MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Stolen Glances: Heist Cinema and the Visual Production of Deception

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Introduction: Cinema as Deception, Deception as Cinema

The capacity to deceive figures into cinema's history in a number of interesting ways. For Méliès, motion pictures allowed the technical production of deception and illusion for his "trick" films, and in popular mythology, frightened spectators fled an exhibition of Auguste and Louis Lumière's *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* (1895) fearing the imminent arrival of the train at the theatre itself. While this latter story has been roundly discredited, it holds an important place in cinematic lore. In the various efforts of documentary filmmakers to negate the idea of objective truth, whether through direct cinema/cinema *verité*, the use of reflexive gestures, or subjective positioning, there is a sense of an imminent threat of deception in film's mediation of truth. As Tom Gunning (2004) and Rachel O. Moore (2000) have recently argued, even critical explorations of cinema, quite as much as filmmaking practices themselves, have held the medium in deep suspicion. In the screen theories derived from Lacan and Althusser that dominated 1970s film studies we see film scholars move towards a conception of film that sees deception and trickery – otherwise called "ideological mystification" – as an innate feature of the cinematic apparatus.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these ongoing concerns, there seems to be a civic-mindedness among critics, theoreticians, filmmakers, and film-watchers alike which holds that film should be able to present at least some verifiable truths and that filmmaking should still be able to provide a reliable document. However, since film is *always* a mediation of something else, the direct path to these truths – as the debates about documentary filmmaking and realism have shown – will always be complex, and,

indeed, contingent upon the culture in which they find purchase. What is at stake then, is not so much what is real and what is not, but the conditions under which verisimilitude – the experience of reality – can be taken to occur and be produced.

But perhaps we should not be so quick to discount cinema's more deceitful abilities. Deception, trickery, and illusion, after all, have a presence in everyday social and political spheres as well as in the realm of cultural production, and produce misapprehension, misunderstanding, and delusion. Thus, fantasy is not only a product of the evolving technologies of visual culture such as film, but also plays a significant role in defining the contours of modernity generally. That is to say that everyday social, political, and national life is defined by an interplay between things that are considered to be true, and those which are fabrications – be they lies, promises with no intention of being fulfilled, imitation, performance, sophistry, or even ideological mystification. Sociologist Georg Simmel argues that the lie, in modern life, takes on a much greater importance than it did in previous civilizations:

> We base our gravest decisions on a complex system of concep-
> tions, most of which presuppose the confidence that we will
> not be betrayed. Under modern conditions, the lie, therefore,
> becomes something much more devastating than it was earlier,
> something which questions the very foundations of our life.
> If among ourselves today, the lie were as negligible a sin as it
> was among the Greek gods, the Jewish patriarchs, or the South
> Sea Islanders; and if we were not deterred from it by the utmost
> severity of the moral law; then the organization of modern life

would be simply impossible; for modern life is a "credit economy"

in a much broader than a strictly economic sense. (1950, 313)

Those wanting to exploit this credit economy need only trade on those markers and

indexes that will somehow establish them a line of credit. For example, in a subset of the

criminal world, fabrications take the more precise forms of fraud, grifts, cons, and scams.

These are criminal operations with a defining element of deception at their core; their

ends are achieved not through the threat of violence, but rather by means of a specific

form of social, technical, and psychological intelligence put into action, a subtle form of

seduction that will see the crime's victims in agreement with a particular framing of

events. At this point of agreement, the perpetrator need only exit the premises before the

ruse reveals itself—there is usually an element of time whereby the deception will have

run its course—in order for the deception to have successfully served its purpose. The

thieves, con artists, and grifters who are successful at their trade have carefully observed

the character of social interaction, and are attentive to its formal and informal patterns. To

achieve desired reactions, they compose a suitable demeanor, catalogue of gestures, and

form of impression to make. They follow a plan, either individually or in concert with

others, performing both covertly and explicitly, moving in and out of urban flows.

Because this form of criminal operates on a plane of the social unconscious, accounts of

his actions can usually be gained from victims, witnesses, and officials only considerably

after the fact and with concomitant inaccuracy. Writing particularly about fabrications,

sociologist Erving Goffman points out in *Frame Analysis* that, "when the contained [i.e.

deceived] party discovers what is up, what was real for him a moment ago is now seen as

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a deception and is totally destroyed. It collapses" (1974, 84-5). What sort of experience does this represent? To recognize that one has been deceived is akin to being shaken awake from a dream, to realize that the moments before were not in any sense "real" and that they have no purchase on "now" – whatever the retroactively uncanny now comes to mean for the victim under the circumstances.

This experience is not an uncommon one outside of the sphere of crime. Deception is performed in various contexts, by many different kinds of people in an assortment of positions and for a myriad of reasons. Goffman goes on to note the multiple ways that fabrications can be approached and studied:

> They can be considered according to how long they last or the
> number of persons contained by them. They can be ordered
> according to the materials that are manipulated. Thus a motive
> can be made to deceive, as can an intent, a gesture, a show of
> resolve or a show of a lack of it, a statement, an artifact, a pers-
> onal identity, a setting and its gathering, a conversation, an ex-
> tensive physical plant, a gust of wind, an accident, a happenstance,
> a company of Israeli commandos dressed as Arab prisoners and
> airline mechanics to surprise skyjackers, a Trojan horse. (1974, 86)

While many suspect they are being "fooled with" all of the time, many others do not know when to expect deception or how it will occur. The experience of realization is therefore a common feature of modern life, situated in a time and space where we are faced with, and must involve ourselves with, strangers—potential deceivers—on a regular basis, a "credit economy" where trust is contingent on a series of (easily

fabricated) markers of authenticity; a world where, as Marx and Marshall Berman (1988) have argued, "all that is solid melts into air."

Film has brought us closer to the arcane world of criminal fabrication than any other medium. I call this world arcane not only because it is closed and secretive, but also because its methods are, for the most part, kept out of sight. Cinema, then, in its ability to show and display, is in a unique position to take us into the criminal sphere, even if, at the same time, it might imagine and invent this sphere.

This paper is about some of the pleasures to be found in watching a cinematic depiction of theft. Theft is something we do not ordinarily see. In cinematic depictions of theft we are shown something that occurs underneath the surface of our everyday reality. Just as much as cinema is deceptive, therefore, so too can it penetrate and explore deceptive phenomena.

A sequence from Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) provides a paradigmatic example of just how cinema might show a production of deception. In the scene, three pickpockets descend on a busy train station and perform a series of deft manipulations to relieve passengers of their wallets and purses. The camera in this sequence must attune itself to gestures and movements that, in public life, would normally be overlooked. For example, a woman who has just paid for a ticket moves to tuck her purse back under her arm. The protagonist, Michel (Martin LaSalle), places a rolled up newspaper there instead and takes the purse directly from her hands, immediately passing it to a partner behind him in the queue. This partner hands the purse off to a third partner, who places it inside his jacket, moves away from the line, removes the cash, and deposits the purse into a waste bin. From marking the woman as a target to disposing of the evidence, this

sequence unfolds in less than a minute—almost too swiftly for all of these actions to be caught. This deception can thus be broken down into: the marking of a victim (the woman), a sizing up of the contingencies (is there money in the purse?), a perfectly choreographed material substitution (newspaper for purse), a handoff (distancing and authorship disavowal), and a clean getaway. Point-of-view and quick editing are used in such a fashion as to provide these elements for us point by point: picking the woman out of the crowd, showing the purse in close-up, noting the gesture which allows the undetected exchange (again in close-up), and finally tracing the removal of the marker of guilt (purse tossed into waste bin) which signals readiness for a clean getaway.

This chain of action, caught by the camera in close-up and somewhat unconventional framing, is in many ways an accurate visual reproduction of a series of moments – moments that may or may not be caught by a pedestrian eye embedded in the confusion of a train station. Because of the sequence's necessary rapidity, first of all, it is initially difficult to assimilate the visual information provided – the deconstruction I'm giving here is the result of multiple viewings, pauses, and rewinds. The speed of the movements presented, combined with the singularity of the action depicted forces a questioning of vision itself. Did we really just see a theft? Are our eyes playing tricks on us? In the film, as in everyday life, there is no corroborating event, no evidence, to substantiate our vision. It is perfectly understandable that a witness to this purse substitution would wait for a reaction from the victim before she would admit even to herself that she saw what she thinks she saw. As we watch this complex operation it passes before the eyes so quickly, that we question whether we saw it at all. And what exactly are we seeing here? Do we actually get to see a deception, or simply a flutter of movement? What is

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deception itself, but a strange sort of movement that passes before us and disappears, resisting our grasp? In this way, film and deception, flickers of presence and absence, are one and the same.

Even while film may endeavor to show a process of unlawful deception, this production does not necessarily involve an objective reportage on, or a how-to manual of, criminal procedure. Both the magic and poetry of deception as a cognitive experience seem to be maintained, and even enhanced, as they are carried over into cinematic representation. The sequence from *Pickpocket* demonstrates the ways in which verisimilitude and illusion – the apprehension of reality and the unreality of everyday circumstances – are held in balance.

I would argue that while cinema is complicit in the production of deception, capable of producing materials meant to trick viewers in various ways, it is also capable, as we have seen in the sequence from *Pickpocket*, of confronting deception as a phenomenon of everyday life. Involved in this confrontation is piercing through appearances and examining cues. However, this confrontation is also somewhat like detective work in reverse: instead of unraveling a mystery from a series of clues, a series of clues are used to create something like a mystery. Tom Gunning, in his book-length study of Fritz Lang (2001), notes a similar sort of reversal when he talks about the practices of professional criminals:

> But if the forces of order employed all the means of the ration-
> alized sciences of observation to reduce individuality to points
> on a graph, the criminal (at least in fiction) used the devices of
> illusion and theatre, grimacing when mug shots were taken, multi-

plying fictional aliases, and mastering makeup and costume to

ward off the penetrating gaze of the police. (101)[1]

The criminal, therefore, is the author of a complex production, a conjuror who veils technical virtuosity with an illusive screen.

The central sequence in *Pickpocket* discussed here is spectacular in contrast with the darker, more spiritual narrative from which it is drawn. It is in the genre of the heist, or caper, film that we see a more thorough exploration of the production of deception, both visually and socially. In these films, the whole of the narrative is structured around the process of completing a complex robbery. Because this robbery must be committed against an institution with the means to shroud itself in the most lavish systems of protection, it is necessary not only that the perpetrators be in possession of an array of highly-specialized talents and abilities but also that they devise a plan to penetrate these systems that is cunning and masterful. It is the plan—its actual construction as well as its unfolding—which is at the heart of the heist narrative.

While robbery and crime have figured prominently into cinematic history, heist films—either films in which the plot structure revolves around planning, assembling a team for, and performing a complex and difficult theft, or merely films in which a complex and difficult theft occurs as one component of the plot (a number of the *Pink Panther* movies, for example)—emerge primarily after WWII within the film noirs of the 1950s. *The Asphalt Jungle* (Huston, 1950) is most likely the first film to utilize a heist as a defining plot element. It is preceded only by *Criss Cross* [Siodmak, 1949] which features a small armored car heist and is followed in America by *Armored Car Robbery* (Fleischer, 1950), *Five Against the House* (Karlson, 1955), *The Good Die Young* (Gilbert,

1955) and *The Killing* (Kubrick, 1956), in France by *Touchez pas au grisbi* (Becker, 1953), *Bob le flambeur* (Melville, 1955) and *Du Rififi chez les hommes* (1955) by American director Jules Dassin; and in England by *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Crichton, 1950), *League of Gentlemen* (Dearden, 1959) and *The Day They Robbed the Bank of England* (Guillermin, 1960). In the 1960s the heist, or caper film as it is also called, discarded the darker tones of noir—*Odds Against Tomorrow* (Fleischer, 1959) is arguably the last noir heist film—in favor of the more colorful sheen of adventure, romance, and comedy. *Ocean's 11* (Milestone, 1960) provides perhaps the most archetypal document of heist cinema and is a text whose spirit subsequent efforts, most notably Steven Soderbergh's 2001 remake, have aspired to capture. *I Soliti Ignoti* (also known as *Big Deal on Madonna Street* [Monicelli, 1960]) is an Italian production which mixes neo-realism with comedy and is a deft take-off of *Rififi*. Dassin weighed in again with a slightly parodic version of the genre in *Topkapi* (1964) a colorful, continental caper. Verneuil's *Any Number Can Win* (1963) and Melville's *La Cercle rouge* (1970) although products of their time, continue in the tradition of earlier French and American noirs. The decade is rounded off by films attempting to combine a mod style with liberalized depictions of sex and a continental flair: *The Biggest Bundle of Them All* (Annakin, 1966), *Gambit* (Neame, 1966), *How to Steal a Million* (Wyler, 1966) *Dead Heat on a Merry-Go-Round* (Girard, 1966), *Jack of Diamonds* (Taylor, 1967), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (Jewison, 1968), *Ad Ogni Costo* (*Grand Slam* [Montaldo, 1968]), *Deadfall* (Forbes, 1968), *The Italian Job* (Collinson, 1969), *Perfect Friday* (Hall, 1970), and *The Sicilian Clan* (Verneuil, 1970). Whereas the 1960s was characterized for the most part by sophisticated criminals operating nefariously within a society, in the 1970s

heist films begin to depict an "outsider" criminal rebelling against society. In *The Anderson Tapes* (Lumet, 1971), *The Hot Rock* (Yates, 1972), *$* (Brooks, 1972) and *Thief* (Mann, 1981)[2] heists are committed, with various degrees of success by characters— usually ex-convicts—operating from the margins of society. As the genre has developed and transformed so, too, has the object to be obtained. In films such as *Sneakers* (Robinson, (1992) and *Mission Impossible* (DePalma, 1996) it is technology or information itself which is protected and must be stolen. The past few years have seen a spate of heist remakes—*The Thomas Crown Affair* (McTieman,1999), *The Italian Job* (Gray, 2001), *Bob le flambeur* (as *The Good Thief* [Jordan, 2002]) and *The Ladykillers* (originally directed by Alexander Mackendrick,[Joel & Ethan Coen, 2004])—as well as a bevy of original entries—*Hudson Hawk* (Lehmann, 1991), *The Real McCoy* (Mulchay, 1993), *Heat* (Mann, 1995), *Dead Presidents* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1995), *Set It Off* (Gray, 1996), *Mission: Impossible* (DePalma, 1996), *Entrapment* (Amiel, 1999), *Reindeer Games* (Frankenheimer, 2000), *Small Time Crooks* (Allen, 2000) *Heist* (Mamet, 2001), *The Score* (Oz, 2001), *Femme Fatale* (DePalma, 2002), *Steal* (aka Riders, Pirès, 2002), *Catch That Kid* (Fruendlich, 2004 – a remake of the Danish film *Klatrehøsen* [Wullenweber, 2002]), *Foolproof* (Phillips, 2003), and *The Perfect Score* (Robbins, 2004). A sequel to Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11* entitled *Ocean's 12* is due in the winter of 2004; as is *National Treasure*, a Jerry Bruckheimer film whose depiction of the heist of the Declaration of Independence is sure to make it a hallmark of post-9/11 cinema.

