"CHANGING FRAMES:"

MEDIUM MATTERS IN SELECTED PLAYS AND FILMS OF DAVID MAMET

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama
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**DISSERTATION ABSTRACT**

David Mamet is one of a small number of American playwrights who have successfully made the transition to the role of writer/director in mainstream American cinema. This thesis considers the influence of the distinct relationship between the controlling conventions and the unpredictable excess of the newly-adopted medium (or media-complex) of film upon Mamet's work.

The first section of this thesis provides a brief survey of theoretical models of theatrical and cinematic production, reception, and signification. The second section explores a selection of plays which make explicit the playwright's understanding and practice of live (re)presentation: *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1975), *Edmond* (1982), and *The Shawl* (1985). The third section considers Mamet's early pronouncements regarding writing for the cinema, and the two motion pictures which were conceived entirely as films, without theatrical heritage, on which Mamet acted as both writer and director: *House of Games* (1987) and *Homicide* (1991).

What becomes evident through this research is Mamet's theatrical preoccupation with the conventional restraints of social performance and interaction. Repeatedly, Mamet's fictional (re)presentations enact the parallel potential for the transgression of convention inherent in the theatrical form. With *The Shawl* (1985) Mamet proposes an organic mode of performance that
unites theatrical and social authenticity and efficacy. In contrast, Mamet's cinema protagonists are both consumed by deceitful narrative worlds and imprisoned within manipulated and highly restricted fields of view. In effect, the possession of the film characters by both narrative and medium duplicates the cinema spectator's experience within the over-determined yet "transparent" narrational manipulation of mainstream film.

This thesis concludes that the work in theatre and film of David Mamet is strongly determined by his engagement with the governing conventions of each form. Through the contrast between the transgressive volatility of Mamet's theatrical exhibitionism and the voyeuristic passivity encouraged by his work for film, this study illustrates the powerful influence of medium selection on one author's creative expression, and identifies general theoretical implications for all such cross-medium authorship.
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Perhaps no one knows better the unique challenges that confront a student who attempts to write a Doctoral dissertation while holding a full-time university position than his or her thesis supervisor. I would like to offer my gratitude to Professor Ronald Bryden for his enduring patience, intelligence, insight, guidance, and common sense throughout the often hectic years of this project’s completion. I have greatly appreciated both his generous and informed input and his willingness to let me find my own argument, focus, and voice. Thank you, Ron.

As a student of drama and performance, I initially perceived the world of cinema as a seductive but alien domain. Although superficially similar in its preoccupations and methodologies, cinema studies quickly revealed itself as sharply distinct from theatrical research in almost every aspect. My dissertation thus required that I chart new practical and theoretical landscapes—a rather daunting project to be taken on as an independent endeavour. In this work I am very fortunate to have had such an accomplished and skilful guide as Professor Cam Tolton. Any deficiencies in my understanding and utilization of film theory and interpretation are, indeed, my own; Professor Tolton’s advice and instruction have repeatedly and expertly steered me through formidable trials.

I would like to thank my parents, whose unconditional support provided the often unacknowledged and geographically distant, yet always present inspiration for this work. I thank Chris Barton, for his powerful example of endurance and perseverance. And, finally, I would like to thank Terry Mitchell, who, with generosity, patience, love, and unwavering belief, has been my constant audience and dramaturge, and who, ultimately, convinced me when it was time to start writing, and when it was time to stop.
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**BIBLIOGRAPHY / FILMOGRAPHY**
"Hollywood," David Mamet has more than once asserted, "is the Big Table." A committed gambler, the playwright has fittingly approached involvement in American film with a combination of trepidation and fascination. Initially scornful of its legendary duplicity and manipulation, Mamet has more recently become cautiously generous in his assessment of Hollywood working conditions. Recalling the "camaraderie" on the set of his first feature film as writer/director, *House of Games* (1987), he has noted "the sense that we were engaged together in a legitimate enterprise as part of a legitimate industry...." Taking his seat at the "Big Table," Mamet has entered a very exclusive group: American playwrights who have successfully made the transition from theatrical author to cinematic auteur.

Mamet's central role in this study is, therefore, despite his creative accomplishments and considerable biographical allure, due equally to his uncommon positioning. As my brief historical survey shall reveal, the status of authorship within the ranks of American film writers has been and continues to be highly dubious. While a large number of theatrically trained writers have reaped large monetary rewards for their efforts in American cinema, various formal and institutional factors all but ensure the screenwriter's anonymity and a determining loss of artistic control. Far fewer playwrights have proceeded to the (arguably) central role of writer/director. Yet even within this restricted grouping, David Mamet remains unique in at least two crucial aspects.

Amongst American playwrights, Mamet's success as a scriptwriter and, subsequently, writer/director is unique in the current era of American film. Only Preston Sturges, during the
1940s, enjoyed comparable popular and critical acclaim (although the latter primarily in the form of subsequent retrospection). Equally pertinent, however, is Mamet's generosity with his ideas about dramatic and cinematic composition. The author of a small library of aesthetic proclamations, he stands as a highly attractive subject for investigation. What is not attempted in this study is an exhaustive cataloguing of the writer's complete work, either in the theatre or in film. The former is the subject of numerous, engaging book-length studies by, amongst others, C. W. E. Bigsby and Dennis Carroll; the latter is the focus of a single, recent (and ultimately disappointing) treatment by Gay Brewer. Rather, my motive for selecting Mamet's output is more singular and theoretical in nature, inspired by the unusual opportunity afforded through his conspicuous public posture and his stance in the motion picture industry. For, within an aesthetic form in which the priority claimed by financial considerations renders the concept of authorship so elusive and indeterminate, Mamet has achieved a degree of control over the final form of his work enjoyed by few playwrights either historically or currently employed by the mainstream, commercial--i.e., Hollywood--system.

Clearly, and of the utmost significance for this study, such freedom is of an entirely relative nature, and contained within strict formal and ideological patterns. Indeed, a principal focus in this study is Mamet's ability to discover within the regulated vocabulary of mainstream American film the terms adequate for his expression. Clearly, the modifications which that expression undergoes within the jurisdiction of the newly adopted medium demand equal attention. That both processes occur is a fairly safe hypothesis. Less certain are the terms of reference required to discuss authorship within this altered context of production. A fundamental preoccupation within film studies has long been the tension between the authority of the writer and that of the director. Much (though not exclusively) early criticism has struggled with the question of
'ownership' in regards to the motion picture, a debate apparently only made more attractive and contentious by its practical unresolvability. By greatly reducing this source of ambiguity, my study will, with significantly less risk than that present in an investigation of joint production, allow me to concentrate upon the intersection of creative intention and formal realization. Thus, with otherwise unattainable focus, I am able to scrutinize how one veteran of the commercial American theatre comes to terms with the culturally and technically specific dialect of American film.

At the centre of this debate is another slippery term, perhaps the most crucial and problematic for this research. Where, within the contrasting claims of script and direction, does one locate the concept of the text? Do screenplays, separated from their realization in sight and sound, achieve the degree of autonomy regularly attributed to the printed play? Does the flexibility of interpretation that the play text insists upon, through the indeterminacy of its potential performance context, set it off fundamentally from the printed screenplay, which stands as the record of a single aspect of an immutable filmic structure, embedded permanently within a particular, fixed matrix of signifying systems?

The difficulties immediately encountered are thus many, and not resolvable in any absolute sense. Rather, certain decisions determining the scope and the intention of any such comparative study must be made. One possibility is to focus on the screenplay at that stage of its development most closely resembling the printed play: that is, in its original, pre-production state. Hypothetically constructed within a full awareness of the practical vocabulary of a specific filmic 'dialect' (i.e., classical Hollywood), such a text stands in anticipation of but as yet free from the precise narrative control of the medium. Such a document approximates the status of a play text awaiting a particular interpretative realization. Thus, a comparison of such a script
to a play text would contrast the conscious practices of an author working with full competence in each form.

However, as this degree of familiarity with both theatre and film is rare and, in regards to David Mamet, certainly not the case, I have decided instead to utilize the screenplays *as filmed*--the products of the actual filming process. If the aim of this research was to record, completely and categorically, the precise order of and motivation behind Mamet's preconceptions, decisions, reactions, and responses within the film-making process, then this focus upon the end product would quickly prove insufficient. However, my aim is, rather, to identify what appear to be the playwright's--as playwright--central concerns and dramatic means of expressing those concerns, and then to examine the films produced beneath his twin authority as writer and director. In this way I hope to rediscover, if and when possible, these concerns and practices as reconfigured within the new medium of the motion picture. Thus my intention is to identify, quantify, and attempt to qualify the formal and thematic persuasion of the filming process upon a theatrically trained perspective. Clearly, Mamet is working within a distinct and authoritative (i.e., mainstream American) model of filmic expression. But his situation is also one reduced in the practical and theoretical interference that commonly results from separated and competing production roles and personalities.

Admittedly, the potential is real that I may attribute credit for a thematic or formal aspect of a completed film to premeditated aesthetic intention on the part of the author (in any or all of his roles), when in fact its source may lie in arbitrary circumstance or practical necessity. A partial defence against such misinterpretation is to be found in as complete a familiarity as possible with the conditions under which each individual motion picture was completed. This, within practical expectations, is a necessary objective. However, such familiarity can only ever be partial, and,
taken to extremes, can result in a pursuit of production details that overwhelms broader theoretical questions or, worse, renders such issues perpetually indeterminable. Thus, the speculations of this study are frequently and intentionally presented as hypothetical. While my readings are informed by the historical documentation available, they attain towards a consideration of the issues examined that, while firmly built upon the particular cases studied, also attempts to move beyond them. Thus, while an effort will be made to be as inclusive as possible in the scrutiny of aesthetic, philosophical, social, practical, and otherwise cultural influences, I will work to maintain an element of interpretative flexibility in my observations and proposals, in an effort to discover the possibility of more generalized and equally inclusive dynamics.
Inherent in theatrical representation, Bernard Beckerman suggests, is "the idea of offering a gift ... by making it present, of the moment," which involves "the act of being—of the donor being in touch with the receiver of the gift." Clearly, this concept of performance, in its emphasis on the presence of the presenter, is a fundamental aspect of live theatrical expression. Just as clearly, however, (re)presentation—as I shall from this point on refer to theatrical performance, in order to emphasize its definitive presence—proposes a performative element alien to filmic representation and the inevitably recorded nature of narrative motion picture composition.

As Bert O. States has suggested, there are, in the theatre, always "points at which the floor cracks open and we are startled, however pleasantly, by the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended." It is precisely at these moments, when the considerable strength of culturally specific conventions of performance are momentarily overpowered by the critical mass of the theatre's raw, physical matter, that live (re)presentation insists most intently upon its distinct status in relation to the motion picture. For, with apparent seamlessness, the motion picture has, indeed, "subdued and transcended" the "real" that it re-presents. The filmic experience is one that acquires its immediacy and overwhelming persuasion precisely in its status—as opposed to the presence of the stage—as an absent performance. As Christian Metz has claimed, in his proposal for the cinema's "Imaginary Signifier,"
Whether or not the theatrical play mimes a fable, its action ... is still managed by real persons evolving in real time and space, on the same stage or 'scene' as the public. The 'other scene,' which is precisely not so called, is the cinematic screen (closer to fantasy from the outset): what unfolds there may, as before, be more or less fiction, but the unfolding itself is fictive: the actors, the 'decor,' the words one hears are all absent.... For it is the signifier itself, as a whole, that is recorded, that is absence. 3

I would concur with Marvin Carlson that the singular nature of the theatrical "scene" shared by public and performance is more complicated than this quotation suggests. Yet I would dispute Carlson's proposal that there are (only) two contiguous spatial/temporal zones. 4 Rather, I would suggest that the borders between theatre's shifting, emerging, and receding dimensions are as elusive, discontinuous, mutable, and problematic as they are necessary to theatrical experience. For what they measure is the degree of success with which the spontaneous and potentially consequential nature of theatrical physicality is contained within predetermined conventions of production and reception.

However, the fundamental distinction that Metz describes, I believe, remains valid. The intimacy of the cinematic experience relies on the continuous unconscious (and regularly conscious) acknowledgement of this absence, this absolute assurance that "everything is recorded (as a memory trace which is immediately so, without having been something else before)." 5 As subjective and as autonomous as memory, the cinematic signifier, in Metz's definition, escapes the troublesome efficacy of physicality—and thus, at the same time, theatricality. Indeed, considered within the conceptual context of theatrical (re)presentation, the cinema itself, or rather the cinematic, becomes the fundamental convention of filmed representation. The perpetually imminent emergence of volatile physicality that mutually frames and is framed by conventions of theatrical practice is, in the cinema, definitively contained—absented. Cinema, as an absent media (in this distinct, phenomenological sense), is instead
dependent upon an assurance of the voyeuristic safety of its spectator for its specifically filmic illusion to be sustained.

The power of cinema thus emerges—in direct opposition to that of the theatre—as predicated upon the assumption of the absolute authority of its frame. Since the cinematic frame and spectator alike are immune to the threat of immediate physical consequence, the former has the potential to encompass the latter within a consuming narrative identification. However, while physical spontaneity is consumed within the cinematic process, substituted in its place is an equally problematic yet experientially distinct excess. For implicit in the basic assertion of the cinema's selective gaze is the accompanying admission that there is always that which it does not see, that which forms the image's always absent contextualizing frame. And just as the volatile physicality of theatrical (re)presentation at all times threatens the disruption of the performance's premeditation, so too the absent excess of cinematic representation carries within it the perpetual refutation of the viewer's illusory omniscience.

Immediately acknowledged within any such cross-media study is that the theatre is not a medium at all, but rather a combination or complex of media, comprised of various and variable means of signification. Patrice Pavis has described theatre as "'syncretic' (a sign system that 'puts into action many languages of expression[,] ... the meeting point for other sign systems [of space, gesture, music, text, etc.])." Keir Elam has subsequently opened up even this inclusive interpretation, and proposes a definition of theatre as "the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction...." Given the breadth of such an understanding, any effort to establish a systematic correlation between theatre and media more accommodating to a semiological interpretation seems fated to frustration. Accordingly, this is not the task I have set myself.
Rather, I am interested in the influence of the media selected upon the composition, production, and reception of a body of storytelling that is, despite formal divergence, compositionally linked through its related authorship. I have therefore chosen from Mamet's stage works those plays I feel best demonstrate the playwright's understanding of theatrical performance. Similarly, I will discuss at length only those films that Mamet has composed exclusively for cinematic realization (thus excluding adaptations of stage plays), and for which the writer has also acted as director. In this way I hope to isolate, to the degree possible, the attributes of Mamet's specifically cinematic expression. As my following argument explains, it is through a consideration of this selection of works that the powerful, at times formative influence of medium on Mamet's practice becomes most evident.

*Mamet and Medium*

David Mamet's plays, as live (re)presentations, rely upon and struggle against the established practices of theatrical performance. As (re)presentation, his theatre is played out within a consensual field of expectation and convention—a *real* artificial system of security—that it often, intentionally and unintentionally, overwhelms, if only to re-affirm in a newly scrutinized and revalidated configuration. Further, however, Mamet's theatre seems acutely aware of its (re)presentational properties and determined to capitalize on its inherent volatility. His drama repeatedly re-enacts its phenomenological nature on a thematic level through a preoccupation with the possibility of personal identity through social liberation. As becomes particularly evident in plays such as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1975), and *Edmond* (1982), Mamet's characters encounter and, to differing degrees, rebel against what are presented as culturally imposed yet systematically dehumanizing conventions of socialization.
Paradoxically, then, they stand as fictional metaphors for the volatility of theatre itself in its perpetual encounter with the containment of often devitalizing convention. In their often brutal assault upon these imposed restrictions, these characters present a powerful reminder of the potential for similarly uncontrolled and rebellious efficacy in the theatrical form.

Yet, just as on the level of the plays' performative mode, this attack on unexamined or enervating convention does not equate with an outright rejection of structure or organization. With *The Shawl* (1985) Mamet gives what seems full embodiment to his proposal for a theatre that moves beyond the tentative and almost invariably violent first steps of earlier plays, towards what he has written of (problematically, to be sure) as a "true" mode of performance. The mutual presence and self-consciousness of John and Miss A in this later work result in what the playwright has described as an "authentic" or "organic" performance relationship, in which both performer and spectator are identified as collaborators in a reciprocal and mutually empowering performance dynamic. Thus the tendency, within the fictions (re)presented, to argue a freshly examined and re-imagined necessity of social consensus achieves a sense of equilibrium parallel to that established within the re-visioned model of performance conventions.

In contrast, Mamet's films—specifically those conceived as films from the outset through completion—present another process altogether. Although radically different in their apparent motivations and ethical representations, *Margaret of House of Games* (1987) and *Bobby Gold of Homicide* (1991) are seen, ultimately, as consumed within the deceitful narrative worlds that they
Margaret proceeds to surrender her opportunity for efficacy; Gold, in a manner more closely related to Mamet's theatrical protagonists, passionately struggles towards his. Yet both characters are swallowed whole by fictions that deny them any level of real self-control or personal effect. Each is imprisoned, finally, within her/his own manipulated and highly restricted field—or frame—of vision. Thus, the ultimate inefficacy of both characters is facilitated and exaggerated by their cinematic representations, which repeatedly enact visually their narrative containment. Further, the possession of the characters by both narrative and medium thoroughly duplicates the cinematic spectator's experience as it has been proposed by a broad spectrum of psychoanalytic film theorists. The protagonists' presumption of a voyeuristic omniscience is facilitated by an unknown and unknowable (since transparent) system of narrative manipulation. However, in Mamet's often over-determined interpretation and employment of the cinematic apparatus, the seduction of an entirely illusory autonomy results (on the level of apparent authorial intention) in the erasure of individuality within a total narrative possession of personal will and efficacy.

"Frames" of Reference

Initially, however, I must attempt to establish a set of fundamental conditions, circumstances, and/or catalysts for, respectively, theatrical and cinematic experience (while avoiding the temptation to assert some intangible essence for each form). My brief exploration will seek at times a montage, at others a collage, of observation and speculation. In this way, I believe, it is possible to posit a number of definitive characteristics for each medium—or co-
ordination of media--within the categories that I have delimited.

Admittedly, there is some asymmetry in this last matter. The theatrical sources I consider range from the Poetics through Brecht's Epic Theatre and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. By contrast, the cinematic model that stands almost exclusively as the object of this study (as that of most film criticism and theory throughout the short century of the cinema's evolution) boasts a far less lengthy or diversified legacy. Noel Carroll has offered the following succinct designation and description: "[M]ovies' refers to popular mass-media films, the products of what might be called Hollywood International--films made in what has been dubbed the 'classical style,'...." Following the lead of both historical and contemporary research, it is similarly the products and practices of "Hollywood International" that shall figure most prominently in this study. In part, this is a consequence of how directly and powerfully this "genre" has influenced the popular conception of film form and function. In particular, however, "movies" emerge as distinctly relevant to the cinematic practice of David Mamet, whose films are largely conceived and executed within the classical model of Hollywood features. Mamet's plays, by contrast, are ultimately far more resistant to such generic categorization, and engage with the full spectrum of theatrical precedents discussed in the next section.
What is theatricality? It is theater-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice—gesture, tone, distance, substance, light—which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language. Of course theatricality must be present in the first written germ of a work, it is a datum of creation not of production. There is no great theater without a devouring theatricality—... the written text is from the first carried along by the externality of bodies, of objects, of situations; the utterance immediately explodes into substances.¹

What is this theatricality, which, as Roland Barthes asserts, "submerges" text and explodes "utterance ... into substances"? What is it that is perceived as present in theatrical (re)presentation, which Joseph Chaikin describes as "additional energy, like an electric field .... a free-heightened space in which the actor stands"² With necessary brevity, this section attempts to identify the preoccupation that is common to three of the most influential conceptions of theatrical performance in the Western tradition of the form. Through a short consideration of Aristotle's Poetics, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, my survey pursues that which is the subject of pursuit in all such (re)presentation: the living, present Other of performance.

Aristotle's Poetics

Whether blaming sensation-seeking audiences, egotistical actors, or accolade-hungry, acquiescing playwrights, the guidelines of the Poetics, the fourth century B.C. treatise by Aristotle, propose a model of dramatic composition which emerges as defiant in the face of the
actual practice of the theatre.

Now it is possible for the fearful or pathetic effect to come from
the actors' appearance, but it is also possible for it to arise from the very
structure of the events, and this is closer to the mark and characteristic of
a better poet. Namely, the plot must be so structured, even without
benefit of any visual effect, that the one who is hearing the events unroll
shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens. 3

What this early and seminal tract effectively dismisses is the "appearance"—that is, the presence—
of not merely the performers but of all aspects of "visual adornment." This latter, in Aristotle's
conception, is

the least artistic element, the least connected with the poetic art; in fact
the force of tragedy can be felt even without benefit of public
performance and actors, while for the production of the visual effect the
property man's art is even more decisive than that of the poet. 4

While interpretive disputes have characterized the translation history of this text, the
sometimes problematic but regular use of "poet" by most editors clearly locates the concerns of
the treatise within the dramatic text. As Ericka Fischer-Lichte has recently noted, critical
attempts to define the precise relationship between text and performance have been nearly as
diverse in theoretical approach as they have been numerous. In recent study alone, the dynamic
has been proposed as similar to that which exists between

a musical score and its realization (Raszewski 1958); as that of an
invariant to its variants (Jansen 1968); that of a deep to a surface
structure (Pagnini 1970); that between the signifier and the signified
(Kowzan 1975); that of two sets of different signs with a—more or less
large—intersection of common elements (Ubersfeld 1977); and that of two
different 'pheno textes' (drama and performance) that are related to the
same 'genotexte code' (Ubersfeld 1981). 5

In contrast to all these approaches, however, the theatre that the Poetics anticipates may
arguably be described as entirely inscribed within the text. Phenomenal embodiment represents
for it little
more than an opportunity for diffusion and distraction.

It is very little wonder, therefore, that Aristotle immediately and accurately identified the thoroughly problematic nature of theatrical mediation—a process so inherently characterized by competing systems of signification, at once collaborative and contradictory, as to pose a serious and persistent threat to the *Poetics*’ cherished "tragic effect." For a theatrical performance is, in fact, an act of encoding, a live time process involving not a single "semiotic system of the theater," but rather multiple and often contentious systems. It is, then, not simply a communication of a preconfigured body of information, but rather a volatile and unpredictable meshing of intentions. Some of these intentions are, indeed, somewhat stable, such as the dramatic text itself in its vocalized form. Others, however, are impossible to fix in any definitive way, either within their own work of signification, or in their relationship with other concurrent, overlapping, and interacting bodies of 'work.'

As Jiří Veltrusky has asserted, in reference to the working of dramatic text in performance, there is a distinct "dialectical tension between the dramatic text and the actor, based primarily on the fact that the sound components of the linguistic sign are an integral part of the voice resources drawn upon by the actor." The character’s words and the actor's voice are here seen as inseparable and yet not synonymous. Their meaning is joint, not singular, and it is precisely the "tension" within this contentious collaboratation, in all its aspects, which provides the theatrical sign's animating principle. Indeed, it is the text's interaction, its co-presence, with the physically present Other of the (re)presentation that, through its living mediation, imparts similar life to the text.

Although Aristotle’s doctrine dwelled in relative obscurity for hundreds of years
following the receding of Greek influence, it re-emerged during the Renaissance and served as a weighty and enduring critical club to hold over the heads of several centuries of misbehaving playwrights. Thus, its significance is perhaps greatest as a focus for the consideration of the truly conventional nature of theatrical practice. The complaints of popularity-conscious writers, uttered from beneath the yoke of the Poetics' three unities of time, place, and action (vaguely established in the original, but refined into lethal and punitive rules under the careful grooming of academia) were countered repeatedly and with astonishing uniformity through reference to Aristotle's classical authority. As late as the end of the nineteenth century, Realist and Naturalist playwrights practiced, if not directly preached, the single temporal and geographical context understood to be endorsed by the Greek treatise, confident of a precision and unity of action capable of creating a true depiction of society.

Brecht's Epic Theatre

Having grown weary from years of attempting to explain the slippery idea of 'Epic' theatre, Bertolt Brecht indicated his motives, if not his method, with increased clarity by offering the alternative label, 'Non-Aristotelian.' Brecht consistently condemned the opiate of illusion which he found at the heart of traditional theatre practice from Aristotle to Stanislavsky. Equally scorned by Brecht was the resulting social and moral paralysis—the ability to forget oneself in both the theatre and the world—that he believed it encouraged within its audiences. In opposition, Brecht proposed a theoretically objective, critical, and fully self-conscious approach to theatrical (re)presentation.

What Brecht's Epic Theatre targets is the conventional framing of the illusionistic
theatrical experience as it has been perceived in the Poetics. Erving Goffman has explored the nature of framing in performance situations, and proposes that the "purity" of theatrical performance, as opposed to "mixed" performances such as sporting events and "impure" performances such as military or surgical operations, automatically casts the spectator in an "audience role." This situating of the spectator "gives theater-goers the license to watch and collaborate in the 'unreality' of a theatrical performance. Based on a 'syntax of response, the spectator sympathetically and vicariously participates in the unreal world generated by the dramatic interplay of the scripted characters." Brecht's intentions, while hardly polar to those described by Goffman, involved a challenge to the "purity" of the theatrical event—and thus its categorical separation from daily experience. Thus it was that Brecht repeatedly compared his theatre to a sporting event, in an attempt to reframe the spectator's experience.

Familiar to those acquainted with the Prague School of literary theorists and the Formalist/Structuralist writings of Roman Jakobson, the literary concept of defamiliarization—or, as it found its way into Brecht's theatrical practice, alienation—represented the most systematic approach to recreating theatre via a recreation of its audience. Brecht began with the idea of defamiliarization as describing the conspicuously poetic—i.e., conventional—aspects of language, those designed to prolong the aesthetic pleasure of literary expression (what Michael Riffaterre referred to as the "ungrammaticalities" of the text9). Brecht adapted this self-reflexive quality to theatrical experience and shifted the focus from that of unqualified artistic appreciation to that of social, political, and cultural perception. (Re)presentation that overtly demonstrates its own status as presentation, which alienates its audience by foregrounding its own work within the theatrical work as a whole, will, in Brecht's formulation, foster spectators equally objective and self-aware within the work of their own lives.
However, Brecht's own experience demonstrates that the propensity of an audience to ignore or transcend almost all practical obstacles, and to construct an empathetic relationship with a virtuous and unfortunate protagonist, must play a significant factor in any approach to composition or production. Brecht had attempted to push this Other—which the Poetics had sought to deny—beyond identification, entirely into the realm of ostension, as performer and character. Yet, repeatedly Brecht found himself forced to redraft the texts of his plays in an attempt to forestall the ready and significant sympathy, empathy, and identification that his central characters inspired. The spectators' ability to interpret the unconventional causality of his productions (episodic and discontinuous, as opposed to linear and conventionally logical), and to recognize the same patterns (or lack thereof) in their own lives, seemed to require a constant emotional centre. Despite the author's attempts to suppress identification, there unfailingly emerged one or more enduring agents of adjustment, adaptability—survival—within the social upheaval that provided the contexts (fictional and performative) of his fables.

Contrary to Brecht's theory, then, Epic practice does not fully deny its roots in an Aristotelian heritage, nor its employment of empathy, nor its fundamentally illusory nature. As States has argued,

[I]n productions of Brecht it is not the stage illusion that is undercut ... ; what is undercut is simply the conventional system of current theater. Even in Brecht, everything seeks its own illusory level.... Even the schizophrenic actors, slightly outside their roles, playing that they are playing the roles, fade into the Brechtian illusion of theatrical protest....

As the entire performance exposes itself, parades the fact that it is, indeed, "playing that [it is] playing," empathy and objectivity constitute a fundamental dialectic for both performing and
observing, both actor and spectator—in the theatre as in society. Brecht's actors are actually no more "schizophrenic" than Stanislavsky's (or Robert Wilson's). Rather, while Epic performers consistently embody the act of playing, they are simply more (than Stanislavsky's) or less (than Wilson's) overtly in front of, behind, or to one side of the initial, arguably most superficial of roles that they are playing at playing. Thus, Brecht's actors draw more or less attention to the signifying gap between actor and role, fiction and medium, that exists in all forms of theatre, from the most naturalistic to the most stylized. It is in this space of contest, of control and unruliness, that the requisite yet tenuous authority of theatrical convention operates.

But Brechtian performance also demonstrates how quickly that gap between player and played fills in again once it has been identified. No sooner does the Brechtian actor establish his fixed distance from the character he is "demonstrating," than he assumes a new character—that of the actor demonstrating his character. Successively redefined as a performer within the environment of the performance, he may continually step back from each new character, only to adopt another that frames all those that he has already offered up. As Michel Foucault has suggested, theatrical (re)presentation signifies, "only on condition that it manifests, in addition, the relation that links it to what it signifies. It must represent; but that representation, in turn must also be represented within it. . . . [S]uperimposed upon the idea that is replacing another ... is also the idea of its representative power." As long as the theatrical frame is operative, the Brechtian performer cannot ever only demonstrate his own presence, even though, or rather because he is forever occupying it. That presence, within the theatrical event, is contained within and therefore defined by its playfulness.

However, I would suggest, counter to States, that the Epic performer cannot ever fully
"fade into the Brechtian illusion of theatrical protest." The threat of his imminent emergence—the suddenly, unexpectedly exposed incongruity of his disruptive presence as non-performing body within the dramatic situation—is the context within which he plays. And no less in Brecht's than Aristotle's conception of theatre, this is a *conventional* context. The Epic Theatre is merely more open *and* more covert in its dependence on conventions of technique and expectation, in that it attempts to domesticate emergent actuality through the integration of that actuality into the fictive construct.

**Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty**

Artaud's envisioned Theatre of Cruelty sought to bypass the "narrow and constricted" perspective of the conscious mind, and to directly access the rich and chaotic unconscious within its spectator. In the place of spoken language he proposed an equally symbolic (i.e., conventional) but phenomenally based vocabulary of gestures, masks, costumes, lighting, and sound, in order to convey "the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms."\(^{13}\)

Whereas most people remain impervious to a subtle discourse whose intellectual development escapes them, they cannot resist effects of physical surprise, the dynamism of cries and violent movements, visual explosions, the aggregate of tetanizing effects called up on cue and used to act in a direct manner on the physical sensitivity of the spectators.\(^{14}\)

The moral cruelty of Artaud's theatre, through which "plague," torture, rebirth, and ultimately purity were to be attained, was predicated on not merely the threat but the actual experience of bodily "cruelty." This latter was to be effected primarily through the powerful use of lighting, sound, and image; but actual assault was to be a real element in both expectation on the part of the audience and execution on the part of the performers. The extent to which this
bodily cruelty was to be carried remains an issue of debate—one complicated by the ecstatic abstraction and at times apparently contradictory nature of Artaud's statements. However, the spectator's moral torture was to be one imposed directly upon the senses, in an enforced and physical attempt to reach the unconscious. Not a "purely corporal cruelty but a moral one," it is nonetheless one which should not allow the spectator "to leave the theatre intact, but exhausted, involved, perhaps transformed."^{15}

The Theatre of Cruelty is a desperate, violent struggle to free itself from precisely that dynamic which is so pivotal in Brecht's model: representation. Herbert Blau has proposed that it was Artaud's passionate bid to escape the tyranny of representation that fuelled the flames of his theatre—and the impossibility of success which ultimately led to his insanity.^{16} Blau references Derrida's claim that within

this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable.... For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles.... What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.^{17}

Thus, Blau suggests, it was this splitting, this procreational necessity apparently inherent in representation (and which, I suggest, by design multiplies itself exponentially within the Epic Theatre's repeated attempts to step back to a purely demonstrative position) that Artaud was determined to overcome. Only by eliminating this (at least) third element of the performance, what Blau refers to as the "consciousness in the grain of performance,"^{18} could Artaud see a way to rescue the represented from its theatrical status as, in Derrida's words, "nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer."^{19} As such, Blau contends, "Artaud's theater is not a representation. To the degree that life is unrepresentable, it is meant to be the equal of life,
'the nonrepresentable origin of representation.'

Hypothetically, then, the spectator in Artaud's theatre is asked to neither identify nor empathize with the now *presentation*, as to do either would be to acknowledge its fundamental "Other[ness]," an element which Blau suggests is universal to the understanding of performance across cultures: "[W]hat we think of as stage presence is related to that aloneness, the nature of the performer who, in a primordial substitution or displacement, is born on the site of the Other." Ultimately, it is perhaps this separateness which provides the stage for (re)presentations of communion, and which stands as the symbolic lack (i.e., *desire*) of the theatrical event. To deny the immediate and physical presence of that Other, or, as in Artaud's case, to attempt to overpower and consume the space/time of the spectator within the "primordial" hunger that is expressed in that Other, is to disarm the theatre's requisite threat of contact.

*In Danger—of Life*

All aspects of the mise en scène—actors, properties, setting, etc.—carry about within themselves this indistinct separation, overlapping, and generative union of the performing and the performed. Blau's "theatrical *gestus*, the signifying element of theater," Foucault's "idea of *representative power*," Derrida's "one plus one [that] makes at least three"—all balance precariously on this communally constituted and sustained division of space/times. What emerges, therefore, is an image of an artistic form of remarkable—but not infinite—flexibility, one clearly more unruly than a purely *voyeuristic* model can accommodate, yet nonetheless governed by the phenomenological tension inherent in its mediation.

Thus it is that Darko Suvin can argue that it is precisely the guarantee of literally
untouchable safety which lies at the centre of theatrical experience. Positing the existence of a "psychological proscenium," Suvin claims that it is "the basic split between the visual and tactile experienced by the audience" which constitutes "the central practical or ontological contract between theater audience and theater stage." Theatre is thereby proposed as dependent upon complete visual access afforded the spectator, combined with an absolute preclusion of actual or potential tactile interaction. However, through the near absolute intellectualizing of the theatre experience, Suvin proposes a space/time in which what Teresa De Lauretis has described as "the visual component of meaning" becomes not merely primary but absolute. What such a dynamic precludes is the self-reflexiveness of a spectator equally conscious of his/her own presence and participation in the theatrical event.

Hélène Cixous has explored the two options open to the female spectator within what she describes as the hostile territory of this utterly objectifying gaze. Marc Silverstein, in his essay "'Body Presence:' Cixous's Phenomenolgy of Theater," interprets these as "masochistic identification with the woman in the performance frame (whose heightened visibility underscores her invisibility as a dramatic subject) and sadistic identification with the male protagonist (thus contributing to the erasure of female subjectivity)." The alternative structure that Cixous hypothesizes through her critical texts and pursues in her creative works is one in which phenomena, in her words, will appear as "body-presence; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for 'staginess,' going beyond the confines of the stage, ... this stage-body will not hesitate to come up close, close enough to be in danger—of life...."

While these models represent extreme conceptions of theatrical performance, the fact remains that they are, indeed, conceivable—if only temporarily, if only through the imposition or suspension of stringent conventional frames—within this highly elastic mode of expression. For
the experience of theatrical (re)presentation is one predicated not only upon an anticipation of spectatorial safety, encouraged through its historically validated systems of technical and interpretative conventions. Equally fundamental, along with this expectation of security, and persistently, inescapably, and dialectically interdependent with it, is a fear of/desire for its loss. Within the shared space/time of the (re)presentation, the living, present Other of the performance is forever contained within the paradoxically 'essential' conventions of accepted practice. Equally, however, that Other is forever emergent from within those conventions, straining against the arbitrary absolute of the performative theatrical frame. And as Susan Bennett suggests, it is in the region in which this (re)presentational frame intersects and interacts with that of an equally present, living audience, that the work of theatrical signification takes place.

[T]he audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection. It is the interactive relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience.\(^{27}\)
"[S]pace will be difficult."\(^1\)

As the brief observation above from Stephen Heath suggests, the inherent apparenacy of the filmic form means that the space of its narrative must be forever recreated through the assertion of what its projection at all times confesses is absent. Thus, attention in contemporary cinema theory (in particular psychoanalytic theory) is regularly focussed less on the image than on its frame, which provides the context for and the denial of the image's entirely conventional existence. What follows here is a curtailed survey of the critical shift in focus away from the seen to the unseen, to the absent Other that governs the cinematic experience.

Realist Windows/Formalist Frames

Two distinct approaches to film form and function characterized more than half of the cinema's first century: Realism and Formalism. The contrast between these two approaches—and the evolving stylistic, philosophical, and ideological positions that they have inspired—has regularly been reduced to the divergent metaphors of the film screen as either a window or a frame. Realist interpretations of film form generally propose an understanding of the delimited cinematic image as a window or porthole on the world of reality, offering restricted but direct access to the experience of that reality, if not to its substantiality. Andre Bazin considered the projected image "the object itself,"\(^2\) by virtue of the camera's ability to not simply record the pre-filmic object but, in Bazin's term, to "trace" it. Theoretically, the result is that, as Peter Wollen
has suggested, the photographic/cinematic image is not only iconic, as a spatial impression constituted by analogy; it is also (and for Bazin primarily) an index, "by virtue of an existential bond between itself and its object."³ For Siegfried Kracauer the window of the restricted image is essential for the degree of selective and concentrated focus required for the spectator to "literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence."⁴ For both writers, the legitimacy of the reality accessible through the window of the screen predicates an unlimited world beyond. For Bazin an "endless field," for Kracauer "prolonged indefinitely into the universe," the only apparently demarcated filmic image is seen to seamlessly extend beyond its immediately perceived parameters.⁵

To counter this perspective, formalist theorists often conceive of the screen as a frame, thus stressing its relationship to screens used in other visual arts, such as painting. And indeed, as (the distinctly nonformalist) Stephen Heath has noted, the cinematic frame, "describes the material unit of film ... and, equally, the film image in its setting, the delimitation of the image on screen...."⁶ A site of rendering, of arrangement and composition, the frame stands, in formalist tradition, not as a point of access to reality, but rather as the first and most significant indication of its absence. As Heath also points out, "in [Rudolph] Arnheim's Film as Art, ... 'frame' and 'delimitation' are assumed as synonymous."⁷ As the most conspicuous "technical limitation of representationalism,"⁸ the surface and, in particular, the edge of the screen determines, in Arnheim's formalism, all aspects of balance, symmetry, co-ordination, rhythm, the relationship of fore to ground—that is, all the aesthetic considerations inherent to varying degrees in both ordinary human perception and the creation of 'great works' of art. Drawing on concurrent research into Gestalt psychology, Arnheim contends, "Every man's eyesight also anticipates in a modest way the admired capacity of the artist to produce patterns that validly interpret
experience by means of organized form."⁹

For Bazin, the unattainable "source" represents what Kaja Silverman has called the "structuring lack" of realist theory,¹⁰ a source of desire through its absence. For Arnheim, it opens up the possibility for the film artist to substitute his/her own presence into the representational act, as an opportunity inherent in film form for personal statement through the exploitation of film's basic "unreality." In both cases, however, what the projected images portray, faithfully or as a focus of distortion—as the condition within which meaning is possible—is the absent, since mediated, object and/or event of which it is a representation.

