such as K. W. Jeter denaturalize a self-fashioning technology often veiled by the representational tactics of literary realism and semidocumentary filmmaking. As Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux suggest, however, such postmodernist subversions may also engender a self-defeating nihilism in which “[f]atalism replaces struggle, and irony resigns itself to a ‘mediascape’ that offers the opportunity for a form of refusal defined simply as play. Foundationalism is out, and language has become a signifier, floating anchorless in a terrain of images that refuse definition and spell the end of representation” (66). But this kind of “dedoxifying” program may also provide a starting point for a reconstruction of the subject attacked under postmodernism. While the present discussion treats the centrality of the confidence man within contemporary film noir, the concluding chapter addresses ways in which film noir has revised the modernist subject through community rather than through authenticating alienation. Many films noirs of the late twentieth century see the reintroduction of the confidence man, an especially charged figure attended by enormous anxiety and suspicion within the noir imagination. As we have seen, noir fictions and films of the earlier twentieth century continually draw protagonists from the ranks of private detectives, policemen, criminals (perhaps most often heist men), and the “common man” that falls into the underworld. Few noirs foreground the
The confidence man is a familiar figure in the western literary canon, recurring in texts as various as *The Odyssey* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Herman Melville’s 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade* certainly represents the most radical deployment of the con man in fiction: identified only by his continual use of the word “confidence,” the titular figure appears so mutable and dispersed as to reject the notion of an essential self. John G. Blair concludes that Melville “carries the confidence figure as far as it can go”—“If the fiction is given over any further to the principles implicit in the con man . . . he himself would disappear out of sight behind the mechanisms of the fiction: everything inconsistent, changeable, shifting, identity-less” (139). At least part of what makes *The Confidence-Man* so challenging a novel is Melville’s refusal of any privileged glimpse into the “essential” identity of the swindler; it is all but impossible to discern a figure that consists only of a series of “masquerades.” Within the noir imagination, however, the excess signification posited by the confidence man becomes delimited by the reaffirmation of a “core” self.

For Blair, the confidence man erodes “the moral significance of the congruence between the inner self and outer presentation of the self—the sincerity so dear to the Romantics, or the authenticity praised by some of their twentieth century offspring” (131). Accordingly, noir virtuosi have warily handled the confidence man, seeking to maintain a subject authenticated through alienation against the threat of unchecked signification. A hard-boiled hero such as Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe may misrepresent himself in the course of investigation, but he arrests this textual play by insistence upon a subjective code of conduct and by rooting out the plastic tendencies of con men like Terry Lennox. In a number of prominent noir texts, the confidence man is more centrally evoked but circumscribed within the modernist polarities of Naturalism and Existentialism; these...
include William Lindsay Gresham's *Nightmare Alley*, Frederic Brown's *The Fabulous Clipjoint*, Jules Dassin's film *Night and the City*, and Jim Thompson's *The Grifters*. Unlike Melville's writerly novel, these texts operate within the tradition of realism to reveal the alienated essential self beneath the shifting surfaces of the confidence man. The con man in each of these novels operates via some manipulation of available signs. But the self-as-bricoleur implied by such figures becomes obscured as the narrative focus shifts toward the alienated universe of noir: ludic signification yields to the binary struggle of the rational self against an irrational world.

**NO ARTIST** more fully realizes the noir ethos than William Lindsay Gresham, whose life, in a real sense, reads like one of his plots. After an eclectic career that included folk singing in Greenwich village, soldiering with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, and editorial work with a crime magazine, Gresham was diagnosed with cancer. He registered at the Dixie Hotel in New York City and committed suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills. But Gresham's tragic course also holds elements that ill consist with the stark realism of noir—he experimented, for example, with religions as diverse as Presbyterianism, Zen Buddhism, and Dianetics. In retrospect, we might find in the adjacent text of Gresham's life chapters that conjure both modernism (Communist activism and fighting in the Spanish Civil War) and postmodernism (philosophies derived from pulp science-fiction). Gresham's most successful novel, *Nightmare Alley*, similarly proves a site of contest between the modernist ethos of noir and the postmodernist practices of the con man. From its outset, *Nightmare Alley* grapples with the “carnivalesque” via realism: “Stanton Carlisle stood well back from the entrance of the canvas enclosure, under the blaze of a naked light bulb, and watched the geek” (523). Even this opening line reflects Gresham's aesthetic, for just as the naked bulb (itself a noir icon) sheds harsh light upon the geek, the bottom of the carnival hierarchy and a fit subject for naturalist exposé, Gresham's minimalist prose seeks purchase upon the “carny,” which is constantly broken down, moving, reassembled, and populated with grifters of all description. Gresham introduces his *dramatis personae* through a catalogue that moves freely between barkers’ pitches and interior monologue: “‘Here you are folks—brimful of assorted poems, dramatic readings, and witty sayings by the world’s wisest men. And only a dime . . . ’ Sis wrote me the kids are both down with whooping cough. I’ll send them a box of paints to help keep them quiet. Kids love paints. I’ll send them some crayons, too” (531). As in this introduction of Joe Plasky, “Half-Man Acrobat,” the fluid discourse of the carny is hedged
by the counterpoint of “realistic” interior reflections that posit a human figure behind the pitch and the quotidian world beyond the play of the carnival. This juxtaposition of ludic signification and realism governs Gresham’s presentation of the protagonist Stan Carlisle. On one hand, Stan emerges from a background that collapses self and world into narrative play; Stan’s father is a preacher-cum-real estate agent—“Church vestryman on Sundays, con man the rest of the week . . . the Bible-spouting bastard” (341). Resentment aside, Stan inherits his father’s rhetorical skills as he works the carny as magician and apprentice mentalist: “The old gent was a great hand at quoting scripture. I guess a lot of it rubbed off on me” (605). At a pivotal moment in the novel, Stan saves the troupe from police harassment as he deftly reads and manipulates a small-town sheriff: “The face had changed. The savage lines had ironed out and now it was simply the face of an old man, weary and bewildered. Stan hurried on, panicky for fear the tenuous spell would break, but excited at his own power. If I can’t read a Bible-spouting, whoremongering, big-knuckled hypocrite of a church deacon, he told himself, I’m a feeblo” (597). Stan concludes the reading by “[m]aking his face look as spiritual as possible” and by resting his hand against the carnival tent “in a gesture of peace and confidence[,] . . . a period at the end of the sentence” (599). In such moments, Stan recalls Melville’s amorphous confidence man in that he becomes wholly subsumed by his own rhetoric: “Now he rambled; with a foolish drunken joy he let his tongue ride, saying whatever it wanted to say. He could sit back and rest and let his tongue do the work” (761). As the novel proceeds, Stan becomes “the Great Stanton” and eventually “the Reverend Carlisle,” exploiting increasingly wealthy “chumps” through a mentalist routine and a phony religion, a “spook act”—“He read, sketchily, in Oupensky’s The Model of the Universe, looking for tag lines he could pull out and use, jotting notes in the margin for a possible class in fourth dimensional mortality” (678). In moments such as these, Stan indeed emerges as the con man who implicitly posits a vision of the self as “a plurality of other texts.”

As the novel proceeds, however, it becomes apparent that Nightmare Alley mounts a conservative response to the deconstructive implications of a text such as The Confidence-Man. Early on, Gresham seems to declare his recuperative intentions in his portrait of “Sailor Martin,” the “living picture gallery”:

He was shipwrecked on a tropical island, which had only one other inhabitant—an old seafaring man, who had been there most of his life—a castaway. All he had managed to save from the wreck of his ship was a tattoo outfit. To pass the time he taught Sailor Martin the art and he practiced
Martin embodies the ludic textuality of the carnival. Although it turns out to be a ruse, his “castaway” narrative recalls the transgressive boundary crossing treated throughout late-Victorian adventure. Despite Zeena’s debunking (“If he was ever in the Navy, I was born in a convent”), Sailor becomes a striking image of the self collapsed into signification. As Zeena points out, “He started by having a lot of anchors and nude women tattooed on his arms to show the girls how tough he was or something. Then he got the battleship put on his chest and he was off. He was like a funny paper, with his shirt off, and he figures he might as well make his skin work for him” (557). Sailors’ body art is itself reflective; like the autonomous tattoos in Jeter’s Noir, these images suggest the power of textuality. Both the Rock of Ages and the battleship Maine are common enough early- and mid-twentieth-century tattoo motifs; but while the replica painting might suggest the destruction of aesthetic aura, the latter tattoo alludes to a moment when the “real world” of history and politics becomes swallowed up by journalistic narration. At first blush this character merely underscores the carnal underworld; and yet Sailor Martin proves central to Gresham’s vision of meaning and identity. He symbolizes unchecked signification, concentrating the deconstructive tendencies latent within the con man. Martin and Stan Carlisle are at one point interestingly conflated under a strange image that occurs at Pete’s funeral: “Sailor Martin had one eye closed. . . . He [Stan] had done that a hundred times himself, sitting beside his father on the hard pew. . . . There’s a blind spot in your eye and if you shut one eye and then let the gaze of the other travel in a straight line to one side of the preacher’s head there will be a point where the head seems to disappear and he seems to be standing there preaching without any head” (569). This moment not only aligns Stan with the tattooed man, but ties both these characters to the bizarre tableau of the headless preacher: an image of the confidence man as pure rhetoric, “preaching” without the rational agency and subjectivity implied by the head. In a move reminiscent of Phillip Marlowe’s treatment of Terry Lennox, Gresham expels Martin from the carnival; in doing so, he jettisons the disturbing possibilities of the con man. From this point, the novel turns from the volatile significations of the grifter toward a noir drama of authenticating alienation.