The films listed above represent only a partial list of all heist films and there are many more noirs that involve heists, non-Hollywood films (mostly from Europe) that involve

heists, and a host of lesser known films (B-films, as well as straight-to-videos) that involve a heist of some sort. I have touched upon what I regard as the most important films in the genre,[3] films that have been widely seen and popularized, or should be widely seen for the narrative and visual elements they call into play. Although constitutive features of the heist film are outlined here, this paper does not seek to succinctly define what a heist film is and what it is not. It does not attempt to group heist films according to subtle variations of form and content. Instead what is offered here provides enough of a historical background to get a sense of the cinematic development of the heist, this paper is not intended to chart a morphology of heist cinema.

Instead, in the chapters that follow, the aim is to eke out what I feel are the innately cinematic pleasures of watching a depiction of theft. This paper addresses itself primarily to an experience of cinema and how this experience is produced. In order to do this, I have chosen to concentrate closely on a relatively small group of films. In the first chapter, "Lingering Images," the depiction of the heist operation is contrasted against the broader narrative conventions within which it transpires. It is argued that the heist, while not completely independent of narrative, can be seen as a cinematic exhibition, an extended sequence, astounding and pleasurable to watch, that can take us away, for a time, from the involvements of narrative (exposition, cause and effect relations, resolution). In chapter two, "Criminal Procedure, Normal Appearances and the Stage of the Heist," I take up the idea of the cinematic heist as the portrayal of a production, a production that concomitantly requires a stage, a performance, and an audience. Here I take a close look at Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11*, and the way in which disguise is used—both narratively and reflexively—to create a cloak of normal appearances.

Chapter three, "Moving Through Walls," explores the problem of cinematically representing an everyday phenomenon—theft—that is largely unseen by everyday people. Given this fact, it is germane to ask just what it is in fact that heist films show to viewers. I propose here that the depiction of the theft is a way of restoring locality and particularity to institutional spaces where there is a tendency to deny or efface the local and the particular.

The heist film, in all its periods and variations, is the representation and dramatization of attempts by individuals to navigate complex systems of power for specific illicit ends. The drama of the heist film is one of criminal agency vs. the structure of institutionalized power; because systems of power are themselves dynamic so, too, are the modes of deception which seek to penetrate them. In many ways, it is the terrain of capitalism itself, in all of its complexities, that is explored in heist cinema. What many of these narratives reveal are the lengths to which banks, treasuries, casinos, and museums (which are nothing if not exhibitors of national "properties") will go to protect their holdings.[4] As such, heist films provide a cinematic expression of the shifting grounds upon which the struggle between individuals and abstract systems of power occur, a palimpsest of modernity.

Heist films epitomize the capacity of cinema, despite (or perhaps even because of) its deceptive tendencies, to observe, show, and display. While the examination that follows is a sustained meditation on just how heist films work, it is also hoped that an understanding of the operations of cinema and the ways it can produce visual pleasure is fostered here as well.

Notes

[1] In "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema" (1995), Gunning documents the fact that these practices were the *modus operandi* of real, non-fictional criminals as well.

[2] Both Michael Mann's *Thief* and *Heat* (1995) focus on the professionalization of crime, crime as "work."

[3] For reasons that will become apparent in the next chapter, the discursive term "genre" must be understood in the loosest sense here.

[4] Holdings by institutions such as these, it should be noted, are always soiled by corruption, exploitation and war. Although this theme is rarely explored in the heist film, it suggests an interesting subtext: heist films are almost always about the liberation of objects from the tyranny of usefulness. This is not, it should be made clear, the intent of the thieves who engineer the heist, who are clearly "in it for the money." This theme becomes particularly resonant in those heist films whose conclusions depict the destruction of that which was stolen. In *The Killing* cash stolen from a racetrack floats away in the wind, in *Ocean's 11* (1960) money is cremated with Jimmy Foster's (Peter Lawford) body, and in *The Italian Job* (1969) gold bricks tumble from the back of a van and off a cliff, never to be retrieved. As well, in films such as *The Asphalt Jungle* and *La Cercle rouge*, the singularity of the heist take (the particular jewels involved, as well as their volume) serves to scare off the dealers who agreed to fence it effectively rendering worthless that which was stolen. It can be seen therefore, that heist films often depict a necessary stage in what Bataille (1988) has termed "general economy": the destruction of surplus value.

Chapter 1: Lingering Images

There are perhaps numerous ways to categorize, enumerate, and otherwise classify what have been called "heist films".[1] Unlike westerns, gangster films, melodramas or films noirs, the heist film has as no weight of scholarly discourse by which the conventions, codes, and iconography it employs may be historically understood and navigated. The only sustained investigation into the heist film as a genre is found in Stuart Kaminsky's 1974 book *American Film Genres*, in a chapter entitled "The Big Caper Film." ("The caper" being another name for films which involve some sort of large-scale criminal operation.)[2] Kaminsky writes that heist films are "really a sub-genre of the adventure-process film, the film in which any small group of individuals of diverse ability (often social outcasts), comes together to confront a massive establishment, be it prison, army or secret installation" (1974, 74-5). We might also see the roots of heist cinema in the World War II combat film wherein the narrative follows a platoon comprised of Americans from diverse social backgrounds—an Italian, an Irish Catholic, a New York Jew, a white farm-boy, a Black southerner—through the process of a difficult and often fatal mission. Emphasized in these films, as we watch these men unified in battle despite their racial and ethnic differences, is the dominant political message of 1940s America to its public: in order to succeed, everyone must pitch in together and internal discord must be forgotten. Heist films, however, remove from this narrative model the overarching democratic ideology of circumstantial solidarity.

In the definitions provided thus far, words and phrases like "professional," "diverse ability," "process," and "massive establishment" seem to indicate a clear distinction of

the heist from other, more banal, forms of robbery (*Bonnie and Clyde* [Penn, 1967], for example could not be classified as a heist film). It is from this admittedly imprecise premise that I would like to begin my investigation. Here then are two provisionary postulates from which this inquiry proceeds: 1) that the term "heist" describes a specific, specialized criminal operation to steal goods from an especially well guarded area; 2) that emerging out of late-1940s and early-1950s cinema, a complex and well-planned criminal operation was depicted and the films which contained such depictions have been variously called "heist" or "caper" films. The heist films produced in this period typify the concerns of American film noir; the action of the heist providing a narrative framework through which themes of fatality and desperation could be explored in the seedy backdrop of a criminal underworld. It should be noted that this overview is by no means comprehensive and does not strive to categorize different strains of heist film. Instead, it seeks to touch upon what I consider to be the major and relevant works and explores the evolving visual experience provided by the occurrence of a heist within a narrative film.

While heist films can certainly be seen to constitute a genre, it is important to be careful in applying this term. In major genre films such as westerns or gangster dramas, the terms of the narrative are largely defined by narrative circumstances under which action and drama unfold. Thus, in a classical western, movement, characterization, and space are constrained and defined by the particular and recognizable circumstances of the story being set in the western United States at a particular—if not largely mythic and idealized—period in time.[3] Heist films, on the other hand, are largely defined by a singular, precisely framed, tightly organized, and skillfully performed illegal act that

takes place at some point within the narrative. Sometimes a heist is positioned in a film because the plot requires a suspenseful scene or an arbitrary causal link in the chain of its events. Richard Fleischer's *Armored Car Robbery* and Brian DePalma's recent film *Femme Fatale*, for example, feature elaborately planned heists in the opening stages of the story, the rest of the film dealing with the consequences and aftermath of this initial action. Other times the commission of a single heist is the reason for and cause of everything that occurs on screen, such as in *Topkapi* and *Ocean's 11* (1960 and 2001). Thus a heist can play a small part within a story or define and dominate it.

The discourse of genre theory has served to delineate the major cinematic narratives, formulas, and landscapes upon which individual agencies struggle and meet. In essence, the theory of genres is one way of providing an outline of a bounded cinematic space and the way in which actors, directors, stories and images have occupied it and moved within it. The narratives of major American film genres and the settings within which these narratives take place are mutually oriented: the frontier setting of the western is tied to a pervasive aura of civilization vs. wilderness; the domestic setting of the melodrama aids in an exploration of the family. The settings in these films are made to mirror and in some ways determine the psycho-social dimensionality of the primary characters. Even backstage musicals, which, in their concern for the production and success of "the show", would seem to be akin to the production displayed in the heist film (a similarity that will be remarked upon later), construct a space of performance and exuberance—the stage— that pervades the narrative and determines what kind of action can occur. In some ways, settings work to enclose the narrative, and the characters within it, within an established system of action and response.

In the heist film, however, narrative movement is always towards or away from the central organized act of theft itself. It is this operation, occupying a single inexorable and complex moment in time and space, which defines the heist film: thinking of it, preparing for it, committing it, and getting away from it. As opposed to a space, then, a heist is an action out of which a film can expand diegetically, both backwards and forwards through the narrative. Notably, most heist films take place in the time at which they are made, the establishments and institutions confronted by the thieves being contemporary ones, places that both they and we will find familiar. The way in which heist films understand the modern world is, in fact, the central concern of this investigation as a whole, and will be returned to throughout.

First, particular attention must be paid to the ways in which the heist film moves outwards from the heist itself. If the ways in which the heist is planned, executed, and escaped from can be considered to be fundamental elements—elements that in some ways defy the way in which genre theory has imagined the relationship between setting and narrative development—then through them we may begin to apprehend the transformations of the heist film across filmmaking traditions and through time.

The Asphalt Jungle and *Armored Car Robbery* are arguably the first American films to include the heist as an act upon which the whole of the plot turns. The group of films which follow closely after—*The Killing, Perfect Friday, Five Against the House* and *Odds Against Tomorrow*—are similarly dark in tone, the act of the heist allowing them to explore themes of fatality that are, as Paul Schrader notes, constitutive of the film noir generally (1995, 213) and indexes of a general postwar anxiety. J.P. Telotte (1996), in an article that represents perhaps the most insightful and extended consideration of the heist

film,[4] argues that the "central attraction" of the American heist films is that "they detail a complex strategy that invariably turns fatal, an ironic reversal of plotting that suggests a higher 'law' might determine human destiny—or, more unsettlingly, that there might be no law at all" (163). The heist in these films, therefore, serves to function as a site of investment and energy, a promise of escape (through wealth) that morphs into a promise of imprisonment and death.

The Asphalt Jungle typifies the early American heist film. The settings are dark and desolate, and the characters are desperate and corrupt. In *The Asphalt Jungle* the heist is based around a plan capitalizing on the erosion of brick walls in the basement of a jewelry store. The criminal team—"Doc" Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe), the brains; Handley (Sterling Hayden), the muscle; and Louis Cavelli (Anthony Caruso), the safecracker—need only to smash through these walls, enter through the basement, and break into the safe. The plan is threatened, however, when shockwaves from the explosives that have been used to blast open the safe set off alarms in other buildings in the area. The men continue with the process in the midst of these alarms, Dix Handley tripping up a lone patrolman and knocking him out as they make their exit, and the group escaping even as police begin surrounding the area. Here we have a bare-bones heist: an opportunity (the eroding walls), a team demonstrating "diverse ability," and a follow-through. Yet, like the robberies in *Armored Car Robbery* and *Criss Cross* but in contrast with those in the many films produced afterward, especially *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *The Killing*, *Rififi*, *Topkapi*, *Any Number Can Win*, and *La Cercle rouge* the heist in *Asphalt Jungle* is itself only a suspenseful occasion within the plot and not an action that expands, sustains, and marks itself as a discrete visual pleasure. In the many heist films that follow

The Asphalt Jungle, it becomes clear that the action of the heist itself becomes the centripetal force of the narrative, strategy and fatality being only necessary bookends. Further, both *The Asphalt Jungle* and *Armored Car Robbery* are concerned with evoking the sense of an ever-tightening and constraining social order expressed through the intelligence and actions of the police force (the latter exhibiting the generic traits of the police procedural). The heist operation in these cases serves as the instance of exposure to the realities of this order, the promise of a grand payoff usually instead leading only to capture or death.

In *Rififi* and *The Killing*, however, the heist achieves a weightier cinematic presence, a presence towards which the rest of the narrative begins to bow. While *Rififi*, produced in France and directed by the American Jules Dassin, has all of the underworld drama and starkness of its American counterparts, it also provides the robbery sequence the space of thirty minutes (without dialogue or music, no less). During this time, we see the criminals enter the apartment above a jewelry store (Mappin and Webb Ltd.), tie up the residents there and proceed to drill a man-sized hole through the floor. This slow unfolding is perhaps meant to mimic duration: the viewer must be made to feel the time, and hence the patience, that such a careful operation requires; and so the camera holds on the proceedings, cutting only on a close-up of a clock so that time passed will be explicitly noted. And yet the sequence is not merely a test of endurance. The necessity that the windows must be covered completely so that passers-by do not see the light, that the street must be checked to ensure that a patrolman is following his usual rounds, and the exchange of worried glances made every time an accidental noise is made provides an underlying aura of suspense and tension. At a certain point during the drilling an

umbrella is produced, attached to a rope and pushed through the hole into the jewelry store. As it dangles from the ceiling, the umbrella is opened and used as a net for catching the pieces of plaster that would otherwise trigger the alarm as they fall to shop's floor from the ceiling. When the umbrella is filled with chaff it is pulled up to the hole, emptied carefully by hand, and then lowered again. Yet, at no point during the planning of the crime, an activity shown in an extended sequence earlier, was this device mentioned—it is only seen at the moment of its use. The umbrella apparatus offers an unexpected delight, a distinct pleasure that remains, as Stuart Kaminsky comments, "as a lingering image" (88). Likewise in *The Killing*, the synchronized action of the heist unfolding before our eyes—the sniping of a horse, the diversion of a drunken brawl, the dropping of money bags from a second story window to a (corrupt) policeman below— offers both expected and unexpected visual surprises; surprises that seem to exceed those of the narrative itself.

One more "lingering image" from *Rififi* can be mentioned here in order to provide a rounder vision of the experience of a heist's unfurling.