By focussing upon the cinematic image as isolated object, both realist and formalist arguments boast the conversely unbounded mobility of the spectator's gaze, unlike what was regularly described as the restricted and inevitably partial perspective of the stationary theatre patron. Yet what an array of contemporary theoretical perspectives has identified within formerly celebrated cinematic empowerment is, in fact, its exact opposite. The concept of the space of the cinematic spectator, or, more accurately, his/her positioning in the cinematic process, has been proposed as predicated on a fully convincing illusion of individual authority. This mobile (and thus independent) centrality within the work of signification is thus an illusion that, of necessity, masks or effaces the actual project of the projection. Built into both the medium and its apparatus are a set of conditions that, contrary to appearances (within a signifying system utterly dependent upon appearance), actually isolate, insulate, and anchor the spectator, physically and psychically—and thus ideologically. The authority of this absent (since invisible or transparent) Other of the cinema contrasts directly with the perpetual and
unavoidable potential for ideological volatility perceived within the oppositional Otherness of live performance. It is thus perceived as potentially coercive in its pervasively—and, much contemporary theory suggests, perversely—ideological operation.

Perhaps most influential as an articulation of the spectator's interaction with the conditions of film representation has been the extensive psychoanalytical work that has found in cinema an immediate and fertile site of inquiry. In an attempt at brevity, I will here reference the work of only a few representative theorists, in particular Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, while tangentially addressing what seem the most important concurrent contributions and/or objections to the work of these central figures.

The All-Perceiving 'I'

In Metz's The Imaginary Signifier (1977), just what it is a spectator attends when s/he goes to a movie (where s/he is present as well as what s/he is presented) is seen as determined by the relationship between his/her physical location and posture, his/her psychical state and desires, and his/her position within both micro and macro social configurations. Clearly Metz concurs with Baudry's assertion that "[b]etween 'objective reality' and the camera, site of inscription, and between the inscription and the projection are situated certain operations, a work which has as its result a finished product."11

Metz's methodology seeks to bypass several more conventional approaches to cinema, and to practice instead a "special kind of psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema specifically devoted to the cinema itself (and not to films), to the signifier as such."12 While the representational, fictional film is understood on the level of its signified in ways common to all
forms of diegetic and/or mimetic expression, it is unique, Metz asserts, in crucial ways on the level of its signifier.

The fiction film is the film in which the cinematic signifier does not work on its own account but is employed entirely to remove the traces of its own steps, to open immediately on to the transparency of the signified, or a story, which is in reality manufactured by it but which it pretends merely to 'illustrate', to transmit to us after the event.... Hence what distinguishes fiction films is not the 'absence' of any specific work of the signifier, but its presence in the mode of denegation....

What the cinematic spectator thus encounters is not the object represented, but rather its "replica in a new kind of mirror." However, this "new kind" of mirror differs from the "primordial" mirror as it is defined in Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud. Unlike the latter—which is proposed as that which initiates the formation of the ego—the one thing that the cinema as mirror is incapable of reflecting is the spectator's own body. Deprived of his/her own reflection, Metz suggests, it is in the spectator's self-awareness of her/himself as "all-perceiving" subject that s/he assumes her/his role as "the instance ... which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film).... [T]he spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception ... as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject...."

Primary to this experience, Baudry asserts, are the differing conceptions of perspective underlying theatre and film. While the Greek conception of space, which thus conditioned the original theatrical construction of perspective, was discontinuous and heterogeneous, cinema descends directly from the linear model of Renaissance perspective. Thus the organization of the Greek stage was based on a multiplicity of views, whereas, Renaissance perspective constructs a "centred space." The result of the latter, as opposed to the former, is a "fixed" subject, omniscient by virtue of its immobility. The effect provides an image of "ideal vision and
in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence ... which corresponds to the idealist
conception of the fullness and homogeneity of "being."\textsuperscript{16}

The spectator, Metz (following Baudry) asserts, having thus identified with "himself as
look," "can do no other" than to identify with the camera. Located "at the back of his head, that
is, precisely where phantasy locates the 'focus' of all vision," the projector substitutes for one
half of the camera's function, while the screen, as the site upon which the images are projected,
fulfils the other half: "[T]he film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not
pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I
am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera,
which points and yet which records."\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{The Viewer and the Voyeur}

Critical to the Freudian concept of \textit{voyeurism}, Metz observes, is the permanent
separation of the source of the drive (i.e., the eye) from its object: "The voyeur represents in
space the fracture which forever separates him from the object; he represents his very
dissatisfaction (which is precisely what he needs as a voyeur), and thus also his 'satisfaction'
insofar as it is of a specifically voyeuristic type."\textsuperscript{18} The representation of this fracture in the
cinema, Metz claims (in clear contrast to Suvin), is dependent upon its deviation from the
practice of the theatre, which "really does 'give'" what it promises perceptually. What the
cinema offers is always in "effigy," "in a primordial \textit{elsewhere}, infinitely desirable (= never
possessible)."\textsuperscript{19}

Thus the distance maintained by the cinema spectator is not only physical, but
ontological. The "\textit{unauthorised} scopophilia" of cinema, Metz asserts, differs fundamentally
from that of theatre in key ways. These include: 1) the solitude of cinema spectators compared to those of theatre—the latter, unlike the former, comprising "a true 'audience', a temporary collectivity"; 2) the "more radically ignorant" status of cinematic as opposed to theatrical spectacle in relation to its spectator, "since he is not there"; and 3) the absolute heterogeneity of "non-communicating" cinema space (i.e., that represented by the screen) in relation to that of its spectator—as opposed to the two, merely oppositionally arranged areas within a single "space" in theatre.

Particularly significant is Metz's contention that the divergence between the two contexts results in two largely (if not fundamentally) different approaches to narrative. As itself fictive and "absent," Metz argues, the cinematic signifier "lends itself better to fiction." The common, dialectical relationship between a real instance and an imaginary instance is therefore inevitably weighted towards the latter in cinema to a degree which exceeds that of theatre. Unlike the theatre's "set of real pieces of behaviour actively directed at the evocation of something unreal," the cinema offers "the quasi-real presence of that unreal itself," and thus "it plays more into the hands of the diegesis, it tends more to be swallowed up by it."21

Belief in the cinema, then, specifically on the level of the signifier, requires a splitting of the self into an "incredulous" spectator, who is at all times conscious of the artifice, and a "credulous" spectator, who is "seated beneath the incredulous one."22 Thus, the function of the cinematic signifier, particularly but not exclusively in the fiction film, is to efface the divergence between these two parts of the spectator—to facilitate disavowal, to pose as fetish23—through the denial of its own operation. The apparatus employs "censorship," thus calling into play the simultaneous "excitation of desire and its non-fulfilment." The boundaries of the frame, in its apparent "wanderings," actually exercise absolute control of expectation and suspense through
continuous displacement and emplacement. The result is "a less direct but more perfected strip-tease, since it also makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has previously shown, to take back as well as to retain."^24

What emerges from Metz's argument is the opposition of the "exhibitionism" of live performance and the "voyeurism" of cinematic experience (the former based, in Emile Béhistic's terms, upon discourse, the latter upon story). Theatrical performance is based entirely on the play of reciprocal identification, on the conscious acceptance of the to-and-fro movement between I and you.... [W]hat it exhibits is not exactly the exhibited object but, via the object, the exhibition itself .... when actor and spectator are in each other's presence, when the playing (of the actor, and the audience) is also a distribution of roles (of 'character parts') in a game, an active complicity which works both ways.^25

Film (or certainly those products of "Hollywood International"), however, designed and refined so as to disavow all traces of discourse, to present itself entirely as story, is for Metz "(at best) a beautiful closed object which must remain unaware of the pleasure it gives us (literally, over its dead body)."^26 The cinema emerges as the juncture of a performance that had no audience and an audience that has no performance. Rather, what is witnessed is the performance's "shadow," its "effigy"—in effect, the cinema audience has only its own seeing.^27 Thus, the spectator is at once convinced by the cinematic story of his "fullness and homogeneity of 'being'" and reminded of his inherent emptiness, his requisite absence. For this story "is always (by definition) a story from nowhere, that nobody tells, .... is not told at all, since the receptacle is required only to be a place of absence, in which the purity of the disembodied utterance will resonate more clearly."^28

Omniscience or Absence?

To be sure, there have been more than a few reservations—indeed, outright objections—
voiced regarding Metz's stance and/or focus. Jean-Louis Comolli warns of the potential dangers of isolating any technical piece or pieces of equipment as site(s) of spectator identification. To discover the impetus for cinema in a specific stage of technological sophistication, Comolli argues, is to simply facilitate a new idealism of scientific evolutionism that (at least) distracts or (worse) deflects attention away from the social/ideological impulse that must always precede invention: "The tools always presuppose a machine, and the machine is always social before it is technical."29

William C. Wees has noted that linear perspective, despite its extensive pedigree, is in actual practice "a rather unscientific mixture of theory, experiment and artistic convention."30 The standard cinematic image born of analogous framing, Wees contends, actually represents approximately 2 degrees of the 200 degree angle which makes up an individual's total visual field. Ironically, then, the omniscience of the cinematic subject is in effect authorized within a minuscule percentage of possible vision. As Stephen Heath has noted, "Our eye is never seized by some static spectacle, is never some motionless recorder; there is no brute vision to be isolated from the visual experience of the individual inevitably engaged in a specific sociohistorical situation."31

Rather, Heath suggests, the impression of the cinematic spectator of him/herself as all-perceiving is at all times tenuous. It is only sustained—if possible—by a cinematic process that must continuously overcome the inherent limitations of its perspectival model, through a constant construction and reconstruction of narrative space. In this sense, the exposed fallacy of the camera as detached, "unerring eye"32 is retrieved within the cinema's "ideal picture" (as distinguished from Baudry's "ideal vision"): "The ideal, however, is a construction, the mobility acquired is still not easy, the shifting center needs to be settled along the film in its making.
scenes, its taking place; space will be difficult." In this model the spectator is not so much 'planted' in a central, transcendental position, but rather achieves a state of "balance," a "homogeneity." This last is once again reminiscent of, but fundamentally distinct from that proposed by Baudry, as it represents, most crucially, a "containment" within "moving fields" which continuously define and redefine the spectator's subjectivity. The "narrativization" of cinematic space, Heath contends, takes the form of a "suturing operation": "In psychoanalysis, 'suture' refers to the relation of the individual as subject to the chain of its discourse where it figures missing in the guise of a stand-in; the subject is an effect of the signifier in which it is represented, stood in for, taken place (the signifier is the narration of the subject)." The spectator, then is ultimately bound into his/her always elusive, always difficult centrality, through the seen and the unseen,

the give and take of absence and presence, the play of negativity and negation, flow and bind.... What moves in film, finally, is the spectator, immobile in front of the screen. Film is the regulation of that movement, the individual as subject held in a shifting and placing of desire, energy, contradiction, in a perpetual retotalization of the imaginary (the set scene of image and subject). Heath's argument (amongst others that focus on the process of suture) offers an important reorientation of Metz's fundamental mechanisms. Heath's more dynamic model of subject construction, while identifying many of the same cinematic techniques as those present in Metz's, describes a site (the viewing of a film) that is more volatile, more the product of managed than unseen narrative forces: "Classical cinema does not efface the signs of production, it contains them, according to the narrativization.... It is that process that is the action of the film for the spectator." This has major repercussions for the idea of the 'absent' voyeur of Metz's model, who is no longer seen as safely isolated, a detached "Peeping Tom" who only arrives after the performative fact. Correspondingly, the film is no longer something that is, in
Metz's terms, "designed to be caught unawares."

Rather, the film has about it an innate authority (in a sense, an absent Otherness), outside of and beyond that of the film-maker, which it exercises upon the spectator, weaving him/her into its, and his/her own, construction. Narrative film thus, Heath contends, is constantly rediscovering its space, which is "regulated, oriented, continued, reconstituted" around that which it lacks, and which it perpetually reconstructs: the spectator's subjectivity. "[T]he film ceaselessly poses an absence, a lack, which is ceaselessly recaptured for--one needs to be able to say 'forin'--the film, that process binding the spectator as subject in the realization of the film's space." Thus, Heath suggests, the film is neither an autonomous product nor a passive perception awaiting a transcendental subject to experience it. Rather it is a work of containment, of construction through the forever redefinition of mutually sustaining narrative space and subjectivity: "[F]ilm is not a static and isolated object but a series of relations with the spectator it imagines, plays, and sets as subject in its movement."

One of the most significant consequences of this situation is the potential for "certain terms of excess"--for what Heath elsewhere refers to as "radical disturbances." Suture, as process, is at all times employed to counter the potential productivity of excess, of that which never ceases threatening to emerge incongruently, to impede smooth forward progression, to invade delimited territory--to disrupt narrative coherence: "[T]hus the film frame, for example, [is] exceeded from within by the outside it delimits and poses and has ceaselessly to recapture...." What suture ultimately signifies is that which threatens its constructed coherence and the subjectivity which it maintains. In this sense, it represents Metz's disavowal (and Lacan's before him) as a system inherent in narrative cinematic representation. This is precisely how it has been presented by Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan. However, the play of
control and excess, the constant threatening and retrieval of stability that Heath describes, becomes for Oudart and Dayan a stark contrast between unconscious pleasure and conscious unpleasure in regards to cinematic production.

The viewer discovers that the camera is hiding things, and therefore distrusts it and the frame itself which he now understands to be arbitrary.... This radically transforms his mode of participation—the unreal space between characters and/or objects is no longer perceived as pleasurable. It is now the space which separates the camera from the characters. The latter have lost their quality of presence.41

Thus signification for Dayan is entirely dependent upon unpleasure, which is unavoidably and necessarily experienced at the moment of the spectator's realization of the conventional status of cinematic representation. The central consequence of this understanding of film as enunciation is the recognition of an unseen yet all-powerful enunciator. Thus the spectator's gaze is taken over, entirely subordinated to that of "another spectator, who is ghostly or absent."42 Similarly, for Oudart, cinematic expression is always that of the "Absent One," of the "missing" spectator who occupies the "hidden" field of view. The cinematic signifier relies upon the spectator's awareness of what it doesn't say or reveal, upon a lack which perpetually disrupts "imaginary plenitude."43

In the discourse of suture, in its most direct application, what perception discovers is the fact of concealment, of suppression, of the spectator's enslavement to an unacknowledged—and therefore unassailable—Other. When suture is successful, it obscures its requisite unpleasure, manoeuvres the spectator squarely into the absent position of agency, and coerces him/her into playing the role of subjectivity it seamlessly constructs. To be certain, however, the (relative) extremes here represented by Metz and (adopting Kaja Silverman's phrase) the 'theoreticians of suture' have been bridged by attempts to integrate both—and other—perspectives. As Paul
Willemen states,

In fact, the viewing subject is itself caught in a complex interaction of different looks from different places... A film text is always traversed by two sets of marks relating to the looks of two different subjects, one assigned to the place of the author, the other to the place of the viewer, with the viewing subject in fact, as an instance incorporating that irrevocable split and vacillating between the two terms.

*Mamet 'Here'/Mamet 'Missing'*

It is within this theoretical context that my study of Mamet's plays and films shall proceed. On the one hand, there stands the perception of theatrical (re)presentation as an always emergent, always conventionally contained physicality. The resultant "dialectical tension" between the components of the theatrical sign generates meaning through its inner struggle. The living, present Other of the stage depends upon the conventions of theatrical practice to provide the context of its signification—at the same time that it physically tests, reforms, and revalidates their legitimacy. Conversely, within mainstream narrative film, the authoritative Other is perpetually absent—present in its absence—as the controlling delimitation of vision. Meaning thus resides at the intersection between what is seen and unseen, a location and experience determined by the framing gaze.

Mamet's plays emerge as deeply invested in theatrical volatility. The characters he portrays regularly seem, initially, in denial of their own efficacy through physicality. Instead they appear as if possessed by absent, unseen social forces that reduce their activity to a negation of effect. Yet these characters, through and concurrent with the process of their (re)presentation, stage a realization of the potential liberation in performance. Thus the resonance of their rowdy rebelliousness sounds throughout both the fictional and phenomenal realms of the playwright's theatre.
Mamet's films appear equally informed on the level of narrative with the qualities of their medium. Ironically, what Mamet's cinematic characters ultimately desire is a *theatrical* sphere of consequential action and effect. Yet their attainment towards the emergent presence realized by his theatrical characters is systematically and conclusively consumed, both within the narratives told and through the absolute mediation of their narration. Thus, the propensity for Mamet's cinematic stories to literally devour their protagonists is experienced as particularly disturbing, as the events portrayed so thoroughly embody the working of the cinematic mechanism—and its accomplice spectator.

*
My chief memory of movieland is one of asking in the producers' office why I must change the script, eviscerate it, cripple and hamstring it?... Half of the movie writers argue in this fashion. The other half writhe in silence, and the psychoanalyst's couch or the liquor bottle claim them both.¹

Ben Hecht's bitter tone, disturbing yet quickly familiar in its combination of cynicism, disbelief, resentment, and resignation, succinctly captures the sense of displacement and alienation so many playwrights (along with other 'immigrant' writers from a broad range of fields) experienced in the employ of the studio system during the early decades of Hollywood film. As voluntary victims to an incompatibility of historic proportions, corps of established authors regularly discovered themselves ill-prepared for their newly adopted working environment.

As early as 1919, Samuel Goldwyn initiated his ill-fated 'Eminent Authors' initiative, which enlisted the services of many of the nation's then most successful novelists for scenario contributions. The same program sought out a smaller number of similarly recognized playwrights, such as Elmer Rice, who were hired to supply the dialogue for the intertitles, recognized by Hollywood as crucial to story advancement and comic or dramatic potential. But the experiment—the first of numerous similar projects—quickly proved untenable, the difficulties encountered providing an often revisited model for such attempts. Whereas Rice credited "the scenario department's entrenched bureaucracy" for the failure, Goldwyn identified a somewhat different situation: "The great trouble with the usual author is that he approaches the camera with some fixed literary ideal and he cannot compromise with the motion picture viewpoint...."²

Significantly, Goldwyn's reference to "the motion picture viewpoint" only partially
relates to the technical and/or aesthetic demands of the medium. There was, and is, required of
the transplanted playwright a radical, and for many deeply unnerving, reorganization of
priorities. For the most part, to write for Hollywood films meant and continues to mean taking
one's place in a highly competitive and product-oriented industry. As Janet Staiger observes,

Hollywood's mode of production has been characterized as a factory system akin
to that used by a Ford plant, and Hollywood often praised its own work structure
for its efficient mass production of entertaining films. The employment of a
mass-production system fulfilled the owners' goals of profit maximization.
Concurrent US business practices had set up a particular mode of production
which seemed to insure the most efficient and economical work arrangement. It
was within that context that the film industry began operating.¹

In order to satisfy the demands of a mass-production orientation, Staiger suggests, Hollywood
studios adopted certain requisite operating procedures. And while the policies of
interchangeability, standardization, and assembly² relate, on an initial level, to machinery and
processing activities, the same concepts were quickly applied to all aspects of film composition.

However, heightened productivity was only the most obvious of altered expectations,
and indeed was hardly alien to the leagues of newspaper veterans that relocated on the west
cost. On the other hand, the prior experience of playwrights (and, for different reasons,
novelists) provided poor training for such instant accountability. More irresolvably, however, it
was the expectation of what, in the initial Eminent Authors situation, Rice described as
Goldwyn's "promise of free creative scope"³ which almost immediately proved at odds with the
fundamentally collaborative nature of film composition. Predictably, the situation would become
considerably more complicated with the advent of sound, when a film such as Stamboul Quest,
shot in 1933, could boast a writing staff of no fewer than 15 members, with credits given for
writer, original story, treatment, construction, dialogue, and special sequences.⁴

However, such team writing situations represent only the most controlled of 'creative'
influences upon an immigrant playwright's film activities. The hierarchal structure of decision making was and is further complicated by a dizzying and unpredictable network of vertical, horizontal, and lateral co-contributors.7 Thus, from the earliest instances of Hollywood's wooing of established authors, there was coupled with the fundamental loss of autonomy a sense of betrayal, of the sacrificing of reputation and honour in addition to artistic freedom.

It was, not surprisingly, the release of The Jazz Singer in 1927, and with it the first intimations of the revolution of film sound, that motivated what Hollywood producer Bud Schulberg referred to as an "S.O.S .... beamed to the East, a hurry-up call for what was then described as real writers, to distinguish them from the continuity boys, the gag-men, the ideas men and the rest of the colorful illiterate silent contingent."8 And, even if against their better judgment, many came. Playwrights such as Preston Sturges, Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, and (under very different circumstances) Bertolt Brecht joined Herman J. Mankiewicz, Hecht, and Charles MacArthur, along with literary figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Dorothy Parker, Nathanael West, Christopher Isherwood, and Thomas Mann, all of whom had made the trek to Hollywood.9

The Crawl to the Coast

In the decades following the first inductions of theatrical talent to the cinematic cause, what Robert Coe has called "the Crawl to the Coast"10 has continued relatively unabated. This constancy is particularly remarkable given the changing economic, political, and social forces that act as motivation (and discouragement). In the process, the attraction for playwrights, those who are unknown and untested as well as those critically and popularly successful, to try their
luck in the movies has survived myriad trials (the discussion of which extends far beyond the
scope of this brief commentary): the Hays Office and the Motion Picture Production Code; the
House Committee on Un-American Activities inquisitions; the demise of the studio system; the
near devastating emergence of television; and the effective dismissal of writers by the auteur
theory. All these factors have contributed to the cultivation of an environment as distant
culturally as it originally was geographically for Eastern scriptwriting recruitments.
Undoubtedly, however, the central practical obstacle—outside of all aesthetic considerations—to
the possibility of personal fulfillment for the writer in film still remains. This obstacle, as my brief
survey has proposed, is one of authorship.

Author, Author

I have neither the necessary page length nor the intention to attempt a comprehensive
survey of this many-sided dispute. Within the circumscribed world of film theory, the work of
Jean-Louis Comolli, Christian Metz, Peter Wollen, and Stephen Heath, among others, has taken
the discussion of authorship to levels of considerable sophistication. However, the
indeterminacy that haunts even the most complex of these analytical approaches is multiplied
exponentially within the productive anarchy of popular American film-making. And, certainly,
the selection of a playwright/screenwriter who directs his own works as the subject of my study
can only moderate these inherent complexities (while, undoubtedly, contributing new ones).

Presently and historically, the figure who directs production (i.e., producers during most
of the studio system years, directors since the declining years of the studios as both vertically
and horizontally organized corporations) exerts definitive influence upon the shooting script of
the majority of mainstream American movies. Those films not products of this process are almost unfailingly "conglomerate" projects, composed, in James Corliss's phrase, by a "screenwriting platoon."  

In the first of these two situations, the practical immediacy of directorial authority, combined with the studio's dictates (declared or otherwise) and regularly outright ownership of the writer's work, almost inevitably result in significant, in-production revision. As noted, it was precisely this loss of control to the then determining influence of production personnel that had led to the quick demise of Goldwyn's Eminent Authors venture in the early 1920s. Some twenty years later, in 1943, Lillian Hellman would pay the same Samuel Goldwyn a reported $27,500.00 to be released from her contract for *The North Star* (1943). Hellman claimed that the film's director, Lewis Milestone, had turned her screenplay into a "big-time, sentimental, badly-acted mess." And in an interview for the 1993 study *American Screenwriters*, Richard Price described the relationship between the original and the production scripts of director Martin Scorsese's *The Color of Money* (1986): "They're saying your words somewhere in there, and it follows the progress of a plot that you figured out, but it's not yours. It belongs to the director.... [Y]ou know, the director's medium."  

Likewise, evidence that the second circumstance of team composition remains standard practice is also plentiful. Compare the already cited *Stamboul Quest*, with its small army of screenwriters, to Corliss's account of the 1992 film *Sister Act*, directed by Emile Ardolino and featuring Whoopie Goldberg: "Paul Rudnick wrote *Sister Act* with Bette Midler in mind. After a half-dozen other writers, including Carrie Fisher, toiled to Whoopify the project, an exasperated Rudnick declined screen credit. 'Joseph Howard,' the writer of record, is the pseudonym for a committee."
Taking Focus

Given these factors, a study of American playwrights working in mainstream American film is led to adopt one of two broad approaches. The focus can fall upon those writers who enter into the traditional production process, conceding considerable control over their contributions to the finished film product in exchange for equally considerable economic benefits. In recent industry history, numerous American playwrights with successful theatrical careers have made this transition, including John Guare, David Rabe, and Michael Weller.

The other option for the researcher, one which involves a conveniently much reduced field of subjects, is to study those few American playwrights who have been able to maintain a far greater degree of control over their work by becoming film directors. Historical precedents include Ben Hecht, whose work, particularly with the 18 month Astoria Experiment (at the Astoria Studios in New York in 1934/35), represented one of the first and most influential opportunities for a playwright to script and direct his own features. Preston Sturges—who, ironically, made the move from the stage to films in order to avoid the same enforced collaboration associated with the studio system—went on to write and direct a number of highly successful comic features. And Clifford Odets made several lengthy trips to Hollywood as both writer and writer/director, despite a keen awareness of the inherent contradiction between his efforts for commercial film and his collaborative, socialist-oriented work with the Group Theatre in New York.

In some ways, however, the decade between Hecht's first Astoria products and Odets's
debut as writer/director (1944) represents a reluctant and awkward period of adjustment. Opportunities for writer/directors were offered, squandered, and/or interfered with, in an uncertain and generally unsatisfying process that often resulted in the studios prematurely reclaiming authorial control. The most clear-cut result, however, has been, until very recently, the disappearance of opportunities for a native (or any other) playwright to script and direct his/her own feature within the American film industry.

There are, however, among contemporary figures, a few exceptions to this apparent rule. In addition to David Mamet, John Patrick Shanley has a single full-length directorial credit to his name (Joe Versus the Volcano, 1990). With the release of his second film two years ago (Far North, 1988 and Silent Tongue, 1993), Sam Shepard may be added to this roster. Yet even this highly restrictive listing stretches the effectiveness of categorization, as the films produced by these three writers could hardly differ more greatly. Of the three, only Mamet has achieved a significant degree of critical and popular success.

*
"It's the theater's job to address the questions of 'What is our place in the universe?' and 'How can we live in a world in which we know we're going to die?'" \(^1\)

"[F]ilm is a collaborative business--bend over." \(^2\)

Few American playwrights, past or present, maintain as high a public profile as David Mamet. Outspoken, opinionated, and conspicuously self-styled, Mamet offers himself as a unique and unusual hybrid of eclectic personae. A consummate social performer, Mamet is seldom at a loss for a display of wit and confidently bestowed insight. In particular, his statements on the appropriate thematic and structural natures of theatre and film are plentiful. Throughout numerous interviews and a series of volumes of personal essays, the playwright has discussed at length the theatrical elements of acting, stagecraft and design, direction, composition, and a distinctly pragmatic version of audience response. Also addressed in some of the same sources, as well as numerous articles and a separate volume focussed specifically on the role of the director, are the formal and conceptual aspects of film. This richness of commentary makes Mamet a logical choice for my study.

Of equal significance—perhaps more—is the fact that Mamet has been and continues to be the busiest of American playwrights in the area of film, to a degree that his primary status as stage dramatist is becoming questionable. The 1980s, particularly the latter part of the decade, and the first half of the 1990s have seen a reduction in theatrical output from one of
contemporary theatre's most prolific authors. At the same time, Mamet's participation in film has been energetic, resulting in six original screenplays directed by others, two adaptations for cinematic release also directed by others (in addition to several intended for video and specialty television distribution), as well as one adaptation, one collaboration, and two independent screenplays, all directed by the author.

This list does not include the writer's activities in television. A volume of *Five Television Plays*, published in 1990, includes Mamet's sole produced episode of a regular series—the critically acclaimed *Hill Street Blues*—which was first broadcast in January of 1987. In his introduction to the collection, Mamet exercises his propensity for confident generalization in his assessment of television executives as "the worst people I have ever met in my life," "pimps and hucksters" whose "whorehouse mentality" translates into a simple philosophy: "Give 'em as little as you can, and get 'em out of here as soon as possible." In the same essay, Mamet offers an assessment of television itself as a "[l]ovely, exciting medium." However, in a 1988 article he was more explicit about his reservations, proposing an experiential continuum between theatre, film, and video.

In a theater, we have live actors before us, acting out stories. In film, we have, wonderfully, a re-creation of the very light that fell on them. In video, we have that light reduced to electrons and those electrons splayed upon a screen. Like binomial numbers, the electrons do not handily communicate information that cannot be reduced to the statistical. They do not easily deal with the "suggested," with the approximate, with the ambiguous—in short, with Art.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, given this combination of practical and material factors, that Mamet's contribution to the small screen remains minimal to this point, despite the fact that the *New York Times* found the *Hill Street Blues* segment "an injection of strong, intelligent writing" which inspired the actors to give uncommonly strong performances.
This is not to suggest that the playwright has always been warm to the world of the larger screen, however. As the opening quotations of this chapter indicate, Mamet's early tendency was to adopt starkly opposing attitudes towards his two areas of endeavour. But in the time-honoured dramatic tradition perhaps best exemplified by Bertolt Brecht, Mamet too has maintained the prerogative of changing his mind, or at least moderating his stance, without apparent sacrifice of integrity. Indeed, as the essay "Film as a Collaborative Business" (published in the 1989 collection Some Freaks) suggests, the playwright seems to have discovered a degree of toleration for his own "commodification": "Hollywood is the city of the modern gold rush, and money calls the turn. That is the first and last rule, as we know, of Hollywood—we permit ourselves to be treated like commodities in the hope that we may, one day, be treated like valuable commodities." 

The ultimate effect of Hollywood film and television, Mamet contends, may actually be a heightened desire for the kind of experience which, he argues, only live theatre can offer: "They're flooding the market with trash. The taste and the need for a real theatrical experience, which is an experience in which the audience can come to commune, not so much with the actors but with themselves and what they know to be true, just increases. Everyone's palate has been dulled to an extraordinary degree by the mass media." 

Mamet's activities in the theatre are many and diverse. He is a teacher, which he has described as the circumstance of his first attempts at writing, and he continues in this role at Yale and Harvard Universities. He is also a frequent director in the theatre, with credits that include his own work, such as the 1992 New York staging of Oleanna (1992), and that of others, including the 1994 Off-Broadway production of Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants. These, in addition to his writing, are areas in which Mamet maintains primary control and
authority. An increased involvement in film, therefore, was perhaps a natural progression. With
the production, in 1987, of House of Games, the playwright entered the ranks of American film
directors. Subsequently he has written and directed three more features, the most recent being
the adaptation of his controversial drama Oleanna.

As I have already indicated, my intention is to focus specifically on work composed—on
the page, as screenwriter, and through the lens, as director—individually, specifically, and
originally for the screen. Therefore, my study will deal primarily with the two films which are
not adaptations, and for which Mamet receives sole credit for both script and direction: House
of Games and Homicide (1991). However, Mamet's efforts in film are most productively
explored within the context of his plays. With the production of Edmond and Glengarry Glen
Ross (both 1982), The Shawl (1985), Speed-the-Plow (1988), Bobby Gould in Hell (1989),
Oleanna, and most recently The Cryptogram (1995), Mamet continues to be a prominent figure
on the American stage as well as in its cinema. Indeed, the playwright suggested in a 1986
interview that it is the theatre community's suspicion of highly productive writers that is the
greatest detriment to his offering more dramatic texts—an attitude he is pleased not to have
experienced in American film. It is quite likely, therefore, that this conscious repositioning,
with its at least partly and admittedly commercial instigation, involves a less clear-cut aesthetic
reorientation than might otherwise be anticipated.

The first segment of my study of David Mamet's work focuses upon the writer as
dramatist, up to the point in his career when he entered into film production as both screenwriter
and director. Thus, my study considers selected works for the stage which preceded Mamet's
engagement in the cinema, which coincided with his apprenticeship as a screenwriter, and which
immediately preceded his present state of maturation as a film maker. Direct cross-referencing
to Mamet's concurrent film activity, however, is limited within this section. My aim is not to unearth specific instances of material influence between particular plays and films. Rather, I am seeking a sense of the playwright's evolving understanding and realization of the theatrical dynamic, so that this may be likened and/or contrasted with his (at least chronologically) second vocational process in film.

The plays I focus upon primarily may at first seem unlikely choices, largely because of the attraction of those which I have decided not to discuss in detail. I have all but excluded A Life in the Theatre (1977), precisely because of its overt, metatheatrical preoccupation. Similarly, I engage sparingly with the biting satire on the film industry in Speed-the-Plow. I have decided instead to concentrate on works which explore the role of theatricality, and theatrical presence, as an aesthetic and social dynamic less obsessively, and in a more pervasive and integrated manner. Similarly, since it is not my intention to directly explore the related but distinct issues involved in cinematic adaptation, I have chosen neither the stage nor film versions of Glengarry Glen Ross or Oleanna as primary subjects.

Rather, I have selected amongst Mamet's pre-film plays Sexual Perversity in Chicago (1974) and American Buffalo (1975). As representative of the period of Mamet's work concurrent with his earliest efforts as a screenwriter, I have selected Edmond. My final, most extensive consideration explores The Shawl, a stage work which coincides with Mamet's more seasoned film writing, yet which was written prior to his directorial debut. The discussion of each of these plays proceeds within a context of cross reference with the playwright's other theatrical works, both major and minor.

The second segment of my study of Mamet's works begins with a discussion of the significance of the writer's earliest comments on film composition and operation, as they
emerged in conjunction with his first screenwriting attempt, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981). This is followed by an in-depth investigation of Mamet's first project as writer-director, *House of Games*. The most extensive exploration of a single work in this study, this section focuses on the film which I feel is the most direct example of the cinematic medium's influence upon the writer's work. This, in turn, is followed by consideration of the author's second feature, *Homicide*, a film which, I believe, both verifies and extends the interaction between medium and narrative that is evident in *House of Games*.

Through an investigation of this selection of stage works from these points of progression in the playwright's career, along with these key examples of his development as a film writer and director, I here attempt an understanding of the influence of medium selection upon a specific writer in 'medium transition.' Clearly, the impact of medium selection is only a single factor in an equation that includes a spectrum of aesthetic, economic, political, institutional, and ideological considerations. However, as my general introduction and the following analysis argue, I believe that medium selection is a strong, if not definitive influence, thematically as well as structurally, upon the composition and reception of Mamet's works.

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SECTION THREE: MAMET / THEATRE

Part Two: THEATRE BEFORE FILM  /  Sexual Perversity in Chicago

Early Works, Enduring Attitudes

Primary in both of David Mamet’s early dramas Sexual Perversity in Chicago (1974) and American Buffalo (1975) is the inherent tension that animates the act of storytelling. Personal narrative is portrayed as perpetually defined by and constrained within the culturally specific social conventions that validate its performance. At the centre of each play is a character simultaneously empowered and isolated by his pronounced status as a performer within largely unconscious, imposed parameters. By extension, these characters enact the parallel containment and animation of theatrical performance within its equally conventional frame(s). Where the two plays differ is in the responses of these characters—and of the plays themselves—as they encounter the determining social/theatrical constraints of their performative stances.

In a sense, each play approaches these predetermined boundaries of social performance from a different direction. Sexual Perversity in Chicago portrays the deadening conformity of a suitably perverted performative capacity that is subsumed into a decadent and solipsistic narcissism. American Buffalo, by contrast, challenges the domination of a (significantly) verbal and (definitively) inefficacious model of communication that has been co-opted into inherited and arbitrary patterns of non-meaning. Through the exploration of problematic yet potentially liberating physical violence, however, American Buffalo ventures an initial probing of the possibility of transgression.

Both plays, as is the case with the majority of Mamet's works, received their first
stagings in Chicago. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (hereafter *Perversity*) was initially produced by the Organic Theater Company in June, 1974, with direction by Stuart Gordon. *American Buffalo* (hereafter *Buffalo*) premiered at the Ruth Page Auditorium for the Goodman Theater Stage Two in October of 1975, and was directed by Gregory Mosher. The locations are significant. Todd London has suggested that the "Organic [Theater] could only have sprung from the head of the 60's: anarchic in spirit; improvisational in method, colorful, eclectic, populist and completely zonked out." Conversely, "Chicago's flagship Goodman Theatre ... until the late 60's housed Goodman School of Drama shows with guest professionals." The work of Mamet and Mosher, London suggests, provided a central factor in turning "the long-drowsy [Goodman] theater around." ¹ *Perversity*, fittingly, is an unorthodox, highly episodic, and consciously controversial work, while Mamet has described *Buffalo* as "a traditionally structured drama based on tragedy." ²

The contrast between these two early examples of, and original forums for, Mamet's work is characteristic and instructive. Discussing the playwright's paradoxical desire for approval from the very audiences and producers he most strenuously condemns, C. W. E. Bigsby has noted, "Despite the new importance of regional theatre, it was still success in New York which established a national reputation; contemptuous as he was of such a system ... it was success in New York that he sought." ³ Indeed, the playwright has worked diligently to cultivate a self-image of iconoclasm. In both his drama and his essays his assault on what he describes as the corrupting influence of materialism in contemporary American society is impassioned and ostensibly reformist. However, his social rebelliousness emerges under scrutiny as considerably isolationist, assimilationist, and conservative. It is not, apparently, the consequences of the American Dream that Mamet laments, but rather those of its loss.
Of Fourth of July and Memorial Day ceremonies in his (then) adopted home of Cabot, Vermont, the playwright has written: "There is something in these same families performing these same traditions in the same spot for over two hundred years.... The community is not abashed by public display of those things which unite it. Life in a farm community seems to instruct the young to think what is right and then to do what is right." The threat to such uniformity of thought, Mamet contends, lies principally in art of "decadence," which is governed by the political urge, which is the urge to control the actions of others. It is in direct opposition to the artistic urge, which is to express oneself regardless of consequences. I cite 'performance art,' 'women's writing,' and, on the less-offensive end of the scale, 'nonbooks'—'The ---- Handbook,' etc.—which are not books at all, but badges proclaiming a position.

A fundamental focus on the "the human capacity for [moral] choice," ultimately separate from all questions of privilege or hardship, thus leads the playwright to a confident declaration of what are not the "fit subject[s] of drama": "[I]llness, homosexuality, accident, aging, birth defects, equally befall the Good and the Bad individual. They are not the result of conscious choice and so do not bear on the character of the individual." Through a process of reasoning that is somewhat difficult to follow, Mamet resolves that the proclamations of individualized positions motivated by the "political urge" result in a "one-party system, [which] is not a conspiracy, but a trend. The trend expresses our deep wish to deny. The trend silences ferment, stills inquiry, and, at no point, allows the purpose of true art, the purpose of which is to create."

This is clearly a problematical, perhaps impenetrable argument. Mamet's apparent attempt to "deny" the expression of alternative positions and to silence the very "ferment" that he identifies as a prerequisite for "true" artistic creativity, result in immediate self-contradiction.
Yet the playwright, in appropriate Aristotelian manner, has remained remarkably consistent in his inconsistency. Informing all his dramatic and critical writing, including his most recent work, is a distinct and often definitive ideological and formal tension, as a desire to challenge the arbitrary authority of convention coexists uneasily with an attempt to re-establish an unquestioned and unquestionable legitimacy of universal tradition. The consequences are clearly manifold for a conception of theatrical performance which, by extension, attempts to both scrutinize and validate its own governing complex of basically realistic tenets.