After this expulsion, Nightmare Alley resolves itself into a recognizable noir story of frustrated desire. Like criminal protagonists of James M. Cain, William Gaddis, and W. R. Burnett, Stan attempts the Enlightenment
dream of upward mobility by pitting his talents and resources against an irrational world. As he pitches his spook racket to wealthy marks, however, Stan confronts a series of obstacles. Perhaps most obviously, he finds himself caught between two destructive women, recurrent figures within the noir imagination. Stan’s wife and accomplice Molly fulfills the noir stereotype of the virtuous but ineffectual “domestic angel”: she constantly impedes Stan’s designs, finally ruining his ghoulis scheme to use her as paranormal prostitute for the industrialist Ezra Grindle. At the other end of the spectrum is Dr. Lilith Ritter, a psychologist who, as her name suggests, proves a more dangerous, misandrous threat: “Was she an animal? . . . Was she merely a sleek golden kitten that unsheathed its claws when it had played enough and wanted solitude?” (689). Like Charlotte Manning in Mickey Spillane’s *I, the Jury* (1947), this femme fatale exploits her skills as a therapist to con the con man. In addition to negotiating these hazards, Carlisle must contend with his own pathological hatred of his father and the mental exhaustion that comes with operating the racket. These combined forces continually imperil Stan’s dream of wealth and power, coalescing into the terrifying image of the “nightmare alley”: “Ever since he was a kid Stan had had the dream. He was running down a dark alley, the buildings vacant and black and menacing on either side. Far down the end of it a light burned; but there was something behind him, close behind him, getting closer until he woke up trembling and never reached the light” (585). Stan never does “reach the light”; he ends up on the run, ultimately falling to the nadir of the carny world. As with his treatment of Sailor Martin, Gresham here returns us to the origins of noir in Victorian adventure: donning a “Hindu outfit with dark makeup” (794), Stan for a time assumes the guise of “Allah Rahged,” a traveling palmist. After learning of the marriage between Lilith Ritter and Ezra Grindle, however, Stan falls into alcoholism and the dreaded role of carny geek, a figure initially pitched in terms of exotic regression: “He was found on an uninhabited island five hundred miles off the coast of Florida. . . . Is he man or is he beast?” (524). It is therefore possible to discern in Stan’s fall from “Rev. Stanton” through “Allah Rahged” to castaway geek a pattern of colonial regression. Such undertones similarly emerge from Edmund Goulding’s 1947 film adaptation of *Nightmare Alley*, in which the initial exhibition of the geek is accompanied by a turbaned fire-eater act and a mural featuring the geek as a troglodyte that adumbrates the un Kemp, enervated Stan (Tyrone Power). Gresham therefore enacts his own rendition of the colonial adventure motifs common to noir: far from regenerated civilization, the USA is itself an unstable contact zone where westerners might “go native.”
NIGHTMARE ALLEY steers the confidence man away from intertextuality and toward a sociological and psychological vision of human atavism. The tension between naturalistic disempowerment and existentialist resolve informs other noir con-man narratives. In The Fabulous Clipjoint, Brown presents an investigation scenario that juxtaposes modernist and postmodernist thematics: with the help of his Uncle Ambrose, a carnival pitchman, Ed Hunter pursues his father’s murderer throughout the brutal cityscape of Chicago. This routine noir groundplot conjures the disturbing implications of the confidence game when Uncle Am, himself a grifter, inducts Ed into the art of disguise and manipulation. Moreover, Ed discovers in his father an erstwhile adventurer, carny hand, and vaudevillian blackface minstrel, not to mention a master printer. Brown reasserts the noir hedge against surplus meaning, however, by concluding with psychological realism. It turns out that Ed’s father suffered from a lifelong suicidal depression, ultimately arranging his own murder—a naturalistic revelation that is countered only by Ed and Am’s humanistic resolve to unravel the mystery. In Night and the City, Jules Dassin similarly conjures and contains the grifter as he casts Richard Widmark in the role of Harry Fabian, an American hustler in postwar London who opportunistically breaks into the professional wrestling business. Exploiting the tension between the aesthetic purism of Greco-Roman wrestler Grigorias (Stanislaus Zbysko) and his racketeering son Kristo (Herbert Lom), who stages sensationalist wrestling exhibitions, Fabian engineers a match between a young Greek athlete and Kristo’s wrestler “The Strangler” (Mike Mazurki). But when Grigorias preemptively defeats the Strangler, a victory that costs him his life, Fabian becomes a hunted man and climactically sacrifices himself for his fiancée Mary (Gene Tierney): this gesture sees the playful bricolage of the con-man exchanged for the existential redemption of noir.

Thompson’s The Grifters, on the other hand, returns to the naturalistic world of Nightmare Alley. Like Stan Carlisle, Roy Dillon is a hustler on the verge of the big-time “long con.” Thompson characteristically ups the ante of con-man noir: Roy is stymied by two femmes fatales—his lover Myra Langtree and his mother Lily Dillon (with whom he has suffered an abusive, possibly incestuous relationship). As in Thompson’s short story “The Cellini Chalice” (1956), everyone in the universe of The Grifters is on the make. But just beneath the surface of these shifting identities is the epistemological bedrock of modernist angst and Darwinian competition. Much of the narrative is given over to treatment of the alienation and psychological trauma that Roy suffers under the strains of the short con. Myra and Lily, on the other hand, compete for Roy and his “stake,” a contest eventually decided in favor of Lily, who kills both Myra and Roy. After
accidentally stabbing Roy in the throat with a broken water glass, a sobbing Lily gathers up her loot and leaves town; even maternal affections yield before the predatory impulses engendered by the urban jungle. *The Grifters* exemplifies noir treatments of the confidence man in that the novel mitigates its nihilistic vision through a commitment to realism: beyond the narrative power of the grifter is a dystopian referential world that hems in signification.

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) stands as one of the first texts in which a con artist “takes” the noir subject: Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) manipulates a series of narratives ranging from Gothic horror and mystery fiction to California historiography in order to dupe the traumatized detective Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) into the plot to murder his wife. Elster’s game is so successful that it forces Scottie himself into the role of a deceiver who aggressively participates in the construction of the fictional Madeleine (Kim Novak). While Scottie solves the crime perpetrated by Elster, he cannot deny his own complicity in the murderous scheme nor the extent to which the con man has invaded his own psyche. *Vertigo* prefigures a strain of revisionist noir that persists into the twenty-first century. Martin Scorsese’s *Cape Fear*, David Fincher’s *Seven*, and Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* posit various noir actants that become subsumed within the boundless textuality of the confidence game. Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* on the other hand represents an apotheosis of this revisionist movement within noir, as this film concludes with the reintegration of the modernist quester and the postmodernist bricoleur—a dynamic and heuristic subjectivity derived from a pastiche of fragmentary signifiers. The humanist subject implied by the noir hero is displaced by the confidence man himself, who projects what Calvin Schrag describes as “the self in discourse,” a subject that emerges from “stories in the making” (26–27).

Critics almost uniformly panned director Martin Scorsese’s 1991 remake of the 1962 thriller *Cape Fear* (directed by Lee J. Thompson and written by James R. Webb). Terrence Rafferty condemns the film as “a disgrace: an ugly, incoherent, dishonest piece of work.” And even the most enthusiastic respondent, J. Hoberman, who acclaims Scorsese a “national treasure,” half-heartedly endorses the film as “more skillful than inspired.” Angela McRobbie offers a somewhat more helpful, though similarly ambivalent, review as she off-handedly argues for *Cape Fear* as proof of Scorsese’s contention for “a postmodernist of the year award”; a film which may “claim pastiche as [its] get-out clause.” Considered within the broader context of 1990s noirs, however, Scorsese and screenwriter Wesley Strick’s remake of *Cape Fear* lies precisely in its postmodernist revision and subversion of the first two versions of the story—John D. MacDonald’s 1957 novel
The Executioners and the 1962 film adaptation. While these earlier texts interpret domestic melodrama through the suppressed signification and authenticating alienation of noir, Scorsese erodes the boundaries between text and referent as he translates Max Cady from unsignifiable menace into signifying con man. The case of the family melodrama bears out Žižek’s contention for noir as a logic that exploits other “proper” genres. Melodrama is most generally considered a “low” popular form characterized by its obvious polarizations between good and evil as well as its heavy-handed “melos,” which literally underscore narrative developments. Melodrama is almost invariably centered around domestic tensions within and between individual, family, and society. As in MacDonald’s The Executioners, the nuclear family itself may often become a kind of “protagonist” that faces various external threats. The Executioners and Cape Fear (1962) are in this sense characteristic noirs that appropriate the domestic melodrama in their presentation of the beleaguered Bowden family.5

Perhaps most famous for his Travis McGee detective novels, John D. MacDonald cut an influential figure among those postwar crime writers moving from pulps to the incipient paperback novel. MacDonald has been described as an idiosyncratic novelist, recruiting the hard-boiled formula to “his own brand of popular philosophizing.” As Woody Haut explains, however, MacDonald participates in a discourse common to crime writers in the American South: “With its reputation for corruption, racism, poverty, backwardness and primitive sexuality, the South is an ideal setting for pulp culture crime fiction. . . . Manipulating specific clichés, Southern pulp culture crime writers . . . were unafraid to exploit the popular conception of a primitive, if not polymorphously perverse, South.”7 Set in the small Southern town of New Essex, The Executioners taps assumptions about the South and questions the efficacy of social and political institutions. Neither the law nor aristocratic noblesse oblige, often associated with Southern culture, are able to protect Sam Bowden and his family from Max Cady. Faithful to his modernist context, MacDonald calls into question the certainties of Enlightenment positivism. David Geherin has suggested that “[t]he frightening (albeit sometimes melodramatic) elements of [The Executioners] also serve to embody a kind of existential parable in which the orderly life of the average man is exposed to the sudden intrusion of the irrational and unexpected.”8 While the domestic melodrama may be said to broadly treat external threats to the family, the “existential parable” sees the human subject estranged from its world. Both of these generic forms come into play throughout The Executioners to render a narrative in which the Bowdens are alienated from and yet cohered by a hostile universe.