In planning the jewelry store heist in *Rififi* the team comes up against a seemingly insurmountable problem: a state-of-the-art alarm system that is highly sensitive to any form of tampering. Acquiring a model of this alarm, the team tries vainly to disable it in a process that will be completely silent. Every avenue they explore seems to render the problem all the more insurmountable. Finally, when it seems they are at an insolvable impasse, a fire extinguisher is produced and it is discovered that filling the alarm box with foam will cloak the noise. About this revelation, Kaminsky writes, "Dassin shows their childish glee." When the extinguisher is produced above the jewelry store, we know

the use to which it is to be put. As Stéphanois (Jean Servais) steps in front of the alarm box we wait in eager anticipation to see if the extinguisher will produce the same effect in this "real" setting as it did within the "test" setting of the basement. It does, and both he and we are relieved.

A question emerges when we contrast the varying narrative and filmic strategies at play in the presentation of the fire extinguisher and the umbrella. An umbrella is introduced without explanation, its purpose to the operation becoming evident only as it is beautifully put to use. Implicit in this captivating image is a planning process, one that the film has not allowed us to witness, in which everyday objects are imaginatively converted into specialized tools for a complex operation, in this case silently drilling through a floor and entering a sensitive space. But why are we allowed to watch the men puzzle and finally solve the dilemma of the alarm, yet not allowed to watch as they figure out how to keep the ceiling from falling to the floor?

Narrative Involvement and Cinematic Display

Within the production of this heist there are two distinct and critically important nodes of cinematic gratification to be discerned: the pleasure of narrative involvement; and the pleasure of cinematic display. In distinguishing the formation, through cinematic practices, of a classical spectator and the viewer of what he names as the "cinema of attractions," Tom Gunning writes:

> If the classical spectator enjoys apparent mastery of the narrative
>
> thread of a film (able to anticipate future action through her know-
>
> ledge of the cues and schema of narrative space and action), the
>
> viewer of the cinema of attractions plays a very different game of

presence/absence, one strongly lacking predictability or a sense of

mastery. (1996:82)

Thus, in the "game" of narrative we attach events on screen to a larger, always unfolding,

chain of cause and effect. In the play of attractions, however, we are asked to simply

revel in the act of display and show.

The robbery scene in *Rififi* balances these two modes of spectatorship, offering us

both the pleasure of anticipation/prediction (in the use of the fire extinguisher) and the

pleasure of presence/absence (in the introduction of the umbrella). The latter is an act of

display that allows us "an experience of a time of pure instance" (Gunning 1996, 83).

We might imagine that this use of the umbrella was realized in a planning session that

was very much part of the story being told even if it is not part of the story being shown,

one not unlike the session the film has already shown us and so it is not impossible to

integrate the umbrella into the fabric of the plot. But this integration is only possible after

the device has already appeared, been opened, been lowered and retrieved; only after it

has been put to use before our eyes. The pleasures here are derived from a display of

assembly—the contrivance of a machine from everyday materials—and the successful

application of a mechanism that we have been allowed to see, for all intents and

purposes, invented. The story has both shown us pertinent planning information, and also

withheld information from us. With this limited knowledge, we view the robbery both

from the inside (we have been allowed to see *some* of the planning) and outside (we

haven't been shown everything). Kaminsky himself derives this pleasure. I find it telling

that in his description of *Rififi* he mentions only these two scenes, saying nothing of a

dramatic conclusion in which all of the principal characters are killed. Writing at a time

when films were not readily accessible for multiple viewings, Kaminsky remembers *Rififi* for a scene that is largely unimportant in terms of the broader narrative within which it occurs. The scenic moment, in other words, is captivating entirely beyond its functioning in a diegesis. If, as Telotte argues, heist/caper narratives serve primarily to illustrate the entwinement of strategy and culminating fatality, why is it that the middle of the film can attain the status of a "lingering image" while the consequences that follow from this middle do not? If fatality is the heist film's *raison d'etre*, why is Kaminsky stuck with the centre of the film in his head, but not the fatal conclusion?

I would argue that what distinguishes a heist film from a film of another kind in which a heist occurs is the preeminence accorded to the action itself, the way in which, for a time, actors are given a degree of freedom from the demands of narrative. Although many heist films, *Rififi* in particular, use the action of the heist as a causal moment in a chain of narrative events, with the heist possibly resulting in, for example, the breakdown of the team as each member vies for a larger cut, or, more commonly, the necessity of the team to evade capture by police, reducing the heist action to a link within a causal chain is forgetting the intense cinematic pleasures that are to be had in viewing it.

In Telotte's conception, strategy is used to map a plan onto what is usually taken to be a routinized and predictable world. As the heist film turns out for him, however, because the world is not in fact routinized and predictable, or because the power of the dominant order to mobilize and protect its holdings is underestimated by the criminals, the plan fails when it is put into action. It is the failure of the plan that results in punishment, usually capture or death. Telotte argues that the fatal endings of caper narratives are hardly a surprise, "for an eventual reassertion of the status quo, its recuperation, is part of

the dynamic that lets us take pleasure in those fleeting transgressions the caper describes" (164). For Telotte, therefore, the doomed ending is not only a requirement of the Production Code (until the 1960s) but the only way that the pleasures of the heist can be isolated and understood as such.

What Telotte seems to ignore is that while noir itself, in both its mainstream and lower-budget variations, recedes in the late 1950s, the caper film itself continues. Still marked by ultimate failure, the caper films of the late 1950s and 1960s take on a much more colorful, exuberant tone. *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, for example, is indebted to neo-realism for the way it depicts the struggles of a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Rome during economic depression, the personality of the characters, their erotic entanglements, and the comedy that is shown to accompany their everyday life forestall the sense of doom that emanates from the similar socio-economic landscape of the American noirs. Beginning in the 1960s is the production of heist films that are enthralled much less with the desperate measures and ultimate demise of figures within a dangerous and restrictive underworld. Instead, owing perhaps to a greater economic prosperity and optimism, in films like *Ocean's 11* (1960) and *Topkapi* we see an emphasis on style, sexuality, and the exoticism of place. In the earlier films, money is a passport to escape, a way out of seedy one-room apartments, failing marriages, and an endless cycle of debt (see, for example, *Odds Against Tomorrow*); in short, the world is fully bereft of possibility. In the 1960s, however, the players have somehow ascended in social and economic class. Wealth, and the opportunities for pleasure that it provides, is now on the screen: in hotel rooms, restaurants, seaside resorts, and the gaudy interiors of the casino. If there is an underworld to be discerned, it is largely indistinguishable from everyday

society. Crime here wears a gloss of sophistication that, in film noir, is largely

(aesthetically, at least) untenable.

The visual sheen acquired by the heist film in the 1960s can be attributed, of course,

to broader transformations within filmmaking and the film industry in general. The

loosening of the Production Code, and the ongoing marketing of widescreen formats and

sensational presentational effects (such as VistaVision and Todd-AO) the collapse of

vertical integration in the production system, and the threat posed by television

broadcasting are a significant cluster of events which heralded a bigger, louder, more

colorful popular cinema. In privileging the noir tradition rather than the story of the

caper itself (that is, taking the caper film to be merely a subset of the noir genre), Telotte

overlooks the fact that, as a cinematic object/device, the caper's life extends beyond the

dark confines of America's postwar cinema and into newer, brighter, and no less

fascinating kinds of film.

Ocean's Eleven (1960) is perhaps most notable for providing the occasion for Frank

Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop to appear

together onscreen for the first time. Certainly it is this group of men that embodies the

spirit and defines the lifestyle of Las Vegas and so an occasion that provides them the

opportunity to act out a fictional story with Las Vegas as a backdrop is truly a cinematic

coup. If it is true that Sinatra et al. *are* the Las Vegas establishment, how is it possible

for us to accept in this film that, in planning to rob five casinos in one night, they are

truly acting *against* Las Vegas? The conceit is that this is a team of old army buddies, not

criminals, who, becoming increasingly estranged from the country for which they fought,

seek the freedom that excessive wealth will undoubtedly provide. Mapped onto the

terrain of Las Vegas then—somewhat inconceivably—is the mentality of warfare. As the

heist nears its completion and the various members of the team are making their

respective exits from the scene, Jimmy Foster (Lawford) suffers a heart attack in the

middle of a busy street and must be disattended to and abandoned by his friends, Sinatra

and Martin, when a crowd gathers, police arrive, and their anonymity is clearly

threatened. It is only the frame of war that could allow such a reaction, yet modern Las

Vegas is clearly not, in the popular imagination, a place of battle. During New Year's, the

night of the planned heist, Las Vegas is shown to be awash with music, costume, liquor

and sexual opportunity. That these men can only act in these circumstances in the

schema of "one last mission" suggests the height of social alienation. There is a tension

in this film between the image of a crisis of postwar masculinity underlying the

characters' desire to rob the casinos—which is really a desire for the sense of purpose

and meaning acquired through daring collective action—and the way in which the

characters are also, at the same time, actors self-identical to the burgeoning

social/national consciousness—the hedonism of Las Vegas—that they pretend to

confront. I feel these aspects of *Ocean's 11* important to mention, even though I have

really said nothing of the mechanics of the heist itself, because they neatly capture the

topographical shift I have argued above. The Rat Pack, in character and, out are a force

to gape at. The locations of the heist itself impress upon the viewer not the dramatic

realities of postwar pessimism and disillusionment, not the hunt for success and fate, but

the spectacles of luxury, travel, sophistication, and global cosmopolitanism.

But if it is the heist itself that is our main concern, how does it change with the

scenery? To answer this, we might first look to Dassin's *Topkapi*, a comedy that is

almost entirely indifferent to pressing social realities. The camera prefers instead to traverse the alluring surfaces of its locales—Greece and Turkey—until it is finally time for to commit the elaborate heist. The energy that animates the heist is one woman's (Melina Mercouri) fetishization of a diamond-encrusted dagger, tightly secured in the world famous Topkapi museum. Her attraction to this object is delineated in an opening sequence in which, as she directly addresses the viewer, the surface of the film dances with tints of purple and green, ensuring that we understand this performance and the stage upon which it occurs—a carnival and the Topkapi museum itself—as outside any sort of closed narrative universe that might succeed it. The narrative that follows centers upon the attempts of Arthur Simpson (Peter Ustinov), a souvenir peddler, to infiltrate a team of assembled professionals—a mastermind (Maxmillian Schell), an inventor (Robert Morley), a strongman (Jess Hahn) and a gymnast (Gilles Ségal)—at the behest of the Turkish secret service, who believe that they are planning a terrorist plot. When the strongman's hands are broken an opportunity opens for Simpson to fill in for him, and the team, now with him on it, must both steal the dagger and give the slip to the secret service. While the film avoids any sort of social commentary, it does provide one of the most complex heist sequences seen by this time. Building on *Rififi*, the heart of the robbery depends on the lowering of a man into a museum by rope, having him unlock a heavy glass case and hoisting the glass case up while lowering him down to retrieve the dagger ensconced inside. Thus, Walter (Schell) must know the precise distance he must lower Giulio, the gymnast (Ségal), and raise the case in order that the dagger can be retrieved. How in fact this robbery was planned is inconceivable, as it seems to involve the co-ordination of details so numerous and minute. How does Walter know, for

example, the exact length of rope he needs in order to place Giulio directly in front, and in arms-length, of the dagger? We see here some recurrent—in that they build on techniques first displayed in *Rififi*—Dassin motifs: dropping into a space from above, a sensitive alarm which constricts every movement inside the space, and an elaborate plan that becomes evident only as it unfolds onscreen.

If, following Gunning, we are to conceive of a major tension in cinematic practices between the demands of narrative and the pure pleasure of visual display, then we may see, beginning with *Ocean's 11* (1960) and *Topkapi* and proceeding through to *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), *Dead Heat on a Merry-Go-Round* and *The Italian Job* (1969), a style of filmmaking which bows to the latter; the idea of a heist providing a narrative platform upon which spectacular exhibitions of cinematic bombast can be constructed. In *The Italian Job* a series of visual gags, silly exchanges, and caricatures comprise the film's opening, giving way to a robbery/hi-jacking whose getaway involves the dispersion of multicolored Austin Minis, each carrying a portion of the take, which careen through the streets, alleys, and piazzas of Venice. In *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Steve McQueen plays the eponymous corporate magnate who coordinates the heist of valuable paintings through a series of telephone calls to faceless laborers, and to show this, Norman Jewison adopts split-screen techniques to present and fragment diegetically simultaneous action. In these films we see the reemergence of a familiar cinematic trope: the criminal mastermind, the powerful individual, the *Übermensch* who acts through technology and urban circulation (carefully arranging appearance and disappearance) in order to assert his superiority.

Owing perhaps to the dramatic social and political shifts which took place in the late

1960s, we see in the early part of the 1970s heist films that still hold individuality dear,

but now as a form of rebellion against a social order which is cold, monolithic, and

alienating. However, while the heist films of the 1970s and early 1980s—including, for

example, *The Sicilian Clan*, *The Anderson Tapes*, *The Hot Rock*, *$*, and *Thief*—are

thematically similar to earlier noir variations, their formal depictions are markedly

different, and display the cinematographic aesthetics of New Hollywood, as well as the

influence of emerging security technologies on the visualization of the heist itself. Such

is the scenario of *The Anderson Tapes* wherein Sean Connery plays a recently released

career-criminal, John Anderson, who assembles a team of former prison inmates and a

homosexual antique dealer to rob an upscale apartment building. Unbeknownst to him,

Anderson's movements are being watched and recorded by multiple, but unconnected,

government agencies. Despite this encompassing gaze, these faceless and atomized

agencies are unable to systematize their surveillance information in order to predict

Anderson's plans. *The Anderson Tapes* dramatizes a key technological development that

shapes the presentation of cinematic theft in the films after the 1970s: the widespread

implementation of video surveillance. Allowing institutions efficient panoptic control

over space, video surveillance significantly changes both the form the heist must take and

the way it appears onscreen. In *The Anderson Tapes* we most often view the frame of

surveillance on a video monitor, over the shoulder of government agents. Implicit in

these depictions is the ability of the state to monitor and track individuals in a space

where agents of the state are not immediately present. More specifically, in terms of the

commission of theft, surveillance technology necessitates a more complex production of

invisibility and illusion on the part of the criminals, raising the import of technological

mastery, disguise, and identity fabrication. Modern surveillance also allows a way of

effectively signaling a bifurcation of action between deception and disclosure.[5] To watch

an action mediated on a video screen, whether over the shoulder of an anonymous

security guard in real time, or in the offices of bank, museum, or casino managers post-

heist, is to inspect an image of illusion for a marker—any marker—that will lead to the

identity of the perpetrators (see Gunning [1995] for more on the strategies of the state to

manage and systematize criminal identity and the tactics used by criminals to evade such

identification). Conversely, we are often disclosed both what plays on security cameras

and how the thieves make themselves unnoticeable there by engineering an aura of what

Erving Goffman (1971) calls "normal appearances," those types of circumstances that

signal to actors (i.e. guards, employees or patrons of the institution in question) that there

is no need for heightened awareness or alert. With the onset of video surveillance, the

production and realistic depiction of normal appearances is paramount to the heist

operation.