**Sexual Perversity in Chicago**

*Perversity* presents two central male figures, Dan Shapiro ("An urban male in his late twenties") and Bernard Litko ("A friend and associate of Dan Shapiro")\(^7\), and deals almost exclusively with their doubts, fears, ignorance, and bravado. The two men's relationship is comprised of a constant process of mutual encouragement and verification. Their dialogue is made up of ego- and deceit-sustaining questions and answers that are as rhetorical as they are fantastic.

DANNY: So how'd you do last night?

BERNIE: Are you kidding me?

DANNY: Yeah?

BERNIE: Are you fucking kidding me?

DANNY: Yeah?

BERNIE: Are you pulling my leg?

DANNY: So?

BERNIE: So tits out to here so.
DANNY: Yeah?

BERNIE: Twenty, a couple years old.

DANNY: You got to be kidding?

BERNIE: Nope.

DANNY: You devil. (9)

Through their joint assertion of his superior sexual capabilities and experience, Bernie adopts what is a primary, recurring role in the male relationships of Mamet's plays: the seasoned mentor, playing here to Dan's eager ignorance (as opposed to innocence). Initially unrestrained by either the obligation of proof or the possibility of challenge, Bernie's wildly creative accounts of his adventures inevitably result in exaggerated self-aggrandizement: "So the whole fuckin' joint is going up in smoke, the telephone is going 'Rat Tat Tat,' the broad jumps back on the bed and yells 'Now, give it to me now for the love of Christ'" (17).

Anne Dean has suggested a unified conception of both characters, identifying in Danny a progressive loss of innocence that is only complete in the final speeches of the play. Prior to this eventual fall, she suggests, Danny's repeated inability to play along, to supply Bernie with the necessary accompaniment, is a source of unintentional antagonism.

Bernie is clearly getting carried away with his fantasy. He no longer wishes to hear Danny's questions and inane remarks, but wants to get on with the action. As Bernie moves further and further and further into the ecstasies of libidinous fantasy, Danny remains down-to-earth, questioning details that had at first acted as spurs to give the story depth and realism, but now serve only as interruptions and irritations.4

This preoccupation with discovering unified character psychology does indeed secure a consistent interpretation of the narrative thrust of the play. However, it limits the play's dynamic to a highly restricted conception of character which effectively ignores the dramatic figure's
status as theatrical participant— as performer and as audience.

Through overt analogy to the character's own (re)presentation, Danny's role in the dynamic cannot emerge as one of passive absorption, as the status of Bernie's histrionics is at all times determined by his friend's response. Bernie seems, therefore, not to be moving "further and further and further into the ecstasies of libidinous fantasy" (that is, into a self-sustaining, dream-like, even cinematic projection of illusion) and thus away from Danny's reaction (the physical presence of his stimulated audience). Rather, Bernie is at all times acutely aware of his reception. The primary "action," then, which Dean fails to identify, is not found in consciously insubstantial escapades of sexual adventure. Rather, the theatrical event portrayed is the interactive performance of the rhetorical recitation of these tall tales. Bernie's pleasure is seen as that of distinctly self-conscious (if not self-aware) exhibitionism, rather than that of subjective, self-fulfilled (i.e., voyeuristic) imagination.

Thus, Danny's influence would seem to extend well beyond simple sanction or naive encouragement on the level of a specific narrative. For "sex expert" is indeed a "role" for Bernie, a means by which the all-consuming end of self-performance is attained. Thus, Danny's proximate positioning as auditor likewise exceeds the particular, unexamined fantasies that seem arbitrarily, spontaneously created in the passion of declamation. Rather, his collaborative spectator status effectively frames—arguably, determines—Bernie's habitual non-sense, by providing it with the insular license of performance.

In this sense, the theatrical substance of Bernie's statements is not to be found in their verified or contested content. Rather, his outlandish claims can be seen as variations on the use of language identified by J. L. Austin⁹ and John Searle,¹⁰ amongst others, as speech-acts. Through its systematic consideration of an utterance's localized intentionality, speech-act theory
radically relocates the primary significance—and interpretative focus—of language use to the contextualized delivery of a sentence. Indeed, a sentence's content is seen as only discernible through the study of its performance. As Keir Elam has pointed out, the utility of the speech-act theory is that it unites the "uses, users and effects" of language use in a "hermetically sealed system."

Particularly relevant is that category of speech-act which Austin called *performative utterances*. As opposed to meeting a criterion of veracity, such utterances either succeed or fail. More specifically, performance utterances are, in Austin's terms, either "happy" or "unhappy." Unhappiness is the result of one or more of a series of "infelicities," which Austin describes as "the things that can be and go wrong" in the utterance event. A number of these infelicities ("MISFIRES") relate to unanticipated faulty circumstances, and thus failed utterances. However, of a very different nature are those infelicities that result in successful utterances which are in fact insincere, effecting an intentional but disguised and coercive impact upon the hearer, ("ABUSES").

Certainly, an overly schematic application of these ideas to a work of drama, as Elam has suggested, runs the "reductively positivistic" risk of "illocutionizing ... the entire verbal structure of the drama." And as this study of *Perversity* is intended to show, this hypothetical communication model of theatrical performance encounters significant obstacles when applied to the complexity of actual production. Yet even these limitations can be seen as instructive. Indeed, the act of narration, once placed within a theatrical frame, is not so much surrendered to, as overlaid with, a spacial and temporal realization. A (re)presentational immediacy is superimposed upon 'timeless' narrative representation, one which animates it and fulfils both its realization and demise.
Mamet has written of precisely this "magical and powerful" performative quality of spoken language. Recounting the conversations of boyhood companions, he notes, "In the narration or recapitulation of serious matters our peers were never said to have 'said' things, but to have 'gone' things; we ten- and twelve-year-olds thereby recognizing a statement as an action." Clearly, however, there are difficulties with a naive lamentation over the loss of an abstractly pure oral tradition. Mamet's assertion that the "Schoolboy Universe was not corrupted by the written word" threatens to establish what Derrida has referred to as a "violent hierarchy" of Western philosophy in which "[s]peech has full presence, while writing is secondary and threatens to contaminate speech with its materiality."15

But the presence that Mamet boasts for spoken language seems distinct from the "phonocentrism" Derrida describes in Western culture, in which a "spoken word, emitted from a living body appears to be closer to an originating thought than a written word."16 Rather, Mamet suggests, the world of young boys is "ruled by the powers of sounds.... Our language had weight and meaning to the extent to which it was rhythmic and pleasant, and its power came from a juxtaposition of sounds...."17 Thus, less the "philosophic Truth" of "pure thought," the linguistic content of spoken language is seen as the secondary message in a tangible medium which primarily functions physically, emotionally, and aesthetically.

In this, the playwright seems more closely aligned with the ideas of Walter J. Ong, whose *The Presence of the Word* discovers in utterance a distinctly phenomenological substantiality. "Sound," Ong contends, "is more real or existential than other sense objects, despite the fact that it is also more evanescent" (original italics).18 Intriguingly, for Ong it is the transient quality of sound, its inherent dislocation from continuity, which imparts its unique declaration of physical presence: "Sound itself is related to present actuality rather than to past or future ....
with the result that involvement with sound is involvement with the present, with here-and-now existence and activity." Characteristically, it is this timeless, nostalgic world, in which speech acts had "weight and meaning," which is lamented as lost within Perversity's suitably perverted inversion of spoken language's inherent efficacy.

As M. H. Abrams has noted, speech-act theory proposes that "[w]hat the author of a fictional work ... narrates is held to constitute a 'pretended' set of assertions, which are intended by the author, and understood by the reader, to be free from a speaker's ordinary commitment to the truth of what he asserts." While this describes precisely the tacit agreement between Bernie and Danny, it can equally be seen as the conceptual basis of theatre, where, as Umberto Eco suggests, "we enter the possible world of the performance, a world of lies in which we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief." Danny's inconsistent but ultimately open complicity in Bernie's charades—within the fiction within its (re)presentation—thus effectively (re)validates a "'pretended' set of assertions" within another "'pretended' set of assertions," in which questions of veracity are suspended. Thus, there is a simultaneous correlation with, and dialectical tension between, the two characters' fictional interaction and that fiction's theatrical expression.

Within a theatrical realization of the speech act model, then, measures of 'truth' are supplanted by criteria of performative sincerity and dexterity. However, as Marco De Marinis suggests, while the individual "micro-acts" of a theatrical performance are in themselves "pretended," the "macro speech act" of the entire performance text "also transmits serious speech acts." Within the "macro speech act" of Perversity, Mamet "serious[ly]" enacts a dependence on the "powers of sounds" that becomes so consuming and abstract that the substantive signification associated with speech action is eventually inverted, (fittingly)
perverted, and converted into escapist self-deceit.

Undeniably, however, within the act of theatrical (re)presentation, all such immediately semiotic and cumulatively, broadly thematic considerations are inevitably recontextualized by—and potentially subordinate to—the performance's porous and often volatile frame of actuality. States' phenomenological "upsurge of the real" offers a perpetual possibility for complication or schism in the communication system of the "performance text." In addition, the constant if variable collaboration of present spectators demands of the communicative process(es) of the performance a degree of mutability and plurality that is inherently (i.e., necessarily) destabilizing. As has already been discussed, in the defence against this threatened discontinuity the containment of unpredictability and spontaneity is regularly reinforced by the weight of traditional theatrical practice and assumptions. In a parallel gesture, Bernie and Danny (literally) man their easy, conventionally assumed sexist barricades through an eventual denial of real interaction and self-examination. They call (equally literally) into action all of the highly persuasive attributes of physically embodied, (re)presentational self-performance. Yet both cling to the anonymity and insularity afforded by the purely representational narration of their allegiance to dominant cultural biases.

The complex, perhaps irresolvable relationship between these two modes of discourse in both social and theatrical performance is a recurrent preoccupation in Mamet's work. On the one hand is the 'unhappy' or insincere speech act, which the speaker, whether or not consciously, employs in an attempt to distance him/herself from accountability. On the other, is the acknowledgement that, indeed, speech, in its utterance, does things, and is an action to which consequences and responsibility are inseparably bound. Although most extensively scrutinized in the plays I have selected to study at length, this less than distinct dichotomy is given what is
perhaps its most darkly amusing realization in the following sequence from Mamet's 1983 play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (published 1984). Two real estate agents are seen discussing the possibility of breaking into the head office of the company that they work for.

Aaronow: Yes. I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just...

Moss: No, we're just...

Aaronow: We're just *"talking"* about it.

Moss: We're just *speaking* about it. *(Pause.)* *As an idea.*

Aaronow: As an idea.

Moss: Yes.²³

Clearly what constitutes the elusive, indeed illusory point of division between "just *speaking*" and "actually *talking*" is not some fundamental quality of spoken language. Rather, the distinction lies in the largely extra-linguistic intentionality of its performance. Aaronow's desire for, and Moss's deceitful reassurance of, consensual absolutes is seen as either fallacious or malicious. Thus it is possible, moments later in the play, for Moss to announce that somewhere along the line he has indeed begun "actually *talking*" (40)—and has incriminated Aaronow in the process. It is Aaronow's idealism, and Moss's anticipation of it, which leaves the former perpetually vulnerable to what David Birch has proposed as the "normal" deviance inherent in the dialogism of actual discourse: "*[W]hen the 'real' discourse of interaction is matched against the 'ideal', the 'real' is always deviant, i.e. in negative, aberrant terms, but as 'normal'. The difference is that 'normal' signifies conflict, in one form or another.*"²⁴

Mamet's concern seems less, then, with essential attributes of abstract versus practical language than with the happy and unhappy, sincere and deceitful motivation behind language performance. Language, in his plays, becomes another, if often central form of *action*, and is
not scrutinized in some ontological separation from the physical activity of the body (which is seen as equally happy or unhappy). As G. J. Warnock has noted, that use of speech Austin identified as *performative utterances* is "operative" in a manner identical to other "conventionally-significant doings, many of which will differ in not involving utterance at all." However, it is in language's unique ability to *pose* as inconsequential, to appear disinterested in the "just speaking" of speculation or philosophy (or theory) that it becomes one of the most complex and influential manifestations of theatrical action in Mamet's work.

In a process of constant decentering, Moss continually redefines the terms of separation between language that operates within the free unaccountability of "idea[s]," and that which enters into the dangerous realm of the "actual." Conversely, Aaronow's naive confidence that a clear distinction does indeed exist proves disastrous.

*Moss:* Well, to the law, you're an accessory. Before the fact.

*Aaronow:* Why? *Why,* because you only *told* me about it?

*Moss:* That's right. (45)

As Barthes has argued, any "speech system is defined less by what it *permits* us to say than by what it *compels* us to say...." Both Moss and Aaronow are subject—in Barthes term, "subjuga[ted]"—to the categorical containment of their language. What distinguishes them is Moss's understanding and manipulation of his and Aaronow's general subordination to its operative conventions. Thus, despite the emphatic insistence that is repeatedly voiced, there is, in Mamet's drama, no such thing as "just speaking." All speech is action, and all action involves accountability. Further, the play argues, there are always consequences in its witness. As Moss curtly responds to Aaronow's repeated, confused queries regarding the grounds of his threatened guilt, "Because you listened" (46).
Yet Mamet is deeply invested in a speaker's ability to locate, even create "weight and meaning" through the linguistic and paralinguistic rhetorical acts of language performance. His characters are forever attempting to champion what Barthes called "the authority of assertion" over "the gregariousness of repetition."

On the one hand, speech is immediately assertive.... On the other hand, the signs composing speech exist only insofar as they are recognized, i.e., insofar as they are repeated.... I am both master and slave. I am not content to repeat what has been said, to settle comfortably in the servitude of signs: I speak, I affirm, I assert tellingly what I repeat.27

The playwright proposes a world in which these two categories are forever in competition. The remarkably familiar quality of common speech, with its dependence upon cliché, contraction, and emphatic banality, is at all times energized by the characters' often desperate wills to autonomy and independence.

But Mamet's faith in the "power of sounds" to effect signification outside of all linguistic considerations, to make utterance in and of itself an action, has already been noted. Thus, of Barthes' theory of representation is demanded a (re)presentational accommodation. For the relationship of language to other forms of action that emerges in Mamet's work is paradoxical. On the one hand, characters may choose, wittingly or not, to hide behind the "gregarious" conventionality of language, comfortably nestling within the alienated isolation of the sleeping "monster: a stereotype."28 On the other hand, characters may elect to employ speech action, again consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to actually escape the threat of fixed meaning and intentionality in language. In a process that repeatedly duplicates that of theatrical (re)presentation itself, conventional structures of communication are resorted to, consciously and unconsciously, in attempts by the characters to either indulge in or undermine and transgress the inherent restrictions of the status quo.
In both situations, however, Mamet portrays his characters' actions as evidence of morally accountable (if socially contextualized) intentionality. His drama, as does his cultural perspective, posits a personal autonomy that defines both his perspective on theatrical performance and his understanding of social interaction. Both are dependent upon what the playwright perceives as a fundamental authority of the individual over his or her involvement with all the operative systems in society. What follows is the individual's responsibility to engage in all activity with an emotional, intellectual, philosophical, and physical authenticity and commitment. Clearly, these terms and ideas are not unproblematic. Yet their acknowledgement and interrogation are prerequisite for an analysis of the function of medium in the playwright's work.

However, the scene cited above from *Glengarry Glen Ross* clearly reveals a much evolved statement of the playwright's ongoing investigation into the accountability of action, and in particular of speech as action. Moss's conscious, premeditated manipulation of Aaronow is a distant descendent of Bernie's unwieldy and unexamined bluster. Indeed, *Perversity*'s most vociferous character seems to be untroubled by even the combination of confusion and still-to-be lost innocence displayed by Aaronow. William W. Demastes has suggested that in Mamet's work "language has reached a point where it fails to function.... It has become an unwilling, unintentional means of self-deceit." Although increasingly limited in its applicability to the more complex operation of Mamet's later plays, this assessment fully captures what the playwright presents as the degenerated state of interpersonal verbal exchange demonstrated in *Perversity* and other earlier works. Bernie proceeds with the blissful recklessness enjoyed only by those unconscious of or uninterested in speech's sliding register of efficacy.

BERNIE: I mean what the fuck, a guy wants to get it on with some broad on a
more or less stable basis, who is to say him no.  (Pause.)  A lot of these broads, you know, you just don't know.  You know?  I mean what with where they've been and all.  I mean a young woman in today's society ... time she's twenty two-three.  You don't know where the fuck she's been.  (Pause.)  I'm just talking to you, you understand. (39)

Further, as is the case with most of Mamet's early characters, the ignorance Bernie displays regarding the active status of utterance establishes a false yet assumed distinction between verbal and physical action—more specifically, verbal and physical violence. Language, in the early works, becomes a domain of presumed safety. Its protection from intimacy is afforded through a reiterated cultural socialization and founded upon a faulty and hostile tradition of conventionalized bias and denial. Yet this habitual refuge from interaction is opposed, in these early plays, by the always imminent possibility of its being shattered by a physicality that reveals its hollowness.

Conversely, the violence of Glengarry Glen Ross occurs almost exclusively between the acts, and seems more a necessity of narrative progression and mise en scène than of constitutive action: "The real estate office. Ransacked. A broken plateglass window boarded up, glass all over the floor. Aaronow and Williamson standing around, smoking. Pause" (52). Inversely, yet to similar effect, the physical conflict between the two male characters in Speed-the-Plow is rhythmically syncopated, with disturbing ease, into their verbal argument. Outraged that his fellow film producer, Bobby Gould, has apparently double-crossed him, Charlie Fox beats his betrayer simultaneously with words and fists, making little distinction between his weapons.

FOX:  *Fuck you ...  (He hits Gould.)*  *Fuck you.*  *Get up.*  * (He hits him again.)*  I'll fucken' kill you right here in this office. All this bullshit; you wimp, you *coward* ... now you got the job, and now you're going to run all over everything, like something broke in the *shopping* bag, you *fool*—your fucken' sissy film—you squat to pee.  You old *woman*...[.]³⁰

Neither Perversity's characters nor, in a sense, its playwright can afford to concede so
fully, as does *Glenngarry Glen Ross*, the legitimacy of speech as a totality of action, or, as with *Speed-the-Plow*, its powerful synergy with physical efficacy. That speech and its audience are acts of consequence is a reality in *Perversity* that Bernie (and, to a degree, Mamet) is perpetually capitalizing on and persistently denying. With each new set of characters, through each of the plays that this study explores, this capitalization becomes progressively more difficult and problematic, as the impossibility of this denial becomes increasingly clear. Bernie, like each of his subsequent counterparts, is (re)presented within a mode of performance that likewise boasts both physical immediacy and aesthetic distance. Yet in this early work's ironic and darkly cynical act of negation, the cooperative self-delusion that is eventually shared by its male figures seems of such an 'unhappy' dimension that what they finally, paradoxically achieve is in fact the abandonment of all possible efficacy.

Bernie's performance temporarily sours when his previously unquestioned wisdom begins to conflict with the lived emotions Danny is seen to experience in his awkward, budding relationship with Deborah ("A woman in her late twenties"). In response, Danny exerts his power, as audience, by withdrawing his tangible support. Bernie's authority over his once rapt spectator is instantly undermined once the "hermetically sealed system" of his performance is disrupted. Of particular significance (increasingly so throughout Mamet's work) is the observation that the temporary disarming of Bernie is seen to stem from his own inability to adapt his performance. Thus, Bernie's vulnerability lies in his failure to exceed a compositional and performative stance that he neither understands nor concedes, yet one that is safely contained within the stereotypical and reductionist iconography of sexist, racist, and generally pejorative popular mentality.
Bernie is thus revealed as a complete and unconscious captive within the collective, media-driven "macro speech act" of his contemporary culture. Jean Alter has opposed the "[s]tructural flaws, hidden contradictions, [and] disguised incoherencies" of fictional narrative to highly self-conscious and artificially structured "historical texts" that struggle to support and propagate existing ideology. But what Perversity's characters present, in direct contradiction to Alter's assertion, is a body of fictional narratives that are apparently entirely subservient to a materialist and egocentric ideology. Indeed, the central figures seem, by the play's conclusion, effectively purged of all desire and/or ability to deviate from this ideology's dictates. "The creation of a fictional world," Alter suggests, "like a dream, will serve ... to express [ideological] problems in unconscious disguises, unconsciously seeking to solve them." This, indeed, corresponds with Mamet's own assertion that "The life of the play is the life of the unconscious, the protagonist represents ourselves, and the main action of the play constitutes the subject of the dream or myth.... The play is a quest for a solution." But, as the playwright continues (and as Perversity enacts), "... some times we are reluctant to remember our dreams.... Many times the true nature of our dreams is hidden from us; and just so in the Theater, the dramas elected and staged may represent an attempt at diversion or denial of our dream life."

Rather than representing a departure "from the prevailing ideology," the "unbridled nature" of Bernie's stories actually offers a direct reflection of what the playwright proposes as a social system that has drafted incoherence and contradiction into its standard method of operation. The character is caught in the self-propagating communicative loop of a society addicted to disjunctive, fragmented information distribution (Austin's misfires) and deceitful, manipulative consumerism (Austin's abuses—although there is clearly overlap and interplay between these two terms and the influences they identify). Fictional logic is abandoned. Gaps in
intention and impression cease to surprise, and become normative. Circumscribed within the institutionalized denial and paranoia of an unquestioned socialization, the character's own emotional and ideological mobility is surrendered, as their positioning becomes fixed and finite. Bernie's initially provocative proclamations are thus revealed as entirely conventional and absurdly, paradoxically conservative regurgitation. His protestations are exposed as the mindless slogans of a prefabricated and conformist caricature of sterile anarchism.

The reflections this situation casts upon the entire theatrical dynamic are difficult to miss or dismiss. The near self-suffocation of Bernie's performance in a sense replicates the potential inward collapse of theatrical (re)presentation that retreats too distantly, within its own governing conventions, from confrontation with its frame of actuality. Content to reside within culturally dictated and self-imposed parameters, to occupy a traditionally predetermined aesthetic, thematic, and ideological landscape, such theatre becomes, in Peter Brook's term, deadly. Now familiar is Brook's suggestion, in The Empty Space (1968), that an "author today can easily cheat himself if he thinks that he can 'use' a conventional form as a vehicle," since "[t]oday ... no conventional forms stand up any more." By extension, Brook claims, "The deadly director uses old formulae, old methods, old jokes, old effects, stock beginnings to scenes, stock ends.... A deadly director is a director who brings no challenge to the conditioned reflexes that every department must contain." Thus, for Brook, the "conditioned reflexes" and the "challenge"—dependence upon, and contention with, convention—are seen as mutually supportive in sustaining the performance's determining frame. Barthes "gregariousness of repetition" and "authority of assertion" provide a particularly fitting parallel. Ironically, despite his provocative posing, Bernie's social performance is thus analogous to an entirely domesticated (re)presentational mode that cannot but falter before any challenge to its carefully rehearsed
Danny's silence, representative of his refusal to participate in Bernie's exhibition(ism), abruptly assumes a physical substantiality in this context. Further, it offers an immediate and uncontestable verification of the power of the recalcitrant theatrical audience. Deprived of reception, and thus, as a live performer, validation, Bernie's response enacts the painful acrobatics of unsuccessful improvisation. He scrambles awkwardly, unconvincingly through a rapid succession of ineffective tactics. In the process, the character inadvertently reveals the truly mundane, programmed nature of his previously narrated adventures.

You know what she is? She's a fucking human being just like you and me, Dan. We all have basically the same desires, and the shame of it is you get out of touch with yourself and lose your perspective. Huh?

*Pause.*

Huh?

*Pause.*

Yeah. You think you're playing with kids? (*Pause.*) Don't ever lose your sense of humor, Dan. Don't *ever* lose your sense of humor. (59)

In a play as ostensibly frontal and provocative as *Perversity*, empowerment is expressed through silence. Mamet's reverence for his friend and occasional mentor, Harold Pinter[^1] is here clearly influential. It is perhaps not surprising that Danny's refusal to offer support to, or even recognition of, Bernie's pronouncements resembles that of the elusive and ultimately dominant Ruth in Pinter's *Homecoming* (1965). Similarly, Bernie's random sampling of provocation techniques closely resembles those employed by the characters of Pinter's play who would contain the new addition to their household within a net of language.
In *The Homecoming*, Ruth is ostensibly drafted into the volatile home-life of her husband's father, uncle, and brothers, in the ambiguous composite role of mother, wife, servant, mistress, and prostitute. Yet in a typically implicit Pinter inversion of the situation's power dynamic, Ruth's final domination is absolute, and predicated on her refusal to offer her identity for appropriation. Her fixed silence denies the male characters the efficacy of completed speech action. Violence, in the guise of communication, is literally short-circuited by the immovable mass of her indifference. Consequently, the men are stranded in an abundance of language that *effects* nothing, and is thus, in the overtly performative nature of their self-presentations, refused signification. In a manner immediately comparable to Pinter's play, Danny's recalcitrance suddenly, radically identifies Bernie's incoherent rhetorical contortions as failed performance: unconvincing, unsanctioned, and inconsequential.

It is possible, therefore, to find in these observations the true source of the unease generated by *Perversity*'s final scene, and of the work in its entirety. Shortly after the original production, Mamet conceded the verbal atrocities committed, to varying degrees, by all of the characters in the play. However, he refused to condemn the demonstrated behaviour as individual deviation. Rather, the author described his intention as an exploration of the popular media, and the resultant "myths around us, destroying our lives.... That's what the play is about, how what we say influences what we think.... The real vicious language is the insidious thing, calling somebody a little girl or this girl. That's more insidious than calling someone a whore--which is also insidious, but you can deal with it...."39

These statements clearly focus on the negative, oppressive influence of unconscious language acquisition and use. As Mamet elsewhere reiterated, "[W]hat you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around."40 And the play itself is, if less direct,
hardly less convinced of this claim's validity. Paradoxically, the final scene is one of a (once again) suitably perverse empowerment. Enacting another, particularly intriguing, recurrent pattern in Mamet's work—boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy wins boy back again—Bernie is seen as having successfully resecured Danny's allegiance. He joins his reclaimed friend for a day of taking in the 'sights' on the beach. But while the language employed by the two is familiar, its distribution and delivery have shifted conspicuously.

The roles of performer and spectator in their relationship had before been clearly demarcated. Bernie had occupied the domain of illocution (assertion, commanding, promising, warning, etc.). Conversely, Danny's action had regularly taken the form of inactive acquiescence. In this, he has represented the passive agent (in a sense, recipient) of what Searle called "the illocutionary effect, the simple understanding of the act." Danny may not always be seen to follow the convolutions of Bernie's proclamations, yet his tacit agreement, early in the play, suggests that he is seldom incapable of "understanding ... the act" that his friend is performing. As Elam points out, this inactive comprehension is the extreme of response to which most subsequent speech-act theory (in a retreat from Austin's work) is comfortable to venture. For beyond this lies the bothersomely unpredictable realm of active response—perlocution (enlightenment, inspiration, intimidation, etc.). According to Elam, "[P]hilosophers of language and linguists and semioticians have all but disowned the perlocutionary effect as an unphilosophical embarrassment or extra-semiotic contamination. Too dangerous. Perlocutionary acts, as someone once said, should be prohibited in public." Danny's first venture into the perlocutionary realm is clearly in his silence, which speaks of an initial, critical withdrawal. But his temporarily unidentified response (enlightenment? inspiration? intimidation?) does not remain a mystery for long.
In the last scene of the play there is the sense that the bravado of Bernie's previous monologues is destabilized by a distinctly dialogical tension. Danny speaks, not in his once characteristic questions, but in increasingly confident statements, assertions, and evaluations. In (perlocutionary) effect, he stretches his own illocutionary limbs and paces off the figurative parameters of the metaphorical stage upon which he has joined his 'associate.' Disturbingly, he seems to adopt his new context as entirely naturalized, indicating a subtle, but wholly consuming retreat from individuality and accountability. The two characters enter into an at first cautious interplay of mutual support and inspiration—one which, however, quickly gains momentum.

DANNY: ...You know what I like?
BERNIE: What?
DANNY: Stomach muscles.
BERNIE: You're talking about flab.
DANNY: Yeah.
BERNIE: I know what you're talking about.
DANNY: I know you do. (66)

Intriguingly, Danny's new aggressiveness appears as equally daunting for Bernie as had been his silence. Whereas Danny's earlier withdrawal had short-circuited the performative action of Bernie's wild narratives, his newly discovered assertiveness crowds and complicates the stage of signification. Clearly, the last thing that Bernie seems to intend or expect is reaction. In a perverted (and, it is safe to speculate, unwitting) attempt to circumvent Austin and Searle's contentions, Bernie calls upon speech action not as incentive but as a deterrent to effect or consequence. To his complete befuddlement, the narrative that now both he and Danny attempt to structure and maintain—their work in progress—has suddenly become a collective creation.
Bernie has, throughout the play, been resistant to (because incapable of) this form of composition, most significantly because of its departure from formula and increased proximity to spontaneity. Not surprisingly, then, in the second of his only two extended passages in the final scene he finds himself frantically adlibbing in order to re-establish the authority of his personal disorder.

...I mean who the fuck do they think they are all of a sudden, coming out here and just flaunting their bodies all over? (Pause.) I mean, what are you supposed to think? I come to the beach with a friend to get some sun and watch the action and... I mean a fellow comes to the beach to sit out in the fucking sun, am I wrong?... I mean we're talking about recreational fucking space, huh? ... huh? (Pause.) What the fuck am I talking about? (68)

The final line of this speech is highly significant within what becomes an evolution of character self-awareness that progresses throughout Mamet's entire body of work. In Perversity the result is a momentary lapse. Increasingly, however, in play after play, self-reflection insinuates itself into the cynical isolation and denial that characterizes so much of the social and personal interaction portrayed. In each case, self-consciousness (to whatever, fleeting degree) is sudden and unanticipated. In each it represents a shocking "upsurge of the real," an unexpected eruption of consequence and accountability. In each, the conscious or unconscious "world of lies" of the character(s) in question is pierced by its own frame of distinctly physical actuality, interrupting the often desperate inactions of speech.

In this early play, self-reflection is slight, and significant primarily through its instant (if not easy) and apparently decisive rejection. Yet the seed of self-observation and obligation is here planted, and its growth becomes more and more difficult, in each subsequent play, for the characters to deny. Equally, self-consciousness is manifested in increasingly, conspicuously theatrical metaphors. The individual's struggle with dehumanizing socialization bears
progressively greater resemblance to the challenge of theatrical sincerity in the face of commercial and popular pressure. Thus, the interactive correlation of authenticity—the *organic*—to both personal and theatrical expression gradually assumes centrality, reaching a full realization in *The Shawl*.

Thus, this comic, almost throw-away line in *Perversity* marks a moment of potential catastrophe for both characters. Bernie's investment in his own fantastic self-creation is apparent throughout the play. But Danny has only just 'sold his soul.' What Bernie seems to intend as a rejection of an unpredictable actuality is instead experienced as an assault of the same. Turning from the unmanageable fluidity of human intimacy, Danny has opted for his friend's formulaic, socially programmed fantasies. Yet as soon as he has committed himself to the sanctuary of a supposedly seamless chauvinism, this protection from uncertainty is revealed as flawed, as vulnerable to the potential invasion of accident and self-reflection. Salvaging the situation requires that Bernie immediately re-establish his most restrictive, conventional definition of himself as performer—as opaque icon—delimited in signification to unself-conscious superficiality.

**DANNY:** Are you feeling alright?

**BERNIE:** Well, how do I look, do I look all right?

**DANNY:** Sure.

**BERNIE:** Well, then let's assume that I feel all right, okay?

**DANNY:** Okay. (68)

However, Bernie is remotely distant from assuming self-conscious—i.e., *organic*—performance, and is uncomfortable with even this much scrutiny: "I mean, how could you feel anything *but* all right, for chrissakes? Will you look at that body?" Their now mutual, total
displacement from the containing frame of an actual (and thus unpredictable) social reality renders them, in a sense, a performance without an accessible or even interested audience.

_A long pause. They watch an imaginary woman pass in front of them._

BERNIE: Hi.

DANNY: Hello there.

_Pause. She walks by._

BERNIE: She's probably deaf.

DANNY: She did _look_ deaf, didn't she.

BERNIE: Yeah. (_Pause._)

DANNY: Deaf _bitch._ (69)

Ruby Cohn, in her synopsis of the play's action, suggests that this final line is Danny's expression of his grief over the loss of Deborah, as he is seen "venting his frustration at what he has lost." However, Danny's loss is far greater than a missed opportunity for romance. Ironically, Danny's last line may stand as the first time in the entire play when he actually outperforms his mentor. In this, it may represent a form of truly perverse empowerment. But the hatred of others and self that both characters now mindlessly recite is presented by Mamet as the voice of a far broader cultural paranoia, and its effect is isolation and alienation. Danny's speech is, finally, a force of inaction and denial. His is an emergence into a social vacuum of deceit, and a performance of self-delusional stagnation.

Regularly expressed charges of sexism, misogyny, and relentless profanity, therefore, must be reconsidered (though not necessarily dismissed) in relation to a play concerned primarily with the nature of performance in contemporary American society (which is, in _Perversity_ as in
almost all of Mamet's plays, an effectively if not ostensibly all-male community). The characters exist within a cultural context that deprives them of the opportunity, skills, or clearly apprehended need for communication or intimacy. As an alternative, they resort to the sources of identity and confidence that pervade their environment, generously provided and defined by mass media. Adopting the rhetorical patterns thus supplied, they risk venturing into the social arena within the armour of aggressive yet normalized performance. There they enact roles charged with ideological approval and formulaic presentation, but ultimately incompatible with experience. As C.W.E. Bigsby has suggested, the characters operate within "the ironic space between confident language of sexual aggression and a fumbling incompetence when confronted with the reality of potential relationships." Consequently, the function of performance in modern American culture emerges as, at the very least, suspicious, and more generally as the expression of ignorance and fear.

However, rather than a fear generated by ignorance, at the core of Bernie's and eventually Danny's paradoxically introverted exhibitionism is, for Mamet, a willed ignorance generated by fear. The latter is presented as the easiest and most direct response to the anxiety that isolates and insulates the individual from the possibility of intimacy. The nature of Danny's defeat, however, is not only or even primarily that of personal morality. As already noted, empowerment is discovered throughout the play in the denial of response in the face of demeaning (re)presentation. Ironically, the rediscovery of his voice marks Danny's abdication of both his obligation to achieve a self-performance of sincerity and effect and his responsibilities as critical spectator. Through his decision to abandon the role of discernment in their relationship, he joins Bernie on the corrupted stage of their finally all-consuming misogyny.

Ironically liberated from any chance of contact, physical or emotional, the characters
remain sentenced to the lonely peace and cynical safety of perpetually absent ("deaf") audiences. 

Perversity in performance, consequently, is unnervingly recognizable yet oddly distanced for this very reason. Its abrasiveness is ultimately and, I would suggest, intentionally undermined by the inconsequence of its action. Edith Oliver of The New Yorker expressed surprise, in retrospect, at the play's cynicism, reporting that "one spends so much time laughing at the funny lines that the underlying sadness of the play comes as an aftertaste." In particular, Perversity's aggression is ultimately, paradoxically experienced as a safety zone of alienation, rather than an immediate threat to life and limb. Julius Novick of the Village Voice noted that F. Murray Abraham's Bernie considers women as "sexual material to be discussed, evaluated, fantasized about—from a safe distance." Thus, despite its lingering bitterness, Perversity's ostensibly vicious bark exceeds its resigned and cynical bite.

Paradoxically, then, the play stands as a theatrical (re)presentation of the potentially paralyzing degradation of the theatrical context itself. Bernie's self-performance remains neatly and nihilistically contained within unexamined and uncomprehended social conventions which are shaped by prejudice and morally degenerate, material self-interest. "We live in an illiterate country," Mamet has asserted. "The mass media—the commercial theater included—pander to the low and the lowest of the low in the human experience. They, finally, debase us through the sheer weight of their mindlessness." Admittedly, the playwright's rather reductionist tendency to isolate the media in an apparently cause-and-effect relationship within American culture limits the validity of his claim. However, within Perversity's social model, Bernie's successful effort to "debase" his friend's understanding of human relations emerges as analogous to—since an extension of—Mamet's concept of "mass media." The demonstrated seduction of unchallenged social convention parallels Brook's Deadly Theatre—that is, theatrical performance that
reinforces commercially palatable and thus, in this argument, simplistic and stereotypical perspectives on both theatrical and social propriety. Both Marnet's characters and the Deadly Theatre they mimic enact a failure to "challenge" the "conditioned reflexes" of a complacent, illusion-dependent status quo.

However, as Richard Schechner, discussing both fixed text and intentionally interactive theatrical contexts, has noted, "[P]erformance is licensed by its audience which can, at any time, re-ratify or withdraw that license. This is true of all performances, though most of the time the audience doesn't know its own power—or is provoked only occasionally into exercising it." It is this "license" which Danny is tentatively "provoked" to explore. However, the ambiguity and emotionally challenging interaction of a personal relationship with Deborah immediately and permanently strains the macho stereotypes of an inherited and unquestioned misogyny. Danny is simply overwhelmed by the routine complexity of actual contact, and, in his apparently willed ignorance, seems simply unprepared to contemplate such a mode of intimacy.

Deborah's sarcasm, during one of their scenes of heated animosity, is directed at exactly this apparently insurmountable obstacle to joint participation and meaning.

DEBORAH: You try and try. You are misunderstood and depressed.

DANNY: And you're no help.

DEBORAH: No, I'm a hindrance. You're trying to understand women and I'm confusing you with information. "Cunt" won't do it. "Fuck" won't do it. No more magic. What are you feeling. Tell me what you're feeling. Jerk. (57-58)

Thus, Danny is asked to surrender the "magic" of self-serving mythologies of simplistic gratification. His role as anonymous consumer is challenged in the face of a living, collaborative process of mutual identification and accountability. Finally, however (once they contain the
deeply unnerving threat that they might actually have to respond to one another) Danny and Bernie both emerge—to their mutual relief and reassurance—as incapable of personal interaction that involves spontaneity, mutability, and accountability.

Likewise, these same attributes may be seen to be absent from theatrical (re)presentation that comfortably separates itself from the physical and emotional presence of its audience, behind a psychological buffer zone of entrenched, illusionistic convention. Arguably, Danny stands as representative of a contemporary American audience that Mamet has described as complacent and non-discerning. Such an audience, the playwright has suggested, gets precisely the technical and moral calibre of performance it deserves: "That most of today's acting is false and mechanical is no coincidence—it is a sign of our society's demanding that its priests repeat the catechism essential for our tenuous mental health: that nothing is happening, that nothing very bad or very good can befall us, that we are safe."