In The Executioners, Sam Bowden strives to preserve a haven of law,
order, and community against the naturalistic forces embodied in Cady. While Sam inhabits sanctuaries such as the Bowdens’ home and the “tidy little city” (12) of New Essex, Cady haunts the darkness just beyond the Bowdens’ property line. Described as an “animal” at least a dozen times throughout the text, he may be read as the repressed unconscious or as a “reversion to a more primitive stage of evolution” that has “come bobbing up out of ancient history” (7). Cady cannot be accounted for by the legal system, by science, or even by language: “He looks like he’s got muscles they haven’t named yet” (32). Although Sam fears that Cady will at best “turn their world into a jungle from which they could never escape” (185), the external threat ultimately consolidates the family. As Carol assures her husband, “They can’t lick us Bowdens” (72). When Sam succeeds in killing Cady, he experiences “a feeling of strong and primitive fulfillment. All the neat and careful layers of civilized instincts and behavior were peeled back to reveal an intense exultation over the death of an enemy” (211). Throughout the novel, Sam is driven by the natural forces embodied in Cady into the ultimate refuge of his own consciousness. However Sam might desire to “submerge himself completely in the rhythms of the summer night,” he cannot “halt the ticking of the clock in the back of his mind” (108). The Executioners conclusively endorses a subject that is isolated but protected by that alienation from unlimited textual play. As MacDonald suggests in Cady an objective, unmeaning material universe, Sam himself attempts to maintain the distinction between representation and reality, at one point warning his son, “This is for real. . . . This isn’t television” (31). Expelled from meaning, Cady bounds the creeping threat of signification and emerges as referent against which the subject draws distinction.

Like its original, Thompson’s 1962 Cape Fear has been located at the intersection of two genres; as Jenny Diski suggests, “The original version of Cape Fear is pure film noir” in which “the family—The Family—is under threat.” Nor is this a surprising turn, for, as Nina Leibman points out, “[noir] narrative is often centered around family issues, with the plot’s problematics motivated or resolved by and through the family unit,” which entity parallels the “existential angst of the male hero.” Thompson and Webb’s interpretation of The Executioners may be inferred from the film’s final sequence, in which the Bowdens stage an ambush for Cady. While MacDonald chooses the rural home for his novel’s climax, Thompson and Webb set the showdown on the Bowdens’ houseboat on the Cape Fear River, where marshlike environs strongly suggest an elemental opposition between humanity and nature.

Visual style plays a decisive role in this telling sequence. MacDonald frequently employs imagery that underscores the absurd dichotomy of self
and world: “naked bulbs” and “dark shadows” (99), “utterly black nights” (195), and polarized imagery in general: “The dark water and sky made the white houses stand out clearly at the end of the lake” (179). MacDonald’s descriptive technique lends itself to the cinematographic devices that Place and Peterson ascribe to film noir: “Small areas of light seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that threatens them from all sides.”

MacDonald’s high-contrast description of the lakefront houses returns to its filmic source in the final scenes of Thompson’s Cape Fear. The brilliant houseboat, besieged on all sides by dark water, foliage, and night sky becomes an iconic “clean, well-lighted place,” bearing out Leibman’s general contention that the family “remains one of the few brightly lit entities in the otherwise completely dark noir style, and it is constructed within a mise-en-scène that is far more calm than the film in which it rests.”

Perched on the riverbank and then crawling down into the water, Cady (Robert Mitchum) assumes the appearance of “some sort of prehistoric reptile—a cold blooded predator that we thought had disappeared from the earth a few geological ages ago.” The encroaching darkness moves with Cady as he gains on the houseboat and the adjacent cottage. Photographed through a darkened set of shelves, Peggy Bowden is trapped within her own kitchen. Nancy is similarly pursued into diminishing areas of light until she is overtaken. Cady’s reptilian aspect persists as his serpentine gaze “mesmerizes” Nancy into dropping the poker with which she defends herself.

This sequence reifies Cady’s animality; and it comes as no surprise that Thompson’s version has retained Siever’s (Telly Savalas) pivotal line: “A type like that is an animal. So you’ve got to fight him like an animal.” Sam’s recourse to “uncivilized” methods, including hired thugs, culminates in the final struggle with Cady, which recites a version of evolutionary history. The pair begin by fighting hand-to-hand in the waters of the river; their thrashing motion, coupled with Bernard Hermann’s horrifically effective musical accompaniment, lends an unmistakable impression of two animals locked in mortal combat. As they crawl ashore, the combatants learn weapons—Sam strikes Cady with a rock, Cady conveniently finds primitive maul. When Sam regains his revolver, he forbears killing Cady, and consigns him to “a long life, in a cage. That’s where you belong and that’s where you’re going. And this time for life.” Sam’s decision to spare Cady at once reflects a triumph of consciousness, a desire to repress reminiscent of Carol Bowden’s attempt to “lock [Cady] in a neat little corner in the back of [her] mind.” But this conclusion of Cape Fear manages to preserve MacDonald’s essential conflict between rational mind and irrational world. Diski ultimately decides that what Cady does to the Bowdens “is
literally *unspeakable.* No detail is shown or said, it is all shadow and implication . . . " Taking the cue from its literary model, Thompson's *Cape Fear* invents a Cady beyond the scope of human language and culture. But in this first adaptation it is the family unit which comes to the fore. As Nina Leibman suggests, "*Film noir,* by virtue of its contrasts, centers the family as the locus of normalcy, a haven from a hateful world, and a cure for angst and alienation; . . . in 1950s society Americans were encouraged to see the happy family huddling together against the visceral terror of modern times." Thompson leaves us with an image of the disillusioned Bowdens huddled against a threat that insures their identity.

Thompson would be succeeded by an auteur whose directorial approach is at odds with the noir realism. Robert Philip Kolker contends that Scorsese, unlike other post-New Wave directors, "always provides a commentary upon the viewer’s experience, preventing him or her from easily slipping into plot. He creates an allusiveness, a celebration of cinema through references to other works. . . ." None of Scorsese’s films is more redolent of this reflexive tendency than *Cape Fear.* For J. Hoberman, “the new *Cape Fear* assumes that the viewer has seen the earlier one . . . [it] oscillates between a critique of the original and a variation of a common text; it’s a choreographed hall-of-mirrors, an orchestrated echo-chamber." The 1991 *Cape Fear* manages a critique of its predecessor *by virtue of* its status as “a variation of a common text.” As McRobbie has astutely observed, “It’s a film about film—about the surface of the screen, about image-making. And it’s about archetypal struggles between good and evil, the outsider who invades the fragile fabric of the nuclear family with the intention of destroying it.” It is important to recognize, however, that Scorsese renders in Max Cady a signifying confidence man who undermines rather than coheres the Bowden’s collective identity.

Assigned in a high-school English course to write a “reminiscence” “in the same style” as Wolfe’s *Look Homeward Angel,* Danny Bowden (Juliette Lewis) introduces the film’s narrative frame: “My reminiscence. I always thought that for such a lovely river, the name was mystifying—*Cape Fear*—when the only thing to fear on those enchanted summer nights was that the magic would end, and real life would come crashing in.” Predicated upon the distinction between the sentimental and “real life,” Danny’s story recalls the earlier renditions of *Cape Fear:* she attempts her own domestic melodrama in order to shore up a splintered family. Scorsese and Strick hereby establish in *Cape Fear* a postmodernist investigation and subversion of its pre-texts.

Scorsese’s favored tactics of allusion and quotation are also apparent in his evocation of literary and cinematic intertexts. Two allusive instances,
in particular, foreground Scorsese’s subversive program. The first occurs when the Bowdens initially encounter Cady in the darkened movie theater. The sequence on one hand evokes the family melodrama, recalling Thompson’s scene in which the marauding Cady interrupts the Bowden’s evening of bowling. Scorsese heightens the reflexivity of this moment by staging the encounter in a cinema—a gesture very much in keeping with the film’s reflexivity. Even more interesting is the fact that the Bowdens are screening Problem Child (Dennis Dugan, 1990), a parodic family melodrama about a couple terrorized by their adopted seven-year-old. In the quoted sequence, the frustrated father (John Ritter) becomes a homicidal maniac who smashes through the child’s door with an axe for a comic recasting of Jack Nicholson’s famous role in The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). This mise-en-abyme counters the recuperative function of the family melodrama; we shall see that these Bowdens are already riddled with violent, explosive tensions. In this light, Cady may be ironically read as a kind of deus ex machina, the cohering Other of the first two versions. Cady quite literally steps into the frame to obstruct the Bowdens’ vision of familial fragmentation that lies in their own domestic sphere.