The amplification of political and social tension, paired with the familiar experience of

the unrelenting institutional gaze, changes again the terrain upon which the heist occurs.

Mere acrobatics, strong-arm tactics, and safe-cracking techniques are no longer useful

when confronting institutions girded with the most cutting-edge of cutting-edge security.

It is the apparent impenetrability of institutional wealth and power that marks the heist

films that continue to be made to this day. In exchange, the monetary gain promised by a

payoff is exponentially higher, rising to previously inconceivable levels. The

professionalism and specialization—the group's diverse abilities—also increases.

Characters are introduced as ex-FBI, ex-Green Beret, ex-Navy SEAL and ex-CIA—individuals who would be privy to a stratum of specialized knowledge and information pertinent to countering the protective measures of wealthy and powerful institutions. Such is the case in films like *Sneakers* with its motley assemblage of cold-war castoffs, *Entrapment* featuring a two-person team of professional career burglar (Sean Connery) and corrupt insurance agent (Catherine-Zeta Jones), and even *Mission Impossible* whose protagonist, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), is an estranged operative of the IMF (a fictionalized intelligence organization). Interestingly, all of the above films center on the seizure and control of information, not hard currency: the control of a code-breaking black box that could dismantle global power structures in *Sneakers*; the electronic siphoning of billions of dollars of digital interest in *Entrapment*, and the retrieving of a computer file that threatens the anonymity, and hence lives, of IMF operatives in *Mission Impossible*.

Even as the thieves in these contemporary heist films—which also include DePalma's *Femme Fatale* and Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11*—are shown to come up against increasingly sophisticated technologies of security, the depiction of the heist operation is still entirely indebted to the physical acrobatics introduced by Dassin in *Rififi* and *Topkapi*. Whether hanging from ceilings (*Mission Impossible*, *Femme Fatale*), crawling along floors (*Entrapment*) or even slowly walking across a motion detecting room (*Sneakers*), modern cinematic heists require a performance of the limits of human ability. What these films dramatize physically are the furthest bounds of maneuver and bodily contortion required by individuals to outwit structures of wealth and power.

However, to instrumentalize the body to perform a series of actions within a restricted amount of time requires that the thief manage his body intelligently. Intelligence must be rendered in both miniscule and grandiose physical gesture, to both create the illusion of authenticity—when, for example, a thief needs to construct the identity of an official who *won't need* to show his credentials—and stealthily maintain invisibility.

To watch a heist film is to visually experience both disclosure—primarily through inserts and extreme close-ups of the crime's traces—and the illusion of normal appearances (that is, the perfect cover). Whether in the end the heist is successful or not bears little relation to the sheer pleasure produced through this experience. Common to all heist films is that they be apprehended and judged by the spectator according to commonly understood social and physical laws. It is in the testing, stretching, and bending of physical, social, and institutional laws that the heist offers its most intoxicating transgressions. Offering anticipatory visual realization (a heist will occur!) and a time of pure instance (a heist is occurring!), the heist film both satisfies the viewer's "apparent" need to master a narrative framework and provides the immediate gratifications of sheer visual presence.

Notes

[1] The etymological origins of the term heist are located in American slang and attributed to a 1920s variation on the verb "hoist", to lift. The Dictionary of American Slang notes the underworld usage of the word and defines the noun heist (it is also a verb, as in: "I heisted that diamond") as, "a successful hold-up, robbery or theft; usually an armed robbery by professional thieves" (1967: 251-2). It is the word "professional" which seems to be key here in relation to the criminal act this definition describes. To be a professional criminal means, above all, that one's criminal act is conducted soberly and with an effort towards precision and mastery. Such is not the case when crimes are committed out of passion or desperation. So to use the term heist is, more often than not, to describe a premeditated and particularly well thought-out theft.

[2] The second edition of this book, published in 1985, does not include this chapter.

[3] As John Cawelti notes, more recent American historiography has countered "the mythology of the West as regeneration through a sort of pastoral rebirth with an account of Western history as an episode in the advanced evolution of industrialism" (1984, 2).

[4] The heist film is also referenced in Charles Derry's book *The Suspense Thriller:Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock* and Ron Wilson's article "The Left-Handed Form of Human Endeavor: Crime Films During the 1990s", and Neale (2000) but receives only scant attention. A definition of heist or caper film is found in a smattering of film encyclopedias as well. Kim Newman offers a compelling, if all too short, entry for "caper film" in *The BFI Companion to Crime* (1997) that reflects upon the heist film's kinship to the musical – a theme which will be discussed further in chapter two.

[5] I thank Blaine Allan for originally pointing this out to me.

Chapter 2: Criminal Procedure, Normal Appearances, and the Stage of the Heist

In the 1987 David Mamet film *House of Games*, a successful psychotherapist and best-selling author, Dr. Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse), falls in with a group of con-men while attempting to clear one of her patient's debts. After figuring out their scam to bilk her of six thousand dollars, she becomes fascinated with their profession and the ways in which they engineer their deceptions. Seeing this new world both as a way to escape the boredom of her current clinical duties and as a potential research opportunity, Margaret asks one of the men, Mike (Joe Mantegna), to be her guide. Mike agrees, shows her some "short cons," and they soon after begin disrobing and toppling over one another in a "stolen" hotel room. But Margaret becomes involved in a much grander design plotted by the con-men, a "long con" which involves stealing from her much more than six thousand dollars. In this film, Margaret is the viewer's surrogate, exiting the sterile daytime interiors of the prison hospital where she works for slick nighttime streets, seedy taverns, and the titular "House of Games." The central idea of this film is that the alluring world of the professional criminal is entered at great peril, that there it is impossible to merely observe without getting burned. Margaret gets burned. She gets even, to be sure, but she also gets burned. Viewers, however, while perhaps empathetic to Margaret's situation, do not get burned. We watch as the scene fades, the credits roll, and the houselights come up, and then we leave the theatre. At no great expense we have entered a world that, in everyday life, is barred to us.

Since roughly the beginning of the 1950s (the height of film noir), cinema has allowed us access to the privileged world of criminal procedure. However, criminal procedure, as

a cinematic subject, does not usually carry enough of a dramatic weight to sustain an entire narrative. Primarily the depiction of a technical operation, there is little opportunity inherent in the depiction of criminal procedure alone for a story to unfold. The lived experience of criminality, its commitments and its tensions with more legitimate spheres, is the true locus of criminal drama (even melodrama). Thus, to be successful in narrative cinema criminal procedure must be enveloped within a larger frame of relationships and events. In the films of Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets* [1973], *Goodfellas* [1990], *Casino* [1995]), for example, we learn much about the mechanics of various gangster rackets— where money comes from, where it goes—but we also learn about the social world that is constructed around them, the hierarchy of power that must be respected, and what happens when this hierarchy of power is undermined. These latter elements are familiar melodramatic tropes, present across an array of filmic genres. What truly distinguishes films which involve crime as a subject are the moments when criminal procedure is displayed, when we are shown things that we would not ordinarily see, and where a film, by exceeding its narrative duties, manages to suspend drama for the sake of action and bring us delight. Film guides us through the intricacies and secrecies of the criminal act.

Rick Altman's analysis of "the Show Musical" (1987) provides a useful corollary for considering the pleasures inherent in the examination of criminal procedure. In this strain of film musical, first developed in the late 1920s, the narrative centers on the production of a stage show, with musical numbers fitting neatly within the diegetic world of ongoing rehearsals. While there were certainly stage productions that centered on the dramas occurring backstage, it was film that was able to take audiences beyond the proscenium arch more fluidly and gracefully than any form of reflexive stage gesture. As Altman

writes, "The show musical gives us the illusion of seeing something which theatergoers cannot perceive: the theater audience's gaze is stopped by the stage backdrop, but the film audience can see right through that backdrop and into the wings" (207). Where theater can reveal a stage to the public, Altman argues, film allows us behind that stage, to private realms; "when we go backstage we lift a veil; by pulling aside the backdrop or peeking into the wings we are able to satisfy our natural desire to look beyond, behind and beneath." (207). Thus the show musical thematically foregrounds the camera's tendency to, as William Rothman has argued, "distinguish between expressions that are candid and those that are staged" (2004, 74). In the show musical we see the stage presented as a space of spectacle and the backstage, itself spectacular, as the area where this spectacle is engineered. The backstage then, becomes the space of the "real", of authenticity—even if, as Altman notes, it continues to obscure the conditions of production (i.e. the real labor needed to construct sets, the technical expertise needed to create the look of scenes) that allow the show to be performed and the film to be made. "The semantics of the show musical plot are thus based not so much on the production of a show (magazine, film, etc.)," he concludes, "as on a particular middle-class view of what it is to produce a show" (209).

Heist films are likewise concerned with the idea of "putting on a show." The planning of a complex robbery must be done "backstage" in the dark privacy of backrooms and basements. The robbery itself must is performed to an "audience" of everyday citizens, agents of the state, and institutional employees. Different, however, is the stage upon which are enacted the performances necessary to the production of a heist. Unlike a musical, in which distinctions between audience, stage, backstage, and "city" (the place

in which the performers live and from which they emanate) are made abundantly clear, in a heist film the arena of performance is always the shifting space which surrounds the object to be obtained. The audience for these performances must not know that they are an audience until it is too late, if at all. Thus in *Pickpocket*, the camera penetrates the urban flows of a train station, allowing us privileged access to movements that are unseen by the crowd—police officers included—that swarms the platform. In heist films, therefore, modern urban spaces—spaces of movement, exchange, consumption—become settings for a performance which must be seen by no one but the performer, and his surrogate, the viewer.

This type of performance is what Erving Goffman would call a performance of "normal appearances." In his book *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (1971), he argues that the appearance of normality is not a state that occurs naturally when everything is in fact "normal," but rather a state that is constructed, maintained, and monitored by individuals who participate in the chaotic vicissitudes of modern public life. Noting that animals and humans alike vacillate between a calm "disattending" state, and an alarmed flurry of activity, Goffman attempts to examine in this essay the ways in which individuals negotiate these polarities through a capacity for "disassociated vigilance" (238) that allows them to continue with everyday activities while at the same time being aware of potential threats in their immediate surroundings. "What is normal appearance for the subject," Goffman notes, "becomes the cloak that others must discern, tailor and wear" (257). However, Goffman does not take the position of the seer who is disrobing reality for the first time. He writes that, "As [the individual's] competencies mature, what he expects of his surround will become decreasingly available to his

conscious mind; less and less will he be able to tell us what these normal appearances are" (259). Thus we become aware that normal appearances are not fixed, but instead evolve over time. Con-men, thieves, burglars, and spies—figures who populate the montage of scenarios Goffman evokes—must employ a guise that addresses itself not to a *universal* notion of normalcy, but to the perception of normalcy held by the individuals or groups of individuals they encounter—a specific notion of normalcy pertinent to a particular time and space. Normalcy is thus performed, and performance, in order to be recognized as such, demands a backstage.

Heist films blur the distinctions—presented architectonically in show musicals in the use of the theatre building itself—between stage and backstage. In the show musical, if an actor says something on stage it is a performance; if she says something in a dressing room it is "actually" an expression of true feeling. When cinema depicts criminal procedure, however, we are more reliant on cinematic cues—close-ups, inserts, and even x-ray effects—to show us what is going on "for real" (i.e. backstage). Stage and backstage during the performance of publicly cloaked criminal operations are brought closely together in terms of their statuses in reality. We may remember the train station sequence from *Pickpocket*. The movement of Michel's hands is a backstage operation, performed in public view, with the expectation (or hope), that no one will see. Backstage is not a clearly defined space but a moment in time—lost to us if we fail to pay keen attention.

Heist films are also concerned to demonstrate a professionalism and competency in theft that will hold us in awe. Like Margaret Ford in *House of Games*, we must become seduced by the designs and skills of the criminals in order that we might want to

investigate further, that we might consent to the spectacles provided in our view and be held in thrall of performance. I would argue that the heist film must negotiate two, potentially contradictory viewing positions. On the one hand we must be taken from the crowd and shown things that others—represented within the diegesis of the film as everyday denizens of the street—cannot see. On the other hand, we must join that audience in watching a thing whose machinery is not immediately available or apparent but which grabs and holds our attention. Occasionally, as in the acrobatic scenes of *Topkapi* and the film which pays tribute to it, *Mission: Impossible*, these separate worlds coalesce and we observe closely the abilities of Giulio "the human fly" and Ethan Hunt (Cruise) respectively to maneuver around alarms while at the same time performing fantastic, gravity-defying acrobatics. Moreover, the settings of these respective sequences are themselves designed to be gazed at, the vaulted ceilings of the Topkapi museum becoming uncannily like a circus tent, and the white paneling of the ironically named "black vault" in CIA headquarters resembling either a Kubrickian spaceship or, seen in an overhead shot as a black-clad Ethan is hovering only inches from the pressure-sensing white floor, a spider's cobweb. So, even as we come to an understanding of how complex thefts are engineered in these films, it is difficult not to be taken in by the spectacles of their design.

The presentation of a heist, therefore, typically positions the viewer with vantage points to both outside and inside the action; the inside being the backstage of its production (the close-up of Claire [Emanuelle Béart] in *Mission Impossible* as she coolly uses a rigged pen to squirt poison into the coffee cup of William Donloe [Rolf Saxon], the CIA computer technician), and the outside being the stage where we see what in fact

is being produced (Donloe's obliviousness to the maneuver, distracted as he is by Claire's red dress, red lipstick, and overall "production" of femininity). In that these productions take place not within the circumscribed boundaries of the theatrical apparatus but rather upon the dramaturgical landscapes of everyday life, it would seem that they might allow us insights into the nature of these spaces. As Fredric Jameson notes of the criminal and other forms of unsanctioned activity stressed in Goffman's sociology, "it is the feeling of being *beyond the social order* that suddenly allows us to grasp what the social order really was in the first place" (1976, 124). In allowing us beyond the veil of normal appearances, the depiction of the heist procedure allows us a new perspective on the social order it represents and the stage where it is played out.

Ocean's 11

Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11* is one of only a few films which gives itself almost entirely over to the act of the heist. Moreover, it is a film that playfully thematizes the importance of staging and disguise to the enterprise of a large-scale theft. While surveillance technology and demolition play key roles, it is the ideas of performance and of precision staging that undeniably preoccupy this film.