Paradoxically, then, what Austin refers to as "circumstances ... appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked" translates, in Perversity, into the avoidance of actuality. In order to ensure the ideal (idealized, fantastical) "circumstances," response is guarded against with powerful, ideologically entrenched prejudice. Thus, in a personal as well as theatrical (re)presentation of self, both characters are seen as captive not merely to the narratives they recite, but to the exclusion of physical actuality in narrative itself. Ironically, relentless, referent-less speech action here becomes a neutralization of theatricality through its perpetual deferral of consequence. In Bernie is discovered a condemnation—through a (one final time) fittingly perverse celebration—of a mode of performance, personal and theatrical, that escapes accountability through a total surrender to (into) imposed and unquestioned social conventions. In Danny is found the audience which sanctions and therefore deserves just such a
theatre of numbing reassurance.
Although *American Buffalo* was first staged one year after *Perversity*'s debut, it is clearly a more traditionally structured play. However, in the nature of its characterization *Buffalo* is the more complex work. Robert Storey's conviction that "*[Perversity]'s Bernie is, at his most definable, a kind of dramatic pressure on the others in the play]*¹ is, if extreme, largely valid. By contrast, Bernie's counterpart in *Buffalo*, Walter Cole—paradoxically referred to as 'Teach'—is a complex pastiche of conflicting but ultimately interactive desires, fears, drives, and obsessions.

Yet it is not primarily a psychological coherence that is approached within the play's orchestration of non-events. Rather, Teach's theatrical cohesion emerges within the character's explosive refusal, unlike either Bernie or Danny, to entirely surrender all claims to personal identity and efficacy unto an unrecognized and seemingly autonomous ideological conditioning. Certainly, the gesture towards self-possession in *Buffalo*, although brutal, is conspicuously tentative. Indeed, Teach portrays little consciousness of the potential contained within his outburst. Yet, through the (re)presentation of a fleeting realization of his own physicality, Teach is seen to confront and confound his otherwise debilitating dependence on assimilated cultural confusion. Further, in that moment of sudden, realized assault, the character and performer enact the parallel potential for the transgression of convention inherent in all forms of theatrical performance. The fragility of the etiquette of containment which maintains the characters' world of "business" is exposed as being as arbitrary as it is necessary. In the momentary failure of that etiquette, and thereby that world's permanent destabilization, is
offered a tangible reminder of the similar status and susceptibility of the theatrical frame of that world's (re)presentation.

Set in a run-down junk—or, as its proprietor, Don Dubrow, calls it, "Resale"—shop, *Buffalo* deals with a single day in the lives of three men. The third character is "Don's gopher," Bob (who remains surnameless). Ostensibly portrayed is the planning of a robbery. A customer (never seen on stage) has purchased a buffalo nickel from Don's shop for fifty dollars. Don has decided that he has been taken advantage of, and that he is going to break into the buyer's home and reclaim the nickel, along with whatever else he can remove for his trouble. The robbery is originally to be done by Don and Bob. But when Teach drops by and determines what is being planned, he insinuates himself into the preparations. In the process he bumps Bob, figuratively and literally, from the arrangements.

The robbery, however, remains a perpetual expectation. No windows are broken or locks picked. The only property damage done is to Don's shop. Rather, what the characters do, as in the most active of Mamet's plays, is talk. Ross Wetzston, reviewing the 1977 British production, noted that "It's a rarity in theatre to find the insights, the characterization, the action, so deeply embedded in the dialogue itself, in its vocabulary, its idioms, its rhythms."² Clearly, this is not unusual for theatrical (re)presentation. As Thomas L. King has suggested, "From the very beginning ... the theatre has been a place where irreconcilable opposites reach an accommodation in a paradox that is fundamental; that is, in the theatre talk is action and action is talk."³ But, as King points out, this basic theatrical truism is immediately complicated in the world of *Buffalo*. As Don early asserts to Bob, "Action talks and bullshit walks."⁴ The extreme linguistic acrobatics that this inspires King to perform (i.e., "Don seems more sensitive to a
Saussurian treatment of language as psychological rather than factual”) illustrate the interpretive possibilities of Don's words. But the apparent simplicity of this statement contains within it the governing principle of the play's dialect.

As with Bernie's at once self-centred and self-denying speech-action, the characters in *Buffalo* simultaneously pursue and defer effect through language use that both displaces and replaces action. Again, as in *Perversity*, Mamet's focus is on speech as illustrative of the semi-conscious complicity of the individual characters in the continuing propagation of a culture which has institutionalized confusion, greed, and deceit. Elusive, insidious contradiction informs the apparently sincere but unfailingly incoherent wisdom that floods the stage of this play. Motivated to varying degrees by anger, fear, and ignorance, all three characters twist language into bizarre and vicious shapes, Teach in particular wielding speech as a broad and relatively indiscriminate weapon: "Only (and I tell you this, Don). Only, and I'm not, I don't think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bullydike asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come" (10-11).

Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Daily News* referred—admiringly—in his review of the original Goodman production (with J.J. Johnston as Don, W.H. Macy as Bobby, Bernard Erhard as Teach, and direction by Gregory Mosher) to the performers' "thick grunts ... whining boasts, and ... hesitant bleats of desperation." Yet this colourful vocalization is simply the first layer of the dense, destructive linguistic method employed by each of the figures in turn. Teach's proclamations, while personally abusive, do the most damage through their interpolation of thoughtlessly absorbed media blurbs, confused Social Darwinism, and badly mangled, deeply cynical common sense.

June Schlueter and Elizabeth Forsyth have noted the influence of first of these elements,
suggesting that "Teach's style often resembles that of television journalism, sharing similar
highlighting techniques of economy, abbreviation, and compression." But this argument
suggests a systematic approach, whether fully conscious or not, in an intentional, quasi-
Strindbergian cooption of a vocabulary recognized for its rhetorical efficiency. Teach, however,
is no 'Jean the valet' to Don's 'Miss Julie.' Rather, Teach seems to be a victim of slippery,
perpetually overlapping, and mutually negating contortions of proof, proverb, and promotion.
Combined, these unequivocally proclaim his fundamental, socio-psychological dislocation. As
opposed to an acquired or intuitive skill for manipulation, Teach's verbal mannerisms depict a
personality saturated with high velocity, persistently discordant sound-bites, and announce his
absolute yet unconscious social configuration.

Just as with Perversity's Bernie, Teach's self-performance can be seen to parallel
theatrical performance that relies upon the distraction of pyrotechnical delivery and the assumed
safety of emptied convention. Jerzy Grotowski, in Towards a Poor Theatre (1968), has offered
his own, often-cited version of Brook's Deadly Theatre. In Grotowski's depiction of "Rich
Theatre" ("rich in flaws"), he describes a mode of production that strongly parallels Teach's
chaotic choreography: "The Rich Theatre depends on artistic kleptomania, drawing from other
disciplines, constructing hybrid-spectacles, conglomerates without backbone or integrity, yet
presented as an organic art-work." As becomes evident in such performative "kleptomania,"
the rhythms and patterns of communal significance—what Mamet refers to, undoubtedly more
comfortably than would Grotowski, as "traditional values"—are co-opted within popular
usage and imbibed through social conditioning. Successful appropriation, however, is seen in
Grotowski's theory and throughout Mamet's works as dependent upon a combination of factors:
a willed ignorance on the parts of both performer and spectator, and the material (i.e., brute) force of production.

John Lahr has referred, with conspicuous flourish, to the "pitch and roll of Mamet's stunning dialogue [which] exposes the spiritual failures of the society while it relishes the barbarous poetry of street talk." In response, the playwright, rather more straightforwardly, has claimed that the "people who speak [this] way don't institutionalize thought. They speak from a sense of need." This "sense of need" would seem to be borne out in the case of Teach by the differing critical responses to two of the character's portrayals, the first, in the 1977 production, by Robert Duvall (opposite Kenneth McMillan as Don and John Savage as Bob, with direction by Ulu Grosbard), and the second, in the early 80's, by Al Pacino (with J.J. Johnston as Don and Bruce McVittie as Bob, direction by Arvin Brown). For example, Walter Kerr, writing in the New York Times, found that Duvall's performance problematically conveyed "genuine intelligence," thus legitimizing Teach's anger as that of "valid furies.... [T]he verbal fireworks seemed to me a too muchness: I was inclined to attribute it to the author's own verbal self-indulgence."

By contrast, in Pacino's portrayal, Kerr found it to be "[Teach's] apparently knowledgeable vocabulary that points up his utter ineptitude. The language he uses, the rhythms he adopts, are set dead against the brutally foolish incompetence of his plans for the evening...." Thus, although Pacino's Teach "shakes his head sorrowingly ... as though he were in mourning for the massive stupidity that is loose in the world[,] ... it is Mr. Pacino's small-time hood who is desperately stupid, and therein, I think lies the secret of Mr. Mamet's telling use of language...." Thus, the suggestion of insight or understanding, and, more significantly, the potential for actual efficacy, seem at odds with the frenetic, externally determined confusion of
the character. Teach, like Bernie before him, acts the inhibition of all action—social or theatrical—which is constrained within the enervation of unexamined cultural convention.

Ironically, Buffalo was originally perceived by New York critics as the story of three petty criminals in which nothing happens. Gordon Rogoff suggested that "with friends like ... [Mamet] words don't need enemies"; Brendan Gill noted the play's "tiresome small talk"; and John Simon lamented the work's tendency to "mark time." Catherine Hughes' review in America described Buffalo as "much ado about very little." And indeed, the dynamic set up between the characters is designed not to precipitate a climactic confrontation but rather to sustain and prolong itself through internal verification and the deferral afforded by obscurity.

TEACH: You know what is free enterprise?

DON: No. What?

TEACH: The freedom...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: Of the Individual...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.

DON: Uh-huh...

TEACH: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit.

Am I so out of line on this?

DON: No.

TEACH: The country's founded on this, Don. You know this.[...]

Without this we're just savage shithheads in the wilderness.

DON: Yeah.
TEACH: Sitting around some vicious campfire. That's why *Ruthie* burns me up.

DON: Yeah.

TEACH: (Nowhere dyke...) And take those fuckers in the concentration camps. You think they went in there by choice?

DON: No.

TEACH: They were *dragged* in there, Don...

DON: ...yeah.

TEACH: Kicking and screaming... (72-73)

This passage's significance lies only partly in Teach's simultaneously fecund and decaying imagination. The apparently precise use of ellipses suggests that Don's replies—much as those of *Perversity's* Danny—stand not merely as toleration of Teach, but as indictment of Don's own complicity. Bury St. Edmund of the *Chicago Reader* noted of the original production that "Donny is the touchstone, the slow, solid personality who anchors the others and keeps them from blowing away." But Don "anchors" not primarily as a moderating but rather as a facilitating influence. His responses accommodate, even promote the seamlessness of Teach's performance, supplying unearned affirmation instead of the demand for assessment and contextualization.

When ellipses are absent from Don's replies, Teach (again reminiscent of *Perversity's* Bernie) seems suddenly, if only momentarily, brought up short. As a result, Teach is forced, albeit with an agility that far exceeds the previous character's, to discover through free association a new line of 'reasoning.' But Teach's kinetic energy is entirely centrifugal. His offered insights are necessarily, unfailingly free from self-reflection. As in the following defence of his desire to carry a gun on the robbery, Teach's argument is entirely dependent on the
momentum of personal turmoil desperately paraded as common sense: "All the preparation in the world does not mean shit, the path of some crazed lunatic sees you as an invasion of his personal domain. Guys go nuts, Don, you know this. Public officials ... Ax murders ... all I'm saying, look out for your own" (84-85). So disguised, his anxious volatility generates the sheer force of his (self-)deceivingly rational tone of voice and laboured, long-rehearsed spontaneity. But, as with Perversity's Bernie, the legitimacy of his fragmented, third-hand sermonizing is perpetually undermined by its dependence on hollow, misunderstood, and misapplied 'conventional wisdom.'

Much has been made of Buffalo's depiction of Mamet's blanket condemnation of corporate America. The author was unequivocal in his assessment that the "play is about the American business ethic," and offered as evidence the fact that "[b]usinessmen left it muttering vehemently about its inadequacies and pointlessness. They weren't really mad because the play was pointless ... they were angry because the play was about them." As Mamet further explained to Richard Gottlieb: "We excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business.... There's really no difference between the lumpenproletariat and stockbrokers or corporate lawyers who are the lackeys of business. Part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behavior becomes laudable."

In this context, Teach, Bob, and Don become the surrogates of contemporary leaders of industry and legislation, and the junkshop a microcosm for American socio-economic operation. The profound and frequently acknowledged influence on Mamet of the turn-of-the-century economist and social critic Thorsten Veblen is seen here in full force. Veblen, in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), suggests, "The whole question as to a class distinction in respect of
spiritual make-up is also obscured by the presence, in all classes of society, of acquired habits of life that closely simulate inherited traits and at the same time act to develop in the entire body of the population the traits which they simulate."17

Whether or not the thematic shoulders of the play are up to this kind of metaphoric burden, however, is questionable. As Jack V. Barbera has pointed out, "Don and Teach and Bobby are as antiquated and out-of-it as the American buffalo or bison (successful American businessmen may or may not be ethical, but they are not marginal)."18 However, as the next work to be considered in this study, *Edmond*, makes explicit, it is perhaps precisely the characters' "marginalized" status that positions them so aptly for Mamet's sociological experiments. Still, such direct and overt paralleling of dramatic and societal contexts and figures is hardly necessary—nor perhaps desirable—for a theatrical (re)presentation to make its intentions known. As Michael Billington of the *Guardian* noted, "Without ever mentioning politics, Mamet has in fact written a deeply political play...."19

More easily agreed upon is that *Buffalo* firmly establishes a number of the patterns initially discernible in *Perversity* and recurrent throughout Mamet's work. The mentor/disciple relationship is clearly operative in Don and Bob's relationship. The 'company of men' dynamic predominant in almost all subsequent plays is in place. The attack on materialism and on the distorting influence of capitalism is evident. The constant threat of conflict as a means of dealing with a suppressed desire for intimacy provides the underlying motivation of all the characters. Finally, what is indeed directly attributable to the socio-economic framework inherited from Veblen is the environment within which all of these patterns are played out. As Mamet has suggested, "Economic life in America is a lottery. Everyone's got an equal chance, but only one guy is going to get to the top.... Once someone has no vested interest in behaving
in an ethical manner and the only bounds on his behavior are supposedly his innate sense of fair
play, then fair play becomes an outdated concept."²⁰

The specific implications of this stance for theatrical (re)presentation are extensive, as
this understanding of the relationship between commercial, cultural, and personal morality
directly informs the nature of self-performance exhibited by Mamet's characters. What emerges
is a social dynamic of utter relativity, determined by personal gain and immediate gratification.
In such a climate the concept of performance becomes an entirely aggressive and acquisitive
measure of material productivity. Personal narrative is evaluated by its capacity for coercion.
Character identity becomes an unfixed and opportunistic propensity for assimilation and
deceitful regurgitation.

Mamet repeatedly portrays a world in which what is presented as the positive and
substantive familiarity of tradition is supplanted. Offered in its place is the seduction of illusory
and illusionistic convention, both in the broadly social and the specifically theatrical contexts.
Accordingly, Mamet has lamented the loss in the contemporary commercial theatre of what he
has described as "generosity, desire, organic life, actions performed freely—without desire for
reward or fear of either censure or misunderstanding."²¹ Thus, for Mamet, any attempt to
transgress or transcend the imposed framework of consumeristic expectations in contemporary
American society, both in theatrical production and in the performance of personal interaction, is
subsumed into formulistic recitation and superficial histrionics.

This, then, is where the motivational overlap of, on the one hand, the characters
portrayed in Mamet's theatre and, on the other, the (re)presentational form through which they
are animated, results in the plays' amplified impact and volatility. Mamet's dramatic figures are
seen struggling within a degree of social programming that completely overwhelms all sense of
authority over the presentation of self. In this way the characters replicate the suppression, within systematic conventions, of the spontaneity and mutability of theatrical performance, which would otherwise approach too closely the inherent dynamic of spectator desire and fear. The paradoxical result of this suppression, in the social sphere portrayed, is a retreat from intimacy that is disguised and displaced within hyper-animation. In the theatrical context, the parallel consequence is the (often spectacular) denial of the very condition which distinguishes live performance from all other, fully representational forms of expression.

The challenge, then, for the writer, director, and actor who wish to overcome this particularly Rich but Deadly environment is to find a way to contextualize this degraded conception of performance within a critical (re)presentation. When Mamet's characters approach the possibility of transgressing the numbing conditioning of a dominant popular culture, they likewise enact the identical, perpetual impulse of the theatrical form. The overpowering of socially constructed behavioral frames on the personal level, therefore, is mutually informed and enhanced by the parallel potential for the performance to disrespect its equally conventional containment.

Where Perversity and Buffalo fundamentally part ways is precisely in their resolution of this central question of performance. To be sure, Buffalo, in its increased structural compression and its proclaimed fidelity to the Aristotelian requirements of revelation and resolution, has considerably greater demands placed upon it. "Endings in tragedies are resolved," Mamet has asserted. "The protagonist undergoes a reversal of the situation, a recognition of the state, and we have a certain amount of cleansing. This is what Don experiences in American Buffalo." Yet to define Buffalo as a tragedy in this way is to possibly
also place upon it even more severe restrictions—however legitimately 'traditional'—than those implied by an overtly didactic ideological interpretation.

Presumably, a writer as self-conscious in his announced following of the prescriptions (and proscriptions) of the Poetics as is Mamet must be aware of the implications of such a categorization, and prepared to incorporate them into his own understanding of his work. But it is difficult to discover in Buffalo's Don either the initial hubris or the eventual, definitive self-consciousness that traditionally results from tragic loss. It is likewise difficult to discover in the portrayed situation evidence to support Mamet's assertion that Don's "reversal" occurs when he realizes that "all this comes out of his vanity, that because he abdicated a moral position for one moment in favour of some momentary gain, he has let anarchy into his life and has come close to killing the thing he loves." There is little to suggest that Don's interest in "monetary gain" is either "momentary" or uncharacteristic. The "anarchy," which is so well manifested in Teach's arrival, would seem, at the beginning of the portrayed events, a familiar visitor to Don's Resale Shop. And the weight of Don and Bob's tentative, inarticulate reunion at the end of the play seems due, in fact, to its ambiguity and lack of emotional clarity.

The obstacle, for this reader and spectator, to accepting the author's interpretation may lie in Mamet's understanding and utilization of Aristotle's concept of character. Gerald Else's translation of the fourth-century B.C. treatise tells us that "tragedy is an imitation not of men but of a life, an action ... they are not active in order to imitate their characters, but they include the characters along with the actions for the sake of the latter." Intriguingly, for Mamet's contemporary, Sam Shepard, "character is something that can't be helped, it's like destiny. It's something that's essential.... It's like the structure of our bones, the blood that runs through our veins." Mamet has offered a somewhat contrasting view: "[T]here is no such thing as
character other than the habitual action, as Mr. Aristotle told us two thousand years ago. It just
doesn't exist. Here or in Hollywood or otherwise.... "Character" is exactly what the person
literally does in pursuit of the superobjective, the objective of the scene. The rest doesn't
count."[26] Both writers, then, share the view that character is ultimately defined by action. But
whereas Shepard endows character with truly providential weight and durability, Mamet literally
dismisses its significance, describing it as specific and habitual, an acquired behaviour motivated
by isolated desire. This does indeed precisely describe the unexamined and frequently chaotic
patterns demonstrated by Mamet's (again, in appropriate Aristotelian fashion) consistently
inconsistent victims of runaway socialization. Yet this would also seem to restrict his characters
in possible audience identification, on a thematic level, to an unnerving recognition of the
fragmentation and impulsiveness that their actions demonstrate.

The comments of Gregory Mosher, who has been the initial director of most of Mamet's
plays, are particularly intriguing in this context: "If [Buffalo] is played as a psychological study
of a madman, then it can't make sense; the focus of the whole thing tends to shift to the
virtuosity of whoever is playing Teach and the plot and themes disappear...."[27] Unless Teach,
like his counterpart in Perversity, is to be reduced to "a kind of dramatic pressure on the others
in the play" (which the more traditional structure of Buffalo strongly discourages), Mosher
would seem, wisely, to be arguing against a fully realistic psychological reading of any of the
characters' motivations. The action of Buffalo is neither progressive nor familiar, and is difficult
to perceive as moving towards the universal identification that its author would seem to claim
for it. It is not made up of the commonplace absurdity of Beckett's clown-tramps, who, in
Waiting For Godot (1953), without fail, make perfect sense within their meaningless existence
and uncontrollable environment. Rather, the absurdity of Teach, Don, and Bob is of a
manufactured variety, forcibly fabricated out of resistant but ultimately coerced rationality within a specific, distinctly 'perverse' social milieu.

At the same time, however, as is indicated in the vast majority of reviews of assorted productions, critical and audience response is indeed regularly preoccupied with the performance of Teach, both as an actor-generated personality and as a fictional embodiment of a common, if exaggerated, social phenomenon. The pivotal revelation (if such is the correct term) of the play in performance would seem not to belong to the figure of Don at all. What is, I believe, explored with powerful immediacy and impact is the inherent, irresistible, and potentially transgressive force of spontaneous performance--of action, unrestrained by context or anticipated consequence--as a social dynamic. The play, like so much of Perversity, demonstrates the consuming, self-propagating potential of story--or, rather, storytelling--within a social climate that encourages the breeding of dangerously diseased narrative. Yet, in contrast to the earlier play, Buffalo proposes the inevitable straining of, and possible liberation from, the centripetal compression of unchecked narration through resort to the unpredictable physicality of theatrical performance.

As Perversity makes evident, the critique of representation within theatrical (re)presentation is nothing if not problematical. As C. W. E. Bigsby has noted, "Mamet seems to suggest that fiction-making is a means of evading the real..." However, Bigsby argues, this must be balanced with the fact that "Mamet, too, is a trickster. The emotions his play provokes, the imagination he stirs, are the product of calculation and professional skill." Don's tacit complicity in Teach's (self-)mesmerizing monologues cannot but draw attention to the audience's own collaboration in--and thus legitimization of--that which it knows to be contrived and intentionally shaped. For what is the play itself but a performance designed to persuade and
manipulate in its own, self-interested manner?

There is, however, the additional factor, specifically identified by Austin and familiar to all storytellers, that "things ... can be and go wrong." Mamet, as well as his characters, no matter what level of "calculation" and "skill" they bring to their tales, are subject to these "infelicities," which, in both social and theatrical performance, represent the re-insistence of "the real." As noted, infelicities comprise both accident and insincerity, so that the ostensible intention of spoken language either fails or is deceitful. Central to Mamet's plays are the social and cultural circumstances which lead to the collapse of the distinction between these two, quite different intentions and effects. And it is within this perspective that there is a determining distinction between Perversity and Buffalo.

The contrast between the two plays identifies a steadily intensifying preoccupation throughout Mamet's work and, in particular, in the plays that are considered in my study. Through both the fictional world of the stories told and the specifically theatrical means of their telling, the delusional hyperactivity of unqualified dependence on habitualized convention emerges as symptomatic of contemporary American culture. Yet with increasing clarity and conviction, Mamet addresses the possibility of overcoming, in the face of deteriorating cultural conditions, the seemingly inherent susceptibility for deceit in performance—through the union of both levels, personal and theatrical, of performative energy.

Clearly, as discussed, within Perversity this realization of individual potential is distant. However, Matthew C. Roudane has argued that "... Mamet harkens back to the Romantic tradition.... Mamet believes in the powers of the aesthetic imagination and art to liberate, to create a liberal humanism. Underneath his characters' hard-boiled, enamelled public bravado lies an ongoing inner drama, a subtext presenting the characters' quest for consciousness."30
Certainly, Mamet is on record as in support of this assessment, particularly in relation to the role of the theatre.

In a morally bankrupt time we can help to change the habit of coercive and frightened action and substitute for it the habit of trust, self-reliance, and cooperation.

If we are true to our ideals we can help to form an ideal society—a society based on and adhering to ethical first principles—not by preaching about it, but by creating it each night in front of the audience—by showing how it works. In action.31

It is not always easy to discover this optimism, or this conviction in the potential perfectibility of humanity, in many of the plays themselves. The final thematic nihilism of Perversity is not unique in the playwright's body of work. However, the final, two word methodology proposed within the above theatrical mandate perhaps contains the key to the discovery of that mandate's potential. Buffalo, in contrast to Perversity, displays its specifically theatrical idealism, in that it holds itself, and the act of performance, accountable.

While the episodic structure of Perversity suitably dissipates the energies of its characters, Buffalo's two act construction has the inverse effect. The anticipated but continually withheld sense of progression within the latter work creates a pervasive atmosphere of frustration amongst its characters (in addition to some already noted critics). Inevitably, this influences the audience in its equally conventionalized expectations of exposition, complications, rising action, climax, and resolution. But the play denies these traditional signposts. Characters are reported and identified as sources of conflict: Ruthie, Fletcher, the nickel's purchaser. Yet none of these figures is seen to perform within this environment which equates histrionics with stasis. In a sense, the absence of these (at times conspicuously) missing characters is felt as a presence, which is generated solely by the expectation of their arrival.
Thus highlighted is the shared continuum of participatory status that connects player and spectator, and which here unites both in their enforced (fictional and performative) containment. As Jan Mukărovský noted, "[T]he roles of the actor and the spectator are much less distinguished than it might seem at first glance. Even the actor to a certain extent is a spectator for his partner at the moment when the partner is playing."\textsuperscript{32} Thus, simply through their refusal to appear, to interact, or to acknowledge the expectations they have generated, the absent figures effectively relegate the present characters to the status of "extras who do not intervene actively" in the consequential action reported from off-stage. Don, Teach, and Bob are indeed "distinctly perceived as spectators," and become the source of, while sharing in, the audience's growing uneasiness and sense of futility, frustration, and dependence on imagination.

But more important is the constantly growing perception of the starkly inconsequential nature of these characters' performative presence—particularly when compared to the reported accomplishments of the missing figures. Teach's agitation, unlike Perversity's Bernie's, is shut up tight within a space enclosed both literally and metaphorically. The mounting evidence of his impotence is thus seen to raise within him a proportionate increase of rhetorical vitriol. Yet the result only further frustrates both the character's portrayed desire and the conditioned anticipation of mainstream North American theatre audiences. Convention promises a seemingly inevitable crisis of conflicting forces. Common expectation predicts that the thrust of the play will have established the thematic and empathetic substantiality of those forces, thus encouraging audience investment. Yet \textit{Buffalo} consistently undermines the stakes it has dubiously sketched.

The irony is undeniable in Teach's own unwitting self-negation: "What am I standing here convincing you? What am I doing demeaning myself standing here pleading with you to protect your best interests? I can't believe this, Don. Somebody told me I'd do this for you ...
(For anybody) I'd call him a liar. (I'm coming in here to efface myself.)" (79). The irony here, for any actor on any stage, is unmistakeable. More specifically, "effaci[ing]" is precisely what Teach is doing to himself on multiple levels within the (re)presentation. His speech-action, more profoundly than even that of Perversity's Bernie, is motivated by a desperate, apparently unconscious need to delay reference, to avoid signification, and to defer (with fitting redundancy) actual concretization. Language becomes for Teach a perpetual denial of actuality itself—of the very doing that he, ostensibly, is so impatient to engage in. Indeed, he emerges as animated solely by the apparently unspeakable anger and ignorance that the play suggests lie at the foundation of contemporary American public and private performance.

What becomes increasingly clear is that whatever Teach says is perceived as a paradoxically effective claim of inconsequence—a status that he too must share as long as his presence is defined through his self-negating misuse of language. In some ways, then, he resembles a high-speed version of Winnie in Beckett's Happy Days (1962)—but with significant, illuminating differences. Buried, at first up to her waist and then her chin, in a symbolically post-apocalyptic desert, the protagonist of Beckett's play resorts to "the old style" of speaking in order to defend her sanity against her encroaching extinction. As the earth slowly swallows her, she calls upon the half-remembered songs, slogans, maxims, and clichés of an earlier, more mobile and promising period of her life, in order to regulate and normatize her bizarre situation: "Ah well, what matter, that's what I always say, it will have been a happy day, after all, another happy day."33

But Happy Days, like so many of Beckett's plays, deals with the agony of self-consciousness, rather than its avoidance or culturally enforced denial. Winnie talks about language as much as she indulges in it as a survival mechanism, repeatedly acknowledging her
utter dependence upon it in order to continue her performance of self: "... just to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don't is all I need..." (27). Yet the same self-reflection allows her to contextualize language and its use, and to concede the limits of its efficacy: "Something says, Stop talking now, Winnie, for a minute, don't squander all your words for the day, stop talking and do something for a change, will you?" (41).

Teach, like Bernie, refuses to suffer such self-awareness. In direct contrast to Beckett's Winnie, he frantically denies his performative use of language, as well as the powerful, conventional limitations inherent in such practice. Trapped within this realm of perpetually obscured and deferred hypotheses, he claims a substantiality of identity that is continuously betrayed by its own empty, rhetorical proclamation. His performance is thus a wildly open text that persistently defies its own potential through an impassioned boast of closure. Up to this point, then, Kerr's assessment—that Teach "is all language, and because he is all language, he is going to fail, which is what makes him so intensely angry"—is valid and has direct implications.

The unavoidable irony is that the play must also contend with the same assessment of inconsequence for the actor portraying Teach. The (re)presentation of (re)presentation, the performance of performance, creates a perceptual paradox that involves the audience in a conflicted response. On the one hand, the spectator may be led to question the very legitimacy of a contemporary performative mode which discovers in its social counterpart a fundamental futility and deceit. At the same time, however, s/he may desire reassurance that this same performative mode will not be altered in any way that threatens the conventional safety of her/his role as audience member—a safety that maintains the performance's continuous containment through a parallel, conventionally enforced futility and deceit. The reversal of the play, finally, while moral in nature, is primarily so through broad and phenomenological
implication. For it is marked, I believe, not by Don's crisis of faith, but by the transition between performative modes. It is marked by action.

At a point that seems to have been arrived at intuitively, given the play's lack of identifiable and progressive causality, the world of Buffalo is radically transformed. Teach's brief statements at the moment when he discovers that Bobby has apparently conspired with the absent forces of Grace, Ruthie, and Fletcher, are suddenly, unexpectedly accompanied and contextualized by action:

TEACH grabs a nearby object and hits BOB viciously on the side of the head.

TEACH: Grace and Ruthie up your ass, you shithead; you don't fuck with us, I'll kick your fucking head in. (I don't give a shit...)

Pause.

You twerp.

A pause near the end of which BOB starts whimpering.

I don't give a shit. (Come in here with your fucking stories...)

Pause.

Imaginary people in the hospital...

BOB starts to cry.

That don't mean nothing to me, you fruit. (94)

Teach's repeated denial of personal investment identifies a truly dramatic--or, more accurately, theatrical--shift of perspective. Abandoned is the acrobatic irrationality of his previous performance, the bulk of which had been intended to prove to Don just how much he did, indeed, "give a shit." In its place he offers a direct and tangible declaration of presence. In this the character seems to enact "the image of man" that Herbert Blau suggests emerges in a theatre
that finally frees itself from the blind and unquestioning imitation of realistic convention. Having overcome "the enemy of mimesis," Blau contends, "we see ... the grotesque offspring of the theater's self-perpetuating enormity: ego, self, personality, a mere reproductive subject, slave to the ideological apparatus of reproduction, who must learn to free himself from false acting by true performance."35

Intriguingly, Teach is ultimately inspired to this movement by a powerful disgust for what he perceives as the simplistic and inconsistent artifice of Bob's story—and, significantly, Bob's ineptitude in its telling. Thus the play offers nothing so unequivocal or uplifting as a conversion of conscience. It is, rather, the play's, as opposed to the characters', philosophy that has altered. In adopting an apparently intuitive mode of action, Teach moves beyond, and thus overpowers, the restrictive, inconsequential mode of verbal narrative he has been struggling to sustain. For while the story he attempts to tell to this point in the play is chaotic, it nonetheless is shaped by a desperate pursuit of the perception of unity and veracity. However, the explosive transition through which he ultimately transgresses the ruling, unspoken agreement of verbal inefficacy entirely dismantles (indeed, deconstructs) the desperate dynamic of his—and Buffalo's—prior mode of theatricality.

Michael Vanden Heuvel has discussed precisely this assault on textual containment associated with a variety of contemporary conceptions of "performance": "Instead of relating a story built upon a coherent illusion of plot and character development, a cogently symbolic mise-
en-scène, and (especially) discursive or expressive language, performance disrupts, displaces, and deconstructs these codes by revealing what Barthes calls the seams between them..."36 The consequences of this "disrupt[ion]," within the theatrical event, are seen as manifold and revolutionary.
The "true performer" might, for instance, reveal to the spectator improvisational acting techniques and transformation exercises as a model for escaping the social constraints of playing a fixed and static role. In another fashion, performers might blur the distinctions between the actor/character and spectator in order to expand the stage environment to develop participatory relationships and interactions ... all in order to reveal ways of transcending the constraints imposed by an overly cerebralized and puritanical society.37

Admittedly, Buffalo's predominantly realistic mode is in many ways resistant to most of the fundamental transgressions here identified. However, even the limitations of the comparison are instructive. Both Teach's and Mamet's ability and/or willingness to venture beyond defining conventions emerge, finally, as cautious and tentative. Yet both share local environments (Buffalo's 'junkshop' of American business ethics, Mamet's highly commercialized popular American theatre) in which confused and unquestioned appropriation has attained the status of norm. The character's language, manically discursive, is seen as expressive of a near hysterical denial of uncertainty and inferiority--Mamet's revisioned take on "fixed and static" socialization. Similarly, the proposed "overly cerebralized and puritanical society" is replaced in Buffalo by one of intellectual and moral vacuity.

However, the consequences of the overstepping of conventionalized textual boundaries--thereby transgressing the frame of 'safe' theatre's tacit agreement of futility--nonetheless results in the same, destabilizing sense of disruption in Mamet's (re)presentational world. Instantly, once insistent and doggedly defended (if near schizophrenic) roles are challenged; a heightened degree of interaction, both emotional and physical, is forcibly instigated; and the once presumed status of each character as doer or observer is blurred beyond recognition. Finally, the play's basic realism does not discount so much as contextualize and underscore the potential disruption of fractured performative frames. Thus, the parallel potentials for transgression in personal self-performance and conventionally defined theatrical practice both animate and undermine
Buffalo’s visceral impact.

The tone is recast from this moment in the play. Things happen. Bobby’s actual deceit is uncovered—a benevolent ruse to win back Don’s patronage. This, in turn, spurs Don’s moral review (as opposed to reorientation), which has the subsequent effect of forcing Don into the ‘act’ual arena with Teach. None of these characters, however, seems well adapted to this new social organization of physical consequence. Teach’s repeated "Oh Christ... Oh, my God, I live with madmen" (101) as Don advances, striking him, clearly expresses his surprised impotence in the face of the unprecedented performative dynamic he has initiated. The amazement informing Teach’s exclamation, "You’re going to hit me," voices the experiential whiplash that the audience has likewise been exposed to. Finally, when Teach further realizes that Bobby has been lying regarding his surveillance of their prospective victim, and has thereby endangered the two older men, he enters into a remarkably well-coordinated combination of material and verbal destruction.

TEACH picks up the dead-pig sticker and starts trashing the junkshop.

The Whole Entire World.

There Is No Law.

There Is No Right and Wrong.

The World Is Lies.

There Is No Friendship.

Every Fucking Thing.

Pause.

Every God-forsaken Thing. (103)

The devastation, however, despite its unwittingly profound philosophical underpinning,
is temporary. The play ends, not with a spiritual, moral, or metaphysical impact of similar magnitude, but in expressions of physical and mental exhaustion.

DON: Are you alright?

TEACH: What?

DON: Are you alright?

TEACH: How the fuck do I know?

DON: You tire me out, Walt.

TEACH: What?

DON: I need a rest.

TEACH: This fucking day. (104)

Again, the contrast to Didi and Gogo of Waiting For Godot is instructive. Beckett's characters express, in their unflagging curiosity, the punitive sentence of incomprehension their author perceives in human existence. By contrast, there is little in the world of Buffalo's characters to encourage the consciousness that must precede any desire for understanding.

But what Buffalo does propose in its final images (and which Godot ultimately refuses) is an embryonic, intuitive sense of possibility. Through its sudden and violent shift to physical activity, the play foregrounds an inverse, yet far more common and seductive propensity. Its explosive action, by contrast, exposes the attraction of unscrutinized inertia (through unexamined convention) in performance, both personal and theatrical. Further, Buffalo insists upon the constant potential for the transgression of this denial of accountability. Teach, in Buffalo's last moments, carefully fashions himself a rain hat out of a piece of newspaper. He then models it in front of a mirror before leaving to get his car, actually looking at himself for the first time in the play. As if expelled through a distinctly corporeal emulation of tragic
catharsis, the intensity and desperation that until this point have made self-reflection impossible recede, perhaps but perhaps not only momentarily.

For this tentatively redeeming physicality to be perceived by an audience, however, requires its shared experience. The works of Sam Shepard provide an instructive counter-point at this juncture. Shepard's characters regularly display a highly conscious theatricality. Their movement to extreme activity is thus contained within their stylized, self-reflexive self-presentation. As Sheila Rabillard has observed, a "Shepard character ... performs like an actor before an audience, speaking lines not so much because he intends what they mean, as in order to have his performance regarded, his presence and power felt. Shepard anatomizes a profound need for audience." As a consequence, as Charles R. Bachman has pointed out, "Menacing, potentially violent characters or forces are introduced, only to have the terror they create defused either by an avoidance of the threatened violence, or vitiation of its effect through audience alienation devices." In a converse means towards the same end, Shepard may also simply leave the anticipated violence in suspension, its threat transformed into an atemporal abstraction. As Raynette Halvorsen Smith has noted in reference to Shepard's True West (1980), "Paradoxically, the threat of violence that pervades most of this play builds to a climax and then is frozen unresolved."

Mamet's characters, however, often seem victim to their own performative drive. Thus, when the inherent physicality of the theatrical context emerges in Mamet's work, it is experienced by characters and audience alike as far more unexpected, unpredictable, and uncontrolled. When, as in Buffalo, it is suddenly, explosively, and impulsively present, this most theatrical of elements (with apologies to Peter Szondi, who would reserve this distinction, at least within modern drama, for "the dialogue") all but precludes indifference on the part of the
simultaneously present audience. Further, it locates the concept of performance within a context of renewed, inherently dangerous, yet potentially redeeming accountability, as social and specifically theatrical conventions of performance are momentarily fused and confused in their mutual transgression.

Following Toby Silverman Zinman, who in turn refers to Peter Brook, it is possible to see Shepard's theatrical figures as silhouettes\(^2\) projected upon the "First Wall" of his theatre, as conscious, stylized creations of an acknowledged artifice. Inhabitants of an often surrealistic and symbolically charged theatrical mode, his characters emerge as the natural counterparts to their (re)presentational expression. But Mamet's images are less content. The plays adopt a theatrical approach that, through its adherence to realistic staging, largely respects the dictates of naturalistic convention. Yet his plays explore the literally maddening perversity generated by the habitual acceptance of parallel conventions in the performance of social interaction. The tension thus created both challenges and revitalizes the playwright's chosen (re)presentational form.

Goffman's work begins to offer a context in which the behaviour of Mamet's characters may be considered.

The legitimate performances of everyday life are not 'acted' or 'put on' in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have. The expressions it is felt he is giving off will be especially "inaccessible" to him. But ... the incapacity of the ordinary individual to formulate in advance the movements of his eyes and body does not mean that he will not express himself through these devices in a way that is dramatized and pre-formed in his repertoire of actions. In short, we all act better than we know how.\(^3\)

Schechner further subdivides the "Goffman performer" into "the ones who conceal, as conmen do; and the ones who don't know they are performing."\(^4\) Yet Mamet's works repeatedly and
specifically address the practical impossibility of precision in this kind of categorization. Instead the plays enact the perpetual fluidity of what Schechner has elsewhere called the "many gradations of purposeful concealment or information sharing" in performance. Teach, Don, and Bobby, in their willed ignorance, all act both better and worse than they know how. For the pure, brute force of a chaotic cultural conditioning—against which they can never more than react—results in the routine bruising, frequent collapse, and occasional, tentative triumph of its performers.