This early sequence is seconded late in the film during the Bowdens’ tense vigil with the private detective Kersek (Joe Don Baker). The later episode is of general interest, as it irreverently confuses the polarities of the family melodrama: while the invasive Cady poses as the family maid in order to murder Kersek, Danny’s emblematic teddy bear is also ironically deployed as the warning-signal in Kersek’s ambush. We here see the Bowdens cast once more as spectators, “huddled together” not against the real threat of Cady, but around a televised version of Douglas Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows (1955). While the conventional polarities of the family melodrama blur, the Bowdens look to a text about a widow struggling to keep her family together as she incorporates her lover, an “outsider” beneath her social station. As she falls in love with her Thoreauvian gardener Ron (Rock Hudson), Carry (Jane Wyman) must weather the censure of her pretentious bourgeois children and social circle. The Sirk quotation in one sense counters the earlier instance of film spectatorship; if the Bowdens are rescued from a picture of their own internal tensions by the intrusion of Cady, then they look to Sirk’s earlier, successful family melodrama for a model of recuperation. But despite its snug conclusion, All That Heaven Allows here again underscores fractures within the family: throughout the film Sirk deploys noir cinematography to render Carry a woman trapped within her own home, threatened not by an external force, but by her own repressive and conservative children. Scorsese’s allusions collectively denaturalize and undermine Cape Fear 1962 and The Executioners.²₀
Cape Fear’s reflexivity also emerges through the many “directorial tricks” dismissed by many reviewers of the film as “mere baroque excess.”

We shall presently see that many of the particular effects Letts describes are used strategically, to achieve specific ends. For Stuart Klawans, Cape Fear’s “screen becomes almost non-representational.” If the “insignificant notations” of the realist text “say nothing other than ‘we are reality,’” then Scorsese’s special effects say, among other things, “we are not.”

One such effect cues the erosion of the “othered” Max Cady. In an early scene Cady walks out of prison toward the camera until his face fills the frame. The shot recalls D. W. Griffith’s close-up of the first American film gangster, the Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth), in The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912). In the hands of Scorsese and cinematographer Freddie Francis, Cady becomes not so much an embodiment of “unspeakable” natural forces as a generic villain who emerges only from the “unconscious” of cinematic convention. The critical response to the revised Cady underscores its visual “unrealization.” Rafferty’s dismissal of De Niro’s Cady typifies its reception as “a riff” and a “stick figure”; “De Niro’s frenetic but thoroughly uninteresting performance is emblematic of the movie’s inadequacy. He’s covered with tattooed messages and symbols, but he doesn’t seem to have a body. We could feel Mitchum’s evil in all its slimy physicality; De Niro’s is an evil we merely read.” Mitchum’s visceral performance preserves the illusion of a real threat that becomes part of a flattened “depth-model.”

The first scene of the narrative proper articulates the process of this collapse. Danny’s introduction is immediately followed by a widening dolly-shot that reveals: 1) the collage of photographs on Cady’s cell wall—comic-book characters and historical figures such as Lenin and Robert E. Lee; 2) Cady’s bookshelf—the Bible sitting atop titles such as Nietzsche’s Will To Power and Thus Spake Zarathustra; 3) the heavily tattooed figure of Cady itself. This sequence is punctuated by Cady’s parting shot at a prison guard; when asked if he wants to take his books, Cady replies, “Already read ‘em.” This first sequence introduces Cady as Barthes’s “I” which “is already itself a plurality of other texts.” Indeed, Scorsese’s Cady reads as a counterpoint to Gresham’s Nightmare Alley: while Gresham steers the subject away from signification and into nature, announcing the gesture with the expulsion of the tattooed Sailor Martin, Scorsese isolates a noir figure that is paradoxically a sign of the referential and proceeds to elaborate its “meaning” potential. As the narrative proceeds, Cady proves himself a confidence-man who deftly manipulates the Bowdens.

Refracting the cineaste himself, Cady communicates through texts (he at one point even leaves for Danny a copy of Henry Miller’s Sexus). Although the elaborate tattoo which covers Cady’s back ostensibly installs the Bible as transcendental “Truth,” his other tattoos consist largely of decontextual-
ized and openly manipulated scriptural quotations (“Vengeance is mine,” for example) which belie this assertion. MacDonald’s Sam Bowden faces a Cady who “looks like he’s got muscles they haven’t named yet”; Scorsese’s Police Chief Dutton (Robert Mitchum) says, upon beholding the “walking hieroglyph” of 1991, “I don’t know whether to look at him or read him.” Sacred language is in fact parodied throughout the film—as Cady engages in baffling tautologies with Danielle (“Do you know what paradise is? It’s salvation.”); and at the film’s conclusion, the drowning Cady sings hymns and “speaks in tongues.” It is also helpful to note in this context the lengthy scene in the high-school theater in which Cady virtually seduces Danny. Cady here coyly suggests that he is “from the black forest,” an admission that might ostensibly ally him with his naturalistic predecessors. But the “black forest” of Scorsese’s film is, after all, a theater set (the sequence in this sense looks something like Little Red Riding Hood vs. the “Big Bad Wolf”). This Cady is neither “missing link” with the primordial past nor an externalization of the libidinal unconscious; he is rather a walking tissue of quotations from anterior texts.

Conversely, an “unspeakable” Cady serves as the linchpin for the first two versions; both the nuclear family unit and the alienated self depend upon an external force which will guarantee their differential identity. Danny Bowden’s own attempted domestic melodrama fails precisely because Scorsese and Strick render in Cady a figure not only “unrealized” or “flattened,” but also a projection of the entity which it is meant to oppose; “Whereas the 1962 evil stalked the Bowden family from without, the threat is now to be found within.” Sam at one point significantly complains to Kersek, “I don’t know whether he’s inside or outside.” Such confusion readily translates into Cape Fear’s erosion of oppositions. Negative imaging not only implies that Scorsese’s remake “contains its own negative image,” but also manages to suggest a reversal of binaries. The reappearance of Mitchum and Peck, in roles contrary to their originals, likewise playfully recognizes the instability of identity. But the paramount example of self-loss in the film has to do with the central figure of Sam Bowden, who comes to resemble his nemesis, Max Cady. Despite Bowden’s vehement protestations, Cady insists that they are “colleagues” in the law. Sam also exercises Cady’s brand of explosive violence: on the racquetball court with Lori, whom Cady later brutally rapes; against his own daughter, in reprisal for her “tryst” with Cady; and in the final sequence, against Cady himself. The film’s conclusion in some sense underscores Sam’s loss of alienated identity. Having failed to finish Cady, Sam finds his hands covered with blood, an effect that does not recall the “damn’ed spot” of Lady Macbeth so much as the stigmata of Christ. Rinsing his bloody hands, Sam is left in a yet
more dejected attitude than when he discovered the stains, for he has been
denied the role of alienated martyr.

The dissolution of Cady as authentic Other undoes Danny’s recuperative
domestic melodrama. Cady’s unrealization gives way to that of Sam,
whose central assignment as “father” guarantees the individual identity
within the family of the melodramatic world. As Robin Wood recom-
mends in a commentary on film melodrama, “The Father must here be
understood in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential: patriarchal author-
ity (the Law), which assigns all other elements to their correct, subordi-
nate, allotted roles. . . .”30 We may locate the moment of Sam’s failure as an
authority figure in the argument with Leigh about his fidelity; although he
tries to muster a cohesive response to Cady (“I keep feeling there’s some
animal out there stalking us; . . . we can beat that son-of-a-bitch, the two
of us together, working as a team”); his wife cynically replies, “You’re really
scared, aren’t you? Somebody finally got through to you.” We next see Sam
banished to the living room couch. De Niro’s diffused, “new-and-unim-
proved” Cady cannot, in this instance, inspire a terror commensurate with
a fragmented family in which the mother believes “they switched babies
on me at the hospital.” Scorsese concludes with an image of the Bowdens
once more “huddled together,” this time on the banks of the Cape Fear
River; but, as Danny’s mechanical epilogue implies, theirs is a cohesion
based on deliberate repression: “We never spoke about what happened,
at least to each other . . . .” Glossing the “crucial shift” accomplished in
Cape Fear, Žižek argues that “what gets lost is precisely the remainder of
an outside” (208–9)—an apt designation for the delimiting referential that
noir conserves. Cape Fear is perhaps most obviously a characteristic Scors-
ese production in that it persistently references not some free-standing
existential reality, but other cinematic and literary texts, traditions, and
conventions—thereby eroding the possibility of the crucial “remainder of
an outside.”