The idea that time itself is the enemy of the gambler is key to the notion that "the house never loses." For this reason, as Danny Ocean (George Clooney) notes in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's* 11, casinos are built like labyrinths meant to keep the player inside and playing until he inevitably loses. Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11* is a film that while not entirely faithful to the 1960 rat-pack original from which it takes its name—we might just as well conceive of both films as ensemble pieces in which a heist is staged in Las Vegas and end comparisons there—is at least faithful to the real and imagined spaces of modern

Las Vegas. Over the past ten years, Las Vegas has transformed itself from the "what

happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas" adult playground to a family theme park. The

Bellagio, the primary setting of *Ocean's 11*, is emblematic of this renovation.

Constructed on the rubble of the Dunes hotel, the Bellagio is "a $1.4 billion version of a

northern Italian resort, complete with its own $30 million, 12-acre artificial lake"

(Hannigan 1998, 152). No longer able to inhabit its own aesthetic history, modern Las

Vegas attempts, through architectural spectacle, to recreate the majesty of other spaces

such as Italy, Paris, and Egypt. This may of course be because in the popular imagination

Las Vegas's own history is founded on, and continues to be marred by, violence and

crime. This much we have learned from recent films like *Bugsy* (Levinson, 1991),

Leaving Las Vegas (Figgis, 1995), *Hard Eight* (Anderson, 1996), *Fear and Loathing in*

Las Vegas (Gilliam, 1998) and *Casino*, which in many ways lament the passing of the old

Las Vegas on the eve of the new Las Vegas. To invoke its own place-ness, Las Vegas

would need to acknowledge the deadly toll—a toll mythologized by these films— that it

continues to extract from its visitors.

The underlying theme of *Ocean's 11* is the shift from old to new Las Vegas. The title

comes to denote a particular version of Las Vegas depicted in the earlier *Ocean's 11* that,

in the updated film, is fading away. Here again we have a heist film whose setting is

contemporaneous, sensitive to the various forces—in this case historical, industrial, and

cultural—that play upon modern spaces. The opposition between old and new is

personified in Reuben Tishkoff (Eliot Gould), the former owner of the Dunes, and Terry

Benedict (Andy Garcia) a young corporate mogul who is constructing the Bellagio on the

site of the Dunes and who also controls the Mirage and the MGM Grand. As Tishkoff

notes, "Used to be that a guy would whack you and that was it. Not with this guy, though. First he kills you, then he goes to work on you." Tishkoff agrees to bankroll Danny Ocean and Rusty Ryan (Brad Pitt) in order to exact his revenge on Benedict because "he torpedoed my casino, muscled me out. Now he's going to blow it up next month to make room for some gaudy monstrosity!" Like many films about Las Vegas, *Ocean's 11* is enamored of the city's surfaces. Blinking lights, shiny cars and dancing fountains fill out the atmosphere.

The setting of Las Vegas in a heist film, however, can never be *only* a backdrop. The specific settings of this film, The Bellagio, The Mirage, and the MGM Grand, are also the stage upon which a production—the "fantasy" Las Vegas endeavours to create—and counter-production—the illusion of normal appearances that the thieves use to conceal their activities—must be performed. The economic success of Las Vegas rests in the continual production of Shangri-La atmospherics, the ways in which fateful time—the time needed to part a gambler with his money— is masked by eroticized surfaces and the appearance, and actuality, of plenitude (try the buffet!). The counter-production in this film is the infiltration of this system by the eleven thieves who, creating a cloak of normal appearances, use the casino as the stage upon which their heist will be engineered. Our pleasure in this film lies in the way it coherently integrates a modern, family-oriented Las Vegas—a Las Vegas of ugly tourism—and a Las Vegas of smooth, masculine criminality—a Las Vegas of old—embodied by Danny Ocean and Rusty Ryan. In this way the crew of thieves seems to transcend the new Las Vegas in order to assert the essential primacy of the old. Accompanying this opposition, however, is a winking reflexivity with regard to performance. Just as much as we are shown that the thieves

must convincingly perform certain identities in order to conduct their operations, so too are we shown that the production of the film itself relies on the performances of professional actors/celebrities. This meditation on performance—sustained against the (cinematographic) realism of its settings—is demonstrated in a key opening sequence.

Near the beginning of the film we see Rusty sitting at a smoky, backroom poker table in a nightclub on the Sunset Strip, surrounded by a group of young (and actual) television stars—Topher Grace ("That 70s Show"), Josh Jackson ("Dawson's Creek"), Holly Marie Combs ("Charmed"), Barry Watson ("Seventh Heaven") and Shane West ("Liberty Heights"). After Rusty addresses them by name, it becomes clear that these stars are playing themselves and that they have hired Rusty to conduct a "poker school." The joke here, besides the fact that these cover boys and girls are less concerned with poker than they are with writing off the "lessons" and goofing around, is that whereas the young stars are recognized by the film and by nightclub patrons as celebrities, Pitt and Clooney (who soon joins the poker session) are stuck in their roles as relative nobodies, even though, in the Hollywood star system in 2001, their movie-star celebrity status trumped that of these "rising" teen stars. This reflexive gesture comes off as spurious self-deprecation, humorous to be sure, but ultimately an attempt to solidify the untouchable stardom of these leading men and to capture—successfully or not—the aura exuded by Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin and Joey Bishop when they first appeared together in the original *Ocean's 11*. However, that such a gesture is included in the film implies that the presence of Pitt, Clooney, and even Matt Damon (Linus Caldwell) together onscreen does not in itself signal a cinematic event nonpareil. This sort of reflexivity permeates the performances in the rest of the film, even as the stars—Pitt and

Damon specifically—assume the disguises necessary to execute their plan. Disguise will be returned to below, but first the introduction of the characters—which are, after all, the disguises of actors themselves—must briefly be mentioned.

The robbery of the casino vault is presented as a daunting challenge, for as each of the eleven characters is introduced when Ocean and Rusty assemble the team—in a sort of "trade show" montage that is a convention of the heist film—we see them plying their respective specialties with varying degrees of success and thereby learn what consummate professionalism is requisite for this job. The Malloy twins, Virgil (Casey Affleck) and Turk (Scott Caan) are shown on a dirt racetrack, the first drag racing his radio-controlled monster truck against Turk's real thing (Turk sideswipes Virgil's plastic truck, smashing it to bits). Basher Tarr (Don Cheadle), the cockney explosives expert, is seen blowing his way into a vault only to be caught because one of his crew forgot to cut the alarm. Yen (Shaobo Qin), "the grease man" (a handle that is never explained), is watched by Ocean and Rusty performing acrobatics in a circus act and they agree to recruit him. Livingston Dell (Eddie Jemison), costumed like a cross between Radar from "M*A*S*H" and an extra from *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), is doing freelance work for the FBI and is teased by operatives (who call him "Radio Shack") for being too particular about his surveillance equipment (we see him soon afterwards clumsily entangled in someone's dog leash as he walks down a sidewalk). Saul Bloom (Carl Reiner) is wiling away his retirement years eating doctor-prescribed oranges at the dog races. Linus, the "rookie," is picking the pockets of stockbrokers on the Chicago subway.[1] It is only in the enterprise of a casino heist, managed by the expertise of Ocean and Ryan—who, although cool and consummately professional in the gray area between

legitimacy and illegitimacy within which they circulate, are ultimately floundering "occupationally"—and bankrolled by a surviving member of old Las Vegas, Tishkoff, that the individual talents of these marginal figures will be fully realized. Epitomized in this structure is Durkheim's notion of "organic solidarity," the idea that, with the division of labor in modern societies, social cohesion is based on the dependence upon others who perform specific, individualized actions. This form of solidarity is contrasted with the "mechanical solidarity" found in pre-modern societies, where social cohesion is based much more on common, collective practices. Durkheim argues that organic solidarity "resembles that which we observe among the higher animals. Each organ, in effect, has its special physiognomy, its autonomy. And, moreover, the unity of the organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked" (1964,131)[2]. Thus, we might say that the varying backgrounds and specialties of the heist operators contribute to the ultimate cohesion (and perhaps success) of the heist operation, or at least that the cinematic depiction of a heist presents for viewers a drama of organic solidarity.

For the disguises the operation demands, the thieves must become identical to the real casino crowd and pretend to be the types of people who would ordinarily move across the floor. That is, they must mirror the organic solidarity of the casino operation. However, because they have been introduced as identifiable types, their capacity to achieve the anonymity and invisibility required by the operation is jeopardized for the viewer. In a diegetic world, however, in which Topher Grace, star of "That 70s Show" is accosted outside a nightclub while George Clooney and Brad Pitt are roundly ignored a certain suspension of disbelief has already been established and viewers are prepared to watch Clooney and Pitt engage in a performance. But if construction is revealed in the element

of characterization, might we not become aware of it elsewhere? Concomitant to an awareness of character construction is an awareness of the space within which the characters must move. Because these characters have been introduced *as* characters, it follows that we should come to view the spaces in which they move—the streets of Las Vegas, the casino floor—as also a stage. While we recognize the reality of Las Vegas as a setting, just as we recognize Clooney as a star, the film also prepares us, just as we are prepared to watch Clooney as *also* a character, to see Vegas as a space upon which performances are staged. In order to build into the film a staging area, the area that is architectonically given within the show musical, Soderbergh must skillfully establish characters and settings that will both play into and exceed our preconceptions of them.

The first task in this operation, as intoned by Danny Ocean to the assembled team in a voiceover, is reconnaissance: "I want you to know everything that's going on in all three casinos, from the rotation of the dealers to the path of every cash cart. I want to know everything about every guard, every watcher, anyone with a security pass. I want to know where they're from, what their nicknames are, how they take their coffee. Most of all, I want you guys to know these casinos—they're built like labyrinths to keep people in, I want you guys to know the quick routes out." As he says this, a cash cart passes by and there is a cut to Linus watching it from a nearby casino table. As Ocean mentions the necessity of knowing anyone with a security pass, the camera moves back from a torso bearing a security pass to reveal two casino computer technicians talking during a break. One is lazily telling another that he's been "seeing" a dancer named "Charmaine" who is putting herself through school by working at a club called the "Crazy Horse Too." As he says this, the camera pulls back further to settle on the ear of Frank Catton and cuts to an

insert of the crossword puzzle in front of him. He is penciling in the information he hears in the empty white boxes of the puzzle. As a result of this reconnaissance, the team is able to access a security card (Charmaine lifts it for them) long enough to break into the casino's mainframe and hack into its in-house surveillance system. This operation is aided through interference run by the Malloy brothers, who stage a confrontation between a balloon delivery boy and a casino patron:

Turk: "Watch it bud!"

Virgil: "Who you calling 'bud', pal?"

T: "Who you calling 'pal', friend?"

V: "Who you calling 'friend', jackass?"

T: "Don't call me a jackass."

V: "I just *did* call you a jackass."

During this exchange a bundle of balloons is released from Virgil's hands, rising to the ceiling and obscuring the view of a surveillance camera. A guard is dispatched from his post in front of a door to the casino's inner hallways to defuse the situation and Livingston, the team's surveillance man posing as an in-house technician, is provided the opportunity to enter through the door undetected and tap into the Bellagio's computer system.

Central to the aesthetic of *Ocean's 11* is the fluid alternation between staginess (seen by virtue of an observing/"backstaging" camera) and cinematically constructed verisimilitude—evident throughout this sequence. The camera's movement from the technician's security pass to Frank's ear to an insert of the crossword puzzle neatly captures the aural flow of information and its surreptitious recording. As Rusty pays

Charmaine for lifting the technician's security pass, we see over his shoulder a bundle of balloons in the backseat of his convertible. The camera closes in and blurs on the red and yellow balloons as Rusty climbs into the car, refocusing to reveal that they are now being carried across the golden casino floor by a young man dressed in a tight t-shirt and ten-gallon cowboy hat. In a series of quick edits the camera passes across the busy casino floor, following the walking balloons and impressionistically capturing the crowds that surround the slot machines. On the soundtrack, David Holmes's organ score keeps a jaunty rhythm. As the man with the balloons, now revealed to be Virgil, bumps into Turk, the camera remains in a longshot, focused on the balloons, and we see only the brothers' heads in the bottom of the frame as they challenge each other. The Malloy twins' staged confrontation, although played for laughs, is embedded within the realistic mise-en-scéne of the casino. The absurdity of their exchange is rendered within a sense of the everyday economy of casino life. There would of course be a balloon delivery boy, just as there would be a belligerent, down-on-his-luck casino patron ready to challenge anyone who stepped in his way. The casino security guard who intervenes (primarily, we suppose, because the balloons are blocking the view of the security camera) exhibits a dispassionate resignation to the incident; situations such as this, it seems, are too common to care about. At the same time, we realize, these brothers—who quarrel and bicker throughout the film—are playing a version of themselves, roles that are very familiar to them.

Livingston, a nervous man to start, loses his map of the labyrinthine casino hallways, written on his hand in ink, after his palm sweats it off, and it begins to look as though he will not find his way out. Moreover, he has aroused the suspicion of a security guard by

uneasily responding, "Fine, thanks" to the guard's greeting of "Hi," momentarily rupturing the flow of normal appearances. When this guard finds a piece of leftover equipment in the computer room he calls after Livingston just as Livingston is about to make his exit. As a profusely sweaty Livingston has one arm out the door, the guard catches up with him, only to return the equipment, which he mistakes as a portable television, and ask, "How's the reception on those things?" Livingston replies, "Great," and beats a hasty retreat. Ocean and Rusty watch this action unfold over the newly bugged surveillance system, sighing a breath of relief as Livingston finally makes his exit. Livingston ostensibly makes his getaway only because in his nervousness he has unwittingly fulfilled his role as the socially awkward computer technician, a role he also plays in the narrative of this film (Fortunately for the team, this is the only duty, the only "acting part" he plays, that takes him out of their clandestine hotel room headquarters).

Displayed in these scenes are the situational and conditional realities—the stages— that allow for successful performances. Frank can be invisible because he is merely a casino dealer playing a crossword puzzle in the break room. The Malloy brothers' encounter signals itself cinematically as both a staged event—an event that we can watch and enjoy—and an event that, if we happened to be watching it from a nearby slot machine, would be completely unremarkable—even for casino security it is merely a momentary nuisance—a blip in the kaleidoscopic activity of the casino floor. Livingston's mission is fortuitously successful because he plays into the expectations of the security guard. The casino's hallways are as unfamiliar to him, the guard seems to recognize, as they would be to any absentminded computer technician with a combination of circuit boards and erotic dancers on the brain.