Overwhelmed and estranged, Mamet's protagonists regularly fragment under the weight of their involuntary and miscomprehended—since incomprehensible—socialization. Self-awareness is a highly uncommon result. Yet what is never absent is the frequently unconscious but tenacious act of resistance. Shallow and transient in Perversity, it rears an angrier head in Buffalo in Teach's momentary rebellion. Finally, however, it is (functionally) ironic that the playwright's realistically portrayed characters are animated and empowered by their potential liberation from the adherence to unquestioned convention. For it is a related, if not parallel adherence, on the part of playwright and performers, which holds the characters within the frame of the chosen mode of their expression. In effect, it is this irony, this apparent dichotomy of theme and form, which generates the intensity of Mamet's works.

As a study of Perversity and Buffalo makes evident, however, the playwright is hardly celebratory in his offerings. The self-consciousness demonstrated by characters such as Teach and Don is painfully underdeveloped, the bastard child of a union of mutually distorted and reckless conceptions of morality. In this, Buffalo is indeed representative of Mamet's perspective as it is realized in play after play. But so too is the work typical in its assertion that even such embryonic awareness is only possible through a willingness to expose one's self to
precisely the threat of involvement that Mamet's theatre, in its fullest realization, demands of its audience. Ultimately, the inner contradiction which lies at the centre of both *Perversity* and *Buffalo* is, with *The Shawl*, resolved, as Mamet proposes a sense of equilibrium—a practical ideal—in the fusing of personal and theatrical performance.

*
Edmond (1982), is a twenty-three scene, twenty-nine character, modern day "morality tale" (the author's own classification for the work\(^1\)). It thus stands as a structural departure from both of the earlier plays discussed. Edmond's episodic organization is reminiscent of Perversity, but it reveals itself a sibling closer to Buffalo thematically. In a sense, Edmond marks a further, more developed stage in the playwright's maturing conception of the potential efficacy in self-conscious performance, personal and theatrical. For it is with Edmond that Mamet offers a protagonist who in fact recognizes—and openly, violently opposes—the nature and magnitude of his omnipresent, socio-cultural composition. The resolution of this resistance is highly ambiguous. However, within the character's apparently utter persecution by the instituted paranoia of his culture may be found an ironically redemptive transcending of deadeningly proscriptive social convention.

Edmond was first staged at the Goodman Theatre in June of 1982, with direction by Gregory Mosher and featuring Colin Stilton in the title role. The production was moved to the Provincetown Playhouse in New York in October of the same year. The influences the work displays, in addition to the author's noted allusion to the medieval Moralities, are diverse. The substantial spectre of Georg Buchner's proto-modernist Woyzeck (1837) haunts Edmond's episodic and expressionistic treatment of an inexplicable yet (the play suggests) inevitable murder, and in the psychological fate of its outcast perpetrator. As well, Mamet has cited a fascination with Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy: "[I]t's always struck me what a great achievement it would be if I could one day write a scene to make people understand why
somesbody killed. The playwright has also credited the writings of Brecht, though specifically the plays—"the most wonderful, charming, involving, quintessentially dramatic writing ... wonderfully whacky...." These Mamet has opposed to Brecht's theoretical statements, which he deems, ironically, "... nonsense ... balderdash, a direct contradiction of the writing itself."³

*Edmond* charts the adventures of one Edmond Burke (with an ironic and self-conscious nod towards the conservative, eighteenth century political theorist). Edmond—a conspicuously white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, American male—decides, in a fashion not dissimilar to that of the Cashier of Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* (1912), that he can no longer tolerate the numbing normality of his superficially content existence. However, the contrasting responses to the announcement of this revelation in the two plays are significant. Throughout Kaiser's play there is a sense that the Cashier inspires a commanding, Romantic fascination in all those he encounters, including his wife, who displays practically speechless placation in the face of her husband's unusual behaviour. Edmond's partner, on the other hand, is precise and lethal in her response. Discovering that Edmond has had no interest in her either "spiritually or sexually" for "some time," she responds,

WIFE: And why didn't you leave then?  
Why didn't you leave *then*, you stupid *shit*!!!  
All of these years you say that you've been living here...

*(Pause.)*

Eh? You idiot....  
I've had enough.  
You idiot ... to see you *passing judgment* on me all this time...

EDMOND: ...I never judged you....⁴

The speech sets the tone for the first half of the play. Edmond is portrayed as earnestly yet somehow perversely objective. His attempts to break out of the deadening isolation of
perpetual, helpless spectatorship take the form of random, and thus inevitably ill-fated, gestures towards physical and emotional participation. His statement that "I never judged you"—initially a denial of any wrongdoing—emerges as his own self-indictment. For what Edmond progressively aspires towards is precisely that: a communally shared and upheld system of examination and evaluation, of the self and others.

But Edmond is conspicuously, and apparently intentionally, without the poetic insight and philosophical agility of Kaiser's protagonist. As opposed to the Cashier's introspection, Mamet's protagonist is possessed of (by?) an intense and self-absorbed solipsism. Similarly, the political and spiritual evangelism (inseparable in Kaiser's play) that so clearly motivate the earlier character are translated in Mamet's play into a desperate, often violent groping for personal and public meaning and order. What quickly becomes clear is that the antagonism that a reluctantly prodded society feels towards an unsolicited messiah is far more violent in Mamet's version of the tale. Edmond encounters an instant and brutal rejection that mirrors the heightened rage of its provocateur, as opposed to the lazy, habitualized subordination of the earlier play's 'masses.' Socialization, Mamet suggests, is no longer merely an anesthetic. Contemporary North American acculturation is seen as a far more dangerous and desperate mode of self-denial.

Clearly, Edmond finds the mantle of prophet (a distinctly performative role) much less an instinctive one than Kaiser's protagonist. Nor is he as immediately associated, as is Buchner's Woyzeck, with the battling expectations of primal intuition (spontaneous improvisation) and distorted civilization (awkward, rehearsed affectation). Thus, Edmond has neither the quick, distancing confidence of superiority displayed by the Cashier, nor the strangely validating voices of nature which eventually drive Woyzeck to the merciful displacement of madness and death.

Edmond's attempt to escape the suffocating constraints of convention are instead definitively
circumscribed by the very forces of social conditioning he seeks to overcome. As he tries to effect reform at the heart of this social dynamic, he merely finds himself exiled amongst its darkest, more successfully marginalized extremities.

Leaving his wife, Edmond heads out to experience life—which, in Mamet's take on contemporary America, resides by default in the quarters of prostitution, gambling, violent crime, quick sex, and, finally, murder and incarceration. The scene titles are self-explanatory: "A Bar," "A Peep Show," "The Whorehouse," "Three-Card Monte," "Jail." Not surprisingly, Edmond's journey is an irresistible spiral downwards. His brief, frustrated attempt to enter into "The Mission" in order to "preach" (276) before he is arrested for the slaying of a woman seems a cynical, ironic gesture towards the same, revelatory situation in Kaiser's play. Kaiser's protagonist is allowed a spectacular ascent into metaphorical crucifixion and martyrdom. As a corps of police scramble in the darkness at the Cashier's feet, he delivers a powerful declaration of his social manifesto. Edmond, under superficially similar circumstances, is initially humoured and ultimately thrown to the ground and hand-cuffed, in silence and disgrace, by a single officer.

Finally subjugated within a bruising, entirely unanticipated, yet strangely intimate relationship with an unnamed, black, male convict, Edmond apparently finds the long sought-after peace that has motivated his entire journey.

EDMOND: Do you think that we go somewhere when we die?

PRISONER: I don't know, man. I like to think so.

EDMOND: I would, too.

PRISONER: I sure would like to think so. (Pause.)

EDMOND: Perhaps it's Heaven.
PRISONER (pause): I don't know.

EDMOND: I don't know either but perhaps it is. (Pause.)

PRISONER: I would like to think so.

EDMOND: I would too. (Pause.)

Good night. (Pause.)

PRISONER: Good night.

(EDMOND gets up, goes over and exchanges a goodnight kiss with the PRISONER. He then returns to his bed and lies down.) (297-98)

The bizarre sense of resignation which informs the play's conclusion results in one of the most ambiguous of the playwright's works. Yet, in the character's final, enforced containment within what the play proposes as the most despised and socially deviant combination of roles imaginable by his culture, Edmond is seen to enjoy an almost absolute attainment of his distorted desire.

It would be an understatement to say that the play is not without its detractors. Daniel Dervin subtitles his article on the work "Is There Such a Thing as a Sick Play?" Speculating about "a hidden agenda, a private scenario," Dervin laments the play's highly reductive representation of class, gender, and race. He further challenges its trivialized—since idealized—portrayal of "the tender intimacies of the homo-erotic bond." It is, however, possible to share many of these concerns without following Dervin through to his conclusion that the play expresses a consistent and unified movement towards the protagonist's self-discovery within an outwardly denied but actually desired homosexual subordination.

Rather, what seems uncontestable is the pronounced singularity of much of the protagonist's experience. Regularly stated claims that the character is an immediately identifiable
Everyman seem untenable—even within the circumscribed population base suggested by the playwright. Given the failure of the American Dream, Mamet contends, "the people it has sustained—the white males—are going nuts." But Edmond's motivations, responses, and attempts at solutions seem anything but common in nature, even amongst "white males."

Indeed, this seems to be precisely the point being made by the play. The character is in fact presented as a socially degenerate yet individually progressive anomaly, what Mamet has called an "unintegrated personality." For what Edmond conspicuously attempts is to not perform the role assigned him in his social context.

The 'Everyman' argument, however, has repeatedly been made. Jack Kroll, in his review of the play, asserted that "Edmond is neither good nor evil; he's modern man as a bundle of behavioral spasms that turn into a destructive epilepsy when the rotting social-psychological structure finally collapses." Richard Christiansen of the Chicago Tribune wrote of the play that "Its savagery, which summons up the demons in us all, is cleansing. And for all its brutality, it is ultimately a most humane and compassionate work." And Michael Feingold of the Village Voice actually entitled his review "The Way We Are," the play's universality apparently discovered in the fact that it offers "something for—and something to offend—everyone."

Edmond's typicality, Feingold suggests, is to be found in the familiar incongruence of his attempt to release his frustrations. Rather than towards those aspects of society that hold him oppressed, the reviewer notes, he directs his rage "at those below him [:] ... homosexuals, blacks, and women." But while Edmond's response perhaps portrays a socially verifiable reality, the play does little to challenge or even explore the structure or underpinnings of these conditions. The ill-advised project of establishing the character's universality must therefore stumble before the inevitable alienation of the "homosexuals, blacks, and women" in any given
announced.

Ann Dean has offered in support of her own claim for Edmond's status as "universal" the assertion that "In him is embodied all of Mamet's fears about humanity's dilemma in the modern world." Yet this would seem, inadvertently, to concede the personal and individual nature of the "dilemma" Edmond is meant to represent. "Edmond," Mamet stated in an 1988 interview, "is about ... a man trying to discover himself and what he views as a sick society." And for the most part, Mamet's assault on society in this play is as broad-edged and indiscriminate as is his protagonist's. Edmond's rage—and its (re)presentation—retains a remarkable degree of predetermined and unqualified conviction throughout, both in its motivation and in the development of its portrayal. The character justifies his behaviour through an expressionistic self-indulgence that withstands extended exposure only through his author's omission of detailed contextualization and avoidance of sustained or focused examination.

Thus when Mamet offers Edmond's "homosexual alliance with a black guy" as the grounds for an assessment of the play as "very, very hopeful," the utility of character psychology seems once again strained. Rather, a significant degree of the impact of Mamet's tale, here as elsewhere in his works, is to be found beyond the level of characterization or moral didacticism. Rather, meaning resides in the exercised efficacy—and lived consequence—of performance that strains to transcend convention. What Edmond does explore, then, is precisely the relationship that provides the experiential focus of both Perversity and Buffalo. Presented, on the one hand, are the habitualized behaviour and conventionalized systems of thought that emerge as rehearsed but highly unself-conscious social performance. Opposed to these is the possibility of emancipation through a performative mode of self-insistent physical action.

Indeed, Edmond tackles this issue more directly than either of the two earlier works.
The play's intensity is possibly the reason for the perceived distortion of its amplified statement. After he has viciously beaten a mugger—an alarming and uncharacteristic act of self-defence—Edmond commits the violent murder of a waitress. With perverse yet consistent logic, the crime is brought on by her refusal to acknowledge her lowly social status and admit the fantastical nature of her claim to being an actress. Overcome by his disgust for and resentment of what he perceives as deceitful role-playing—in a manner directly reminiscent of Teach's response when that character thinks that Bobby is lying—Edmond strikes out at those whom he identifies as complicit in the self-delusion of his entire society.

Yet Teach's criticism of Bobby's faltering storytelling is entirely reflexive and unconsidered. By contrast, Edmond's response to what he sees as his victim's hypocrisy is expressed with passionate, philosophical conviction. In this way, Edmond continues and expands the question of accountability in social performance. Further, its protagonist also identifies and enacts an increased, complementary responsibility as self-conscious and discerning spectator. Edmond is frustrated in his attempts to achieve what he considers honesty and effect in his own actions. Yet his greatest distress is generated by his inability to solicit or inspire self-consciousness and sincerity in others.

In this sense, the protagonist's anguish is doubled through an awareness that is effectively absent in Perversity's Bernie, which remains unexpressed by Buffalo's Teach, and which will ultimately become central in the imaginative territory of The Shawl. For Edmond focuses, in a manner more direct and emphatic than either of the earlier works, on the mutual reliance and accountability of both the primary roles (or poles in a continuum of performance participation) in both social and theatrical (re)presentation. Further, Edmond explores the potentially volatile proximity and interrelatedness of performer and spectator, and the potential impact of an
immediate, even violent straining of the division between the two.

In between the fight with the mugger and the murder of the woman—his two most brutal statements of self-insistence—Edmond gives voice to the just-discovered animation in his existence:

The fucking nigger comes up to me, what am I fitted to do. He comes up, "Give me all your money." Thirty-four years fits me to sweat and say he's underpaid, and he can't get a job, he's bigger than me... he's a killer, he don't care about his life, you understand, so he'd do anything...

Eh? That's what I'm fitted to do. In a mess of intellectuality to wet my pants while this coon cuts my dick off... eh? Because I'm taught to hate. I want to tell you something. Something spoke to me, I got a shock, and I spoke back to him. "Up your ass, you coon... you want to fight, I'll cut out your fuckin' heart, eh, I don't give a fuck..." (264)

The correspondences and divergences between this speech and Teach's defense of his own resort to violence are illuminating. Clearly, Edmond is capable of greater articulation of his perceived dilemma (at points awkwardly so). Yet the "intellectuality" that he laments is only initially and superficially remote from the set of influences upon Teach. Both in fact represent a systematic programming of emotional and ideological attitudes and responses, a media-driven and ultimately inuring pattern of self-negation through depersonalized conditioning.

As David Savran has noted, only "when Edmond acknowledges the breakdown between the narrowness of his language and the depth of his desires does he begin to apprehend himself as whole and to forge a link with others and with his environment."12 Savran here identifies the same dynamic my own argument has posited for Buffalo's Teach, who also seems only, temporarily connected to intuitive response and action when he forcibly transgresses the confining socialization of language. However, Edmond's more advanced contribution to the playwright's evolving perspective reveals that this commonly adopted emphasis on the
opposition between spoken and physical expression can obscure the necessary further distinction between *modes* of performance.

As already noted regarding *Perversity*, Mamet has stated, "That's what the play is about, how what we say influences what we think." Implicit in this statement, however, is an understanding of language as a barrier to, rather than a conduit for, communication. As the work of C. W. E. Bigsby and Ruby Cohn, amongst others, has thoroughly shown, this has been a common preoccupation of American dramatists (and critics), and one which clearly precedes its twentieth-century roots in the work of O'Neill. However, above and beyond this perception in Mamet's work is an identified distinction between performative stances that do or do not attain what is elusively but emphatically proposed by the author, in both his plays and his critical essays, as *organic* performance.

If a precise definition of this last concept, and a full understanding of its implications for theatrical signification, remains highly problematical, it is not because of a lack of commentary by the author. Mamet's use of the term *organic* suggests a strong, if indirect influence of a fundamental Romanticism (Roudane's observation of this predisposition has already been noted). Thus, *organic* alludes to accumulative, ultimately unified, and 'naturally' (an equally challenging term) integrated structure and meaning. Mamet's writings endorse the simultaneous expectations of interrelatedness (whether that of a work of literature with its tradition or that of an individual with his/her community and culture) and self-sufficiency (structural for a work of literature, physical and emotional for an individual, intellectual and moral for both). More directly, however, Mamet has made reference to the use of the term *organic* in the writings of Constantin Stanislavsky (to which I shall return), whose teachings Mamet endorses in a characteristically selective and idiosyncratic manner.
Because of the centrality of the idea of organic performance in Mamet's full body of work, I here quote at length, first from Mamet's essay "Acting," published in his 1986 collection *Writing in Restaurants*:

The organic actor must have generosity and courage—two attributes which our current national hypochondria render in low supply and even lower esteem. He must have the courage to say to his fellow actors on stage (and so to the audience): "I am not concerned with influencing or manipulating you, I am not concerned with nicety. I am here on a mission and I demand you give me what I want."

This actor brings to the stage desire rather than completion, will rather than emotion. His performance will be compared not to art, but to life; and when we leave the theater after his performance we will speak of our life rather than his technique. And the difference between this organic actor and the self-concerned performer is the difference between a wood fire and a florescent light.

The correlation between Mamet's criteria for organic performance and his characters' self-presentation is extensive. As already considered, *Perversity*’s Bernie is portrayed, ultimately, as entirely without "generosity" or "courage." Terrified by his own "desire," his "will" in a state of perpetual deferral, he is seen as substituting seamlessly "technique" for "life."

Similarly, *Buffalo*’s Teach is both masterful and manic in his twisted and twisting manipulation:

"And what if (God forbid) the guy walks in? Somebody's nervous, whacks him with a table lamp—you wanna get touchy—and you can take the good it did you—and wanna know why? (And I'm not saying anything...) because you didn't take the time to go first-class" (37). Further, this coercion is disguised—hidden, apparently, even from the character himself to a determining degree—within an angry and self-righteous preoccupation with "niceties" that seems as earnest as it is ridiculous. For instance, Teach reports an incident where Grace (of the powerful, absent "Grace and Ruthie") has remarked on the ease with which he had taken a piece of toast off of her plate. In response, lamenting what he considers her audacious ingratitude for his past
favours, he inflates a question of table manners to a vicious challenge to his honour and dignity:
"But to have that shithead turn, in one breath, every fucking sweet roll that I ever ate with them into ground glass.... This hurts me in a way I don't know what the fuck to do" (11).

"The only way to teach these people," he brusquely concludes, "is to kill them." Finally, it is only when both manipulation (rhetorical coercion) and nicety (habitualized convention) are temporarily suspended in a sudden, overwhelming explosion of self-assertion, that Teach is able to act upon, and thus confront, his fear of his own vacuous performance. But in Buffalo even this is ultimately seen as an act of self-serving "emotion," of strangely articulate but reflexive, apocalyptic desperation. Neither generosity nor courage, nor the self-consciousness required for either, lasts longer than a glimmer of unrealized potential.

Edmond, however, has very different priorities. Paraphrased with compression but not inaccuracy, the war cry of the play's protagonist is indeed contained in Mamet's main criterion for organic performance: "I am here on a mission and I demand you give me what I want."

Confronting the waitress, Glenna, over her claim to be an actress, Edmond offers a faltering but deeply felt expression of his personal challenge to his world.

EDMOND: Then you are not an actress. Face it.
Let's start right. The two of us. I'm not lying to you, don't lie to me.
And don't lie to yourself.
Face it. You're a beautiful woman. You have worlds before you. I do, too.
Things to do. Things you can discover.
What I'm saying, start now, start tonight. With me. Be with me. Be what you are....

GLENNA: I am what I am.

EDMOND: That's absolutely right. And that's what I loved when I saw you tonight. What I loved.
I use that word. (Pause.) I used that word.
I loved a woman. Standing there. A working woman. Who brought life
to what she did. Who took a moment to joke with me. That's ... that's ... that's ... god bless you what you are. Say it: I am a waitress.

(Pause.)

Say it. (270)

The brevity and careful composition of Edmond's sentences contrasts sharply with the convoluted, compound statements of Teach's manic philosophizing, and even more strongly with Bernie's runaway fantasizing. There is an increasing sense throughout the body of plays of both the power and the limitations of speech to communicate and affect. The closer the characters move towards a consciousness of personal efficacy, the fewer and more thoughtfully selected words they use. In this light, it is quite fascinating to compare Edmond's approach to Glenna with Bernie's unsolicited and quickly rejected advance towards Joan in the earlier play. Both scenes involve a male character challenging a female character in regards to what he perceives as her hypocrical role-playing. Yet the focus and the form of the language announces the huge transition of intention and sincerity.

BERNIE: So just who the fuck do you think you are, God's gift to Women? I mean where do you fucking get off with this shit. You don't want to get come on to, go enroll in a convent. You think I don't have better things to do? I don't have better ways to spend my off hours than to listen to some nowhere cunt try out cute bits on me? I mean why don't you just clean your fucking act up, Missy. You're living in a city in 1976. (Pause.) Am I getting through to you?

JOAN: I think I'd like to be left alone.

BERNIE: Ah, you're breaking my heart. My fucking heart is pumping pisswater for you. You're torturing me with your pain and aloofness. You know that?

JOAN: I'm terribly sorry.

BERNIE: Sorry don't mean shit. You're a grown woman, behave like it for chrissakes. Huh? I mean, what the fuck do you think society is, just a
bunch of rules strung together for your personal pleasure? (20-21)

Ironically, as the last lines indicate, what Bernie is accosting Joan over is in fact her refusal to play the 'swinging singles' bar game as it is formulated in his crude, adolescent imagination (where it has survived, intact, from the relentless portrayals of popular media, advertising, and entertainment). Projecting his own anxieties, he inadvertently confesses his apparently unconscious assumption that society is just that: "a bunch of rules strung together for [his] personal pleasure." When these rules are abruptly broken within actual experience, the character draws back into his best defence of badly mangled yet suitably formulaic offence. Yet, despite his vitriol, Bernie's assault is strangely impersonal, its energy unfocussed and apparently exhausted in its incoherence. Unlike the barely restrained physicality that charges Edmond's plea, and which then explodes suddenly in unannounced violence, Bernie's castigation of Joan remains abstract and obscure, the awkward profanity of insulted male immaturity. And, indeed, the retreat is definite. In what seems an unmotivated contradiction of character, Joan softens her countenance and actually apologizes for her (imperceptible) rudeness. But Bernie has been burnt once by his own fantastic expectations. Cutting her short, he calls for the cheque, clearly unprepared to expose himself another time to the unpredictable world of human interaction.

Glenna's response to Edmond's repeated "Say it" is, in a sense, the question of the play, and to a degree that of all of Mamet's works: "What does it mean if I say something?" (270). In the playwright's declared understanding of speech action, this question contains the corollary, 'what do I do when I say something?' What does it mean, Mamet and his characters ask, to say something in a world where words facilitate unqualified self-presentation, and where the use of language is without fixed authority or accountability? What is the significance of individual
expression when specific interests arbitrarily demand general recognition—this, at the same time that habitualized socialization ensures conformity through the media-shaped-and-delivered Big Brother of popular culture? Is it possible to speak through these artificially and involuntarily imposed parameters in order to (given Mamet's fundamentally nostalgic stance) rediscover an ideological space of authentic and organic self-performance?

These are the concerns of a character (and a playwright) who anticipates the degradation of 'traditional values' and the onset of communally-sanctioned deceit, narcissism, and anarchy in his contemporary society. These are also, perhaps, the concerns of a character and playwright who feel threatened by an increasing fragmentation of centralized, patriarchal dominance, and by an emerging plurality of voices. Mamet's actual stance likely involves both of these regularly complementary positions. At this point in my study, however, what is immediately pertinent is the degree to which Edmond advances the approach, within the fictions (re)presented, towards a realization of self-presentation that coincides with Mamet's understanding of organic theatrical performance.

Colin Stilton (as noted, the first actor to play Edmond in a professional production) has offered this description of the play's protagonist: "[W]hat he is trying to do is to take positive action.... He is telling [Glenna] what he believes to be the truth.... [I]t makes him alive, it makes him feel real. He wants to pass on this information to Glenna so that she, too, can share in his wonderful discovery.... [A]t least he has the courage to try...."16 Such an interpretation of the character's motivation clearly engages with the concepts the playwright has stipulated for its organic realization in performance—indeed, that of any of his dramatis personae. Both the character and its performance must stress an intense desire to more closely engage a lived reality through a consequential mode of action.
At this point in my study it is sufficient to discover in Marnet's concept of *organic* performance (to which I shall repeatedly return) the idea of self-authorship. Both Edmond's and Teach's resorts to violence are accompanied, even prompted, by an apparently incongruent yet actually liberating abandonment of personal investment in the consequences of individual action. In effect, it is the trepidation concerning the possible costs of physicality and the intimacy that it threatens which thus must be overcome if self-authorship is to be approached. Intriguingly, in a specifically theatrical context, the similarly liberated actor of Grotowski's Poor Theatre "makes a total gift of himself."

The education of an actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between his inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses.17

Such "concurren[cy]," Grotowski asserts, is only possible through "a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one's own intimacy [sic]--all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment."

Clearly, such theatrical substantiality through selflessness is distant from either Teach's or Edmond's portrayed state of mind. Yet their sudden engagement is unprecedented and uncharacteristic--within both the narratives portrayed and the actual performance of those narratives. Thus, both figures can be seen to embody the potential emergence of previously, conventionally contained physicality within the personal and theatrical contexts. On both performative levels, physical presence and intellectual autonomy are approached through the paradoxical surrender of acquired postures in favour of intuitive action. Teach's repeated "I don't give a shit" is echoed in Edmond's minor variation on the same theme (precisely, "I don't
give a fuck," after beating the mugger). The two disclaimers connect the apparently disparate characters—and their (re)presentations—in a similar breaching of unconscious constraint which has been imposed by routine (as opposed to ritualized) self-presentation.

In both plays the concluding revelation is a humbling one, though to greatly differing degrees. In each there is a strong sense of an actor largely unaware of his own histrionic status, who has revealed, both to himself and his audience, the vacuous workings of his performance. The discovery emerges in both situations as a form of infidelity, of a confidence betrayed. Yet the density of Teach's entrenched solipsism does not permit him to explore or even actually concede the nature of his duplicity. Edmond, however, has gone far beyond the safety of any willed ignorance. Teach's meek modelling of the paper hat that makes him "look like a sissy" (105) is therefore only a mild shadow of self-questioning when compared to Edmond's complete, unnervingly voluntary denigration. The earlier character's apparently sincere concern, voiced four times in succession, that Don might still be angry with him (104), is magnified in _Edmond_ to an absolute and self-condemning objectivity.

Like Teach before him, Edmond's action—in and of itself—is ultimately revealed to be as unreflective as that mode of behaviour it has exposed as fraudulent (and thus, fractured irreparably). Edmond's initial response after he stabs Glenna, "Now look what you've bloody fucking done," neatly parallels Teach's assessment of the just beaten Bob, "You brought it on yourself" (94). Yet, while neither character is given an epiphany by either god or playwright, it is possible to identify a clear sense of progression, one which is directly related to Edmond's eventually increased awareness of the necessity for self-reflection. For in Edmond's final condition—emotional and psychological, as well as physical—can be found what Henry I. Schvey has called "a Hamlet-like position of acceptance." And just as Shakespeare's Dane eventually
decides to "Let be," apparent in Edmond's ultimate resignation are the traces of a bitter, strangely celebratory comprehension. Intriguingly, for Hamlet both madness and understanding are the result of his having taken "heedful note" of those about him. So too are Edmond's most extreme experiences of futility and effect the result of his learned preoccupation with the position, provisions, and power of spectatorship.

Thus, in what seems an unconscious attempt to stall real investigation of his own behaviour, the active role that Edmond seeks to realize throughout much of the play is that of observer. In the process, his quest continually conflates the collaborative responsibilities of engaged performance and spectatorship. Suspecting that he has been tricked at cards, Edmond persistently challenges a Card Sharp. But the conman's fraudulent illusionism cannot—and will not—expose itself to examination.

EDMOND: You let me see those cards.

SHARPER: You ain't goin' see no motherfuckin' cards, man, we playin' a game here....

SHILL: ...You lost, get lost.

EDMOND: Give me those cards, fella.

SHARPER: You want to see the cards? You want to see the cards?... Here is the mother fuckin' cards....

(He hits EDMOND in the face. He and the SHILL beat EDMOND for several seconds. EDMOND falls to the ground.) (247)

An air of casual ease pervades Edmond's beating—contrasting sharply with the hysteria of self-justification that accompanies his own act of violence. In effect, despite the scene's obvious brutality, all involved—offenders as well as victim—are seen as passive players. All (although Edmond progressively less so) are simply, unself-consciously fulfilling their roles in a vicious
social context. There is, in fact, a sense that the outrage that has been committed is actually Edmond's audacious challenge to a self-propagating system of institutionalized deceit—a mistake that he makes again and again, right up to and including his own taking of a life.

Suitably, then, Edmond's world unfolds, often literally, like a succession of sideshow attractions, each gaudily made up like a mock Morality play station. In each succeeding encounter, Edmond becomes progressively more conscious of the deadening and destructive commodification of human interaction. The characters—a B-girl, a Peep-Show Girl, a Card Sharp, Two Shills, a Whore, a Pimp—stand as blatant icons of commercialized deception and dehumanization. Each in turn assigns Edmond a passive role to perform. Each in turn proceeds to relieve him of his money by coercion or force.

Edmond's is, then, a world of purported meaning and promised significance which is unfailingly revealed as cheap, fraudulent, and manipulative spectacle. The correlation to a contemporary theatre industry which is similarly preoccupied with superficiality is strongly encouraged by Maret's critical writing.

To the greatest extent we, in an evil time, which is to say a time in which we do not wish to examine ourselves and our unhappiness; we, in the body of the artistic community, elect dream material (plays) which cater to a very low level of fantasy.... We leave the theatre after such plays as smug as after a satisfying dream. Our prejudices have been assuaged, and we have been reassured that nothing is wrong, but we are, finally, no happier.  

As long as Edmond remains a passive participant, as long as he is unsuccessful in his bids to act his way out of his degraded setting through the transition to a form of organic performance—his role is one of complicity. Thus, once jolted from his complacency, the character sees no alternative but to unleash a direct assault on the illusion-sustaining proprieties of 'civilized' discourse. Only in that way, the play suggests, will an audience grown dependent on the safety
of convention concede its collaborative responsibility. Correspondingly, the theatrical (re)presentation of Edmond's dilemma, through its assault upon its audience's prejudices, assumptions, and conventional expectations, seems designed to elicit from its spectators a similar sense—and possible rejection—of their own habitual complicity.

Ultimately, Edmond's social role becomes the mirror image of his most intense, culturally determined prejudices and phobias. Imprisoned, literally, within a racially mixed, homosexual relationship, he appears to have been entirely devoured by the unexamined paranoia and hatred of his society. Yet what the character expresses is precisely the inverse of his physical situation: liberation. "What I know I think that all this fear, this fucking fear we feel must hide a wish. 'Cause I don't feel it since I'm here. I don't. I think the first time in my life" (285).

Carla J. McDonough's critique of Edmond focuses on the struggle of all of Mamet's protagonists with the elusive construct of masculinity. Fear of not merely the difference but of the difficulties of "differentiation" between the sexes, and thus of determining "a clear identity of the masculine self," McDonough claims, is translated in Mamet's works into a certainty "that society is 'falling apart.'" This then leads, McDonough contends, to the kinds of frenzied, gendered violence that characterize Edmond. But the nature of both the "fear" and the "wish" that it conceals, McDonough suggests, extends beyond the immediate, and perhaps easy, target of gender anxiety: "If, as Edmond says, every fear hides a wish, perhaps the real paranoia and pressure are due to the system's limitations, and the real desire is to escape from or to erase these limitations, a desire that is never allowed to be voiced fully, intentionally, or consciously by Mamet's characters."

In this light, it is possible to see Edmond emerging as freed from his fear through his
forced shedding of his once suffocating role and the ostensibly privileging characteristics that accompany its performance: his class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. In exchange, he assumes the position(s) that he, in his previously unexplored socialization, has most hated, demeaned, and feared. Clearly, not the least of these former attributes—which are exposed as emotionally crippling and intellectually numbing liabilities—is his troubled heterosexuality. This last he has fitfully attempted to display through a confused, if determined, "mask" (i.e., persona) of masculinity—a concept that, as Tania Modleski has observed, is past due for critical consideration: "That masculinity may ... function as a mask is an idea made popular by sociologists, who speak of the 'male role,' although the concept has not received corresponding attention among psychoanalytic critics despite their having taken up the notion of 'femininity as masquerade' with great enthusiasm."²²

This parallel concept of femininity or "womanliness" as "masquerade" originates in the work of Jacques Lacan and, in particular, Joan Riviere, whose 1929 essay on conflict resolution and gender proposed femininity as something that "could be assumed and worn as a mask" by an ambitious woman in order "both to hide the possession of [wished for] masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it."²³ The frequently noted deficiency of this model, however, is its definition of femininity as, finally, unattainable desire. Woman is delegated to the role of absence, of lack in relation to, in Judith Butler's terms, "the forever elusive paternal signifier, the Law of the Father" that is reserved for males in the Lacanian concept of the Phallus.²⁴

However, as David Savran has argued, "Although the Lacanian elaboration of masquerade is clearly intended to map the female, heterosexualized subject, it need not be restricted simply to the one who appears to 'be' the Phallus."²⁵ Rather, Savran proposes
masculinity as an "act of assertion, of phallic identification.... Like 'womanliness' for Riviere, this performative masculinity dissolves the distinction between the genuine and the masquerade. It is always a display, a sham, a mask of power...." And just as, according to Teresa De Lauretis, the only possibilities for gender re-evaluation exist in "the blind spots" and the "spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses," so too is this where Edmond is driven before he is sufficiently alienated (i.e., liberated) to reconsider his entrenched socialization.

The mask of masculinity is, in effect, the last conventional hypocrisy behind which Edmond cowers, as his preconceptions of society's other 'pillars' crumble around him. The echo of Teach's concluding exasperation is almost verbatim in Edmond's earlier, mid-play rationale (further suggesting the evolutionary relationship between the two characters). Yet, once again, the ironic nature of Glenna's response, if unrecognized by the character, is conspicuous.

EDMOND: [...] Glenna: This world is a piece of sh*t. (Pause.) It is a sh*t house. (Pause.) ... There is NO LAW ... there is no history ... there is just now ... and if there is a god he may love the weak, Glenna. (Pause.) But he respects the strong. (Pause.) And if you are a man you should be feared. (Pause.) You should be feared... (Pause.)

GLENNA: That's why I love the theater ... (Pause.)

Because what you must ask respect for is yourself. (266-67)

Fundamentally theatrical, Edmond's aggressive masculinity is revealed as one more conventionally sanctioned yet practically inadequate performative ploy--or rather plea--for the validation of always elusive and dubious self-respect. Thus the irony in Edmond's motivation--his attempt to free Glenna from the self-deception of theatricality--is further magnified. And it is only in his final, utter desolation that Edmond is portrayed as liberated from the "masquerade" of masculinity, along with all the other conceits he had been conditioned to maintain. His supposedly "latent" homosexuality, therefore, seems instead as necessarily imposed as his
incarceration, another requisite denigration along the road to his desocialization.

Edmond manages to "escape from" and "erase" the conventional limitations of his society, then, not through their elimination, but through a heightened awareness of and encounter with their regularly assumed and transparent governance. Forcibly confined on multiple levels, he becomes a victim of the same prejudices he had once unconsciously enacted. He is seen as denied the opportunity—and therefore released from the obligation—to enact what he had experienced as the paralysis of hatred that had effectively defined his role in society. Breaking away from the crushing gravity of his previously centralized and ostensibly dominant social position, he discovers a (literally) queer authenticity at the extremities of experience. In a world defined by rejection and exclusion, he finds, with a perverse logic, substantiality at the perimeter, in the shunted (if crowded) regions of what is most despised.

In this the character moves well beyond even the liminal figures of Teach, Don, and Bob, as if self-possession in Marnet's fictional worlds is directly proportional to the degree of a character's alienation. By adopting the most intense, marginalized and, by social definition, dangerous roles identified within his culture, Edmond finds organic status in a portrayal of self which is refused the options of denial and deferral. At the furthest distance from socialized deceit, he is thus at the closest approach to his culture's—and the play's—frame of actuality. There, his function becomes the reflective observation and commentary that the central performers of his world can neither access nor comprehend. And in this transition, he is presented as having at once fully achieved and transcended the very requirement of social performance itself.

The precise correlation between the social and theatrical contexts suggested by Edmond
is elusive. The bitter, violent, and inconclusive solution that the play offers for the overcoming of unquestioned convention makes significant demands on performer and audience alike. To discover meaning in the violence of *Edmond*, as in that of *Perversity*, *Buffalo*, and to varying degrees all of the intervening plays, requires a heightened awareness of all involved in the performance. Actors and audience alike must address the unnerving, shared physicality that is contextualized but not domesticated by the conventions of traditional theatre experience. The characters' assaults on the social conventions of self-performance, by virtue of their theatrical embodiment, strain against the containment of realistic staging. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Edmond* stands as one of Mamet's least traditionally conceived and realized works, albeit one that ultimately conforms, within its multiple scenes, to the strictures of realism. Thus the momentary, liberating, yet uncontrolled explosion of physical efficacy within the fiction offers a realization of the parallel potential within the performance event, and underscores the perpetual threat of live (re)presentation.

Yet, undeniably, the sense of physical presence and self-possession discovered in the intimacy of *Edmond*'s final scenes surpasses in impact the random brutality of the play's earlier segments. The *catharsis* of which Mamet is so fond, as was also the case with *Buffalo*, is precipitated less by the play's bleak thematic resolution than by its discovery, through the stripping away of obscuring convention, of a corporeal veracity. Edmond approaches, both intentionally and through circumstance, that which is perfunctorily surrendered by *Perversity*'s Danny, and only momentarily glimpsed by *Buffalo*'s Teach. The possibility implicit in his emotional, psychological, even spiritual repositioning is seen to be attained through the spontaneous execution of an action of unsanctioned (because liberating) and liberating (because unsanctioned) consequence.
Perhaps even more significant, however, is the need for and obligations of self-observation which set the tone of the play's finish. For this is a work about both action and observation, performance and spectatorship. The inextricable relationship between these two aspects of organic (re)presentation, whether social or theatrical, is emphasized through its consolidation into a single character. Edmond's final setting is indeed a "Poor" one, yet it is proposed as one infinitely, paradoxically rich in self-reflection and potential individual awareness.