THE CON MAN’S will to power would become even more apparent in two
mid-1990s films noirs—The Usual Suspects and Seven. Working within
clearly discernible noir formulae, each of these films dramatizes the shift
from existential heroism to intertextual manipulation. As with Scors-
ese’s Cape Fear, these films have been greeted with an ambivalent criti-
cal response—a reception typified by Foster Hirsch’s remarks in Detours
and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir. For Hirsch, The Usual Suspects
deploys “genre conventions like voiceover, labyrinthine plotting, spatial
and temporal ruptures” in the service of “a commentary on noir resources,
a cunning masterful meta-noir.” But Hirsch qualifies his praise by suggesting that these sophisticated devices hamstring a film which “ends up being about nothing other than its own admirable, if finally hollow, ingenuity” (287). In my view, such criticism is more suited to Lynch’s films noirs than to The Usual Suspects, which offers an education not only in noir conventions, but also in the worldview purported by these tactics. We have seen that while many revisionist noirs target specific cinematic pretexts, others elicit memories of Hollywood genres and subgenres that proved fertile ground for the noir logic. Hirsch’s dismissive comments belie the importance of the heist or “caper” formula conventionally centered on a protagonist faced with the Sisyphean task of coordinating a complicated criminal operation. As John Cawelti notes, the caper formula has its origins in the ancient tale of the Trojan Horse, which dramatizes “a very clever stratagem involving a carefully trained group of men and a major piece of equipment in a skillfully coordinated sequence of actions, subject to the dangers of discovery and mistake, but, when successful, resulting in a feat of great importance that had earlier seemed impossible.”

Endemic to the missions, secret and otherwise, of war fiction and film, caper stories find similar application in the universe of crime. This resilient form proves constructive especially when the operation fails. But however bleak, the noir heist film endows its human subject with grandeur and authenticity. Although noir protagonists seldom “pull off” the caper, they retain the existential lucidity, determination, or, more importantly, definition which marks the noir subject. Kubrick’s The Killing exemplifies the ways in which semidocumentary techniques—on-location shooting and voice-of-god narration—convey and normalize authenticating alienation: as Telotte points out, “They draw on our tendency to valorize the real and on the authority of the seemingly objective, detached vantage we normally associate with the scientific method to qualify their treatment of a sordid subject matter” (137).

Singer and McQuarrie repeat the noir heist motif, but they move beyond ludic reiteration for the “de-doxifying” critique that Hutcheon ascribes to revolutionary postmodernism. Beginning with an existentialist drama centered on Dean Keaton (Gabriel Byrne), The Usual Suspects, like its malleable narrator, metamorphoses into a reflexive meditation on the process of fiction-making itself. The first phases of the film in a sense read as a eulogy for the departed figure of the noir antihero. After an opening sequence in which Keaton is murdered aboard a San Pedro freighter, the suggestively named Verbal (Kevin Spacey), questioned by Customs Agent Dave Kujan (Charles Palminteri), enters into an elegaic narrative about the rise and fall of the titular criminals. Harassed by the police over a hijack-
ing, Keaton, McManus (Stephen Baldwin), Todd Hockney (Kevin Pollock), Fenster (Benecio Del Toro), and Verbal bond against the authorities: “And that was how it began. The five of us brought in on a trumped-up charge to be leaned on by half-wits. What the cops never figured out, and what I know now, was that these men would never break, never lie down, never bend over for anybody... Anybody.” Among this band of outsiders, Keaton emerges as the most Satanic of the lot: this fallen cop receives the worst beating and later proves a catalyst for the gang. As we shall see, the corrupt cop formula is itself a noir fixture caught up within the larger thematics of existential regeneration. Having insulted their interrogators and, in one of the film’s most celebrated scenes, mocked the ritualistic lineup, these antiheroes ultimately pull off a devastating revenge caper that exposes the corruption of the NYPD. As Ernest Larsen has it, “The suspects begin to look like the best kind of victims: the kind that courageously refuse to be victimized” (26).

This defiant spirit persists into the central plot-line of *The Usual Suspects*, in which the criminals, having bested the authorities, lock horns with the underworld of Keyser Soze. Though much more competent than the police, the shadowy Soze initially appears yet another form of institutional power that opposes our populist gang of thieves. He is after all represented by the starched and corporate Kobayashi (Pete Postlethwaite), through whom he demonstrates an omniscience worthy of a government intelligence agency. Kobayashi informs the suspects that they’ve been unwittingly indebted to Soze for years and that the bill has finally come due. He offers the team a chance to clear the slate by hijacking an Argentinian drug deal in San Pedro. The ensuing office-building sequence mirrors the earlier climactic episode in which the suspects rip off New York’s Finest Taxi Service: posing as maintenance men, Keaton and Co. murder Kobayashi’s bodyguards—a brutal refusal of Soze’s coercive proposition. However promising, this gesture of humanistic resistance against the sterile world of late capitalism falls flat when Kobayashi reveals that he has ensnared Edie Finneran (Suzy Amis) and may have her killed at any moment. With his lover held hostage, Keaton has no choice but to lead the gang into a pitched battle against Soze’s rivals. Singer and McQuarrie hereby feint with an homage to films noirs such as *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Killing*, in which Sterling Hayden plays a criminal suspended between the polarities of establishment and underworld. In this respect, *The Usual Suspects* entertains toward noir the same disposition that a film such as *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) entertains toward the western. “[F]or all its ugliness and violence,” writes Cawelti, *The Wild Bunch* “is a more coherent example of the destruction and reaffirmation of myth...
[T]he film leaves us with a sense that through their hopeless action these coarse and vicious outlaws have somehow transcended themselves and become embodiments of a myth of heroism that men need in spite of the realities of their world.”

If we take Verbal’s narrative at face value, then the final conflagration sees Keaton and the gang “transcend themselves” to enter the world of mythic heroism. In the midst of this elegiac narrative, however, Singer and McQuarrie subtly transfer the emphasis from heist to confidence game and from humanistic realism to postmodernist parody. Even those elements that represent a straightforward reiteration of heist-noir are peppered with clues to the film’s disturbing reflexivity. In addition to the comical lineup—undoubtedly a centerpiece of performativity—, there is a general sense of theatricality about the film as well as persistent allusions to mass and popular culture which encourage the viewer toward reflection about radically different orders of knowledge and experience. In other words, like many noirs of the 1990s, *The Usual Suspects* demands familiarity with everything from the Kennedy assassination to “Old MacDonald” and *The Incredible Hulk*. These kinds of devices undercut the gravity of noir heist films; but an even more radical alienation effect awaits the viewer at the conclusion of *The Usual Suspects*. Accomplishing one of the most notable surprise endings in film history, Singer and McQuarrie ultimately reveal in the final moments of the film the fact that Verbal has taken advantage of found materials to bamboozle the arrogant Agent Kujan. Beginning with credible facts, Verbal carefully constructs a narrative that allows him to escape Kujan’s grasp. Verbal therefore reads as a reinscription of the heist mastermind more remarkable for his narrative acumen than for his organizational skill; as his nickname suggests, Verbal “talks too much” (18). Put a different way, Verbal represents the confidence man’s displacement of the humanistic subject of conventional noir. As Kujan’s coffee cup smashes on the floor, we are treated to a montage that reveals Verbal’s artistry; but rather than simply asserting the con man’s preeminence, Singer and McQuarrie take this pivotal moment as an opportunity to illuminate the ways in which representation itself may be understood as a confidence game perpetrated upon the reader/viewer.

Far from naturalizing a reality, *The Usual Suspects* bares the constructive machinery by which a reality is generated. More particularly, the film exposes “insignificant notation” and Orientalism as two tactics fundamental to western modes of representation. Verbal’s most dramatic strategy lies in “the reality effect” that he manages as he is questioned in the office of his colleague Sargeant Rabin (Dan Hedaya). Our first perspective of Rabin’s office reveals a cluttered bulletin-board conspicuous
in McQuarrie’s scene description: “It is a breathtaking disaster of papers, wanted posters, rap-sheets, memos and post-its. This is in the neighborhood of decades. Rabin is a man with a system so cryptic, so far beyond the comprehension of others, he himself is most likely baffled by it” (23). More than a plot device, this collage suggests the broader textual fund from which Verbal “knits” (this anagram perhaps accounts for the unusual spelling of Verbal’s surname) a story for Kujan. In its profusion, the bulletin board insinuates a universe consisting not of referentials, but rather a bricolage of overlapping texts—“practices, discourses, and textual play,” as Jameson would have it. A master bricoleur, Verbal appropriates random signifiers lying about Rabin’s office (we see him scan the room carefully upon entrance)—Skokie Quartet, Kobayashi, Redfoot, Guatemala—and writes them into his own story. Verbal’s digression about the “Skokie Quartet” serves to illustrate the consequent reality effect. Kujan dismisses the obscure detail in Verbal’s criminal past as “totally irrelevant”; but in its very triviality, the aside comprises part of the “concrete details” that certify the narrative.