A little more about disguises. Saul Bloom (Reiner) plays the role of Lymon Zerga, a wealthy German arms dealer, the high roller. We watch as Saul practices his accent and is fitted for a silk suit. When he finally makes his entrance into the casino, he strides confidently across the lobby; the embodiment of pure capitalism, it looks as if he might be walking across the heads of exploited labor as he makes his way to the front desk. Trailing him are the sunglassed and suit-clad Malloy brothers, carrying his luggage. Observing him at the high-rollers table, Benedict's casino manager reports that he is a wealthy and powerful arms dealer. When Benedict says that he's never heard of a Zerga, the manager replies, "I know. That's why I don't doubt him." In this case, the believability of Bloom's disguise is situated within an economy of identity wherein the most powerful world players are often thought to be the most invisible.

Outfitting Linus—in a gray coat, glasses, checkered shirt, and tie—to play the part of a Nevada Gaming Commission officer, Rusty instructs him thusly:

> Where're you going to put your hands? [Linus crosses them in
> front of himself] No good. Don't touch the tie, look at me. I ask
> you a question, you have to think of an answer, where do you look?
> [looks down] No good. You look down, they know you're lying.
> [looks up] You look up, they know you don't know the truth. Don't
> use seven words when four will do. Don't shift your weight. Look
> always at your mark, but don't stare. Be specific, but not memorable.
> Be funny, but don't make him laugh. He's got to like you and then
> forget about you the moment you've left his side. And for God's
> sake whatever you do, don't under any circumstances...

Rusty trails off as he is called to the other room and both a nervous Linus and the viewer are left wondering what it was he should never do. Offered here is a diegetically implanted lesson in the dramaturgical performance of identity, what Goffman might call a lesson in "the art of impression management" (1959, 209). In the context of a heist production, however, gaffes in performance, beyond merely embarrassing, serve to compromise the entire operation. Disguise and the performance of identity is shown to be a technical, professional endeavor, on par with the construction of explosives or the infiltration of complex surveillance systems.

The scene following Linus's "lesson" shows Saul as he readies himself for his final performance as Zerga. As he rises from his bed, he seems to be hit by a sharp pain in his chest and we are reminded of his heart troubles, troubles that could compromise his ability to perform. The uncertainty invoked here works to create tension as the heist— of the plan of which we have only been provided a glimpse—begins to unfold. Linus must call to Terry Benedict's attention his employment of convicted felon Frank Catton as a dealer. Meanwhile, Saul's role is to request, as Zerga, that a briefcase storing expensive jewels be stored in the Bellagio vault. After he collapses from heart trouble while watching his briefcase travel into the vault, it seems that all might be lost. The casino manager tells someone to call a doctor and a faltering Saul/Zerga is escorted out onto the casino floor. Offscreen a voice saying, "Did somebody order a doctor?" is heard and Rusty, in close-up, dressed in sports blazer and thick-rimmed glasses, kneels down to provide aid. Saul Bloom's heart trouble is revealed instead to be, in this instance, Lymon Zerga's heart trouble, a ruse employed to quickly free him from the premises.

These simultaneous and quickly unfolding chains of action, exciting as they are to watch, are also—always and obviously—a show inside the movie show, not only a show performed to outwit Terry Benedict but a show designed to make us laugh, keep us in suspense, and hold us, with him, in rapt attention—a show of cinematic device, self-reference, and illusion. While teaching the techniques of disguise and social invisibility, the film also invites the thrill of recognition. When Rusty unexpectedly appears in the role of a doctor, staring directly at the camera in his glasses and blazer, we are thrown less by his disguise than by our recognition of it *as* a disguise. This is Brad Pitt playing Rusty Ryan playing a Doctor. For a moment, we might even forget about Ryan altogether and simply see Brad Pitt onscreen in a silly costume. For in *Ocean's 11* Pitt is never Rusty Ryan, but rather Rusty Ryan is always Pitt—just as Danny Ocean is always George Clooney and, to a lesser extent, Linus Caldwell is always Matt Damon.

Just as much as the film unveils the intricacies of criminal procedure—disguise, reconnaissance, diversion—so too does it reveal these procedures as elements of a show, a show that exceeds, in its insistent reflexivity, the diegetic boundaries of the narrative. The pleasures of this film are tied not only to examining and penetrating the secure space of the casino, but also to watching this action take place as a fluid combination of specific and specialized acts. Individuals who, on their own, are quite unable to translate their abilities into personal successes are, under the unifying supervision of Danny Ocean and Rusty Ryan, able to rally themselves together for the purpose of the job. Typified by this film is the heist film's enactment and display of organic solidarity: a successful operation, the coherence of which depends on the linked performance of individuated tasks.

In one of the closing shots of the film, the team—minus Ocean and Ryan—leans against a fence facing the fountains at Caesar's Palace. The camera tracks along their faces, revealing expressions of pride and accomplishment. Slowly and separately, each member departs into the crowd. Here we have, for all intents and purposes, a final bow. While this bow is towards the camera and therefore, for a moment, constructs an appreciative audience of its viewers, it is also towards the diegetic space of Las Vegas— Caesar's Palace specifically—that they have surreptitiously conquered. They have listened, watched, and followed those things (money above all else) that Las Vegas works so hard to obscure. In constructing the illusions necessary to conduct a robbery, they have used the casino as a stage doubly. They stage their crime, but they also stage their staging. This final image, then, is double too: it both acknowledges the crowd and winks to the spectator. It is both on the stage of the performance and looking back at it. Unlike *House of Games*, *Ocean's 11* works to invite the spectator into, but also hold him apart from, the production of the heist.

Notes

[1] This character typing, it should be noted, extends into racial categories as well: as an earlier addition to the team, Frank Catton's (Bernie Mac) talents seem to lie in his ability to mobilize his blackness (he intimidates a car salesman with the grip of his handshake and stages a racist conflagration with Linus as a diversion, in order that Linus may steal codes from Benedict's pocket); Yen, the Chinese acrobat, cannot speak English and is utilized solely for his small stature and athletic abilities; and Tishkoff in large sunglasses, gold chains, and smoking a cigar, represents a wealthy Semitic stereotype.

[2] We might also consider that organic solidarity is an innate feature of film production itself; the rolling credits at the end of the film a testament to the individual organs that have conspired to create the coherent presentation we have just seen unfold.

Chapter 3: Moving Through Walls

A 1972 study published in the journal *Criminology*, entitled "Rates of Bystander Observation and Reporting of Contrived Shoplifting Incidents" (Hartman et al.), describes field research done in a department store on shoplifting. To conduct the study researchers staged incidents of shoplifting for unsuspecting customers and waited to see if the witnessed event would be ignored or reported to management. Not only did the study find low reportage rates, it also found, in a poll of the customers as they left the store, that the shoplifting incidents staged for their benefit went largely *unseen*. These findings are interesting for two reasons.

First, the unique relationship between vision and theft in modern consumer society is demonstrated. Even when conceived and performed as an act of display, the illegitimate removal of objects is not something that is readily seen by private individuals. We see here the result of what Simmel calls "the intensification of nervous stimulation," common to urban life, that necessitates the growth of a protective psychic layer (410). It seems here not only that these shoppers had lost a visual impression of a transgressive display to the delirium of the shopping experience, but also that they were unable to recall having ever received an impression in the first place. That they did not claim to see it *at all* speaks to a thickening of this protective layer to incorporate the field of vision itself. Certain things in this field simply do not ever come into focus. Given this development, it is pertinent to ask just how—barring direct participation in the operation—we might come to see theft.

Secondly, the unwitting participants in this study are not, in the events documented, cinemagoers (they are shoppers). As opposed to being encased within the plush,

darkened confines of a theatre, these people are caught up within a locus of consumerism, what Walter Benjamin might have called "the phantasmagoria of the commodity" (2002). They are not, in this instance, citizens of a community but individualized consumers submitting to—or else trying to resist—the enticing surfaces of the mass market. Cinema, to be sure, is another mass-marketed surface. It is produced for and consumed by the masses. A movie is an object the production and circulation of which relies on labor and a marketplace. If a department store can be a stage upon which shoplifting operations—both real and contrived—can be performed unseen, the film screen on the other hand, as argued in the previous chapter, can be made to both replicate the stage and surround of a theft (in the case of *Ocean's 11* the stage is Las Vegas) and show it to a crowd who—if we are to generalize the results of the Hartman study—may well be unaccustomed to ever having seen such an operation in the first place.

How do we know, then, what it is we're looking at when we look at a screen heist?

This question gains emphasis when we consider that the heist phenomenon exists more pervasively in the mediated frames of film, television and print than it does as a first-hand experience in everyday life. Yet, as I have argued above, everyday life is the milieu of heist cinema *par excellence*. What we see most often in heist films is the terrain of contemporary life: modern urban landscapes; modern institutional interiors; modern types; modern forms of interaction and exchange. In this way, the action of the heist is constructed so that it occurs as something we might readily see if only we looked. The heist film cues us, in various ways, to anticipate the heist operation: characters talk about the strategy and the strategy, in fact, assumes a physical existence in the form of a topographical map or drawn-out plan, and we watch as the would-be thieves observe

closely the location to be infiltrated. In *Topkapi* and *Le Cercle rouge* the thieves case the museum and jewelry store, performing as museum-goers/customers but sneaking looks at the security system. In *Armored Car Robbery*, Dave Purvis (William Talman) places an anonymous call to the police in order to measure how long it will take them to arrive at the ballpark where he plans to stage his heist. Scenes such as these require that we take account of the agents of the heist as both anonymous ("disguised") individuals and seeing, recording eyes. In *Le Cercle rouge*, as the thieves eye jewelry display cases, we are given close-ups of the locks as objects of the their gaze. An association is therefore established between the characters onscreen and the specific details of institutional security. The viewer is prepared for a relationship between a recognizable space and agents acting within—and in some ways against—it. This being said, in order to show a heist onscreen requires a complex deployment of cinematic technique.

The Killing

The complexity of apprehending a heist through a linear narrative should not be underestimated. What has been called "classical" narrative construction has dealt with the depiction of simultaneous action through the parallel editing style first developed by Griffith. The depiction of a heist, however, depends on the framing of action on more than just two fronts. The challenge—the problem, even—of the cinematic heist lies in tying together actions separated in space or time (or both) into a coherent operation. Kubrick's construction of *The Killing* seems to be one way of dealing with this predicament.

The *Killing* depicts the planning, follow-through and fatal results of a horse track heist by a team of would-be criminals. Although sworn to secrecy by the group's leader and

planner, Johnny Clay (Sterling Hayden), George Peatty (Elisha Cook Jr.), the "inside

man" at the track, buckles under pressure from his nagging wife (Marie Windsor), and

tells her of the scheme. Peatty's wife, in turn, informs her lover, Val (Vince Edwards) a

young Italian gangster, who makes plans to relieve the semi-professional heist crew of

their "winnings." As the team members assume their overt and covert roles (as

bartenders and betting tellers at the track, as anonymous spectators, and simultaneously

as thieves) the plan is put into action. Although the heist itself is successful, Val and his

gang confronts the team at their rendezvous point and in a violent shoot-out, the majority

of the team is killed. Clay, not yet present at the meet, manages to make his way to the

airport with the cash and his girlfriend. While they manage to avoid police and airport

authorities put on full alert by the afternoon's robbery, the suitcase containing the money

bursts open while on a luggage cart and the wind carries a flurry of bills into the night.

In order to capture the movements of each of the eight operators on the day of a

racetrack robbery they undertake, the story's narrative jumps backward in time to

different moments during the day while an accompanying voiceover intones the exact

time of the flashback and the location of each of the characters: "At 11:40 that morning,

Nicky [the sharpshooter/Tim Carey] left his farm. He arrived at the track at 12:30"; "At

3:32 Randy Kennan [the police officer/Ted DeCorsia] set in motion his phase of the

operation . . . he had timed his trip exactly, a minute or two early was acceptable, but a

second or two late could mean disaster." As we are hearing these voiceovers, we watch

as the men move purposively through the urban landscape of apartment buildings, bus

stations, and sun-bleached downtown streets. Johnny Clay puts a florist's box containing

a gun inside a bus station locker and then drops the locker key in Mike O'Reilly's (Joe

Sawyer) mailbox. Randy Kennan (Ted de Corsia), a corrupt police officer, reports his radio to be broken, ignores the pleas of a woman in distress, and heads to the track, his trip "timed exactly." *Armored Car Robbery* similarly stresses the importance of time and co-ordination to a criminal operation, but shows it to be no match for a fully mobilized police force which can systematically close space in, monitor movement, and co-ordinate itself through radio communication.

The Grids of Modern Time and Space and "The Plan"

It is conventional think of time, space, and situation as particular to a local or personal surround. We often imagine these things to be ordered according to our own agencies (this is when I do this here) rather than as part of a larger, determinative structure. In many ways, however, this approach is the residual attitude of a pre-modern era.

Anthony Giddens (1991) describes modernity as an era where the combined forces of industry, technology, capitalism, and rationalization have conspired to "disembed" or "empty out" time and space of local and particular meanings. In this conceptualization, meaning is derived not from particular fixed communities but from the time-space grids of such institutional arrangements as scheduled railway operations and stock exchanges. Gunning invokes Giddens's theories of disembedding and emptying-out in his analysis of Fritz Lang's representations of Dr. Mabuse, the master criminal. Gunning argues that the master criminal is a figure who can skillfully manipulate the technologies of time and space for his own benefit (2000, 96). The opening sequence of *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (Lang, 1922), wherein Mabuse, from his desk, co-ordinates the robbery of an important briefcase from a moving railway car many miles away, exemplifies for Gunning

Lang's mastery of the co-ordination of space and time through

parallel editing. The various elements of the heist – Mabuse at
his desk; the henchmen on the telephone pole watching and con-
veying the action to Mabuse; the train compartment in which the
robbery occurs; and the car which passes beneath the train over-
pass at the precise moment the briefcase is thrown from the win-
dow, are cut together in a manner which not only narrates the
events but portrays them as interlocking parts of a grand plan,
the mobile mechanism of Mabuse's criminal design. Extending
the discoveries of the Griffith school of parallel action, Lang co-
ordinates separate points in space in terms of a rigorous and un-
swerving temporality. These events literally unwind like clock-
work, capturing, as Ravi S. Vasudevan has observed, the uniquely
modern culture of space and time: 'rather than our being given an
awareness of different events taking place, it is one event, divided
into specific functions, that unfolds before our eyes (97).