An internal exile socially, Edmond finds the possibility of self-realization in the most transgressive and unconventional of all possible worlds. In this, the character enacts the parallel, difficult, yet empowering liberty in performance that recognizes the necessarily transgressive nature of theatrical transcendence. Often avoided, by performer and spectator alike, because of its explosive unpredictability, such performance assumes a similarly observant and commentarial position, from which it critiques the very conventions that provide its structural and thematic foundations. In theatrical realization, Perversity laments the appropriation of sincere and organic performance by the forces of a habitualized and falsely reassuring status quo. Buffalo portrays with increased compression the chaotic but determined conformity of performance in conditions that all but preclude self-authorship. But the edifice of assumed convention, while fortified, is revealed in Buffalo as vulnerable to the forces of intuition, instinct, and spontaneity. Edmond, in its angry way, acts upon this revelation. Powerfully manifesting the always imminent dangers of life and thus live performance, it enacts, on the level of social interaction, a dark celebration of the barely contained volatility of the theatrical event.

Significantly, the play's episodic structure, which encourages critical use of adjectives such as cinematic, is actually distinct from the systematic, Eisensteinian juxtaposition of
"uninflected shots" that emerges as the playwright's proclaimed creed of film composition.

Edmond's many scenes have no comparable counterparts in the author's work in cinema, despite several critics' identification of thematic similarities between the play and Mamet's script for The Verdict (1982), which was shot in the same year as Edmond's first production. In stark contrast to that film (or any upon which Mamet has worked as writer and/or director), the disjointed interrelationship of the play's many sections and relationships remains perpetually unstable. Reminiscent of the early Perversity, Edmond is, in perhaps an even more pronounced fashion than either Buchner's or Kaiser's work, irresolvably ambiguous, both thematically and structurally.

That the title character of the play is, in the final scene, somehow the product or sum of what has gone before seems, in fact, only possibly argued theatrically, in the event of the play in live performance. Such a claim rests upon the strength of a phenomenal involvement and commitment on the part of the participants that would seem to have little to do with the interpretive maps of a cognitive approach to explication. Conversely, Mamet's approach to screenwriting and direction tend to be particularly well-suited to the schemata based models of interpretation advanced by Noel Carroll and David Bordwell (to be discussed in greater detail in the next section of my study). Further, the incongruent and distinctly alienating presentation of motivation and response that effectively negates the 'Everyman' universality of the text seems incompatible with the transparent, assimilationist ideological persuasion of a Hollywood feature. Rather, the overtly expressionistic construction and characterization of the play—a style that, perhaps not surprisingly, is seldom utilized by mainstream American film—presents serious obstacles to a psychoanalytic model of absolute identification.

Thus, Edmond would seem to stand as an overtly, even self-consciously theatrical work,
conceived and produced within an evolving and intensified sensitivity and challenge to the
dynamic of live performance. The play emerges, therefore, as a significant departure from the
techniques and intentions of Mamet's screenwriting of the same period of his career. It is with
the appearance of *The Shawl*, however, that the issues here identified reach their most explicit
statement, and the relationship of the plays to the films—prior to the playwright's transition to the
role(s) of writer/director—is most categorically evident.

*
The Shawl (1985) is both conspicuously a piece apart from, and the logical extension of, the works already considered here. In many of its elements it is immediately identifiable within Mamet's oeuvre. The student-teacher dynamic is operative, as is the focus upon the relationship between narrative and deceit, and the preoccupation with the potential for clarity and obscurity in language. But no play to this point in Mamet's career—or, I believe, since—has dealt so directly with the relationship between personal and theatrical performance. No play has so immediately addressed the issue of organic action, or been so adamant in the identification of a self-conscious, collaborative, and ultimately accountable standard for personal and theatrical interaction. Ostensibly the tale of a benevolent hustler and a distressed client, the play expands into a study of the nature and power of belief. In this way it explores and ultimately ratifies the volatile intimacy that emerges as coincidental within the private and the theatrical spheres. The Shawl, for Mamet, seems to argue a practical ideal for the (re)presentational mode (theatrical and social), one that finally transcends—through a realization of—the fundamental, interactive fear and desire of the performer/spectator relationship.

Intriguingly, the play is conspicuously less histrionic than much of Mamet's work. Remarkably spare in its situation and characterization, it provides a stark contrast when placed beside the diversity and complexity in both of these categories of its predecessor by two years, Glengarry, Glen Ross. Similarly, the plentitude of verbal violence committed with choreographed abandon in that earlier play is almost entirely absent. Substituted in The Shawl is a precise and subtly nuanced portrait of the mysteries of found, lost, and tenuously rediscovered
Gay Brewer has suggested that *The Shawl*, Mamet's last major theatrical work prior to the release of his first directorial outing in film, is in fact most productively considered as closely paralleling *House of Games*: "The similarity of the two scenarios is striking. And since Mamet's writing offers few women's roles, the consecutive creation of perhaps his two most compelling female characters in itself begs comparisons."¹ This seems an accurate assessment in terms of thematic focus—the primary perspective adopted by Brewer throughout the recent study, *David Mamet and Film: Illusion/Disillusion in a Wounded Land* (1993). However, Brewer ultimately fails to recognize a pivotal and, I believe, unavoidable distinction between the two works. Indeed, detrimental to Brewer's entire comprehensive and extensively researched study of Mamet's work in cinema is an apparently untroubled confidence in the dominance of authorial intention over all formal considerations.

In the introduction to a treatment of *House of Games*, Brewer suggests, "The style suits the subject, the medium fits the idea, and Mamet, entirely in control, enjoys a luxury his created hustlers do not: to tilt his cards into view, to suggest his real speed with the cue stick, and still to win the game. It's his house."² Clearly, such an appraisal fits nicely with Mamet's own self-presentation. In particular, the volume *On Directing Film* (1991) reveals a novice film-maker of considerable self-assurance and poise. As Mamet notes in that work's introduction, "I saw and see the director as that Dionysian extension of the screenwriter—who would finish the authorship in such a way that (as always should be the case) the drudgery of the technical work should be erased."³ But Brewer's willingness to adopt the authoritative savvy of the writer/director as the starting point for a critical study undermines a great deal of an often overly-appreciative argument.
Mamet has indeed drawn attention to the influence of his screenwriting experience upon the structural nature of his concurrent and subsequent works for the stage. Noting that working in film "forced on me the issue of plot," Mamet has connected this less than subtle persuasion with the fact that *Glengarry Glen Ross* is the first of his plays to have a traditionally constructed second act. In particular, the playwright has noted the influence of film writing technique upon *The Shawl*’s many structural reversals: "This goes back to writing for movies. Writing for movies is really all about revealing information: when and how you reveal information.... That is all there is in a movie-structure." 

However, an increased focus upon narrative progression is hardly a concern alien to writing for the stage. Lindsay Crouse, the first actress to play the female lead in *The Shawl*, was also married to Mamet at the time of its composition. She has suggested that the playwright’s increased emphasis on plot was inspired by criticism of his theatrical efforts: "David ... started to write *The Shawl* in part because people said to him 'You always write such wonderful characters but you don't write plot'.... So he set out to exercise plot-writing as a craft." And while Hollywood may be the ‘whipping-boy’ subject matter of the playwright’s immediately subsequent theatrical work, *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), that play’s conventional dramatic construction has repeatedly been noted. Jack Kroll pointed out that *Speed-the-Plow* (Mamet’s diatribe against the slick and deceitful executive arm of American film production) unfolds in "three acts whose classic structure would make Aristotle dance the hopa." Frank Rich concluded his *New York Times* review of the same play with the following:

"*Speed-the-Plow,*" not so incidentally, cannot be opened up by the movies. A two-set, three-person play that leaves no room for expansion, it would probably make terrible cinema. Perhaps that’s another part of Mr. Mamet's revenge on Hollywood—to torture the studios to death with a script that is this entertaining and yet so far out of their reach. In "Speed-the-Plow," Mr.
Mamet has created riveting theater by mastering the big picture that has nothing to do with making films.\(^8\)

However, there is an even greater divide between *The Shawl* and *House of Games*. For what emerges most starkly is the fundamental, phenomenological distinction that determines each, through the unavoidable influence of medium selection—one primarily responded to, rather than governed by, authorial manipulation.

*The Shawl* is, in length and locale, a small play. Published with another one-act piece, *Prairie Du Chien*, in 1985, the play received its first production that same year by the Goodman Theatre's New Theatre Company. The work was directed by Gregory Mosher, and featured Mike Nussbaum, Gary Cole, and Crouse (whose central role in *House of Games* is only the most obvious correspondence noted by Brewer). The production was moved later the same year to the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Centre. Three characters, confined to a single location, the situation portrayed initially resembles that of *Buffalo* (and the later *Speed-the-Plow*). Additional similarities, however, are elusive. The story told is of John, "A man in his fifties," who offers "[s]eeming divination" to eager customers for a voluntary fee. His companion and, possibly, lover is a "A man in his thirties" named Charles, who is impatiently and with little imagination attempting to apprentice to John. Miss A, "A woman in her late thirties," is their present client who, it is revealed, is grieving the death of her mother and, more immediately, is struggling with the decision of whether or not to contest the will.
In its reduction of character to single names and philosophical positions, *The Shawl* looks back to lyrical one-act efforts such as *Reunion* (1976) and *Dark Pony* (1977). Like those short pieces, the later play focuses upon the intense desire for and fear of the consistency of story, and the potentially transcendental yet regularly deceitful effect of its telling. In a manner more overt than the major plays already discussed, there is in these two earlier works a heightened awareness of both the authority and the impotence of narratives that remain forever unrealized and unrealizable. Perhaps not surprisingly, these short works emerge as two of Mamet's least 'threatening,' as the potential for dramatic action is perpetually and openly subordinated to the formal and/or informal conventions of narrative representation. *The Shawl*'s accomplishment lies in its ability to combine the greater self-reflection of *Reunion* and *Dark Pony* with the always emergent physical engagement of Mamet's more eruptive works.

In *Reunion*, a father is meeting his twenty-four year-old daughter, Carolyn, for the first time since her childhood. In this effort to (re)present himself--which never escapes the self-conscious distancing of narrative representation--he scrambles to patch together a persona out of cultural and personal possibilities of meaning. Yet each of his attempts is undermined by his own irony, which--ironically--becomes his most definitive characteristic.

I shot a machine gun. Big deal.
They had a life expectancy of--you know what?--
Three missions. Three.
What the hell. You can get killed in a steel mill, right?
But I'm no hero.°

*Dark Pony*, an ostensibly heart-warming and reassuring telling of a children's tale as a father and daughter are driving home, suggested, for Mel Gussow of the *New York Times*, "a feeling of
security and even of sanctuary." But threatening to disturb this serenity, throughout the entire work, is the complex nature of performance. The result is an apparently calm but tenuous fragility of mutual reinforcement between a performer and his audience in a distinctly collaborative project.

FATHER: Yes.
We are almost there.

DAUGHTER (to self): 'Cause I remember how it sounds.[...]

FATHER (to self): "Dark Pony,
Rain Boy calls to you."

DAUGHTER: We are almost home.¹¹

The lesson of Dark Pony, C.W.E. Bigsby has suggested, is that "[e]ven story has lost its power to console beyond the moment of its completion, while those who create the fictions do so out of needs and incompletion of their own."¹² Yet Mamet's confident employment of dramatic expression to challenge both self-deceit and that of others contains within it, of necessity, a less than total renouncing of story's regenerative capacity. Perhaps the central distinction between the two one-act plays lies in the contrast between the performative contexts they imagine.

Reunion's Bernie and Carolyn embody the impossibility of a sustained or organic performance dynamic in the absence of a common basis of experience and culturalization (what Mamet refers to as "tradition"). Unable to discern their relative positioning, to identify and fulfil cooperative roles, the framework of their personal interaction falters and ultimately collapses. By contrast, Dark Pony resonates with the temporary, transient accord of a mutually constructed space/time. The characters are discovered in a forever fleeting moment of imaginative harmony. At the same time, however, Dark Pony, in its always transient make-
belief, forever foretells the imminent expiration of its narrative's spell. For Mamet's play shares in the fundamental transience of all theatrical performance. Its form thus provides a final, definitive critique of its thematic attempt to suspend closure. Thus the two plays explore contrasting perspectives on the possibility and prerequisites of sustained performance. And although Dark Pony, of the two works, describes a precious success, its highly tenuous quality calls into question the validity of perpetually passive (i.e., purely narrative) performance, which must, finally, be forever held hostage by its consensual, conventional frame.

The Shawl displays its heritage in these two works specifically in that it is, initially, a play of voices, of ideas apparently complete without, even resistant to, the burden of embodiment. The voices of The Shawl can seem at first to float in the air about (or without) the characters, the effects of a ghostly seance or supernatural conjuring. Little wonder that Mamet has referred to the play as "his episode of The Twilight Zone." Indeed, The Shawl is charged with such high intellectual and spiritual investment that actual, physical manifestation threatens to trivialize it, and to reveal its aesthetic, philosophical, even metaphysical pretensions. Such is clearly the source of the protagonist's anxiety—one shared, perhaps, to a degree, by The Shawl's playwright.

John: Is that not correct—to surmise ... it's alright .... to "guess" ... you want me to exhibit my power. Is this not the truth? Is this not so? It is so. You wish me to, in effect, "read your mind." (Pause.) For the question is: WHAT POWERS EXIST? And what powers DO exist? And what looks after us? And ... do you see? This is a rational concern. Is there an order in the world. And ... you ask ... and can things be known. Can things be known. (Pause.) And, of course, they can.

Miss A: ...they can.

John: Of course they can, as you have suspected. (Pause.) Have you not?
Miss A: Have I suspected it...?

John: Yes. And you have. For I see that you have ... you have some psychic ability.14

But thematic hyperbole, apparently endangered by physical (re)presentation, is in fact contextualized by it in Mamet's plays. The Shawl's overtly conventional rhetoric is thus animated and discovered as a thoroughly dramatic and theatrical modality.

What in fact becomes evident is that the activities of both characters are dependent upon an increasingly heightened awareness of each other's physical presence—or, more precisely, each other's present physicality—within an overtly performative context. It seems less than coincidental that John shares the name of one of the characters that appears in Mamet's earlier play, A Life in the Theatre (1977), which explicitly deals with the routines and revelations of two actors' lives. Less arbitrary still seems the fact that the generic Miss A, conspicuously denied an individualizing name, seems so entirely to (re)present the position of initially enforced passivity and ultimately determining participation of a live theatrical 'A'dience.

John gains a major victory in his attempt to win Miss A's trust when, despite her repeated protestations to the contrary, he divines a small scar on her left knee, acquired from a fall as a child.

Miss A: I don't have a scar there. (Pause.)

John: You are quite wrong. And I see that you have forgotten it. As it is small. Now: if you would—if you would ... if you would look now you'll see that scar. Would you like me to turn away?

Miss A: I don't.

John (simultaneously with "don't"): It's alright. As I see it's important to you. You want to say you don't mean to "test" me ... But you must trust me. And I am going to turn away. You look, and you'll see the scar.
Miss A: It's alright. I don't have to see ... I believe...

John (simultaneously with "believe"): No. You must look. Not belief but truth. Truth. For it is there. And that answers your doubts. (9)

Grounded upon a groundless authority which is inexplicably (since unquestionably) established within its performance, John systematically destabilizes all bases of dispute. His claims reside outside of the accuracy or fallibility of memory, as he fabricates a reality which corresponds to existing physical conditions, yet which has no foundation in lived experience beyond immediate circumstances.

A thoroughly skilled performer, John recognizes the integral function of the audience within the always present act of a performance's composition. His approach is thus one of common identification through identified commonalities, and collaboratively structured revelations. His pauses, speculations, and questions anticipate and incorporate Miss A's reluctant yet unshakeable desire to believe.

John: [...]You ... you sat and dreamed this meeting with me. Long ago.

Miss A: I did...

John: Dreamed this when you were young ... isn't that so? Isn't that so—long ago. Dreamt that you would one day sit with me. Didn't you? (Pause.)

Miss A: Yes.

John: I know that you did. In summer. When you were a little girl. Late summer. Sitting on a—what is it? By ... is it by the water... ?

Miss A: Yes.

John: It is. Where is this?

Miss A: At...

John: At your home. Is it not? At your summer...
Miss A (simultaneously with "summer"): Yes. Our summer home. (6-7)

Thus, Miss A is assured of their mutual gift of vision, and of her constant, verifying complicity in their joint interpretation. Playing his audience to perfection, John draws on Miss A's past and present, her memory and longing, her imagination and, indeed, her own body, manipulating each and all in order to literally substantiate a mutually imagined scenario.

As a skilful actor, the role John plays is, in a sense, that of spectator, as he calls his audience into self-consciousness, presence, participation—performance. Thus, his mastery as performer is constituted by his paradoxically authoritative subordination within the story that is constructed. Similarly, Miss A's competence as audience is discovered in her tentative willingness to move beyond passivity and detachment. Cautiously, through the overwhelming of their initial polarity, the joint work of performer and spectator forges the always fragile, always compelling veracity of illusionism.

However, both characters have a distance to travel, at this early stage in the play, towards what Mamet, through The Shawl, proposes as organic performance. For, from his opening line, "...You see:“, John attempts to facilitate Miss A's experience of a world where, literally, seeing is believing, and visual evidence is posited as definitive. He is the dominant 'seer' legitimized within the artificial world of their interaction. Thus, at this early stage of their relationship, John presents his vision (employing multiple definitions of the term and wonderfully elliptical logic) as only sustainable within a blind faith that he solicits through a declaiming of just such unexamined belief. Miss A's first statement, "I don't know...," identifies her suitability, through her vulnerability to and desire for precisely the kind of certainty of belief that John offers through his denouncing of its allure.

In this, Mamet seems to be offering a critique of illusionistic theatrical practice. As
Philip C. Kolin has noted, "In The Shawl, Mamet attempts to exorcise his audience's need for
magic (or illusion) while paradoxically demonstrating their dependence on it." This
interpretation accords with the adamant decrying of unquestioned conventionality that my study
has identified in Mamet's work. And the playwright has, indeed, offered severe criticism of
illusionistic realism in his description of contemporary American stagecraft: "Most American
theatrical workers are in thrall to the idea of realism. A very real urge to be truthful, to be true,
constrains them to judge their efforts and actions against an inchoate, which is to say against an
unspecified standard of reality." Such an unspecified standard, Mamet argues, thus becomes,
"the explanation and excuse for any action or effort the artist feels disinclined to make." It is not
difficult to discover in these comments a strong correspondence with the kind of elusive
unaccountability that characterizes, to varying degrees, the self-performance of Perversity's
Bernie and Buffalo's Teach, and against which Edmond wages his ambiguously resolved
campaign.

However, as noted, Mamet's attack upon unexamined rhetorical posturing is itself
delivered within a conventionally defined and "illusionistic" theatrical model. Rather than the
detached and general condemnation of such practice proposed by Kolin, Mamet retains his
regular employment of reversal—thematic, as well as structural—to simultaneously propagate
and scrutinize the fundamental illusionism of realistic (re)presentation. Resonating within the
phenomenological implications of its own live performance, The Shawl seems to work itself
towards the possibility of a shared physical and imaginative context in which illusionism
becomes the evidence of, and investment in, a contract of mutual, distinctly theatrical
commitment.

Thus, the playwright's rejection of an arbitrary and imposed preconception of realism
does not equate with a desire to purge the theatre of what he has repeatedly (if once again problematically) described as its prerequisite "magic." Here, as elsewhere, Mamet's predilection for impressionistic terminology seems intended to establish obstacles to critical (i.e., scholarly) scrutiny. Yet his assertion that the purpose of theatre is "to celebrate the mysteries of life" and "to deal with spiritual issues" clearly proposes for theatrical (re)presentation a quasi-mystical significance. To "make the transition from realism to truth," Mamet has asserted, "from self-consciousness to creativity, the artist must learn how to be specific to something greater than him- or herself on different levels of abstraction: the meaning of the scene, the intention of the author, the thrust of the play. But never to 'reality,' or 'truth,' in general." As The Shawl makes explicit, in the attainment of such organic performance the actor becomes merely its 'medium.'

Mamet's own interpretation of the play offers intriguing insights into the basis of its structure.

...I mean this goes back to Aristotle. It's really a twentieth-century version of the idea that what the hero is following and what he ends up with may be two very different things, but they are nonetheless related in the subconscious. The older guy in The Shawl wants to teach a lesson to his young lover and ends up experiencing a true psychic vision. But both of them are really part of the same objective.... What happens at the crucial moment, as Aristotle says, is that the protagonist undergoes both recognition of the situation and a reversal of the situation.

The first act of the play portrays an apparently authentic act of clairvoyance: John correctly identifies the source of Miss A's anxiety. However, the second act inverts the circumstances of belief and intent. In the process, the play offers its spectators—who, through attendance, ostensibly attest to a share in the vulnerability and desire that allow Miss A to believe—a view of "the trick 'from the back'" (26).
John denies access to either Miss A's subconscious or the mysteries of some all-knowing, supernatural forces, claiming that his powers are simply those of observation, rapid response, and speculation—i.e., improvisation.

John: [.....]You see: it comes down to confidence. They'll *test* you. And you can do nothing till you have their trust. You watch their eyes ... I mentioned the word "husband" ... and her eyes did nothing. So we *confirm* she isn't married. Always confirm. *Pause.* They want to confess. Their question is: can They Confess to You? Can They Trust You. *Pause.* A woman. Comes to you ... she's troubled ... for why would they come if they were not? *Pause.* Eh? (16-17)

Even less comprehensible for Charles than John's technique are the seer's motives. And some reviewers have apparently shared the younger character's confusion. Matt Wolf, writing in *Plays and Players*, stated that in *The Shawl* "...the language of money talks loudest...." John, in Wolf's review, is described as "a charlatan seer who uses mysticism as a kind of coercion." But the singular emphasis of this assertion suggests an interpretation that much of the text refutes. Although John denies any mystical quality in his trade, he nonetheless defines its practice in terms of the "help" it offers his customers, in the slow, progressive "Coming to the Truth" (21). Rather than access to the unknown, however, what he offers to teach Charles is a "profession," "a craft. Which would sustain you..." (26). His job, he suggests, is to "give them a *mechanism,*" to "allow them to *trust* you," in order that they may be "*freed* by 'magic.'" If, John assures Charles, he is patient, and does not "*misuse*" the customers' confidence, "They will ask and they will reward you.... We are going to have money. *I promise* you. When she comes to us asks *us*: How can I repay you?' We say, 'Leave what you will. To aid us in our work ...

Some Would leave fifty, some would leave a thousand.'..." (20, 25).

The altered attitude here expressed towards material reward, as compared to the vicious competition in so many of Mamet's plays, is too conspicuous not to be significant. John's
proposal emphasizes practical skills, applied with integrity and without immediate or necessarily proportionate return. In this, it precisely echoes the mode of performance that the playwright, in his critical writings, opposes to the facile and unself-conscious motives and methods of contemporary American theatre. What John describes is a mode of performance not merely fully cognizant of, but actually defined by its effect. Central is the truly consequential nature of its influence upon an audience that is sceptical and intelligent, yet ultimately ruled by their desire for the magic of organic performance to facilitate their own approach towards a distinct and immediate personal understanding.

The contrast here with the performative stances of Perversity, Buffalo, and Edmond is glaring, though progressively less so from play to play. Indeed, John's sense of calm and self-deprecation closely resembles the final image of the paradoxically imprisoned and liberated Edmond. Traceable is the progression away from a detached self-absorption—revealed as self-negation—that is sanctioned by and contained within habitual conditioning. In its place is a heightened recognition of the empowerment in spontaneity and adaptability that acknowledge yet are not governed by convention. Equally discernable is the movement towards the integral role of observation—of others and of self—within a mode of social performance that seeks to assert identity through communicative interaction rather than solipsistic obfuscation. The clearly intentional semi-theatrical context of The Shawl manifests the transition to increased self-reflection, in its unavoidable—for characters and audiences—bridging of social and theatrical performance. And, explicitly, both on stage and in the actual performance venue, this audience is a present, responsive one. In answer to Charles's question regarding how they will be able to answer Miss A's specific query, John offers confident reassurance.

John: By telling her what she wants to know.
Charles: And what is that?

John: We don't know. We listen and she'll tell us... (27)

Within both the performative circuit established between John and Miss A, and John's own evolving self-understanding, Charles is relegated to the role of passive bystander, dubious even in his value as witness. Yet in this, John's temporary male companion operates as a crucial foil to both of the other characters. What Charles provides is a suitably less than sympathetic or satisfied recipient of John's all too prosaic wisdom and insight. In this sense, he stands as a representative of what Mamet's critical writings describe as the apprentice performer who, in the face of the prerequisites of patience, humility, and compassion, opts for the more direct and self-serving opportunities of commercially popular practices: "Most of you who decide to stay in the theater will become part of the maelstrom of commercials, television, the quest for fame and recognition. In this time of decay those things which society will reward with fame and recognition are bad acting, bad writing, choices which inhibit thought, reflection, and release; and these things will be called art."21

At the same time, however, Charles can be seen to embody the stance of a contemporary audience that Mamet regularly admonishes as timid, lazy, easily distracted, and self-interested: "We expect less of our actors today because we expect less of ourselves.... Our attention is limited; and in this time of fear and anxiety, our attention is devoted to ourselves, our feelings, our emotions, our immediate well-being."22 Charles' response, then, as both frustrated initiate and disappointed spectator, is not surprisingly a naive and angry disdain for the loss of magic that an understanding of psychic—and by extension, theatrical—artifice apparently effects.

John: [...] I show you the trick "from the back" and you're disappointed. Of course you are. If you view it as a "member of the audience." One of the, you will see, the most painful sides of the profession is this: you do your work well,
and who will see it? No one, really... (Pause.) If you do it well. (Pause.) To say, to learn to say, I suppose you must, to just say what separates us, finally, from them is this: that is we look clearly. So be it. Not that we're "special"...

(Pause.) (26-27)

John's insight here is neither striking nor original, nor does it ultimately seem to be intended as such. In name, the concepts of metadrama and metatheatre have been the topic of critical discussion for several decades. It is hardly novel, however, to note that prior to such specialized research the entire history of dramatic theory, criticism, and practice—in Western tradition, from Sophocles through Cixous—has operated within an awareness of the metatheatrical necessity of theatrical (re)presentation. As Richard Hornby has suggested, "In one sense, ... all drama is metadramatic, since its subject is always, willy-nilly, the drama/culture complex." But it seems doubtful, given Mamet's already cited comments, that John's 'lesson' and its implications for illusionistic representation are so straight-forwardly the playwright's primary concern. Ultimately, the central importance of the protagonist's disclaimer is arguably as an index to the limitations placed upon theatrical experience by the imposition of overly—and impossibly—rigid conventions of performance. In particular, demarcated roles (actor, spectator) and space (playing area, auditorium) are proposed as prerequisites for—and immediate, definitive casualties of—live performance.

Conspicuously, the sketchy cynicism of Charles' character effectively precludes his standing as a potential performer or as the disappointed audience that John figures him as. The younger man's selfish motivations exclude his participation in the secular religion of, equally, John's mysticism and Mamet's theatre. Further complicating matters, however, John's self-definition is riddled with unwitting and definitive contradiction. As Deborah R. Geis has pointed out, "The magic that ... art constitutes, John claims, comes simply from the ability to 'look
clearly'—but even these words suggest a pun which reaffirms the doubleness of his vision, for 'look clearly' is also a translation of 'clairvoyance'—which suggests the very psychic ability John seeks so ardently to deny. John's persistent effort to demystify his craft emerges, then, as itself a form of denial, a cautious distancing from the revelatory power of performance that he has already identified. In this, he admits his trepidation before what Marnet has proposed as the organic performer's paradoxical potential: the establishing of personal presence through its very abandonment, in the service of "something bigger" than him or herself.

Every reiteration of the idea that there is no drama in modern life, there is only dramatization, that there is no tragedy, there is only unexplained misfortune, debases us. It denies what we know to be true. In denying what we know, we are as a nation which cannot remember its dreams—like an unhappy person who cannot remember his dreams and so denies that he does dream, and denies that there are such things as dreams.

Pressured by an abusive Charles into providing a fraudulent seance for Miss A, John furnishes her with a grand, histrionic performance. Having called upon the assistance of "one recently departed" (33) in order to access the spiritual world, he collects together a composite of historical research, intuitive speculation, and professional audacity (the standard materials of most playwrights). Woven into a horrifying tapestry of murder, rape, and racism, the tale is delivered in the guise of ghostly personal experience. A bizarre, expressionistic monologue, the long, hypnotic speech is driven by a momentum that seems truly one of possession. The irony, however, is that of all the Marnet protagonists considered so far in this study (and, I believe, all who are not), John's daemonic self-performance is understood as the most self-conscious and least involuntary.

Unlike the resigned indoctrination exhibited by Bernie and Danny, or the frantic,
momentarily threatened, but finally sustained cultural mania of Teach, or even the desperate, nihilistic rebellion of Edmond, John is in control. The intensity and passion of his seance role-playing actually emerges as ironic evidence of his subtlety and skilful use of nuance.

Significantly, he offers himself as the first of Mamet's protagonists who performs himself by not performing himself. His supposed reenactment of the gruesome experiences of his "contact" seems to have been emptied of his own presence, as he becomes merely its vehicle. Ironically, however, this speech is pregnant with his calculated motivation and conscious performative presence. What is in fact witnessed is John's physical and imaginative 'possession' of another's history/legend/fiction, which then becomes the most influential speech act effected in any of the plays here considered.

Most importantly, the violent, fragmented narrative that John tells is apparently and intentionally displaced in its content. The "someone gone before" whom he presents as a bridge into the spirit world is unknown and unknowable for Miss A. The contact's brutal biography thus does not solicit belief through the tenuous coherence or the specificity of its details. Its imagery, though suitably saturated with loss and death, is so grotesque that its appeal is only incidentally rational or coincidental. Rather, finally, the tale seduces through the "magical and powerful ... juxtaposition of sounds," through the "weight and meaning" of rhythmical incantation. Its allure is primarily that of the seemingly uncontestable integrity and commitment of its performance.

I grabbed his hair and helped him to me, I cried out what I discovered was that I had the disease, take me with you. No and so when he went ... how could I say? Even my children here, who'd asked him to come, but he came "you have ruined me." And Take Me. No. Take me upon your ship. No. No. How can you leave me in this room—clung to him threatened, his fierce, my mistake, threatened with the ... you say that I reaped the desired result, that I won, stabbed, stabbed in the belly, ripped out with his dirk, bloodied the sheets, wiped it upon the
But, of course, both Miss A and the actual audience share a fundamental concession to their performative contexts. Both have invested in the simultaneous potentials for transcendence and deceit in recitation, and the dominant, in large part extra-linguistic rhetoric of oration. The successful realization of the scene in the theatre, during which both Miss A and the audience are momentarily stranded between scepticism and enthralment, firmly establishes the paradoxical relationship within performative facility between the duplicitous and the profound.

What follows, therefore, seems on one level all too predictable. John's accession to Charles's demands is verified, as he operates skilfully on his client's vulnerability. The only apparently uncontrolled slipping and sliding of voices and identities within his trance results in the carefully constructed confusion of medium and message, vision and desire. And out of the ordered disorder emerges a clear directive: "I... (Pause.) You have a question ... your dear mother ... 'Let this man decide.' The question of ... you're troubled ... I ... I ... be assured she loves you ... She says be free of the money. And you must forsake your ... She: 'I will never leave you.' Your mother lives in you still. 'Follow my counsel, and come again'" (40). But John has apparently (an increasingly operative and problematic modifier) made the cardinal sin of the performer: he has underestimated his audience. Despite frequent warnings to Charles about customers' inevitable desire to test a clairvoyant's claimed powers, John stumbles when Miss A supplies a false photograph of her mother. As in each of the plays considered so far, it is the eruption of sudden, intense, and uncharacteristic physical activity that radically contextualizes all the social performance that has preceded it.

Numerous parallels with earlier plays are immediate. What initially ignites and then continues to fuel Miss A's drastic response is an overwhelming sense of betrayal, of destroyed
and consequently abandoned purpose. Once again, this is a response to the discovered treachery of artifice. As previously discussed, Teach's assault on Bobby, triggered by an ironic suspicion of deceit, is accompanied by a civilization-damning tirade. Similarly, Edmond's transition from intellectual stasis into physical brutality coincides with the falteringly poetic expression of his disinvestment in socially sanctioned codes of behaviour. In a directly corresponding manner, Miss A's assertion of her individual autonomy is voiced within her perceived loss of all sense of humanity and decency, and directed at what she labels John's insidious hypocrisy:

Miss A: THAT'S NOT HER PHOTOGRAPH. I TOOK IT FROM A BOOK. You're all the, all of you, god damn you! How could you, "I see her by the bed." How can you prey on me? Is there no mercy in the world...?

Charles: If you...

Miss A: If you can't help me, NO one can help me ... why did I come here. All of you ... Oh God, is there no ... how can you betray me... You ... you ... God damn you ... for "money"...? God... (44)

There are, however, two clear points of contrast with the earlier plays considered. The first is the absence of the reality or even serious threat of physical violence. The imminence of physical conflict which plays such an important role in Perversity (through the denial of its requisite commitment), Buffalo (through the realization of its temporarily liberating effect), and Edmond (through the revelation of its failure to provide emancipation), is not a factor in John and Miss A's relationship. Certainly, physical violence will play a major role in several of Mamet's subsequent works. However, in The Shawl the playwright is apparently prepared to leave behind the dichotomy between verbal and physical action (one that he has as regularly undermined as utilized). This later play and its playwright are seen as confident in the autonomous efficacy of utterance as action. To be sure, the threat of intimacy and/or violence (the two so tightly intertwined in Mamet's work) is entirely present. But the manifestation of
each here takes the form of verbal, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and finally moral interaction.

The second point of departure from earlier plays is equally significant. The transition from Bernie's almost entirely unshakeable self-absorption, through Teach's momentarily yet deeply shaken self-containment, and Edmond's simultaneously crippling and emancipating self-reflection, is completed in Miss A's explosive dissatisfaction. As she names the betrayal of hypocrisy in personal performance, she also identifies more directly than any of the earlier characters the rights and obligations of the observer, the always implicated on-looker. For what is clearly and definitively different about The Shawl is the fact that this consequential disinvestment is not located within the frustrated attempt at liberty of the central performer—or, rather, central performer—in the play.

John shares little in Bernie's confused swaggering or Teach's fragmented imposture. He exceeds Edmond's volatile outrage and complicity in the face of a newly discovered, socially endemic hypocrisy. John is far less contained within the imprisonment of unconscious self-performance. Thus he lacks the paradoxically brutal innocence and violent naivety of any of these earlier protagonists. His mastery of social/theatrical performance (so overtly conflated in this play) allow him a degree of self-reflection not before displayed in Mamet's work. Yet, as the playwright's critical writings stress, this sophistication can lead, in its own way, to passivity and resignation—to the failure, even inability to "dream." Miss A's literal calling to account of histrionic virtuosity thus, apparently of necessity, emerges from outside of the "trick," from a sensibility that has too large an investment in the magic of performance to tolerate its betrayal. Miss A, then, emerges as the most singular and impassioned voice within Mamet's work to this point of the other prerequisite of theatrical performance: the presence of the critical and engaged spectator.
Dennis Carroll has located a primary significance in the fact that this "central scene ... is like the apex of a pyramid in which the three characters are onstage together for the only time, and in which the relationships intersect. John is here faced with people antagonistic to one another--rivals for his allegiance." But the play's highly choreographed scenario neither prepares for nor delivers an anticipated, face-to-face conflict between Miss A and Charles. There is visual and compositional symmetry in the three characters' joint presence. But there is never, even given John's apparent willingness to follow Charles' ultimatum, a real sense of competition for John's attention. Rather, Charles's participation in the scene can more effectively be seen as, once again, a means of facilitating the dynamic between the play's two central characters, and within its main protagonist.

Thus, it seems significant that it is Charles who attempts to salvage the situation, almost like a scrambling stage manager trying to calm an unruly, dissatisfied house. John, in his momentarily stunned silence, resembles the suddenly, conspicuously speech-less actor whose performance has been revealed as undeniably, paradoxically fraudulent (a status revisited with very different and illuminating consequences in *House of Games*). The social and spiritual implications within Miss A's curse upon John's head, and its equally intriguing slide from moral to criminal indictment, further signals the confusion inherent in the multiple layers of social performance: "May you rot in hell, in prison, in ... you charlatan, you thief..." But her intense indignation proves to be only the latest swing of a wild pendulum of plot contortions, each one a counter to the last. Each twist more deeply involves the situation's duplicitous nature, as well as its reflection on the nature of duplicity. Each more directly scrutinizes performance's—and thus the theatre's—complicity as artifice. What emerges is the playwright's attempt to increasingly complicate yet ultimately redeem the relationship between performer and spectator, in society as
in the theatre, through an unequivocal statement of their physical, psychological, and spiritual interdependence.

Miss A's charges inevitably ring throughout any actual theatre in which the play is produced, questioning the motives of all who participate in commercial illusionism. Her condemnations, and thus the unnerving candour of the play itself, seem initially reinforced by John's belated reaction, as he seems to contradict Charles' attempts at damage-control, and calls down blame upon himself. Yet his impassioned pleas for forgiveness segue smoothly into a renewed tone of amazement, as John declares, "Oh, God Help Me. I see Your Sainted Mother" (44). Significantly, John re-enters the performance of this final divination, revealing his frightened and humbled agency.

**John**: Yes. And she would sing to you, "Are you asleep? My lamb...?" And she would sing, you hear her.

**Miss A**: No.

**John**: And she would cradle you. The shawl smelt of perfume. You lost it when? Five... Five...

**Miss A**: Yes.

**John**: What?

**Miss A**: Five years ago. (44-45)

The voice and fear and, apparently, prophecy, seem actually to be John's. Ironically, his presence within the speeches is argued by his disinterest in the consequences of his pronouncement. Each of the approaches towards Marnet's proposed organic performance, however fleeting or tentative, is characterized by just such a stance. Thus, John's sincerity seems verified by the overt selflessness of his motivation. The contrast with earlier protagonists is overt. John's gesture is not a violent attempt to strike out at or radically re-structure or even,
finally, 'con' reality. Rather it seems an emptying of the 'self' that Mamet's other characters have so desperately yet with such futility sought to define and sustain.

*The Shawl*, then, is mutually illuminating when considered with Mamet's discussion of what he understands as the "three types of actors" described by Constantin Stanislavsky. The first type, of which Mamet is totally dismissive, will re-emerge in my subsequent discussion of *House of Games*. "The second actor," Mamet explains, "sits with the script and comes up with his own unique and interesting version of the behavior supposedly called for by the scene...."28

John's highly imaginative rendition of his spiritual contact's brutal life and death would seem a fitting example of this admirable yet, for Mamet, ultimately limited approach to performance. "The third, called the 'organic' actor by Stanislavsky, realizes that no behavior or emotion is called for by the text—that only action is called for by the text...." This third type of actor comes "prepared to act moment-to-moment, based on what occurs in the performance ... to deny nothing and to invent nothing."