The prominent character of Kobayashi is likewise drawn from the textual reservoir of Rabin’s office; but he emerges as part of the representational tactic of Orientalism. As we have seen, hard-boiled fiction and film noir exemplify the ways in which western culture imagines for itself “a great Asiatic mystery” to be studied, judged, and disciplined. Said also points out that Orientalism is, like Barthes’s reality effect, “a form of radical realism”: “Anyone employing Orientalism, which is a habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality.” Just as insignificant notation generates a “referential illusion,” Orientalism exploits cultural memories of the East and, in turn, normalizes their reception. Not surprisingly, these two realist strategies work in tandem: the surrounding canvas of innocent detail camouflages the more properly allusive function of Orientalism. One reviewer notes that the character of Kobayashi recalls “Gielgud playing Chang the Deputy Lama in Lost Horizon.” Kobayashi’s strange, theatrical appearance belies the authenticity of Verbal’s account. And whether Verbal is cued by his notice of the word “Kobayashi” to embark upon a more dramatically Orientalist vein of narration or simply and opportunistically accommodates the name to a preconceived motif, this unlikely figure ushers in his rendition of the Oriental mastermind, Keyser Soze: “He is supposed to be Turkish. Some say his father was German. Nobody believed he was real. Nobody ever saw him or knew anybody that ever worked directly for him.
But to hear Kobayashi tell it, anybody could have worked for Soze. You never knew. That was his power.” Adumbrating Verbal’s own ruse, this last phrase interprets the figure of Keyser Soze as mysterious, ineffable, threatening, and altogether consistent with the workings of Orientalism. Verbal culls Soze not from Rabin’s cluttered office, but from the archive of criminal lore. The wily con man capitalizes upon Soze’s supposed Eastern origins to paint a character replete with Orientalist associations. The surreal flashback that accompanies his account of the Soze myth—the hazily shot interior of Soze’s home, itself festooned with Persian rugs, is more reminiscent of a Eugène Delacroix painting (*The Death of Sardanapalus*, perhaps, given the circumstances) than a realist crime drama. This portion of the sequence may indeed recall the Orientalism that came to pervade European painting throughout the nineteenth century. Even as we are subjected to a shot of the Hungarian raping Soze’s wife, the camera pans to a painting of a reclining odalisque—an image that underscores the Orientalism of Verbal’s narrative and forces a juxtaposition of text and referent. Soze’s murder of his own violated family, and the subsequent mass killings, recollect the extravagant violence historically ascribed to the Orient: “He kills their kids, he kills their wives, he kills their parents and their parents’ friends. . . . He burns down the houses they live in and the stores they work in, he kills people that owe them money. And like that he was gone. Underground. No one has ever seen him again. He becomes a myth, a spook story that criminals tell their kids at night.” Soze emerges from this hyperbolic history a composite of Ghengis Khan and Fu Manchu, a reification of the conventional Oriental criminal mastermind. Trusting his bed of insignificant notation, Verbal elaborates the Soze myth (Arkosh Kovash has introduced Soze outside Verbal’s narrative frame), in itself perhaps too fantastic to persuade Kujan. But here again, we witness a transition from the irrational suggested in the exotic to the subtle processes by which the realist text appropriates, exploits, and naturalizes incumbent cultural mythologies.

The film’s conclusion intensifies its challenge to the noir ethos. In heist films such as *The Asphalt Jungle*, the ringleader fails to pull off the caper, but remains coherent in his struggle against an indifferent universe. Throughout the course of the narrative, Verbal has appeared the antithesis of the noir protagonist. Given to talk rather than violent action, Verbal also physically departs from the tough, monadic body of hard-boiled antiheroes such as Sterling Hayden’s Johnny Clay and, indeed, Gabriel Byrne’s Dean Keaton. Kujan all but declares this opposition as he assures Verbal that Keaton has duped and exploited him: “He saved you because he wanted it that way. It was his will . . . Keaton was Keyser Soze. . . . The kind of guy who could wrangle the wills of men like Hockney and McManus. The kind
of man who could engineer a police line-up from all his years of contacts in N.Y.P.D. He used all of you to get him on that boat. He couldn’t get on alone and he had to pull the trigger himself to make sure he got his man.” The final shots of the film see a radical reversal of these apparent certainties. Verbal leaves the station one of the doomed suspects; he refuses to believe that his hero Keaton has betrayed him and he remains at once terrified and defiant of the dual threat posed by establishment and underworld. But even as Kujan realizes his error, Verbal undergoes a dramatic transformation, shedding his limp and using his once paralyzed hand to deftly light a cigarette. The point here is neither a return to the “normal” body—one that aligns physical and psychic autonomy—nor the certain identification of Verbal as Keyser Soze. Against the spectacularly alienated protagonists of heist noir, Singer and McQuarrie leave us with a shape-shifting “pretzel man.”

**RELEASED ON THE HEELS** of *The Usual Suspects* in 1995, David Fincher’s *Seven* sees Kevin Spacey return to the screen as a serial killer who preaches a deadly sermon against his immoral society. John Doe patterns each of his murders upon one the seven deadly sins, ultimately inscribing his pursuer Detective Mills (Brad Pitt) and himself into the text of the grisly sermon. A self-avowed jeremiadist, Doe should also be understood a reiteration of the deconstructive confidence man inimical to noir’s authenticating alienation. In its setting and three principal characters—Mills, Somerset (Morgan Freeman), and Doe—*Seven* presents a spectrum of figures that straddles the divide between modern and postmodern noir. *Seven*’s urban setting impresses many critics as an almost reflexive evocation of the noir dystopia. Hirsch, for example, describes this nameless metropolis as “the most richly rendered symbolic space to date in the history of neo-noir[,] . . . a stylized re-presentation of the crime-filled, studio-built, dark city of classic noir, a place of ramshackle, derelict buildings with murky brown hallways and cluttered warrenlike rooms into which light and air never penetrate” (281). Richard Dyer likewise notes the film’s careful “oligochromatic” adherence to a narrow range of muted colors and its rain-soaked mise-en-scène, which at once symbolizes human sin and alludes to pretexts such as *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator* (62). For Steffen Hantke, the city of *Seven* “is simply a noir icon, stripped of all geographic and cultural specificity,” which, in concert with the rural setting of the conclusion, “functions as a metatextual nod toward the noir tradition.” In short, just as John Doe exploits this infernal city as a perfect stage for his dramaturgical sermon, Fincher and screenwriter Andrew Kevin Walker find in their setting a ready means of situating *Seven* within noir conven-
tions and foreshadowing the way in which the film will undermine noir’s concomitant realism and authenticating alienation. John Doe is therefore not only a serial killer and a preacher but also a confidence man whose homiletic murders become an all-consuming text.

As Dyer points out, *Seven* turns upon a biracial “buddy cop” formula that recalls *Deadly Pursuit* and the *Die Hard*, and *Lethal Weapon* films, all of which reverse the stereotypes of white rationality and black libidinal-ity (Dyer 24). Fincher and Walker scramble the variables present in these films: while the white detective Mills is at once domestic and impulsively violent, Somerset emerges as a calm and reflective isolato. I would suggest that the most important distinction between Mills and Somerset is not simply a psychic duality between libido and superego (assignments that stretch back beyond the 1980s to buddy detective films such as *Private Hell 36* [Don Siegel, 1954], and *Stray Dog* [Akira Kurosawa, 1949]), but rather the varying degrees of semiotic perspicacity adopted by each of these policemen. If Mills has unreflectively constructed himself as an embattled noir hero, then Somerset exhibits a level of hermeneutic savvy that enables him to retain his subjectivity against John Doe’s sophisticated assault. The first conversation between Mills and Somerset reveals that the ambitious detective has sought transfer from “a nice quiet town” to the urban force. Despite his altruistic professions (“maybe I thought I could do more good here than there”), this self-styled “Serpico” understands himself in terms of violent confrontation with a world of crime and corruption. In a revealing anecdote, Mills confides to Somerset that he has remorselessly killed a suspect: “I expected it to be bad, you know. I took a human life . . . but I slept like a baby that night. I never gave it a second thought.” As the film proceeds, we come to see Mills as abusive, insensitive, homophobic, and anti-intellectual. In terms of discernible noir pretexts, Mills clearly derives from figures such as Carrol John Daly’s Race Williams, Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer, and Don Siegel’s Dirty Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood)—detectives who eschew cerebral activity in favor of brutal action. This opposition is clearly registered in the presentation of Mills’s body; the more physically active of the duo, Mills is increasingly battered and bloodied. As with almost all noir protagonists, however, such contusions only serve to underscore a subject locked in combat with his environment.

No less alienated than Mills, Somerset recalls Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe rather than Mike Hammer. At the beginning of the narrative, we find Somerset in his final week of police work, anticipating retirement to a home in the country. Methodical, reflective, and erudite, he appears all too sensitive to the human suffering engendered within the metropolis; like Marlowe, Somerset wages a lonely war against the absurd and retreats from the
world’s chaos into the sanctuary of his apartment, where he soothes himself with the regular cadence of a metronome. But even as he reiterates the “slumming angel” of noir, Somerset also has one foot in the metafictional universe of postmodernism. His name, for example, obviously alludes to modernist writer M. Somerset Maugham, whose existential questers stand as distant pretexts for Freeman’s character. When in the course of their investigation Somerset and Mills touch upon Of Human Bondage (“It’s not what you think it is,” Somerset assures his partner), the allusion becomes overwrought, broaching the ludic excess signification common to postmodernist parodies of noir minimalism. The very hermeneutic nature of Somerset’s investigative tactics likewise elicits postmodernist concerns; as he delves into library records and reads in Doe’s medieval pretexts, Somerset begins to resemble a detective from the pages of Pynchon and Borges rather than any noir detective. In one of the most lyrical moments in Seven, Somerset demonstrates his traverse of modern and postmodern literary modes: “We write everything down and note what time things happened. . . . We put it in a nice neat pile and file it away, on the slim chance it’s ever needed in a courtroom. It’s like collecting diamonds on a desert island. You keep them just in case you ever get rescued, but it’s a pretty big ocean out there.” When Mills pronounces this nuanced observation “Bullshit,” Somerset concludes, “I’m, sorry, but even the most promising clues usually lead only to other clues. I’ve seen so many corpses rolled away unrevenged.” With its images of isolation and futility, the remark most certainly conjures the task of the hard-boiled detective. But here is also an attention to interpretation and signification: the detectives’ job is to assemble a text that will, as Somerset goes on to suggest, “play well in a courtroom.” Like John Doe himself, Somerset recognizes the dependency of identity upon representation and this awareness renders him a fit adversary for the malevolent con man John Doe.