Yet in the corpus of heist films available to us, very rarely do we see the heist

engineered by a master criminal figure in this way. While there are surely figures in

these films with specialized knowledge and an acute desire to accumulate wealth, by no

means could we say that they possess the Nietzschean "will to power" that seems animate

Mabuse; or that they ultimately match Sherlock Holmes's description of Moriarty —

whom Gunning sees as the master criminal prototype: "He is the Napoleon of crime . . .

he is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order" (Conan

Doyle, cited in Gunning, 95). The criminal thus described enjoys a prominent place in

cinematic history, not only in Lang's *Mabuse* cycle but also in the James Bond series

and, to a certain extent in gangster melodramas—from *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) to *The*

Godfather (Coppola, 1972). While the criminals of heist films do seek mastery of the

abstract grid of time and space upon which modern institutions rely, this mastery is

always shown to be temporary and contingent, subject to varying outcomes. In order to

put their faith in a heist plan, participants must exhibit not only a certain degree of

desperation but also a trust in the predictability of the "disembedded" systems they aim to

penetrate. The crux of *Mabuse, the Gambler* it seems—particularly as we watch the

briefcase thrown from the window at exactly the moment when the train passes under the

overpass—is that the logic of the spatial-temporal grid upon which modern society is

constructed can, in an instant, be manipulated to serve nefarious agencies. Conversely,

these scenes seem to establish that the material world actually conforms to the grid placed

upon it. Mabuse's successful exploitation of the time-space grid of the railway system

works to confirm the fluid functioning of that system, a system which, it seems, always

operates free of contingency. While the time-space grid achieves a concrete visualization

within the sequence from *Mabuse, the Gambler*, in heist films it is inscripted within the

idea and presence of "the plan." The plan is most often a topographical map of an

institutional space, a catalogue of invariable routines. In *Rififi*, for example, the exact

moments that a flower delivery truck moves past the a jewelry store on its route and that

a nightshift police officer walks on his, must be known and factored into the plan. The

thieves must construct their operation within and around the routines and obstacles

outlined in the plan (represented in *Rififi* by Stephanois' note pad). The suspense of the

heist is derived from how closely, in fact, the precise information contained in the plan—

its ordered representation—indexes the material existence of routines and obstacles in the real—particular and local—life of the institution. In heist cinema, the planning of the theft is attributed less to the individual mastery of a criminal genius, and more to the ability of individuals to assemble their specialized talents and their readiness to put into practice—by mobilizing said talents—those actions demanded by the plan.

The plan is the script of the heist operation. Onscreen it appears usually, if at all, in the form of a rolled or folded piece of paper, a topographical layout of the structure of the vault and the specific architecture which houses it. Required in addition to this layout is a knowledge of the presence and movements of agents within the space. Yet it is not entirely necessary that the viewer be provided with all of the information contained within the plan; it is only necessary that there is one, the information in which is not conveyed. In *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Any Number Can Win* and *Le Cercle rouge*, the plan has an *a priori* existence independent of those who are attempting to enact it. The materiality of the plan—as opposed to the designs which seem to spring forth straight from the frontal lobe of the master criminal—signals its objective status as both a key to, and alternate mapping of, the institutional system. In *The Asphalt Jungle*, the plan to rob a jewelry store is simply a single, vital piece of information brought to a criminal underworld by recently released convict "Doc" Erwin Riedenschnieder. The plan to rob a casino in *Any Number Can Win* is sold to Charles (Jean Gabin) by a wheelchair-bound ex-criminal now unable to pull off the crime himself. Corey (Alain Delon) in *Le Cercle rouge* is given the plan to rob an upscale jewelry store in the Place Vendôme just prior to being released from prison, by a corrupt prison guard. The plan, therefore, encompasses both a document of the disembedded time-space grid, "emptied out" of contingency (or,

at least, attempting to account for every possible contingency), and the inscription of particular and local qualities—we might even say "human qualities"—into the body of an institution: in Milestone's *Ocean's 11* the security guard diverted by the lure rolling chips; in Soderbergh's *Ocean's 11*, the casino computer technician in love with Charmaine, the exotic dancer; in *Heist* the alcoholic airport security officer (Patti Lupone); in *Mission: Impossible* the distracted lust of Donloe, the CIA computer programmer.

The contents of the plan are unfolded in the performance of the heist operation. As expressed in *The Killing*, the parallel and successive movements of each member of the team are delineated as overlapping strips of activity occurring at, as we are told by the voiceover, determined points on the clock: 3:32; 11:40; 12:30, and so on. *The Killing* both divides the operation of the heist into separate functions and shows how they are connected through scenes that overlap with one another. For example, as Johnny proceeds stealthily to the cash room of the racetrack, the diegetic racetrack announcer is heard noting the collapse of the lead horse just past the half-mile post. This collapse, we have already seen in a previous sequence, is the result of a shot fired from a distant parking lot by Nicky, the marksman. Likewise, we watch as Maurice (Kola Kwariani), the Russian strongman, instigates a brawl at the racetrack bar, initiating a diversion to occupy security guards while Johnny enters the "no admittance" area of the track as the door is opened for him from the inside. In a subsequent sequence, Johnny's arrival at the racetrack and his movement into position in front of the "no admittance" door are shown. Cutting to the inside of the cash room, we see a phone call alerting security officers there to the brawl outside. This time the officers are shown from both angles: (a) leaving the

inside of the no admittance area and (b) emerging onto the floor of the betting area. Cutting back to the interior of the cash room, George Peatty, the betting-window teller, moves to the door and opens it for Johnny to enter. Binding these discrete sequences together is the setting of the track and the diegetic, offscreen racetrack announcer, whose continuous announcement of the beginning of the seventh race—paired with stock footage of horses and the starting gate moving into position—frames the movements of each of the operators. Thus we are cued that these strips of activity occur onscreen at overlapping moments.

In *The Killing*, the constitutive elements of the racetrack robbery are laid back to back. Unlike the *Mabuse* sequence described by Gunning, these elements are not linked together in filmic time and space through the cinematic devices of parallel editing. Thus, when Johnny tosses the bag filled with money out the open window of the racetrack's cash room we are momentarily stunned. Why did he do this? Where did the money go? A sequence employing parallel editing would take the viewer immediately outside the window to show the loot falling to the ground. Later, as the thieves reconvene in an apartment, officer Randy Kenan describes his role in the operation and we are taken back again to the racetrack and to this window. The bag indeed flies out the window, is retrieved by Kenan (who, you'll remember, reported his radio to be broken and thereby rendered himself unreachable by police headquarters), thrown in the back seat of his patrol car, and dropped off at Johnny's motel room. While in the robbery sequence in *Mabuse* separate functions are interlocked through parallel action, the plan in *The Killing*—starting at one point in time, and ending at another—never really appears as a conventional, interwoven cinematic form. Tying these separate events together is the

location of the robbery and the space of time within which it occurs. In between each

character's allotted strip of action are scenes of jockeys entering the track on their horses,

crowds in the stands, and work horses pulling the starting blocks into position. Over a

P.A. system we hear, again and again, the voice of an announcer calling the beginning of

the seventh race.

I would argue that the filmic construction of the robbery in *The Killing* works to

embed individual actions into a particular and local time and space, specifically to spot

every strip of disconnected action we see at the racetrack during or around the seventh

race. The operation of the racetrack depends on technologies of communication (the

announcer), the orderly exchange of what Giddens calls "symbolic tokens" (cash, betting

tickets) (1991, 20 fig1), and the management of crowds through security. The plan

enacted by the team is one which counters the fluid functioning of the racetrack

institution: draining security resources by instigating a brawl or by creating

pandemonium through the assassination of a horse; using the public address system as a

covert synchronizing mechanism; appropriating the symbolic tokens and defying capture

through swift submersion into the crowd. In short, the heist team employs the

particularities of the locale but directs their energy against the institution that is dominant

there.

In many ways, what we have here is an exponential enlargement of the technical

virtuosity of thievery demonstrated in *Pickpocket*. Instead of accurately assessing, and

intervening in, the movement that a purse must make from a ticket counter to a berth

under its owner's arm, the heist operators here must assess the time it might take for a

police officer to leave his post at one end of town and arrive at the race track, how long a

strongman can create a violent disturbance and how many guards it will take to stop him, and how possible it will be to smuggle a gun to this scene in a florist's box. The activities these operators must engage in are just as microscopic to the enterprise of a racetrack as the movements of Bresson's pickpocket are to the enterprise of a purse-holding body inside a train station. What is changed here is the proportion of what must be penetrated: instead of the pockets which cling close to the individual body in public space, it is the body of the institution which must be surreptitously entered and exited. In one of the final moments of the racetrack heist in *The Killing*, the camera tracks a security guard running past the betting booths. In the foreground of this shot, and during the entire sequence, are the darkened outlines of racetrack patrons as they move about the floor. As the guard reaches the "no admittance" door, we see Johnny exiting it. The guard confronts Johnny and pulls a gun on him. Disaster is averted here as the drunken Marvin (Jay C. Flippen) jostles the guard, momentarily distracting him, offering Johnny the opportunity to slug him. As the guard topples to the ground Johnny beats a retreat, walking back past the betting booths and out the door, unnoticed by the omnipresent crowd that moves by in the foreground of the frame. Absorbed into the movement of the crowd, Johnny's actions go unnoticed and he is able to submerge himself into anonymity. The frame of this action replicates the experience of the crowd itself, obscuring and silencing activity that would otherwise lie within a clear field of vision.[1]

The depiction of the heist in *The Killing* presents a working-through of the problem of seeing the process of theft. It is only the spectators of this film, not the perpetrators of the heist itself or any diegetic witnesses, who are in a position to view the heist as a whole— and still it must be re-constituted from the various strips of activity provided. In this way,

the depiction of the heist in *The Killing* both cinematically deconstructs and enunciates what Gunning describes, citing Vasudevan's comments, as the "modern culture of space and time . . . one event, divided into specific functions, that unfolds before our eyes." In *The Killing*, it is the specific functions that are seen and "the event"—the heist itself—is never really brought into view. If the modern culture of space and time is one that works to disembed and empty out the particularity of location and local temporalities through the construction of abstract systems, the operation of a heist employs a counter strategy by exploring and investing in the obscure, often invisible, particularities of place.

A Cinema of Process

Later films while not abandoning the importance of timing, incorporate it more discreetly into the flow of the operation. Time in these films is no longer something to be announced—and surely not by a voiceover—but something to be ardently observed by the perpetrators. Perhaps, this speaks to the sophistication of heist spectators now familiar with the convention of time-watching, knowledgeable that everything onscreen in a heist operation is always "on the clock." In the French variants of heist cinema—*Rififi*, *Any Number Can Win* and *Le Cercle rouge* specifically—time is the constraining brackets within which a carefully planned operation must unfurl. These films demonstrate what Colin McArthur (referring to Jean-Pierre Melville's work) has called a "cinema of process": "a cinema which went some way to honouring the integrity of actions by allowing them to happen in a way significantly closer to 'real' time than was formerly the case in fictive, particularly Hollywood, cinema" (2000, 191). As an example of this concept, McArthur describes a scene from Jacques Becker's *Le Trou* (1960) wherein the camera holds on a prison convict's efforts to break through a concrete

wall, not cutting away to elide the duration this operation will take. McArthur suggests

this style of filmmaking as cinematographic existentialism, succinctly illustrating the

"brute facticity of objects in the real world" (191). Although he does not talk explicitly

about heist films, McArthur's process concept is particularly suited to the representations

of theft as a laborious endeavor in 1950s and 60s French cinema. I would, however, make

one slight alteration to his thesis. While surely the depictions of robbery in films such as

Rififi, Any Number Can Win and *Le Cercle rouge* are characterized by holding to and

documenting a drawn-out process, it is not the brute facticity of *objects* that seems to be

dramatized here. (In the topography of the heist, there is one object—*the* object—that

assumes primacy over all others. It is the jewel, the artifact, the money—that thing in

which is concentrated an exchange value.) If there is a brute facticity to be encountered,

it is located not in the materiality of this object but in the system that must be negotiated

for that object to be obtained. What is real for the thieves, and for the viewers who watch

their actions, is the architectonic structure that girds the institution (exemplified, perhaps,

as the vault). The process enacted by the thieves works not upon the physical world but

upon the, very real, material structure that is built up from its economic base: a structure

of vaults and security and of fiercely guarded commodities and property.

It is within heist cinema that this structure truly appears, when the bodies of thieves

come up against it, contort themselves around it, and—fantastically—move through it. In

Louis Malle's *Le Voleur* (1967) an experienced thief, Father Margelle (Julien Guiomar),

intimates to Georges Randal (Jean-Paul Belmondo), a novice, that the impetus to steal

stems from a refusal to see walls as impermeable, and an insistence on enacting a desire

to move through them. As the film works to demonstrate, the art and pleasure of theft is

rooted in an antipathy to bourgeois life—that is, a set of bounding conventions—and a desire to destroy it.

Is it true then that the staging of theft is a mechanism for rendering the contours of the modern world? If so, what we watch when we watch a heist is not necessarily the cinematic depiction of theft at all, but rather a revelation of the reality of the material world in which we live. In traversing the boundaries of social and economic sanction thieves, in turn, reveal our reality.

Le Cercle rouge

In contrast to *The Killing*'s emphasis on the discrete functions of a whole event, the heist sequences that might be grouped into what McArthur calls the "cinema of process" exemplify the operation of theft as a silent and elegant ceremony. In *Le Cercle rouge*, for example, the thieves stalk their target, an upscale jewelry store, with quiet deliberateness, the camera tracking their movements with a relatively unfractured fidelity to the "real" time of the heist process. Stopping their car on the street in the Place Vendôme, Corey and Vogel (Gian-Maria Volonté) stealthily make their way into a neighboring building, navigate its hallways, and ascend to the roof. Silhouetted against the blue night sky they traverse buildings, jumping from roof to roof. Stopping at a ledge, they unpack two black bags and a rope ladder, lowering them down to a sky-light below. They climb down the rope ladder, alighting in front of what is shown to be a bathroom window. The action cuts to a security guard sitting at his post inside the jewelry store. Hearing a noise, he rises from his chair, unhooks a flashlight from its place on the wall and walks to bathroom. Seeing his light from their perch outside the bathroom window, the thieves press themselves against the wall. Detection narrowly averted, the thieves meanwhile

begin to cut into a pane of glass, etching it and suctioning it off. Reaching in through the newly cut hole and unlocking the window, Corey and Vogel climb into the bathroom. After observing the guard at his post, a silent signal is given and they tackle the guard, knock him out, tape his mouth, and tie him up.