Thus, John's liberation into open and selfless spontaneity enacts the transition to what Mamet endorses as organic performance. The rhythms and cadence of John's earlier deceit are not rejected (just as Mamet's theatre retains much of traditional realistic practice), but rather transformed from unhappy into (apparently?) sincere actions of mutual discovery. The scene ends with his powerful yet calm pronouncement. And in its seemingly authentic tapping of subconscious and/or supernatural realms, it has the ambiguous effect of both sanctioning and further undermining the rehearsed and selfish deceit that had precipitated it.

But the play and playwright are not finished yet, as the next scene provides yet another reversal for the theatre audience. The sceptical Charles, humbled before John's achievement—whether of true clairvoyance or masterful chicanery, he seems unsure—now begs to be allowed
to stay. John, however, is fatigued and embittered. Perhaps protesting just a little too emphatically, he dismisses even this final, apparently miraculous act as "Tricks.... And there is no mystery. And then you can go. The Secrets of the Pyramids?" No. I went to the library. Society files. Perhaps two pictures. Of a woman in a red-fringed shawl..." (47). Ultimately, the only thing that John can find to offer Charles as instruction is to "Live in the World. Will you, please? That's what I'm trying to do."

The apparent insufficiency of this explanation hangs in the air between the characters, and, even after Charles has left the stage, between the figure of John and the audience. What the audience has witnessed—what they have participated in—contradicts his claims of final hypocrisy. For, on reflection, his simple plea is in fact that of the play, and of its playwright. As is ultimately revealed, John's performance, unlike that of Bernie, Teach, or even Edmond, is finally, transformatively contextualized within the expectations of an audience it is unable to ignore or overwhelm. Through his heightened self-reflection and observation, and Miss A's relentless, physically present scrutiny, performance is denied the possibility of insularity or solipsism. Conventions of delivery are dissected; the protection of the unexamined accumulation of habitual practices is peeled away; the authority—and responsibility—of assertion is reclaimed from within the gregariousness of routine reiteration. The "weight and meaning" of action, whether speech or of the body, is re-coupled with accountability. (Re)presentation is brought up against, and integrated into, its frame of actuality. Performance, social and theatrical, is forced to "Live in the World."

Left alone, John is visited a final time by Miss A, and the audience is visited with one more, final reversal—or, more accurately, retraction. Ostensibly stopping to offer payment, Miss A quickly reveals her main motive, and in the process leads John to concede as (one final time)
apparently genuine the just denied vision.

Miss A: You made contact with my mother.

John: That is not the...

Miss: You contacted her.

John: Well. Perhaps I did. And ... I ... I ... I don't know.

Miss A: You saw her. No. You saw her wrap me in that shawl. No one could know that. You saw her.

John: Did I see her...

Miss A: No. You must tell me. (Pause.) You must tell me. You saw her. (Pause.) (52-53)

The inversion of the relationship dynamic is overt. Crouse, discussing the dialogue of her character, recalls that "...[I]t was 'the', what', 'in', 'uh', 'ah', 'um'. It's literally monosyllabic. Even if I have a word, it's part of a sentence that doesn't exist. On the script it's 'Oh' dot, dot, dot." Yet in the final moments of the play, Miss A is seen as forceful and authoritative, while John remains meek and reserved. Her sentences are complete and logically ordered, while his are broken and unfinished. In a sense, the scene seems to describe precisely that ambiguous point at which Mamet has suggested composition and performance overlap and interact, that moment in the formative process when the authority of the spectator is most fully realized by all involved in theatrical (re)presentation.

Many times the audience will help figure how to get a play right. You might think there is something they might not understand and so you're overly clear about it. If they understand before your explanation is over, you're ruining your play. You've got to cut that explanation. Or, there might be a point that's clear to you but unclear to them. That point has to be clarified. Indeed, John's tentative stance seems, on the levels both of characterization and overall (re)presentation, the play's direct counter to Miss A's certainty. His response appears as an
attempt to maintain the crucial balance of scepticism and belief necessary for the visitation—that is, its performance—to retain its fragile but prerequisite equilibrium between actuality and miracle. Not a single question mark appears in Miss A's speeches. She is not asking but asserting. She thereby establishes her identity through the singular motivation that John's performance has offered—by claiming, individualizing, and acknowledging her dependence on the role that their dynamic has created for her. Conversely, John's movement is towards an uncomfortable and nervous humility, an actor discovered within the impact of his performance. Separated from an undisturbed identification with his role and the confident authority of its overwhelming persuasion, he is thereby liberated from its only apparently seamless security.

The italicization in Miss A's last cited speech, in particular, is both revealing and representative. Mamet's use of this device is a vital key for both reader and actor, yet is almost unfailingly idiosyncratic and unpredictable. Stresses fall in unexpected and suddenly illuminating patterns that seem to create, rather than conform to, common usage. As the playwright has suggested,

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The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It's language which is tailor-made for the stage. It's not a matter of my 'interpretation' of how these people talk. It is an illusion. It's like when Gertrude Stein said to Picasso, 'That portrait doesn't look like me.' Picasso said, 'It will.' It's an illusion.
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The playwright's repetition here of the term "illusion" further distances his perspective from a call for the abolishment of theatrical illusionism. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the propriety (a suitably Aristotelian concern) and scrutinized self-consciousness of the use of convention, and of the illusions created, and thus on what Mamet describes as the "unity, simplicity, and honesty" of the performance, once again, as performance. Miss A's shifting insistence is first upon the nature and then upon the necessity of the recitation's delivery: "You
must tell me. (Pause.) You must tell me." Her priorities leave little doubt concerning the final significance of their encounter. Its veracity is a product of selfless (and thus self-full), in Mamet's term, "true" performance. That the "truth" revealed is actually created, a momentary and arbitrary one (since established through the agreement of its collaborators), does little to diminish its worth. Its validity is ensured in its collective status as "something bigger" than either participant.

That the experience is, despite the depth of the unease it generates, finally empowering for both characters, is made clear in the otherwise ambiguous final speeches.

Miss A: You saw her wrap me in that shawl.

John: Yes. (Pause.)

Miss A: And you say I lost it.

John: You, yes, that is what I said. But you did not lose it. You burnt it. In rage. Standing somewhere by the water, five years ago.

Miss A: Yes. And then I...?

John: I do not know. That is all I saw. (53)

As such, The Shawl stands as the playwright's most explicit statement on the nature and status of live performance. His two remaining characters admirably stand the test of his most fundamental criterion: "Actors are many times afraid of feeling foolish. We should teach each other to feel power rather than fear when faced with the necessity of choice, to seek out and enjoy, to feel the life-giving pleasure of the power of artistic choice." What the play suggests is that the demand of courage is not simply restricted to the actor. The spectator's role in performance is revealed as equally challenging, and equally integral to the possibility of theatrical (re)presentation.
That *The Shawl* enacts a specifically *theatrical* phenomenon is insisted upon throughout the play. John's performance is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine as other than a live (re)presentation. Returning to Beckerman's conception of theatre as "presentation," or "gift," it becomes clear that what the protagonist offers his customers is anticipated in precisely this manner. What John appears to provide he refers to as "knowledge." But, as with Mamet's theatre (or Brecht's, or Beckett's), this knowledge is unlikely anything Miss A, or any of his customers, or any member of the theatre audience, does not already know—though perhaps they have forgotten or not yet recognized it. Not, as John points out, "The Secrets of the Pyramids" or "The Pythagorean mysteries" (47). Rather, the play proposes, "knowledge .... is our attempt to be a part of something that continues. Which we are *part* of" (6). Mamet has reiterated this idea in interview situations: "[T]he purpose of the theatre is to transcend the individual conscious mind, to put the spectator in communion with his or her fellows on stage and also in the audience, so as to address problems which cannot be addressed by reason."34

Foregrounding the dynamic at work in all his prior plays, *The Shawl* recasts the contrast between inconsequential and consequential social performance. John's performance of self displays a degree of self-awareness not before explored in Mamet's works. His character is in a sense an embodiment of the inner conflicts such an awareness imposes. His self-consciousness does not necessarily or unproblematically equate with self-knowledge, however. Nor is this desirable state guaranteed, or even identified as attainable. In this, John is a true inhabitant of Mamet's creative world: paradoxically, a fully realized theatrical representation of a partially (and thus realistically) realized personality. Dependent upon social performance, in a manner only superficially more distinct than the salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the ship workers of *Lakeboat* (1970/1980), the studio producers of *Speed-the-Plow*, or the quarrelling lovers of *The
Woods (1977), the lead figure of The Shawl equally struggles with the inadequacy of constructed identity and neatly—i.e., unattainably—defined roles of social interaction. How the character is distinguished has less to do with questions of moral superiority than with, fittingly, clarity of vision.

Ironically, precedent can be found in the same Aaronow from Glengarry Glen Ross that is so thoroughly duped by his fellow worker, Moss. Of Aaronow, Mamet has suggested, "Aaronow has some degree of conscience, some awareness; he's troubled. Corruption troubles him."35 As my prior discussion of Aaronow suggested, that character is seen as crippled by a confused naivety regarding the corruption (i.e., Birch's "normal" deviance) of speech and action—of performance—in the world around him. Like John, who spends the better part of The Shawl trying to demystify his practice, Aaronow wants desperately to believe that things are as they seem. Both characters learn, for what is portrayed as undoubtedly not the first time, to fear intimacy or aspiration, which seem invariably to lead to disappointment and disillusionment. Both have learned to "den[y] that there are such things as dreams."

What The Shawl, finally, seems to present is the possibility that, and the possible context in which, conscience, intimacy, aspiration—dreams—are all conceivable. What is required, apparently, is less a profound insight or understanding, either of the workings of society or even of one's own intellectual patterns. Rather, what the play suggests, when located squarely within the global pattern of Mamet's theatre to this point in his career, is that what is necessary is a shared and mutually supportive dynamic of personal performance. To this end, both actant and witness—performer and audience—are identified as subtly but fundamentally collaborative roles in an enactment of joint-realization.

Mamet has asserted that "[N]ot only the physical and psychological, but also the ethical
laws on the stage are no different than those on the street.... On the stage, just as in the office or the supermarket or the school, human beings must concern themselves with the truth of the individual moment, and recognize and ratify their coconspirators' existence and desire. Based on an attentive and empathetic exchange of regard and accountability, that which for Mamet represents a "true" theatrical relationship between actor and audience is recreated within the cultural theatre of social interaction. This last play prior to Mamet's entry into film direction draws together his diverse and iconoclastic social commentary, his theatrical and dramatic treatises, and his full body of plays, into a common manifesto. The degree to which this philosophical statement is valid or achievable is, of course, another question altogether, and one that, within the context of Mamet's films, grows increasingly problematical.

For what Mamet shares with all of his characters is a fundamental confidence in a discoverable—or, more accurately, reclaimable—moral absolute in personal and public behaviour. His scrutiny and challenge to convention is not an attempt to totally dispel its validity—in which he demonstrates considerable faith—but rather to locate its use and significance within a verifiable and universal system of checks and measures. That the criteria required to establish these standards is elusive, Mamet suggests, has little to do with contemporary theories of pluralism—or, rather, everything to do with their dissemination. Works of theatrical expression, for instance, that attempt to embody such decentralized perspectives on culture, such as "mixed media and performance art," Mamet suggests are basically garbage, very decadent, and a sign of a deep unrest, the sign of a cultural disease—a turning of one's back on a regenerative cultural institution in favour of novelty.... It is the sign of a very decayed and decadent society that we no longer apply ourselves to the old norms to renew ourselves, but have to find new ones. We are so frightened. Those things that have sustained us for two thousand years we no longer retreat to. We have to find new ones.
Mamet seems to be uninterested in the fact that the lament in the last of his sentences here cited expresses the same message found in the frustrated plea of many segments of a contemporary society that find little solace or potential in the "old norms" that "have sustained us for two thousand years..." Rather, that there exists an ascertainable and enforceable body of "traditional values" that reflect the best interests of all members of a given culture is a foundational premise of Mamet's social doctrine and theatrical practice.

There is a certain learned, habituated, perhaps even genetic cultural need for the rituals of the culture in which you exist and which is your culture. You might try to escape it by wishing that you could, and that's a kind of fascist wish fulfilment: you have to ignore a hell of a lot to enjoy yourself as such a performance. You have to pretend that you are something that you are not.38

Here lies perhaps the definitive paradox of Mamet's work and, apparently, his relationship to it. On the one hand, he is on record in support of the "learned" and "habituated" need for ritual in all societies. Indeed, he is content to allow the influence of socialization to segue smoothly, and with little scrutiny, into the genetic patterning of cultural groupings. Yet his drama and essays reflect an enduring and anxious preoccupation with the consequences of just such conditioning. The failure of the individual, his works argue, to stand vigilant guard against the pervasive and indoctrinating movements of regularly fickle and transient cultural expression is the greatest cause of the unrest and injustice in modern Western societies. There is little in Mamet's writing to suggest an awareness that the apparently conspicuous (if challenging) distinction to be made between "traditional values" and "vogue or fashion" is highly complex and potentially irresolvable. By his own account, both are realized unconsciously and symbolically. Both manifest a desire for community—although, for Mamet, the first is a "celebration" of, while the latter is a "profound longing" for, the same.39 That what he terms "trends" may in fact be the expression of perspectives that do indeed aspire to community, but which do not fit the
dominant cultural structures, does little to defer their disqualification in his pronounced view.

Thus, it would seem that the playwright proceeds on an assumption of a universal morality that affords a final arbiter of authentic behaviour—that is, happy action and *organic* performance. Those members of any given "culture" (a term which Mamet applies unambiguously to the aggregate communities of the U.S.A.) which attempt to modify their responsibility to this morality through "invidious" reference to "conditions" such as feminism, homosexuality, racial distinction, or physical or mental challenge, all threaten to sully the waters of this absolutism. This is certainly not an uncommon set of attitudes within diverse segments of the American population, nor one unheard of among American authors. It is, however, a highly selective perspective, adopted from a dominantly positioned and privileged vantage point. In his essays, therefore, the public persona which Mamet has adopted emerges in many ways as an articulate realization of the often unconscious socialization that his plays so thoroughly critique. The at times difficult and even contradictory reasoning of his arguments can bear a striking resemblance to the same behavioral patterns as they are embodied in his most imaginative of protagonists.

Finally, however, like Aaronow, Mamet finds himself caught in a linguistic bind that assumes moral, even metaphysical proportions. As does Aaronow, Mamet the essayist argues a faith in human agency's ability to control the systematic operation of language, and to step into an objective, universal space outside of the pervasive *activity* (and thus accountability) of cultural codification. As with Aaronow, so too can Mamet's assertions, many of which seem predicated on this presumption of a romantically imagined detachment and omniscience, lead to untenable (no matter how determined) positions. Often it is in Mamet's most impassioned declarations of the individual's authority over his/her own actions, regardless of class, gender, or
race, that he exhibits with the greatest clarity his dominant cultural positioning and unself-conscious socialization.

However, few of Mamet's plays are about the achievement of a state of transcendence, where the individual frees him or herself from the negative influences of social conditioning in a world gone bad. His characters seldom attain liberation, individuation, or autonomy. Even Edmond, who is seen as, finally, stripped of his previously defining attributes of constraining privilege, is forced to adopt others so polar in their social signification that the result is effectively that of neutralization, a striking out of all individuality. Edmond is left, at best, a blank sheet of raw self-consciousness. Rather, Mamet's drama imagines moments of respite from social indoctrination. His works attempt to conceive of sites—physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual—where the characters glimpse the possibility of self-knowledge through the experience of another or others.

'Communion' is not the correct term, as the event is almost always a vehicle back into the search for self, an establishing of safety in which the idea of self is momentarily viable. 'Collaboration' is perhaps a better word. A mutual space/time. The security afforded by the knowledge that the other is as lost, as frightened, as incomplete. The concluding moments of *The Woods* (1979) would seem to embody this sanctuary of mutual vulnerability. That play offers another poignant variation on the same tenuous pact (between the characters, between the performance and its audience) that fails so subtly in *Reunion*, that is sustained in the always imminent demise of *Dark Pony*, and which provides the finally fertile relationship of *The Shawl*. *The Woods*'s two characters, a man and woman approaching and retreating from intimacy, have battled each other through a gruelling weekend in the country that has seen argument, incrimination, alienation, and violence. Finally, they discover themselves temporarily stranded,
ostensibly shorn of all expectations, social or personal. The space/time they occupy is, ultimately, that of the frightening, fragile, and always fleeting potential of story.

RUTH: [...]They lay down.

(Pause.)

He put his arms around her.

(Pause.)

They lay down in the Forest and they put their arms around each other.

In the dark. And fell asleep.

(Pause.)

NICK: Go on.

(Pause.)

RUTH: What?

NICK: Go on.

RUTH (to self): Go on...

NICK: Yes.

(Pause.)

RUTH: The next day...

(The lights fade.)\(^{42}\)

But, of course, there are indeed expectations even here (as in Reunion, and Dark Pony, and The Shawl), formal and thematic conventions, desires for coherence and closure, aspirations to meaning and myth. As there are, perhaps, in all stories, all performances. In this, the Mamet persona possibly speaks its awareness of his own finally definitive socialization, through that of his characters, and finally that of the plays themselves, in their formal and thematic offensive on
the same realistic tenets that they ultimately uphold. Playwright, characters, and plays—all seem to share a will that struggles against the confines of convention and cultural habituation at the same time that it clings to the promise of community in the repetition and ritual of tradition.

One aspect of this struggle, however, is beyond question, and of central importance in the specifically theatrical nature of Mamet's social philosophy and the specifically social nature of his theatrical practice. Recurrent throughout his work for the stage is a dynamic that both strains against and is necessarily contextualized within convention, whether in the form of social conditioning or theatrical tradition. For it is only through the constant challenging of what Mamet terms traditional values, in social as well as theatrical performance, that they are thereby seen to be rediscovered and revitalized. Theatre, like life, therefore, is presented in Mamet's work as volatile, dangerous, realizable only in the unpredictable and spontaneous potential of physical presence. But "true," organic performance is not chaotic, or arbitrary, or self-indulgent. The organic dynamic is proposed in its most subtle, but perhaps most profound expression in the final, tentative joint-authorship of The Shawl. Yet it informs all of Mamet's dramatic writing, sometimes through its attainment, more often through its failed attempt, but always as an object of desire. Fundamental for its realization is a reliance, in both personal interaction and theatrical (re)presentation, upon a collaborative physical relationship of presence between the live performance and its equally live audience.

Given this unequivocal contextualization of performance within physical interaction, any pairing of the play and the immediately subsequent film seems necessarily one of contrast. How the collaboration of self discovery/creation that concludes the play can be aligned with the murderous separation and self-negation of House of Games's resolution is difficult to imagine.
For although Miss A does in fact continue to muse on the nature of the unarguable validity of John's vision, the entire set of motivations and expectations that frames their interaction has been radically altered.

**John:** If you search then what would you find? That it was a story, that someone made up. That it was true? Then someone could have read it. That was not noted, then perhaps it had been overlooked.

**Miss A:** Mm.

**John:** I see that's insufficient, but it must suffice. You see: it's not divination that concerns you. Finally. The question of your mother's will. And I see you've decided.

**Miss A:** Yes. I'm going to contest the will.

**John:** I think that is what you want to do.

**Miss A:** Yes. It is, it's exactly what I want to do **(Pause.)** And I'd like to thank you. **(Pause.)** (51-52)

But the two works differ in a far more fundamental manner. Brewer's reading, intriguingly, references Mamet's essay "Stanislavsky and the American Bicentennial" (published 1986). There the playwright endorses "the theatre primarily as a place of recognition and ratification.... The theater must be a place where mutual recognition of this desire can take place. The artist must avow humanity in him- or herself, and also in the audience." This is clearly the ideal that is given tentative, optimistic embodiment in *The Shawl*. It is likewise one that seems not merely deliberately but indeed of necessity alien to the narrative, cinematic experience of *House of Games*. At no stage of its production or projection is the subsequent motion picture—as a motion picture—intended or even able to "avow" a shared "humanity" with its audience in the manner described in the essay: "Stanislavsky recognized that the Theater is a part of one's total life experience, that it is an environment wherein human beings interact (where
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they breathe together, the actors and the audience)...." Nor can the film concern itself with the "truth of the individual moment," existing, as it does, within the isolated, insulated timelessness of perpetual exhibition.

The experience portrayed by Miss A and John is an interactive dance of plea, suspicion, trial, and contact—that is, of theatrical desire. It is an engagement which mirrors and is mirrored within that of the spectators and the stage that they are simultaneously drawn towards and distanced from. The two mutually generative relationships, fictional and (re)presentational, perform in the theatre a perpetual act of joint emulation. The potential for shared understanding that forms the physically explosive yet intellectually and emotionally embryonic dynamic of the earlier works is realized in this pivotal play, cautiously but with celebration. The result is a process so radically distant from cinematic spectatorship that the point of any sort of comparison between The Shawl and House of Games must be precisely the distinct experience of each.

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As is the case with most of the American playwrights who have made the transition to writer/director in cinema, David Mamet had a substantial record as a screenwriter behind him before he first assumed the central role of authority on his own projects. Intriguingly, the majority of Mamet's screenplays for other directors have been adaptations of novels, stage plays, or earlier films (or combinations thereof), thus further complicating an attempt to discover his particular contribution. However the playwright has regularly laid imaginative claim to his source material, projecting it through the filter of his immediately distinct vernacular and characteristic social preoccupations.

As previously noted, Mamet's flippant remark that "film is a collaborative business—bend over" is typical of his quick antagonism towards the structure of American film production. The treatment, in *Speed-the-Plow*, of the absent "Eastern sissy writer" further illustrates Mamet's cynicism. In that play an ostensibly serious and philosophical novel is alternately demeaned without mercy and proposed as the focal point for a brief but apparently sincere moment of self-examination. Speculation is hardly necessary to discover here a reflection of Mamet's own mixed experiences at the hands of less than scrupulous Hollywood executives. The novel in question, *The Bridge, or, Radiation and the Half-Life of Society*, shares the first half of its title with a short story written by the playwright several years prior to the composition of the play. Further, the novel is described as dealing with "The End of The World," an apocalyptic theme that Mamet has repeatedly expounded upon in interviews (albeit in a fashion that *Speed-the-Plow*'s greedy movie men, Gould and Fox, would likely find quite marketable). There is thus a
distinct ring of autobiography when the two would-be producers of a big-budget, low IQ thriller dismiss out of hand both the prose work and its author. As Mamet explained in 1987, just prior to the release of *House of Games*,

> When I wrote the screenplay for 'The Postman Always Rings Twice,' [director] Bob Rafelson's assistant called me up and said they were very disappointed.... Zanuck and Brown threw me out of the office when I gave them the script for 'The Verdict.' Ned Tanen and the bosses at Paramount thought my script for 'The Untouchables' was a piece of dreck until [producer] Art Linson persuaded them to do it. I put a year of my life writing a movie about Malcolm X for Warner Brothers and they hated it.3

But Mamet's ambiguity concerning the writer's role in American film is also longstanding. The work of fiction discussed in *Speed-the-Plow* is in fact never completely redeemed by the characters, play, or playwright. Thus Hollywood's treatment of it is never entirely condemned.4 However, according to Mamet, fundamental failures of understanding and judgement do indeed lead American film executives to disguise their own limitations behind a blanket dismissal of "theatricality." As he told *American Theatre* in 1987, "Hollywood people are very, very cruel and also very, very cunning. And one of the things that they will say to me and to other writers, if they don't understand something or it's not bad enough for them, is 'It's very theatrical. It's too theatrical.' That is used as a curse word. Also as an irrefutable statement. What are you going to say? 'It's not theatrical?'"5

Film production, Mamet asserts, despite the ironic suggestion of his cited witticism, is definitely not a "collaborative business." Echoing the sentiments of his historical predecessor Ben Hecht, Mamet has suggested that "My experience as a screenwriter is this: A script usually gets worse from the first draft on. This may not be a law of filmmaking, but in my experience it is generally true."6 In discussing his work for director Brian De Palma and producer Art Linson on *The Untouchables* (1987), Mamet recalls that "[A]s usually happens, we got to the point
someone said to me: 'Look, we disagree, and (in effect) you are the employee, so do you want to make the script changes which we require, or would you like us to do them, and do them badly?"' While on past films, "this mixture of flattery and aggressiveness" usually resulted in his making the requested changes, this particular time his reported response was "Fine. You screw it up. Spare me." Beyond simple industry fatigue, the fact that the playwright had begun working on his own film, as director, provided the inspiration for his rebelliousness.

Clearly, then, Mamet's contributed screenplays present a highly elusive and often questionable focus for a consideration of his stylistic or thematic influence. One need look no further than Steven H. Gale's study of *The Verdict* to find the degree to which confusion over the screenwriter's role in film production can lead to rather remarkably misdirected analysis:

In terms of cinematic techniques it is easy to see how Mamet has employed the camera eye, sound, and lighting to portray the nature of his protagonist before a single word of dialogue is spoken.... Because the [opening] frame is lighter at the top and in the center frame, the bottom and right-hand side of the composition is heavier, a structure that suggests a combination of subservience and insignificance. The dominant contrast of the window catches our eye first, then the subsidiary contrast of the lighted face of the machine, and only after the eye tracks back across the screen to the right does Galvin become apparent.^

That what Gale describes here has little to do with screenwriting and everything to do with direction and cinematography would seem to go without saying—except that it clearly does *not* in this critique.

However, what is pertinent is that Mamet's shift to cinema as scriptwriter was accompanied by extensive ruminations by the author on the nature of film composition and its
divergence from that for the stage. The confidence of the writer's (very) newly acquired insight is both familiar and familiarly problematic; his willingness to espouse it is particularly helpful to a comparative consideration of his theory and practice. The focus of my study remains the films scripted and directed by Mamet as original compositions separate from theatrical precedent. Initially, however, I will now consider Mamet's early declarations of method through a review of his involvement in and commentary on his first contributed screenplay.

Mamet's first outing as screenwriter was for director Bob Rafelson's 1981 version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (hereafter *Postman*). The film, based on James M. Cain's 1934 novel of the same name, became one entry in a concurrent Cain mini-revival that included adaptations of at least three other of the author's works. Mamet and Rafelson's treatment was in fact the sixth version of the original to come to the screen (although only two others actually acknowledge their debt to Cain's novel). All five previous efforts struggle, with varying degrees of success, to capture the combination of desire, frustration, banality, and eroticism in Cain's novel. The most recent version met with similarly mixed reaction, a good indication of the complexity of the task of adapting the novel.

Mamet and Rafelson's film, like the novel before it, tells the story of a sexually charged relationship between the wife (Cora, played by Jessica Lange) of a Greek immigrant (Nick, played by John Colicos) who runs a rural restaurant and garage, and a drifter (Frank, played by Jack Nicholson) who interrupts his aimless travels to take a job as a mechanic. In due course Frank engages with Cora in a shared seduction and, finally, the jointly planned murder of Nick. Arrested, charged, and tried, they are released only after apparent and real betrayal.
Finally, Cora, after announcing her pregnancy, is killed in a freak auto accident with Frank at the wheel.

Mamet and Rafelson's interpretation remains conspicuously loyal to its source, not only in narrative detail but also in its gritty, highly eroticized atmosphere. Mamet has repeatedly expressed his appreciation for Cain's work. Claiming to have read six of Cain's novels—twice—in one night, he declared, "They were marvellous.... It's like he learned to write by reading [Aristotle's] Poetics. I was struck by his honesty, his frankness about his problems, his personal perceptions of the world. Basically, he wrote the same book eight times, and it was always a wonderful book." In the apparent affinity for (or, at least, agreement with) the classical Greek scholar's precepts, the strongly personalized perspective, and the tendency to rework central themes, the perceived correspondence of Cain's practice with Mamet's own preoccupations and methods is clearly evident.

Also significant are the corresponding thematic elements of the two writers' works. Equating Cain's Postman with "a Greek Play," "Macbeth," "Morte d'Arthur," and "The Wasteland," Mamet has argued for its basis in classical myth: "It's a 4,000-year-old story: the aging man with the young wife, who wants to precipitate some violence, sexuality, regeneration and so takes on a younger, more virile stranger to their house.... It's a mythological story." The novel is, Mamet contends, "about killing and screwing and betraying each other—and under all this very cynical vision is a crying need for human contact in a bad, bad world." Finally, these observations are combined in Mamet's interpretation with the generalized assessment that all of Cain's stories "are really about women." Clearly there is here the problematic coordination of less than 'timeless' or 'universal' attitudes, in particular towards women. The insights offered here into Mamet's perspective are thus even more valuable than the strongly suggested resonance of
Cain's story within Mamet's own ideological stance.

Mamet has suggested that his initiation into the role of screenwriter was unusually gentle, as well as uncommon in its collaborative and educational nature: "Bob very flatteringly made me a silent partner.... He taught me about movies." The scope of this last, brief sentence is deceivingly broad. Reportedly, the director screened as many as five movies a day for the apprentice screenwriter, and supplied him with an equal number of scripts to read each evening. And Rafelson's use of the camera, as described by Mamet, clearly influenced the technique employed by the writer-turned-director on his own projects: "In terms of style, *The Postman* is classical. Rafelson's style is always the motivated camera; it doesn't move gratuitously.... Very straight-forward, almost Hitchcockian. A lot of judicious use of inserts, but nothing gratuitous." At the other end of the spectrum of directorial concerns, Mamet describes the working environment on Rafelson's set in terms remarkably similar to those he would later use to capture the attitudes of his own team of professionals: "I was very impressed by the atmosphere on the set.... That's the one thing I like about Hollywood—about this movie, anyway—everybody seemed to have the idea that what's good for the movie is also good for them and for the industry."

Mamet apparently discovered quickly that the move to film would require a reorientation of his approach to composition. However, he has described less a modification of vocabulary or dialect than an inversion of the role of motivation in his approach to characterization. His process of dramatic composition, he reports, is characterized by a focus on intriguing and/or engaging uses of language, which provide the basis for situation. Thus, the *act* of speaking represents a declaration of presence within the mutable theatrical space/time. He realized, however, that in film "it's the other way around: I start with the structure and work backwards."

The offered explanation for this shift is particularly indicative of Mamet's conception of
cinematic experience. Further, it offers key insight into his own manipulation of the cinema viewing position, vis a vis his understanding and utilization of the role of the spectator in the theatre: "Film is basically a narrative medium, in the sense that it conveys one person's perception— for instance, that of the camera. By contrast, the stage is a dramatic medium: the characters interact and there's friction, because they want things that contradict each other's desires. The drama is in this interaction of opposites." The idea of an over-determined singularity of perception, ensured through an equally policed singularity of vision, is one that informs Mamet's entire approach to filmic representation—and one, the author suggests, which "is the worst kind of playwriting." On the one hand, the elusive, cinematically unattainable dialectic of the theatre space/time is animated through the confrontation of physically present and volatile perspectives and agendas. Theatre as conflict: spontaneous, unpredictable, dangerous, consequential, and potentially transgressive. On the other hand, film for Mamet, even at this early stage of his screenwriting career, is a tightly controlled process of revealing and concealing information, a transparent and omniscient narrative authority that operates to foster, through premeditated manipulation, audience empathy and identification with the protagonist.

At what point do you give the audience information about the characters? And by withholding that information, how do you create suspense so that it is possible, in most instances, to have revelations on the part of the protagonist that are in consonance with the revelations of the audience? How do you make that happen for the protagonist at the same time you make it happen for the audience, so you're neither telling the audience something it already knows nor telling the audience something it can't appreciate.23

The results of Mamet's first effort were, as noted, generally well received, though not without detractors. Janet Maslin of the New York Times described the film as an "intense, impassioned new version ... of courage and consistency," in which much "of the streamlining in the film comes from David Mamet's tough, concise screenplay.... Virtually every line is startlingly
minimal..." But Vincent Canby, writing in the same paper, noted his disappointment in a film he disparaged as—considering its source material—incongruously "tasteful" and "deodorized," and in which "we don't hear the Mamet voice in the dialogue. It's an honorable screenplay without being an interesting one. In literature, as in love, fidelity is sometimes not enough." Mamet's contribution, therefore, was both praised and lamented for its lack of distinction. Yet in keeping with his emerging theory, Mamet the screenwriter clearly departed from the quasi-realistic, often brutally poetic language of his drama. Rather, he resorted to a conspicuously pared down, largely suggestive use of dialogue which facilitates and contextualizes the dominant visual narrative authority of the medium.

The contrast is overt. As a playwright, Mamet's recurrent theatrical dynamic is grounded in an often ironic attempt on the part of so many of his protagonists to establish and sustain identity through the power of relentless, unself-conscious speech. Language operates often as a vehicle for domination, yet almost always as an awkward attempt at communication and intimacy. Characters in Mamet's theatre enact language, and make it the (often arbitrary) site of their self-performance. Yet in his discussion of writing for film (although without making a clear generic or media distinction) Mamet straight-forwardly asserts that the "essence of dialogue is always to make a point. To go on and on is to betray your objective." For a character like Perversity's Bernie or Buffalo's Teach, "to go on and on" would seem to be, precisely, the "objective." Yet here Mamet proposes as a standard policy of composition the denial of this option (and thus its seductive but dubious potential as a claim to identity) to his characters. In so doing, he indicates his intention to bypass the fundamental social and/or existential dilemma that inspires his most memorable of stage creations. Similarly, the empowering self-discovery portrayed in a work like The Shawl is actually seen to be jeopardized at those junctures in the play where an identifiable
progression is present—where a "point" is being made—as in the scenes between Charles and John. Revelation (in this case literal) is inspired by performance as performance, through the "divination"—at times wild and self-indulgent, at others indirect and selfless—of the mystic. Understanding, to the degree it is attained, occurs within and through that which is not said, which is perhaps unsayable. Yet, as Mamet has claimed, with familiar assurance in simplicity, "Movies need to be written in broad strokes and descriptions. Plays are written in dialog [sic] and no descriptions."²⁷

The implications of this credo were particularly influential in regards to Mamet's decision, despite reservations on the part of Rafelson, to omit voice-over narration in their remake of Postman. This technique was regularly employed in films adapted from first-person narratives of the "hard-boiled" school of writers such as Dashell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Cain, and was associated most immediately with the popular stylistic conventions of film noir. (A more complete discussion of this film form follows in my study of House of Games.) Not surprisingly, then, voice-over was used generously in the 1946 version, to general critical approval. Mamet, however, had different ideas:

Cain is delineating the choices in a narrative fashion, but you can't do that on the screen. They used to—very badly. One thing about great silent films is that they're completely visual; they don't rely on narrative material for advancement of the plot, which is a mistake most films today make. That's why they're wretched.... That's not drama. That's shorthand, a program note.²⁸

In On Directing Film, written a decade later, Mamet displays remarkable consistency on this subject.²⁹ Arguing that "[I]f you're telling the story with the pictures, then the dialogue is the sprinkles on top of the ice cream cone," he continues,

If you can learn to tell a story, to break down a movie according to the shots and tell the story according to the theory of montage, then the dialogue, if it's good, will make the movie somewhat better; and if it's bad, it will make the movie
somewhat worse; but you'll still be telling the story with the shots, and they can take the brilliant dialogue out, if need be—as, in fact, they do when a film is subtitled or dubbed—and a great film, so treated, is injured hardly at all.30

Certainly, the generality of this claim is questionable (anyone who has seen either the subtitled version of Federico Fellini's *Ginger and Fred* [1986] or the dubbed release of Lina Wertmeuller's *Swept Away* [1975] would, I propose, beg to differ). But what Mamet's comments regarding the scripting of *Postman* assert is that the narrative strength of film lies almost solely in its visual attributes. Further, what eventually emerges is his dependence upon Eisensteinian principles that, as he describes them, eschew not only verbal narration, but stylistic storytelling as well. His repeated insistence upon "uninflected" shots in juxtaposition posit a viewing experience that, of necessity, is read at face value. As he would later tell the actors rehearsing their lines for *House of Games*, indicating the printed script, "These are the facts.... You don't got to characterize them, you don't got to get involved with them. These are the facts. Real Simple. O.K.?"31

Cinematic meaning, Mamet suggests, for both performer and spectator is the product of a near linguistic semiology, unimpeded by the imposition—i.e., distraction—of what he considers superfluous nuancing and redundancy.

In this, Mamet seems at odds with the fundamental aspect of reiteration that is commonly associated with classical American film technique. As Bordwell has suggested, "[I]n the cinema, repetition takes on a special necessity; since the conditions of presentation mean that one cannot stop and go back, most films reiterate information again and again."32 Further, specific devices and entire systems of narrative direction customarily interact, overlap, and mutually reinforce one another, in the effort to ensure spectator recognition and obedience.33 And, ironically, Roger G. Porfirio suggests that the result of Mamet's and Rafelson's avoidance of the overtly narrative aspects of the film's storytelling is that "Frank is repudiated as its psychological center, thereby
denying all access to the workings of his mind and the fatalism of his perspective. However, as unconventional as Marnet's objection to non-diegetic narration may initially appear, it is grounded in his belief that

[Voice over] relieves the audience.... It tells them someone is taking care of the problem--putting a frame on the movie, making it a flashback. It implies that somebody knows the end of the story, so it gives the audience the signal that they can care about it that much less.... I tried to put the audience in the same position as the protagonists: led forth by events, by the inevitability of the previous actions. They don't know what they're going to do next either. They find out after they're done.

Initially, this approach would seem intended to recreate in cinematic experience an unpredictability akin to that of live performance. But Mamet's rejection of redundancy clearly has little to do with a desire to foster a degree of ambiguity alien to commercial American film. Nor is he seeking to allow for a greater degree of interpretive freedom on the part of a more self-aware, media-conscious spectator. His desire to "put the audience in the same position as the protagonists" is to be understood literally as well as figuratively. Thus, it locates the spectators in a phenomenal, emotional, and psychological terrain that is fundamentally different than that of live theatre. The latter is defined by the audience's perpetual awareness of their own potentially consequential proximity--spatially and temporally--to the spontaneity and volatility of physical presence. Conversely, Mamet's cinematic practice does not attempt to foster a critical understanding of, as much as an emotional and psychological identification with, his characters, by promoting an unwitting assumption of the absent camera's perspective.

The Mamet film thus does not encourage an active and analytical but rather a passive and empathetic viewing position. It is one based upon a negation of spectator self-awareness and conscious participation--that is, of the viewer's independent presence in the cinema house--through the encouragement of a dual identification with camera and protagonist. His denial of the
inevitably "frame[d]" narrative then corresponds to a similar denial of the filmic frame through the masking of the arbitrary and manipulated instruments of the story's contrived "inevitability." The filmic process accedes its conventional and material attributes through the erasure of all evidence of their operation. This is clearly in direct contrast to the mutually acknowledged collaboration of presence in the social/theatrical space/time of his stage drama—a collaboration which overtly celebrates and regularly contests the practical and historic limitations of live performance.

Mamet's films thus emerge as entirely consistent with the tradition of classical American film, which operates on an assumption (through its assertion) of narrative omniscience and transparency. In Mamet's theatre, story seems dependent upon its capacity to threaten and even transgress the conventional limitations of its live telling. In his cinema, story relies upon the elimination of unforeseen possibility and the seamless fabrication of a 'life-like' inevitability.