As evinced in texts such as Nightmare Alley and The Grifters, the confidence man is transformed within the noir imagination from rhetorician into neurotic. Seven reverses this dynamic, seizing upon the serial killer—a sign of psychological deviance—and translating that figure into the signifying con man. In the enigmatic character of John Doe, Fincher and Walker skirt psychology for a direct counterpoint to the worldview asserted by hard-boiled fiction and film noir. Even before the 1957 arrest of Ed Gein returned the serial killer to national prominence, films noirs such as D.O.A., The Night of the Hunter, and Dark City (William Dieterle, 1957), had foregrounded the “homicidal maniac” as a locus of irrational or libidinal forces that confront the protagonist. Other noirs, including M (Joseph Losey, 1951), Without Warning! (Arnold Laven, 1952), The Sniper
(Edward Dmytryk, 1960), and Dirty Harry would elaborate this gesture, elevating the serial killer proper into a representation of criminal pathology. As Eileen McGarry observes of the latter film, “Crime is not seen as a social phenomenon; rather all crimes and all criminals are equated with the psychotic Scorpio Killer” (92). From its first images, Seven undertakes a revision of this noir convention: the title sequence finds Doe pouring over his journal, an amalgam of handwritten scrawl, typewritten text, and photographs of mutilated bodies. While the introductory montage unquestionably suggests the killer’s murderous obsession, here is also a foreshadowing of the way in which Doe generates a homiletic text that consumes his victims. As Mills realizes, “He’s preaching,” Somerset replies, “These murders are his masterwork. His sermon to all of us.” Doe hereby constructs a homily that eradicates not only the life but also the identity of each victim, transcribing the unfortunate into an allegorical symbol of the sin in question. Doe is also repeatedly characterized as a performance artist who transforms bodies into sculptures; the crime-scenes themselves become discrete texts, legible spaces resembling art installations (Dyer 45–46). In one of the most telling moments of the film, Mills and Somerset discover this artist’s “studio.” While Mills charges about the apartment, Somerset wanders into Doe’s archive where he finds two thousand notebooks. As he peruses the graphomaniac’s hand, he realizes the implications of this evidence cache: “If we had fifty men, reading in 24 hour shifts, it would still take two months.” As in postmodernist fictions such as The Crying of Lot 49, Seven inverts the modernist search for meaning; like Oedipa Maas, Mills faces the problem of delimiting a superabundance of textual material that threatens to subsume self and world.

Doe’s role as an agent of excess signification becomes all too clear in the climactic sequence of the film. As Mills and Somerset drive John Doe into the desert, the killer explains the logic behind his jeremiad: “We see a deadly sin on every street corner, in every home. And we tolerate it. We tolerate it because it’s common, it’s trivial. We tolerate it morning, noon and night. Well, not anymore. I’m setting the example, and what I’ve done is going to be puzzled over and studied and followed, forever.” Preeminently concerned with hermeneutics, Doe hopes not only to preach a sermon that defamiliarizes sin, but, perhaps more importantly, to create a self-perpetuating text that will ever absorb its readers. The short-term effect of the text is certainly the absorption of Mills and Doe himself. Doe writes himself into the sermon, murdering and decapitating the pregnant Tracy Mills (Gwyneth Paltrow) in a gesture of “Envy” for the detective’s cozy domestic life. This master stroke also proves a mechanism for luring Mills into the text: shooting Doe, he abnegates himself to become the embodiment of “Wrath.” Read against a film such as Dirty Harry, this stark devel-
development thoroughly subverts the noir protagonist; the vigilantism by which these figures stave off an entropic world becomes a means of destroying this alienated subjectivity. Although he does not physically perish, Mills, like Scottie in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, has lost his psyche to the con man's machinations—dumb and devastated, he faces certain institutionalization. But what of Somerset, the detective who has all along exhibited dangerous affinities with Doe's hypertextual world? During the terrible ordeal in the desert, Somerset vainly admonishes Mills, “If you kill him, He wins.” Yet more telling, however, is the film's final line, in which Somerset observes: “Ernest Hemingway once wrote, ‘The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.’ I agree with the second part.” While Somerset's quotation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* may have been a concession to producers' desires for a “crumb of Hollywoodian comfort,” the line may indeed be read as an appropriate response to Doe's attack on noir worldview. Witnessing the absorption of Mills into Doe's sermon, Somerset invokes Hemingway as an almost talismanic guarantor of authenticating alienation. Somerset will now forgo retirement to his pastoral retreat; Mills's fate has reminded him that he owes his identity to the solitary crusade on behalf of this not so fine place.

**CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S Memento** posits a resolution to the crisis of films such as *The Usual Suspects* and *Seven*. While recognizing the way in which the conventional noir protagonist has been undone by the con man, *Memento* proceeds to dramatize the synthesis of these two antithetical figures. Nolan takes for his antihero a highly recognizable noir character: Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is an insurance investigator stricken with anterograde amnesia. From what we can discern of this necessarily hazy back story, Leonard has suffered a violent attack that claimed the life of his wife and deprived him of short-term memory. While Leonard retains distant recollections of his former life, he cannot “make new memories.” Faced with this terrifying dilemma, Leonard assembles a portable archive that enables him to pursue his sole purpose of revenge against the culprit known only as James or John G. Consisting of handwritten notes and Polaroid photographs, this archive is most dramatically “embodied” in a pastiche of tattoos that adorn Leonard's form: inscribed in contrasting styles by different tattooists, these messages variously remind Leonard to “Find him,” advise him that “Memory is Treachery,” and provide a record of “the facts” of his quest. Leonard also finds himself aided and/or obstructed by familiar noir figures such as ex-cop Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) and femme fatale Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss), who at one point explains in excruciating detail her plot against Leonard, knowing that he will soon forget the admission.
The film's narrative tension arises from Leonard's persistent attempts to complete his mission in spite of sketchy information, his debilitating condition, and the threats posed by everyone he meets. In keeping with its generally reflexive tenor, *Memento* declares the self-constitutive function of Leonard's investigation: responding to Teddy's reminder “You’re living,” Leonard counters, “Just for revenge. That's what keeps me going. It's all I have.” Through a deft manipulation of the amnesiac formula, Nolan steers *Memento* away from the possibilities of modernist self-realization and into the problematics of postmodernist self-construction. Whereas the earlier films posit some rupture of middle-class normality (most particularly amnesia) as an opportunity for authenticity and self discovery, *Memento* presents short-term memory loss as a means of dramatizing the fragility of the human subject.

Noting pretexts such as *Somewhere in the Night*, Richard Armstrong observes that “*Memento* is the logical end game of the amnesiac strain of film noir” (119); Nolan does aggressively pursue the implications of noir amnesia, but he does so in a way contrary to his modernist predecessors. *Memento* recalls not only *Somewhere in the Night*, *The Blue Dahlia*, and *Double Indemnity*, as Armstrong suggests, but also romans noirs such as David Goodis’s *Nightfall* (1947) and Richard Neely’s *Shattered* (1969). Such texts follow the pattern in which some disruption of normality proves strangely fortuitous, inaugurating a drama of self-realization. In Neely’s novel, for example, narrative conflict emerges from the protagonist’s struggle to rediscover identity: “A fragmented memory began to form. For a split instant the pieces darted together like metal fittings homing to a magnet. Then they fell apart.” As Žižek argues, “Classical . . . noirs abound with cases of amnesia in which the hero does not know who he is or what he did during his blackout. . . . [A] successful recollection means that, by way of organizing his life-experience into a consistent narrative, the hero exorcises the dark demons of the past . . . .” Preservation of short-term memories, however, is precisely what enables noir amnesiacs to investigate themselves. Nolan inverts this scenario and in doing so propels *Memento* into the dilemma of the floating signifier. In a revealing conversation with Teddy, Leonard postulates that his notes on “the facts” transcend interpretation: “Facts, not memories: that’s how you investigate. I know, it’s what I used to do. Memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car. It’s an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed or distorted and they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.” This hermeneutic is belied, however, by his later recommendation, “You might catch a sign and attach the wrong meaning to it. . . . It’s all about context”—an assertion against the objectivity of raw data. Leonard’s struggle to maintain a
stable collection of facts dramatizes the contextual nature of experience and the consequent instability of identity. Even the most immediate data assume new meanings as Leonard sloughs and replaces short-term memories; facts notwithstanding, Leonard must continually reinterpret his data with new interpretations derived from direct experience. One of the most telling subplots in this respect is Leonard’s confrontation with Dodd (Calmum Keith Rennie). When the drug-dealer accosts Leonard because he is wearing the clothes and driving the Jaguar belonging to rival pusher Jimmy Grantz (Larry Holden), the two engage in a running battle within which pursuer and pursued continually exchange places. As he finds himself inexplicably running through a trailer park, Leonard wonders, “What the fuck am I doing?” Glimpsing Dodd, he assumes “Chasing him!” The tables turn again, however, when Leonard sees Dodd approach with a gun: “FUCK! He’s chasing me.” The scenario will later repeat itself when Leonard attempts to ambush Dodd in his motel room, which proves the worst tactic for a man in Leonard’s position. As we shall see, the central tension of Memento lies not in the conventional mystery formula of investigation and solution, but rather in the protagonist’s contention for the right of self-fashioneing. Nolan punctuates this thematic of contextualization by placing the viewer in Leonard’s unfortunate predicament, for we too are deprived of the contexts by which we might make sense of the events paraded before us. William G. Little recommends that this narrative structure makes for a traumatic filmgoing ordeal: “The film’s unusual formal construction certainly unsettles viewer expectations of temporal continuity and coherence, expectations shaped by mainstream Hollywood cinema’s commitment to linear narrative” (67).