They are now confronted with a two sets of electric eyes—precursors to laser beam security devices. The first set is a widely spaced pair that can easily be maneuvered around, but the second set—a series of eight eyes, this time set closely together—can not. In turn, Corey and Vogel step over and bend under the first set of electronic beams. They now stand in the main entrance of the jewelery store, hemmed in by electric eyes. In a parallel sequence that begins as the thieves enter through the bathroom, Jansen (Yves Montand) is shown in a beige trenchcoat and tuxedo, holding a guitar case, walking down the street. He enters the front door of the building which houses the jewelry store, announcing to the invisible concierge, "Plouvier" – another of the building's tenants— and surreptiously plants a wad of gum and a metal plate in the doorjambs to prevent the doors from locking behind him. He ascends the stairs, moving up two flights past the jewelry store. Here, at the door marked "Plouvier," he removes his shoes and retraces his steps two flights back down. As he stands in front of the jewelry store's door, there is a cut to an insert of the face of a wristwatch as Vogel checks the time—it is three a.m. He and Corey open the door to reveal Jansen, now wearing a matching black mask, who enters the room. The parallel actions of Corey/Vogel and Jansen are now united in a single frame. Silently moving into the room, Jansen surveys the terrain. In a reconnaissance mission made by Corey and Vogel during regular store hours it was discovered that only one key will unlock the electric eyes that guard the jewelry display

cases. The keyhole for this access is on the other side of the room, separated from the

thieves' present location by an iron gate and the aforementioned set of closely aligned

electric eyes (thus, both a vertical and horizontal obstruction appear). Opening his guitar

case, Jansen begins to assemble his gun and the tripod upon which it will rest. After

attaching the scope, he offers Corey and Vogel a view through it. In an insert, we see the

cross hairs of the scope fixed directly on the keyhole. Jansen positions himself behind

the gun and, in a surprising move, unscrews it from the tripod and begins to aim

manually. Quick edits establish Corey and Vogel's shock as they look to each other from

behind their masks. Jansen lowers the gun to the target and again the cross hairs are

shown, lowering to the keyhole. A close-up of the keyhole now, and the sound of a small

"bang" as a plume of smoke rises out of it. A long-shot of the iron gate and the sounds of

clicking and whirring. The gate opens. (We learn later that Jansen has molded a bullet

from a special metal alloy to act as a key.) A series of close-ups of the display case

locks, as sharp "unlocking" noises are heard. Still the trio must wait: the invisible fence

of electric eyes is still on and they look to it, anxiously, even from behind their masks.

After a protracted moment, a length of time which suggests that this entire operation

might have been for naught, another clicking and whirring is heard. The bound guard is

shown looking helplessly to the surveillance tape mechanism (only activated, it seems,

when the store is open and these alarms are switched off) as it whirs into action. One by

one, the electric eyes shut themselves off. As Corey and Vogel enter the floor of the

store proper and begin to smash open the display cases, Jansen, a recovering alcoholic,

removes a silver flask from his pocket, taking only a whiff before recapping and

replacing it. The pleasure produced by the successful unlocking maneuver, it seems, parallels and even exceeds the pleasures of drink.

Here, interspersed with moments of suspense and astonishment is a feeling of stillness that is relatively uncommon to crime film. As Corey and Vogel survey their location from the rooftop, we get a view of the Place Vendôme utterly empty of daytime bustle. As the thieves attempt to enter the bathroom window, the film cuts back to the top of the building and Henri Decae's camera drifts down from the dark rooftop, through the opening between the buildings and onto the thieves as they work. It is as if, even after following their actions closely up to this point, we have come upon them again for the first time. And when Jansen takes a whiff from his flask, we see, even as his face is hidden by a mask, a man who has been given a moment of dignity.

As Corey and Vogel, following Jansen, exit the building, the writhing guard triggers the alarm and they peel from the scene in their (American) car. The next scene is of a black-and-white video surveillance tape playing on a television screen; the television frame zooms from a bird's-eye perspective of the jewelry floor to focus in on a display case, cutting Jansen out of the frame just as he raises the flask to his face. There seems here to be a meta-cinematic comment on the distinction between narrative film and surveillance video. The surveillance footage is unable to capture the details and complexity of the theft we have just been shown. Cinema—a precisely constructed frame and camera movement—could capture and reveal Yves Montand's performance of Jansen's silent triumph; the unmanned and automatic video camera could not. Commisaire Mattei (André Bourvil), with nothing but this impoverished view of the events we have been privy to, can only mutter, "They're not much for talk." The

inclusion of the surveillance tape within the film's diegesis reminds us that there are many ways in which a theft can be seen and shown. We have two media contrasted here, black-and-white videotape replayed on a television screen and Eastmancolor film. A camera manned by professional cinematographer Henri Decae and a camera—again, within the film's diegesis—manned by, one presumes, a motion sensor. Emphasized here is an idea about cinema itself. Cinema could show this theft, video could not. What we have just seen unfold is the result of polished cinematic technique. The camera did not just document a story, it gave a shape and presence to a series of moments in time. Moreover, it creatively documented a process that the state and the institutions it protects work obsessively to apprehend and isolate. The character of Mattei is shown in close-up surveying the events on the television screen as he comments on the silence of the thieves. As a representative of the state and not a cinemagoer, that is, saddled with his surveillance tape, he is unable to participate in the pleasure of the theft.

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There is a thrill, to be sure, in watching the display of transgressive activity. But the cinematic heist transcends transgression. Because theft is something that we literally cannot see, cinema imagines it for us. The relative accuracy of the depiction is not at issue—there is no person, after all, who would be in the position to judge the fidelity of the representation. The only requirements for a cinematic heist are that it take place upon the recognizable terrain of modern experience and that an institutionally protected object be stolen from the place where it is stored. What is really shown then is the penetrability not only of walls, but of appearances. The capitalist institutions through which objects of value circulate are designed to create ordered relations and a sense of immutability. As

instruments of hegemony, they determine and foster acceptable forms of movement through their spaces.

As Giddens notes, the contours of modernity are defined by mechanisms that disembed the particular relations of locale. These disembeding mechanisms, he argues, consist of "symbolic tokens"—money, or objects of an established exchange value—and "expert systems"—those professionalised quarters such as medicine, finance, and civil engineering which remain a complete mystery to the untaught. It is in the combination of these mechanisms that the abstract systems that define modernity are formed. Yet, abstract systems are stubbornly not visible, they resist being seen or shown. Cinema, on the other hand, can only ever see and show, and it therefore insists on locale. The subject matter of the heist film, in its focus on the robbery of "symbolic tokens" (objects of economic value), is the abstract system that the institution of banks, jewelry stores, and museums embody. The cinematic heist therefore conjoins the invisibility of abstract systems with the visibility of institutions. In the process, these institutions are shown to be not the stable, fixed, and impregnable nodes of capitalism, industrialization, and the nation-state that they pretend, but instead to be facades that conceal fallibility, instability, and contingency.

While *Ocean's 11* (2001), *The Killing*, and *Le Cercle rouge* might look vastly different from each other, they all work to depict a performance of embedding. Contained in their plan is not only a representation of the institution's topography, but also the particular opportunity that will allow thieves to penetrate it—the open window, the lazy guard, the amount of time it takes a door to lock. These are all features not of abstract systems, but of concrete location. The operation of a heist seizes on the

contingencies inherent in locating abstract systems in the material world and pries them open. That cinematic heists are only marginally successful is the acknowledgment that they too must gamble with contingency. This is shown forcefully in the conclusions of *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Rififi*, *Topkapi*, *Any Number Can Win*, *Ocean's 11* (1960) and *Le Cercle rouge* when the spectacular heist converts the objects stolen from symbolic tokens of wealth and freedom to a mark of incarceration and, perhaps the ultimate contingency, death.

Notes

[1] Because large institutions such as banks, casinos, jewelry stores and museums are situated in urban centers and designed to encounter and process large numbers of people, whether as visitors or as customers, the anonymity of the urban crowd is one of the heist engineer's most important tools. The institution open to the public, even if only in a limited way, is placed in a bind: it must both control and monitor the movement of those that pass through its doors and disguise the fact that it is doing so. (A staple feature of any film about casino management is the tracking of individuals on the crowded casino floor through both video and human surveillance.) The opening robbery of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999), for example, features anonymous men in sunglasses and suits surfaces from various points on the street, committing the crime, and resubmerging into the crowd. The conclusion of *The Hot Rock* has (Redford's character) casually exit the front door of a bank as his pursuers simultaneously enter it. In a zoom shot, we see him stroll an entire city block, a smile slowly crossing his face as he realizes that his freedom of movement on this street means that he has finally—after a series of botched robbery attempts—made a clean getaway.

Conclusion: Visioning the Heist

In the opening sequence of a recent Canadian film, *Foolproof*, we watch what seems to be a heist in action: alarms are frenetically disabled, a clock is monitored, and a young man and woman tensely bark indecipherable technical jargon to each other while another man looks on. What viewers soon learn, however, is that staging heists is a hobby for this trio (Ryan Reynolds, Kristin Booth, and Joris Jarsky), who case real locations, plan complex robbery schemes, and mock the steps that would be needed to commit them within the confines of a warehouse/living space. Though intensely interested in the history and mechanics of heists, this team never intends to carry out a real job. The team is soon "discovered" by a career thief (David Suchet) and blackmailed into committing a real job. Although the film was a box-office failure (even for Canada), it suggests a strain of heist fandom extant within contemporary culture.

We might also consider two more heist related occurrences. The first, a one-off television program made for the Discovery channel entitled "The Ten Best Heists of All Time"; the second, a theft of five ivory cameos, part of a private collection and valued at $1.5 million, from Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario in January of 2004. I witnessed both of these "events" as I began this project, the first on television, and the second in the newspaper and television news. As the direction for this project was then still quite up in the air, I watched both intensely in an effort to see if they would offer me any insight into the appeal heists held for me. The television show was almost completely bereft of any real content. Flashy, fragmented imagery, poorly produced "dramatizations," and mundane stock footage comprised the bulk of the program's content, rounded off by

anecdotes from historians of varying pedigree. The news coverage of the art gallery robbery, although sustained over a course of two weeks, offered few interesting glimpses into modern criminal technique. How in fact the thieves managed to take these figurines went unmentioned, we learned only that surveillance tapes had managed to pinpoint, but not establish the identity of, three "persons of interest" (*Globe and Mail*, February 2, 2004). After a few weeks, a lawyer reported to the press that he was in communication with the thieves, and the return of the cameos to their owner was negotiated. Like Commisaire Mattei in *La Cercle rouge*, I was offered by these depictions only an impoverished view of what seemed to be daring acts of thievery.

The reason for my dissatisfaction with these events, I believe, is implicit in the preceding chapters. The pleasure of a cinematic heist is distinct from the heist phenomenon in general. In the former, precise framing, synchronous actions, and virtuoso performances of false identity combine to enthrall the viewer. In the latter, plain, unadulterated facts dominate. Unlike the characters of *Foolproof* who seek to emulate—if only in a limited way—their criminal heroes, my fascination stems from an interest in the framing and depiction of the criminal event, the way it unfolds, and the fact that as a viewer, I am presented with backstage details, minutiae available only to me and not to the denizens of public life onscreen. As such, heist films represent a form of filmmaking that invites viewers to imagine a world parallel to their own, a world of vibrancy and energy existing right below the threshold of their vision.

There is still much ground to cover concerning heist cinema. In concentrating on only a small number of key films, I have necessarily excluded large bodies of work. Avenues for further exploration include critical expositions of various periods in the development

of heist films, auteurist analyses of key directors (Dassin, Melville, Verneuil, Soderbergh), and formal groupings of films according to style, structure, and content. I have dabbled here a little in these areas, but have only scratched the surface.

The act of the heist demonstrates a type of cinema that transcends the rigid boundaries of narrative. Heists present modern spaces as stages that offer certain, often profitable, dramaturgical possibilities. In doing so, the cinematic heist reveals the topographies of modernity, sites where the undeniable locality and particularity of time and space are momentarily revealed and regained. This is not to argue that heist films represent a subversive form of filmmaking or a cogent critique of modern life under capitalism, but rather to argue that what we watch in these films are temporary disturbances in the sanctioned flows of modernity: individuals skirting the boundaries of acceptable action, authorities baffled, institutions rendered inoperational, and thieves emptying them of their holdings (even if these holdings are often destroyed in the end). Shown here is the possibility of counter-hegemonic mystification, the ability of thieves to build illusions that will both occupy and perplex the guardians of order. We are forcefully reminded in these images that social life is never transparent and that the terrain of modern life is rife with the production of deceit and trickery.

Cinema, widely regarded as a chimerical medium, is the instrument that illuminates these productions. Even if the fidelity of filmic representations to actual criminal technique is debatable, the impulse of the camera, and of film, to show detail and to analyse movement is what heist films epitomize. The pleasure derived in watching this show-within-a-show is the pleasure of confronting, in the comforts of a darkened theatre, that which is invisible to us under the sun.

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Touchez pas au Grisbi (Jacques Becker, Antares Produzione Cinematografica/Del Duca

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The Good Die Young (Lewis Gilbert, Remus/Romulus Films Ltd., 1954)

Bob le flambeur (Jean-Pierre Melville, Organisation Générale Cinématographique/Play

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Five Against the House (Phil Karlson, Columbia, 1955)

The Ladykillers (Alexander Mackendrick, Ealing Studions/Rank Organisation, 1955)

Du Rififi chez les homes (Jules Dassin, Indusfilms/Prima Film/Société Nouvelle Pathé

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The Killing (Stanley Kubrick, Harris-Kubrick Productions, 1956)

I Soliti Ignotti (*Big Deal on Madonna Street* Mario Monicelli, Cinecittà/Lux

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League of Gentlemen (Basil Dearden, Allied Filmmakers/Rank Organisation, 1959)

Odds Against Tomorrow (Richard Fleischer, HarBel Productions, 1959)

The Day They Robbed the Bank of England (John Guillermin, M-G-M/Summit Films

    Productions, 1960)

Ocean's 11 (Lewis Milestone, Dorchester/Warner Bros., 1960)

Any Number Can Win (*Mélodie en sous-sol,* Henri Verneuil, CCM/CIPRA/Cité Films, 1963)

Topkapi (Jules Dassin, Filmways Pictures, 1964)

Gambit (Ronald Neame, Universal Pictures, 1966)

How to Steal a Million (William Wyler, World Wide Productions, 1966)

Ad Ogni Osto (*Grand Slam* Giuliano Montaldo, Constantin Film Produktion/Coral P.C./Jolly Film, 1967)

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Set It Off (F. Gary Gray, New Line Cinema/Peak Films, 1996)

The Thomas Crown Affair (John McTiernan, Irish Dreamtime/United Artists, 1999)

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