In this vertiginous film, Nolan conjures the penultimate noir phantasm, a nightmare registered on one hand by Leonard’s conspicuous tattooing. For Little, the motley collection of ink is at odds with itself, representing at once Leonard’s attempt to exoticize and distance himself from a mechanized world and yet “compulsively model” the very disciplinary practices from which he wishes to escape by inscribing himself with bits of typographical information (80–81). Robert Avery, on the other hand, argues that the tattoos suggests white masculinity rather than the exotic: “To look at Leonard’s body, to see the tattoos, is to see his whiteness” (35). At the same time, however, Avery recognizes the tattooed form as an “abject body . . . permeable, blemished, without ‘subject boundaries’” (11). These observations appear all the more persuasive when we take into account the significance of tattooing within the noir imagination. As we have seen, hard-boiled fiction and film noir locate the tattoo as a sign of abjection and excess signification. For Hammett’s Continental Op, tattoos
conjure the corporeal and psychic violence of the colonial periphery. In *Nightmare Alley*, William Lindsay Gresham likewise figures the heavily tattooed body as a dangerously abysmal text, a scapegoat for the disturbing implications of the confidence man. Postmodernist noir exploits these earlier associations; Martin Scorsese underscores his portrait of the terroristic con man Max Cady by memorably clothing this villain in allusive tattoos. More recently, K. W. Jeter literalizes the floating signifier and subjective dissolution by imagining autonomous, animated tattoos. Like the figure of the confidence man, tattoos posit for noir protagonists the twin horror of physical puncture—violation of the hard-boiled body—and the subjugation of that body to unstable significations. Nolan’s portrait of Leonard Shelby therefore reads as a climactic example of “tattoo noir,” for this figure sees the uninhibited inscription of the noir body. Leonard may intend his tattoo collection as an adjunct to his role as hard-boiled detective, a hedge against short-term memory loss and anonymity, but this tactic only exacerbates his predicament. Leonard must not only negotiate a world of unstable signs; he is himself an unstable sign open to constant reinterpretation.

Yet more unsettling than Leonard’s pervasive tattooing is his vulnerability to manipulation. It is altogether appropriate that Leonard has formerly worked as an insurance investigator; as suggested in the complex digression about Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky), Leonard was, like Barton Keyes in Cain’s *Double Indemnity* (1936) or Jim Reardon (Edmond O’Brien) in *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), devoted to discovering frauds and “arresting” the dynamic self of the confidence man. Whether or not Sammy was himself a con man faking anterograde memory dysfunction, as Teddy insists, Leonard has suffered a cruel reversal, for he is now a perpetual “mark” in a world of grifters. Teddy claims to have conned Leonard for his own benefit; he purports to be an ex-cop who provides Leonard an inexhaustible context for being and satisfaction:

I was the cop assigned to your wife’s case. . . . I thought you deserved a chance for revenge. I’m the one that helped you find the other guy in your bathroom that night. The guy that cracked your skull and fucked your wife. We found him, you killed him. But you didn’t remember, so I helped you start looking again, looking for the guy you already killed. . . . I gave you a reason to live, and you were more than happy to help. You don’t want the truth. You make up your own truth. . . . You, you wander around, you’re playing detective. You’re living in a dream kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life.

In this formulation, Leonard and Teddy collaborate toward a narrative of authenticating alienation which will cohere a damaged self. Like Pynchon,
Auster, and Jeter, Nolan recognizes the noir ethos as an intervention into identity crisis. But Teddy is not so altruistic as he claims, in that he conscripted this unfortunate as a personal hit-man. It turns out that Teddy travels about with his unwitting partner, encouraging him to murder “JG’s” (like Natalie’s drug-dealing boyfriend Jimmy Grantz) and then absconding with their ill-gotten gains. While Teddy is undoubtedly the most prominent con man in *Memento*, he is joined by opportunists such as Natalie: she sadistically abuses Leonard and hopes to exploit him as a weapon against her boyfriend’s rival Dodd. “I’m gonna use you,” she declares, “I’m telling you because I’ll enjoy it more if I know that you could stop me if you weren’t a freak.” Although this plot fails, it reiterates Leonard’s susceptibility to opportunists; he even falls prey to Burt (Mark Boone Junior), the motel clerk who charges him for two rooms. Incapable of forming new memories, Leonard reads as a noir hero degraded to renewable resource for the con man’s operations. *Seven’s* John Doe successfully coopts the vengeful Detective Mills for his definitive jeremiad, but Teddy exploits Leonard in an open-ended series of cons.

Teddy assu res Leonard that his search for John G. is a “romantic quest that you wouldn’t end even if I wasn’t in the picture.” The line foreshadows the film’s resolution of the conflict between noir protagonist and confidence man. It is fitting that these climactic scenes transpire amid the looming fuel tanks of an abandoned refinery, a setting reminiscent of pivotal moments in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949), *D.O.A.*, and *Touch of Evil*; the industrial wasteland here again becomes an arena for the grim struggle between self and world. But Nolan rehearses the archetypal noir confrontation with a critical difference. Refusing the authenticating alienation of these earlier films, Nolan does return some measure of agency to a damaged subject. In the final sequence, Nolan provides a context for the opening scene in which Leonard kills Teddy. We now understand that Leonard, in a moment of lucidity, condemns Teddy as one of the John G’s that he must eradicate. Following Teddy’s revelatory speech, Leonard reflects “I’m not a killer. I’m just someone who wanted to make things right. . . . Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes, I will.” He burns the photo of Jimmy’s corpse and captions Teddy’s snapshot with the fatal warning “Don’t believe his lies.” The stage is now set for the hard-boiled hero’s violent ejection of the con man and his reclamation of a fragile subjectivity. With this gesture, Nolan reworks the revenge plot that anchors noirs such as *D.O.A.* and *I, the Jury*. Unlike vigilantes Frank Bigelow and Mike Hammer, however, Leonard cannot simply and innocently assume the role of the dogged existential hero “who wanted to make things right” by meting out personal justice; this plot line has been exposed, along with noir ideology in general, as a “technology of the self.” But while the execution
of Teddy arises from his own nihilistic con game, this act holds dramatic meaning for Leonard in that he finally trumps the arch-enemy of noir. In order to accomplish this liberating gesture, Leonard must con himself; that is to say, he assumes the persona of both con man and mark. Driving away from his decisive encounter with Teddy (more pivotal, really, than the murder scene itself), Leonard engages in another of the film’s more forthright philosophical reflections: “I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning even if I can’t remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world’s still here. Do I believe the world’s still here? Is it still out there? Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I’m no different.” As Teddy recommends, the hunt for John G. provides an ongoing context within which Leonard’s actions remain meaningful. Assured that he will forget this epiphany, Leonard may persist with his search for the elusive John G. In Baudrillard’s terms, Leonard has “reaped the symbolic benefits of alienation, which is that the Other exists, and that otherness can fool you for the better or the worse.”

“The self that has nothing to remember and nothing for which to hope,” writes philosopher Calvin O. Schrag, “is a self whose identity stands in peril” (37). This utterance might serve as an epigraph for Memento, which recognizes in the noir ethos a story of human identity as it evolves under the contrapuntal worlds of modernism and postmodernism. To persist with Schrag’s language, Memento exemplifies the ways in which the modernist subject of noir has “become a prime target for the protagonists of postmodernism.” In films noirs of the 1990s, an arch-postmodernist protagonist, the signifying confidence man, takes for its central dupe the hard-boiled hero that represents “tendencies to construct a sovereign and monarchical self, at once sufficient and self-assured, finding metaphysical comfort in a doctrine of an immutable and indivisible self-identity.” Just as Teddy harangues Leonard for maintaining a sense of purpose by “playing detective,” the con man very generally exposes noir agonism as a self-constitutive strategy veiled in the tactics of realism. Literally embodying excess textuality, con artists such as Max Cady, Verbal Kint, and John Doe implicate the supposedly autonomous noir hero as “an accomplice in the utterances of speech acts and in the significations of language.” If it weren’t for Memento, we might assume that the existential hero of noir had been eclipsed and transformed by the confidence man into a nonsubject “simply dispersed into a panorama of radically diversified and changing language games.” This threatening hermeneutic function explains the marked anxiety that attends the figure of the confidence man in noir fictions ranging from Hammett’s Continental Op stories through Gresham’s Nightmare.
Alley and into Thompson’s *The Grifters*. However tragic and destructive, Leonard Shelby (“Shall Be”?) sees the integration of the hard-boiled determination and rhetorical sophistication toward the end of subjective possibility; he represents a self that continually emerges from “stories in the making” (Schrag 26–27). Taken on its own, the ascendance of the confidence man in late-twentieth-century film noir may be interpreted as an aggressive strain of the nihilist postmodernism of cineastes such as David Lynch. I would suggest, however, that the constructivist vision of these films accompanies and illuminates a more redemptive vision of the noir hero as a “connected guy.”