It is possible to discover in the screenwriter's assertions, from this initial stage in his movie making career, the foundations for a highly economical and engaging stylistics or a basic misinterpretation of popular film technique. However, neither of these assessments accurately describes the unrealized potential in many of the playwright's developing ideas. What is undeniable is that Postman represents far more than Mamet's entry into the practice of scriptwriting. His accompanying proclamations amount to a declaration of first principles of film production (as he had earlier staked out for theatrical [re]presentation36). His many comments provide the groundwork for his current practice of full composition as film auteur. As already discussed at length, the thematic preoccupations of Mamet's theatre clearly replicate (and are replicated in) the formal nature of their (re)presentation. What remains to be considered, therefore, is the manner and degree of influence of his recent adoption of the cinematic medium
upon the narratives, characterization, and thematic focus of Mamet's films.

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SECTION FOUR: MAMET / FILM

Part Two: "A WOMAN IN A TRAP" / House of Games

Near the end of House of Games (1987), the lead male figure of Mamet's first project as writer/director offers the following assessment of the swindle that makes up the film's central action: "Years from now, they'll have to go to a museum, see a frame like this." However, the following argument holds that it is specifically a *cinema* that is needed to house this display. The film's story, the distant descendent of a three-page screen treatment originally conceived by Mamet and Jonathan Katz, revisits several of the major concerns made familiar through the playwright's theatrical work. Indeed, Dave Kehr, writing in the Chicago Tribune, noted (beneath the headline "'House of Games' stylishly meshes stage, film") that the film "is at once perfectly faithful to the world of [Mamet's] stage work and a fully realized piece of cinema...." This assessment follows a practice that is common in the popular press—though hardly restricted to it—of discussing the *theatricality* of Mamet's films. However, this term is employed primarily to describe specific thematic concerns and/or a self-conscious and contrived style of dialogue delivery. Thus, when Kehr suggests that this theatrical manner of speaking demonstrates "no attempt to create an illusion of spontaneity," the difficulties inherent in such reductionism are immediately apparent. Rather, a study of the film reveals a work that is both intentionally and unavoidably shaped and determined by its cinematic nature.

*House of Games,* Mamet has proposed, is "something that used to be fairly standard. It's what used to be called 'a psychological movie,' a woman's picture. Bette Davis. Joan Crawford... Like 'Double Indemnity,' 'Mildred Pierce,' or, one of my favorites, 'Caged'... A
woman in a trap." But this characteristically straight-forward assertion provokes far more scrutiny than perhaps is anticipated or appreciated. The production of "woman's pictures" may have been "standard" at one point in Hollywood's history. No attempt to recreate the experience in the late 1980's can possibly be. Both the positive and negative aspects of women's representation within the original examples of the category undoubtedly still inform much of popular American film content. However, the self-consciousness at once suggested and denied within Mamet's comment earns the film a focused analysis within its proclaimed fictional territory.

Implicit in Mamet's comments is also a desire to emulate the characteristics of film noir, as Double Indemnity and Mildred Pierce represent two distinct variations on the noir theme (both, intriguingly, adaptations of Cain stories). While film noir has frequently been classified as a distinct genre, this perspective has recently been challenged by, amongst others, genre critics and feminist theoreticians. Citing and expanding upon Raymond Durgnat's early Cinema (U.K.) articles on "The Family Tree of Film Noir," Paul Schrader has suggested that

\[
\text{[Film noir] is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood.... Film noir is also a specific period of film history, like German expressionism or the French New Wave. In general, film noir refers to those Hollywood films of the forties and early fifties that portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption.}\]

Film noir is seen in Schrader's interpretation as the focal point of a variety of intersecting influences: disillusionment over WWII, the emergence of realistic technique in postwar international cinema practice, the influx of German expatriates (and thus German expressionism) into the American film industry, and the popularity of the "hard-boiled" school of novelists, such as Hemingway, Hammett, Chandler, and Cain.
The stylistic consequences of this intersection are equally varied. These include a preoccupation with night-time lighting; indiscriminate lighting for actor and setting (resulting in frequent silhouette and shadow); a preference for oblique and vertical lines as opposed to horizontal; compositional tension rather than physical action; frequent use of "romantic" voice-over narration; and complex chronological order. Thus, Schrader suggests, "most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some noir elements."¹⁰

Debate over film noir's motivation and influence is similarly fractious. Bordwell, while conceding to film noir a seeming "criticism of classical technique," nonetheless concludes that the form "no more subverts the classical film than crime fiction undercuts the orthodox novel."¹¹ However, J. P. Telotte has proposed, with particular reference to the 1955 feature *Kiss Me Deadly*, considerably more subversive potential in noir's attributes.

[F]ilm noir can seem a nearly schizophrenic form, powerfully pulled in different directions by both realistic and fantastic impulses.... Viewed against the backdrop of its conventionally realistic scheme, the various distortions here, especially in editing technique and mise-en-scène construction, qualify its level of realism, make the cinematic mechanism far more visible than is usually acceptable in classical narratives, and produce what we might well see as a reflexive dimension.¹²

When these elements are reconsidered within the context of the woman's picture and its feminist critique, an already complex and often contradictory discussion becomes infinitely more so. "At the lowest level," Molly Haskell asserts, "as soap opera, the 'woman's film' fills a masturbatory need, it is soft core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife."¹³ At the same time, "[the woman's picture's] recurrent themes represent the closest thing to an expression of the collective drives, conscious and unconscious, of American women, of their avowed obligations and their unconscious resistance."¹⁴ However, Mary Ann Doane has questioned, in the light of contemporary feminist film theory, the very legitimacy of a category which
anticipates the "presence of the female spectator.... A crucial unresolved issue here is the very possibility of constructing a 'female spectator,' given the cinema's appeal to (male) voyeurism and fetishism." However, in her book length study of the woman's film in the 1940s, The Desire to Desire (1987), Doane attempts to move beyond this "crucial unresolved issue."

The cinema in general, outside of the genre of the woman's picture, constructs its spectator as the generic "he" of language. The masculine norm is purportedly asexual while sexually defined seeing is relegated to the woman. Access to the gaze is hence very carefully regulated through the specification of generic boundaries.

The woman's film is therefore in many ways a privileged site for the analysis of the given terms of female spectatorship and the inscription of subjectivity precisely because its address to a female viewer is particularly strongly marked.

The critical situation surrounding the woman's picture becomes even more complicated when the question of film noir influence is incorporated. The stylistic and thematic elements of noir, Sylvia Hardy has argued, were inspired in large part by the massive entry of women into the work force during WWII. What they reflect is thus an "underlying sense of horror and uncertainty ... as an indirect response to this forcible assault on traditional family structures and the traditional and conservative values they embodied." However, as Christine Gledhill has pointed out, the options open to the "independent" woman so frequently depicted within this framework are highly restricted, circumscribed by "the perennial myth of woman as threat to male control of the world and destroyer of male aspiration." As a consequence, Gledhill suggests, "the films both challenge the ideological hegemony of the family and in the end locate an oppressive and outcast place for women."

The engagement of House of Games with these issues is a complex and fascinating one. Mamet's film seems to strive, both consciously and unconsciously, to simultaneously fetishize and disavow its protagonist to such a degree that identification with her perspective inevitably
encourages a distinctly \textit{feminine}—i.e., subjugated, marginalized, 'absented'—position for the cinematic spectator. \textit{House of Games}, finally, struggles to contain the admission that \textit{all} cinema spectators are potentially dominated by an absent Other through an invisible or transparent mechanism of visual and ideological management. Thus, what is truly fascinating is the film's attempt to initially 'fetish over' and ultimately disavow its reliance upon the fundamental and traditionally gendered propensity for manipulation in filmic expression.

Clearly, then, Mamet's decision to draw upon the conventions associated with earlier works that bridge the categories of film noir and the woman's picture indicates a specific route for analysis of his first directorial outing. For, as David Richards noted in a 1993 \textit{New York Times} article entitled "Mamet's Women," "If women are not simply banished altogether [from Mamet's plays], they are peripheral figures, limited to the roles of sex object, punching bag or sometimes, when men need respite from the hurly-burly, dispenser of Tender Loving Care."\textsuperscript{20}

Mamet has certainly used the relationship between the sexes as frequent and controversial raw material, particularly in his essay writing practice. With articles bearing titles such as "In the Company of Men," "Women," and "True Stories of Bitches," Mamet has made quite apparent, if not exactly clear, his attitudes on the subject.

Women, it seems to me, like to know who is in charge. And if it's not going to be them, they would like it to be you. The problem is that "in charge," in this instance, may be defined as "leading the two of you towards that goal which they have elected is correct." I will, at this point, compare dealing with women to dealing with children or animals. This is not to suggest that women are, in any way, inferior, but merely that children and animals are smarter than men.\textsuperscript{21}

This stance is common to many of his writings dealing with what are presented as men's invariably sexual "negotiations" with women—who, unfamiliar with the "male idea" of
compromise, are "not much fun to do business with." As evidence of this situation, Mamet's essay "Women" (published in the 1989 collection Some Freaks) includes the following assessment: "The coldest, cruellest, most arrogant behavior I have ever seen in my professional life has been—and consistently been—on the part of women producers in the movies and the theater." The above cited combination of irony, resignation, condescension, and evasive self-deprecation equally, though somewhat more subtly, informs the majority of his dramatic female representations.

The controversial casting of Madonna in the Broadway production of Speed-the-Plow clearly demonstrates the playwright's tendency to dichotomize, even within a single character, the conventional female stereotypes of virgin and whore. Director Gregory Mosher's comments initially suggest that the character of Carol was conceived without such polarity in mind: "Madonna brings a backbone of steel. Mamet made the character, rather than a poor soul who is battered to the ground, someone about whom there is an element of doubt." But the familiar dynamic is quickly reaffirmed, as Mosher continues, "The audience is meant to go out asking one another: is she an angel? Is she a whore?" Just as with the orchestrated ambiguity of his essays, Mamet fosters uncertainty, but only between mutually exclusive and equally demeaning roles.

To be sure, in this Mamet basically revalidates an identifiable pattern of dramatic gender representation common to, in Jill Dolan's terms, "both Western civilization and the stage that has reflected it." Linda Walsh Jenkins has proposed the following description of these 'traditional' dramatic values:

"Man" as the Subject of narratives and actions, and "Woman" as the male-constructed heterosexual Other who is the object of male desire, the male gaze, and/or male action. She is the virgin, the whore, the mother, the betrayer, the
sister, the sidekick; but she is always peripheral to the male action and isolated from relationships with other women that are not male-centered.  

But Mamet's considerable investment in this gender imaging seems both more overt and more systematic within his cinematic representations, in ways that offer intriguing insights into his understanding of the film medium.

In this light, Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse), a psychiatrist and successful author, is clearly unique amongst Mamet's women characters in her possession of professional qualifications, social status, and education. The cost of these achievements, however, is announced in the second shot of the film. The camera's point-of-view (p.o.v.) has emerged from behind a nondescript stone structure in an overtly premeditated act of surveillance. (Here, as elsewhere, I employ the term camera as referencing not the profilmic object but rather, in Edward Branigan's phrase, "a reading hypothesis of the spectator about space."27) Then we are led to a book in the hand of what turns out to be a fan in search of an autograph. In the first of numerous departures from his Eisensteinian precepts, Mamet then adopts Jean Mitry's more generous conception of montage (which allows for the juxtaposition of images within a single shot.28) First is seen the book's title: "Driven: Compulsion and Obsession in Everyday Life by Margaret Ford, M. D." (5). Then, after a suitable pause, the volume is turned over, revealing a tight-lipped photographic image of its author. The transition forecasts what eventually becomes clear. The price of Ford's acquisition of personal power and independence has been the denial of self and the paralysis of all emotion. Ultimately, she must succumb to the same compulsive and obsessive behaviour she now explains to the world in her book.

Margaret's fetishistic desire for voyeuristic pleasure ensures her demise on numerous levels. As my previous study of Mamet's plays illustrates, his is a world which valorizes
presence, participation, authenticity, and sincerity. And in a manner more overt than ever realized in his theatre, he presents these qualities in *House of Games* as fundamentally male and inherently theatrical. Margaret is thus doomed from the outset, as she is conceived as entirely female and categorically cinematic. What cannot be contained by the film is the fact that her positioning throughout is radically aligned with that of the—in Mamet's practice—passive and willingly manipulated cinema spectator. In this she is utterly distant from *The Shawl*'s Miss A, whose insistence of presence facilitates that play's *organic* (re)presentation. Margaret, conversely, wants to witness, but remain uninvolved, unaccountable. For this she is condemned and systematically consumed on the level of both the narrative and, with amazing totality, that of its cinematic representation.

Only *The Shawl* approaches *House of Games*’s overt fascination with the profession of deceit. Thus the distinction between the two works is as initially deceiving as it is great. The failure of *The Shawl*'s protagonist is found in his aborted pretence, while his success is located squarely in his transcendence of his own duplicity. Mike portrays a far less conventional and redemptive trajectory, his demise as unrelenting as it is violent. Likewise, Miss A experiences a degree of self-identification that denies her enduring anonymity. By contrast, Margaret—referred to throughout the published screenplay as FORD, in contrast to the familiarity of MIKE—is relieved of any claim to independence or self-knowledge.

A work-aholic psychoanalyst, Margaret learns from a male patient, Billy Hahn (Steve Goldstein), that he has just lost twenty-five thousand dollars gambling. Failure to pay off the debt will cost him his life. Margaret takes it upon herself to go to the 'House of Games,' the gambling establishment in question, in order to demand that the loan be forgiven. There she
encounters the mysterious, seductive, and quintessentially male Mike (Joe Mantegna), who agrees to tear up the I. O. U. if Margaret joins him at a poker game already in progress. She is to pretend to be Mike's girlfriend and to watch for the "tell" of another player—the idiosyncratic gesture that will give away the fact that he is bluffing. Margaret spots the tell, but Mike still loses, and, at the threat to both of their lives, she agrees to write a personal cheque for the six thousand dollars he owes. At the last minute, however, she notices that the gun on the table is actually a water pistol, and she calls their bluff, to a general chorus of disappointed but amiable admiration. So goes the first in an elaborate and labyrinthine series of orchestrated deceits. Each, more complex than the last, envelops all that have preceded it within its consequences. In the process, Margaret learns some of the workings of the confidence game. Unfortunately, she chooses to disregard what Mike offers as its central "philosophical principle": "Don't Trust Nobody" (37).

After arranging to stumble upon a lost suitcase full of money in the street, Mike and one of his partners (Joey, played by Mike Nussbaum) along with Margaret, spend the night in a hotel room with a business man (J. T. Walsh) whom they have agreed to split the money with. In case the cash has been stolen or is counterfeit, the businessman agrees, he will to go to his bank and withdraw thirty thousand dollars of his own money to give to Mike and Joey, while he keeps the money in safekeeping. Margaret, however, notices the businessman speaking into a walkie-talkie in the bathroom, apparently in contact with fellow police officers. In a scuffle with what she now thinks is an undercover F. B. I. agent, his gun goes off and he falls, motionless. After Margaret is struck by Joey and, at Mike's insistence, steals a car, they make good their escape. But in the confusion the case has disappeared—along with the money that Mike and his colleagues have borrowed from "the big boys," in order to pull off their con of the business man.
Margaret gives Mike an equal sum of her own money, and, so she believes, parts ways with him for good, all the characters feeling lucky to still be alive.

Margaret, however, is racked by guilt over the death of the policeman. When she discovers that her entire relationship with Mike has been a protracted set-up, and that she has been the intended victim all along, she is emotionally broken. Describing herself as "out of control," she catches up with Mike at the airport and, through her own ruse, lures him into a huge, empty storage area. When he refuses to concede her loss and his own guilt, she shoots him with the gun she had originally taken from her gambling client—who, of course, was also complicit in Mike's plans. The film ends with Margaret once again in the world, seemingly no longer 'driven' or obsessive, now relaxed and at ease with herself. However, as the last scene in a restaurant concludes, we see her steal a gold lighter from the woman at the table beside her, revealing her healthy and self-forgiven appearance as one last, consuming charade.

The tone of Margaret's cool and abrupt initial response to the autograph seeker's gratitude in the first sequence establishes the rhythm of the entire film: "YOUNG WOMAN: You've helped me very much. / FORD: I'm glad I have. (Beat.) Thank you. (Beat.) Goodbye" (6). Then, as the scene shifts directly to a session with a young woman incarcerated for murder, Margaret's distant and clinical approach to human misery is revealed as the mirror image of her public demeanour. Yet the challenge to her aversion for personal involvement is made explicit in the scene.

WOMAN PATIENT: "I'm talking to you. Do you think that you are exempt? FORD: Do I think that I'm exempt...that I'm exempt from what...? [...] WOMAN PATIENT: Experience. (6-7)
But Margaret quickly deflects the question, forcing the dynamic between them back into the abstract realm of interpretative analysis.

Mamet does indeed have a particular style of psychoanalysis correctly represented. In *Freud's Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Ole Andkjær Olsen and Simo Køppe describe the classical approach as its founder perceived it:

In the first sessions of analysis Freud's rule was that the analyst must say as little as possible and wait for the patient's transference. He pointed out that there would always be transference if only because of the rule of abstinence. The libido, once it had been freed, had no other recourse than to turn to the analyst. The silence of the analyst served to sharpen the intensity of the analysand's expectations of the analyst.\(^{29}\)

But Ford's detachment is repeatedly revealed as withdrawal rather than objectivity. She appears genuinely surprised by and unprepared to deal with any challenge to her stance of silence, unprepared even for the fact that she is in the same room with the woman patient. Quite literally, Margaret is as stunned by the question as a cinema viewer might be if accosted by the image on the screen before them. (Is it merely a coincidence that Margaret and her patient are seen "*sitting across from each other in front of a white background*" [6]? ) Hers is, in fact, the embarrassed amazement of the discovered voyeur. The original storyboard included a sequence that runs "(1) a master of the entire action, (2) a close-up of the patient, (3) a close-up of Doctor Ford, (4) an insert of Ford's wristwatch, (5) a shot of Ford writing on a pad."\(^{30}\) However, the film, more effectively, leaves the gesture of looking at her watch (thereby openly announcing her preoccupation) up to the character herself. In either version, it is not difficult to discover a strong resemblance to the bored movie goer who checks the time in order to know how soon the tedious spectacle will end.

The scene is, however, one of the few moments in the film when visual narration is
secondary to the guidance of performed action. It is not necessary to share reviewer David Edelstein's blanket dismissal of the film to discover validity in his conclusion that, "In short, it's the work of a control freak."\textsuperscript{31} As Mamet notes of the entire filming process, described with winning candour in the preface to the published screenplay, the movie was shot within the structure of a fixed and immutable "Plan." The established nature of this blueprint preceded and effectively governed practically all cinematic activity. As Mamet reportedly reminded himself on the restless eve of production, "Whether or not the movie was even any good was, at this point (on the night before shooting), fairly well out of my hands, all I had to do was stick to the plan."\textsuperscript{32}

Working from an uncommonly final script, Mamet, cinematographer Juan Ruiz-Anchia, and storyboard artist Jeff Balsmeier predetermined the composition of each shot in pre-production with almost mathematical precision. The lessons which the author learned in this process—maintaining the axis of the shot, transitions between shots of varying depths, indications of the passage of time—represented a fundamental apprenticeship in the visual vocabulary of American popular film (a further contradiction of Gale's analysis of \textit{The Verdict}). The central "rule" of his rapid education, Mamet asserts, was "\textit{don't confuse the viewer.}"\textsuperscript{33} Each framing, each transition, each combination of shots is conspicuously intended to advance an intricate but ultimately linear and causally motivated plot. This plot, as already noted in Mamet's instructions to the performers, is to be treated as a series of "facts," uninflected and free from subtext.

Mamet's application of these concepts is logically informed by his attitude toward performance on the stage. As noted, the director has repeatedly called for a theatre in which actors and audience consciously share a communal event. But Mamet also describes acting as a
craft, a skill which has everything to do with technique and little to do with authentic emotion between actors or between actors and their roles: "People don't go to the theatre to hear emotion; they go to hear the concerto. The emotions should take place in the audience." Equally, the organic actor in Mamet's theatre is also a detached observer who is cognizant of the necessity of cool self-reflection in order to navigate the unpredictable spontaneity of live performance. Finally, Mamet's ideal actor meets the emotional enthusiasm of his/her audience with an off-setting humility and detachment. Ultimately, The Shawl's John displays a calm and selfless self-reflection that is sufficiently emptied of anxious preconceptions to be opened to a collaborative authenticity of experience.

However, translated into cinematic practice, this process has starkly different results. Deprived of the simultaneous, signifying collaboration of a live audience, the unnervingly controlled and defiantly denotative performances risk alienating the only subsequently present cinema spectator. The intentionally subtextless readings that the highly economical lines are given often seem at odds with the pronounced metaphoric significance that the cinematography aspires towards. The ambiguity generated by this effect has been noted by several critics. However, Edelstein's comment that "the language works like a straightjacket for actors" seems based upon the familiar failure to distinguish between language and language use. Vincent Canby, who offered a far more appreciative review, comes closer to the mark in his observation that "One sees the actor within the character who is speaking the lines, as well as the man, just off-screen who wrote the screenplay and is monitoring everything the actor does." At the centre of this persistent and often highly productive—if not always intentional—incongruity is Mamet's deep reliance upon what he concedes are his own, rather idiosyncratic interpretations of the theories of Sergei Eisenstein. As is commonly, if often imprecisely,
understood, Eisenstein's theory of *montage* describes a process by which images are juxtaposed through carefully orchestrated editing. Meaning is thus dependent upon the relationship established between and, ultimately, amongst shots, as opposed to the specific meaning of any single shot, or of the temporal progression from one to the next. In an early essay, Eisenstein makes example of the Chinese "ideogram" to explain his thesis: "[E]ach [hieroglyphic symbol], separately, corresponds to an *object*, to a fact, but their combination corresponds to a *concept*...."36 For Eisenstein, the analogy to cinema is automatic: "It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content—into *intellectual* contexts and series."37

However, that *any* shot can ever be purely "*depictive*" in the manner that Eisenstein here proposes is highly debateable. Further, that the "*copulati[ve]*" efficiency of two juxtaposed representational images is comparable to that realized within a firmly established system of conventional (i.e., arbitrary) symbols, seems a dubious proposition within contemporary theoretical understanding. As Calvin Pryluck notes, "Phonemic boundaries are part of the system [of verbal language] and part of what makes the system work.... The important point is that there is no clear boundary within the range of film variables. They are continuous in the mathematical sense of the word."38 Thus, Pryluck argues, while verbal language is a deductive system, the multiple codes of film—even if individually deductive—become inductive through interaction.39 Yet these (considerable) reservations have not diminished the extent of Eisenstein's influence upon, in general, practically all subsequent film practice and theory, and in particular the work of David Mamet.

Intriguingly, the primary allure of these principles for Mamet was their suitability to his own movie-making short-comings: "I found Eisenstein's theories particularly refreshing as they
didn't seem to call for any visual talent. The shot, he said, not only need not, but must not be evocative. The shot should stand as one unemotional term of the sequence, the totality of which should create in the mind of the audience a new idea....\footnote{40} Clearly, there are distinct grounds for Mamet's interpretation. In order to further emphasize the relationship between the filmic shot and the word (or "word-complex"), Eisenstein called the shot a "montage cell (or molecule).\footnote{41} He thereby ensured its independent existence and its dependence for meaning, within the film sequence, on interaction with other montage cells. But, as noted, the problems identified by contemporary semiological theory with the decidedly linguistic formulation of this model of 'copulating hieroglyphics' and ideograms are quickly encountered.

More problematic still for Mamet's employment of these practices is his own increasing emphasis on plot, which Eisenstein had dismissed as an out-dated and ineffective method of cinematic meaning-making. In a sense, Mamet's perception of the interaction of shots more closely resembles that of V.I. Pudovkin, who, Eisenstein insisted, saw montage, "as a linkage of pieces," "a chain," "bricks," "arranged in series to expound an idea."\footnote{42} This is clearly distinct from Eisenstein's creation of meaning "[b]y collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision."\footnote{43} By adhering closely to the classical rule of avoiding audience confusion at all costs, Mamet regularly sacrifices the generative forces of temporary (or lasting) incongruence in an effort to maintain the complex but consistent "inevitability" of his tale. Thus, despite the many narrative surprises, reversals, and recognitions of the film's story, its visual signification—that which the author claims as primary—sustains a near seamless and often overtly authoritative continuity.

Finally, what Mamet's complete dependence upon, and faith in, his "plan" demonstrates is his apparent confidence that there is a single meaning, and therefore a single correct
interpretation, towards which the attentive spectator can successfully be led. Thus the filmmaker seems convinced that he can curtail the bothersome connotations in his filmic narrative. Ironically, Mamet has continually critiqued and qualified this very presumption in his theatre. There the strict governance of clearly delimited performance conventions is seen as mutually contextualized by, and inter-dependent upon, the inherent 'messiness' of live (re)presentation. Yet in his cinematic representations, Mamet's discovery of the greatly increased narrative control of the camera seems to encourage his anticipation of a near absolute authority over signification.

Mamet thus indirectly argues a cognitive approach to film appreciation. As Bordwell has suggested,

> Looked at from the cognitive perspective, understanding narrative films can be seen as largely a matter of "cognizing." Going beyond the information given involves categorizing, drawing on prior knowledge, making informal, provisional inferences, and hypothesizing what is likely to happen next. To be a skilled spectator is to know how to execute these tacit but determining acts.\(^4\)

Within this interpretation, viewers bring a set of fundamental, inherent, and cross-cultural communication skills and abilities to the film, which becomes the site of intention, expression, reception, interpretation, and comprehension, in a highly orchestrated and almost unfailingly efficient system. At the same time, Noel Carroll asserts, the film maker, who has mastered his/her craft, utilizes the particularly powerful narrative authority of film in order to precisely guide the spectator through his/her carefully choreographed statement.

The consequence of this is that the movie spectator is always looking where he or she should be looking, always attending to the right details and thereby comprehending, nearly effortlessly, the ongoing action precisely in the way it is meant to be understood.... Through cutting and camera movement, the filmmaker can rest assured that the spectator is perceiving exactly what she should be perceiving at the precise moment she should be perceiving it.\(^5\)

What is, paradoxically, acknowledged yet very difficult to account for within this
attractively productive understanding of cognition is a concept at the heart of most other current
theoretical models of cinema: excess. There is extremely limited accommodation made here for
those aspects of both production and reception that choose not to behave, which insist upon
operating outside of the carefully managed organization of "schema-based knowledge" and
thus schematized cognitive procedures. The influence of narrative and cinematic excess is
thus discounted or ignored in a desire to complete the schematic journey towards a finite and
stable interpretation. And, Bordwell suggests, this process is one implicitly and explicitly
encouraged by American film:

The Hollywood cinema paces its narration for maximum legibility; filmmakers
have learned that, for perceivers who can not stop and go back, cues must be
highly redundant. But in learning this, filmmakers have also learned how to
prompt misremembering. Given our effort after gist and our inability to turn
back to check a point (especially one made ninety minutes earlier), the film can
introduce both redundant cues and highly non-redundant, even contradictory,
one.

The fact that what the film provides are "cues" (as opposed, say, to clues) clearly
suggests the nature of the part played by the viewer—The Viewer—in this process. Unlike the
theatre spectator, the film viewer's role is seen as singular, universal, and rigidly scripted within
the cognitivist viewing situation. S/he is not only told what to know, s/he is also told what to
forget. Or perhaps, more accurately (given the cognitivist allowance for variable—as opposed to
multiple—interpretations by individual viewers) s/he is told how to know and how to forget.
The final and sole criterion is that what s/he ultimately retains makes sense. As Mamet resolved,

I'm not going to be John Ford or Akira Kurosawa, but I do know the meaning of
each of the sequences, having insisted that s/he can believe the meaning of each of the sequences to a series of shots, each of them clean and uninflected ...
the audience will understand the story through the medium of pictures, and the
movie will be as good or as bad as the story I wrote.

In some ways, this indeed parallels Stephen Heath's argument, which also describes a
mutable cinematic reality determined by narrative imperative (see Section One: Part Three of this study). But as Heath emphasizes, the maintenance of such a construct is a tenuous and extremely "difficult" process, fraught with its own inner tensions. While all films work (do work, effect a process) this work is never completely exhausted within a narrative and production that operates cleanly, efficiently—without excess. No body of intentionality, no tightness of direction, no amount of redundancy, can conceal that with which it is in constant conflict, that which its formidable forces are rallied to counter. In a sense, the brute strength of control in the classical narrative signifies, first and foremost, the excess that necessitates it. On the thematic level, Rick Altman has written of "the embedded melodramatic mode that subtends classical narrative.... However strong the dominant voice, excess bears witness to the existence of another language, another logic."50 Similarly, that which is visible, logical, continuous—present within its signifying system(s)—in a film is at all times framed by what is invisible, illogical, discontinuous—absent from the causal chain of a consistent and closed interpretation.

Of specific relevance is the powerful influence that Mamet's preoccupation with the greater control of cinematic storytelling seems to have upon his thematic concerns. The heightened determinism of cinema narrative is translated into a similarly deepened social determinism in the fictions related. The challenge to and transgressive redefinition of convention so pivotal in Mamet's theatre thus gives way to representations of resignation and assimilation.

As noted, however, cinematic excess is not so easily contained. The attempted purging of both performances and visual compositions of all possible excess in House of Games instead results in an inevitable compounding of subtextual indication. The monotone delivery, and the either stiff (Margaret) or consciously stylized (Mike) performances emerge as in direct contrast to the high realism of contemporary American film. Staging is perhaps the most accurate term
to describe the film's uncommon realization of cinematic space. Crouse has noted that "David wanted to have a minimalist feel so there aren't a lot of extras, a lot of cars, a lot of people or anything like that. He wanted to concentrate on the characters rather than the background, to tell their story, so he kept it simple, sparse—like a work for the stage." Such economy, on the stage, can indeed encourage a centripetal impulse that draws the audience in to a more tightly circumscribed performative focus. However, the effect is entirely different when superimposed upon the conventions of mainstream film. Rather than clearing the interpretative space of extraneous distractions, the eliminating of anticipated localization in *House of Games* has the inverse effect.

Stanley Kauffmann's review for *The New Republic* discusses at length the progressive impact of this design: "[O]ur first reaction is that Mamet is not at ease. Where, for instance, are all the sounds we ought to be hearing in the background? Then, as the film progresses, we learn that this scene was the first in a series of abstractions... Clearly we are dealing with essences, not detailed facsimiles." But this attempt to deal with the film's uniformly detached and stylized appearance defuses what would seem to be the central tension that the film-maker is attempting to create. For the film's continuous, inwardly collapsing representations seem dependent upon the audience's sense that a familiar and recognizable basis of experience is always (that is, perpetually) a single revelation away.

The inevitably metaphorical stylization of theatre settings (always only a question of degree) guarantees (re)presentation's aesthetic isolation from the juxtaposed actuality that provides its tenuous frame. Thus the theatrical context's unabashed artificiality (heightened, rather than diminished in naturalistic practice) establishes the performance's communally imaginative foundation, and provides its key means of signification. The world of mainstream
film, conversely, is a mnemonic realm. Its frame denies all (material, technical) actuality, just as its image perpetually struggles against its always exhibited isolation from the contiguous world with which it asserts membership. Although an acknowledged generalization, there is practical validity in Alan Read's assessment that "It was film's fortuitous accident that the flow of everyday life in its background provided the canvas against which the subjectivities of story and plot were set." In contrast, Read suggests, "the technology of theatre has removed performance as quickly as is decent from everyday life, has made the reciprocal trajectory to cinema's 'lightness of movement'." House of Games, however, seems determined to both claim and deny its pose of insularity. The film requests the autonomy of the ultimately unruly theatrical space of conventionally coerced actuality, yet refuses to surrender the narrative authority inherent in the premeditated naturalism of cinema.

Returning, then, to Telotte's assertions concerning film noir's subversive potential, House of Games is seen to share noir's frequent "distortions" in its "mise-en-scène construction." However, the film's "editing technique" is conspicuously domestic, drawing attention to itself, if at all, only through its apparent over-eagerness to facilitate comprehension. Thus, the cinematography of the film does not intentionally heighten the visibility of the "cinematic mechanism," or encourage a "reflexive dimension" on the level of the cinematic. Rather it quietly foregrounds the overtly stylized and artificial environments (or stagings) that it captures. The film's conventional visual style thus unobtrusively reveals the function of its theatrically conceived locales, the systematic substitution of one apparent reality for another, within the film's narrative contrivance. Seldom does the artifice intentionally show its full hand through an authorized invasion into the cinematography, which would threaten to release the ambiguity of cinematic excess into the director's "plan."
Mamet, then, does draw upon those aspects of film noir that contribute to bold character definition (i.e., frequent profiles in silhouette lighting) and narrative mood and suspense (ovely contrived nighttime settings, striking and atmospheric colour schemes). Yet he carefully avoids many others—such as oblique camera angles, compositional tension, altered chronology, and expository voice-over—which foster spectator scrutiny beyond the narrative parameters of the unfolding tale. The heightened authorial self-consciousness of these latter techniques unequivocally threatens to distance the story, through the foregrounding of its telling, from the classical cinema realm of normalized experience. Thus, to deem the proceedings, in Kauffmann's term, "abstractions" is to disconnect them from the perception of a contiguous reality that their author relies upon to at once contextualize and romanticize them.

The thematic protest against unconscious socialization in Mamet's plays is amplified through a productively paradoxical metaphor: the challenge made by (re)presentation's often rowdy and unpredictable actuality to the theatrical conventions that seek to contain it. The near total authority of the cinematic process, however, seems to inspire in Mamet no such potentially transgressive fictions. Rather, he seeks, on the level of story, to replicate his desire to subordinate all narrative action to a transparent and thus unassailable set of conventions of cinematic storytelling. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Mamet's films focus on personal and social situations in which the forces of oppression, injustice, and indoctrination are similarly unknown and unknowable. His plays, in their performative unruliness, seek to test, re-ratify, and transform traditional stage practice, through fictions that recount parallel challenges to societal norms. His films, by contrast, speak of the inaccessible pervasiveness of cinematic control through depictions of individual subservience and consumption.

As noted, however, authority and subordination in Mamet's cinema, in a manner seldom
as clearly delineated in his theatre, are distinctly gendered attributes. Both popular and scholarly treatments of *House of Games* regularly discuss the dual spheres portrayed in the film. Brewer rather alarmingly distinguishes these as, on the one hand, the "'white' day world of women,""55 "this woman's world of light, plants, china and tablecloths,"56 and, conversely, Mike's "male world," "a private chamber of gambling and communion."57 But the camera, and the perspective of the film and film-maker, gaze out of only one of these realms. Consistently throughout the film Margaret is positioned and repositioned within the shifting intersection of viewing and being viewed. It is not so much Margaret and Mike's worlds that are juxtaposed, in which case there would be an alternating of dominance and authority. Rather, it is the vantage point of an always absent observation which shifts continuously. Margaret is initially dominated through the power of Mike's performance, and ostensibly reduced to the role of passive and inept spectator. Yet, in the film's actuality, she is ultimately revealed as its unwitting spectacle, wholly possessed and literally consumed by the omniscient perspective of the gamblers, the camera, and the audience alike. Her final assimilation into both the thematic intent and filmic representation amount to an absolute negation, in a manner so far removed from the purging self-discovery of Edmond as to be practically inconceivable on the stage.

From the outset, Margaret's inability to fulfil the role of attentive spectator is emphasized. Her uncharacteristically excited interpretation of the jailed patient's dream is apparently as faulty as it is simplistic: "She says it is a 'lurg,' it is called a 'lurg.' So if we invert 'Lurg,' a 'lurg' is a 'girl,' and *she* is the animal, and *she* is saying 'I am only trying to do good'" (7-8). Her Freudian mentor, Maria, responds, "And now someone has heard her. Good, Maggie, good for you." Thus, Maria apparently overlooks the same sliding of verbal construction as
Margaret—who, it seems, has herself not been "heard." The spiral of misinterpretation deepens, casting clearly intentional aspersions on the entire profession of psychoanalysis. Indeed, Alfie Kohn, writing in *Psychology Today*, discovered in the film, and particularly in its troubling ending, the grounds for a thorough reconsideration of certain forms of psychotherapy: "It is a cinematic analysis of analysis that has to be taken seriously."  

Margaret's position as a professional watcher, listener, and interpretive analyst seems chosen not in order to arm her against the guile she is to encounter—and thereby verify the virtuosity of Mike's performance. Rather it seems deliberately selected to emphasize and exaggerate her ironic susceptibility and her ineptitude. Finally, it is her *choice* to fail to observe, and her decision to suppress or ignore her own defence mechanisms and common sense, which become her most conspicuous (indeed, almost her only) character traits. It is also this same behaviour which most closely and cynically aligns her with the willingly enraptured cinema viewer.

Roy Schafer has noted (ironically, within a defence of such practice) that psychoanalysis is regularly structured so as to incorporate *two* narrative discourses, that of the analysand's history and that of the analysis process itself. The latter "structures ... provide primary narratives that establish what is to count as data. Once installed as leading narrative structures, they are taken as certain in order to develop coherent accounts of lives and technical practices." For Teresa De Lauretis what results must therefore be recognized as "a joint enterprise and a joint experience": "The suggestion is clear: a case history is really a metahistory, a metadiscursive operation," which recounts its own construction by both participants.

Early in the film, after Margaret's first visit to the 'House of Games,' the potentially self-serving nature of this imposed narrative authority is made starkly evident. In conversation with
Maria, Margaret seems to coopt the story of one of her patients. In this, she reveals a reciprocal relationship that announces not only the implicit power of her position, but also her own questioning of its validity, and the degree to which it resides beyond her control.

FORD: I know why she is in the hospital, she's sick. The question is, what am I doing there. It's a sham, it's a con game. There's nothing I can do to help her, and there's nothing I can learn from her to help others avoid her mistakes. That poor girl, all her life my father tells her she's a whore, so all her life she seeks out...

MARIA: "My father..."?

FORD: I'm sorry?

MARIA: You said, "My father says that she's a whore."

FORD: My father...? (Beat.) I said, "My" father...? (30)

Margaret's experience of the conmen's charades is revealed as less a heightened awareness of the distinction between reality and illusion than an initially embedded, progressively degenerative erosion of her own sense of purpose and identity.

Margaret seems to challenge the possibility of observation as a vehicle for understanding. But she seems equally unconscious of the influence her simple presence exerts upon the analysis dynamic, denying both the effect of her intended participation and the consequences of her passive attendance. Further, she seems unconscious of or in denial over the immediacy of the implications of her speculations within her own life. Thus, her profession's powers of observation are cast as dubious, its function of active participation seen as unacknowledged.

From the outset, Margaret's confidence in her own perceptions is shaken, only to have this uncertainty itself undermined. She sees Mike's poker opponent perform his tell. This observation is immediately denied. Then, with her identification of the fake gun, her conviction is reinstated. But even this seems one more part of the cycle of self-doubt and contrived
conviction that draws her more and more deeply into the larger deceit that extends as far as the film process itself. Each time Mike allows her to see what isn’t seen, the excess that surrounds the frame of the visible confidence game, she surrenders some of her original caution. But, of course, as with the cinema spectator, Margaret is only intentionally shown the illusion of excess. What Mike consciously reveals is in fact carefully contained within the larger frame of the charade that is performed for and on Margaret, just as all the characters and events are largely contained within that played by Mamet for and on the movie audience. And just as Margaret is lulled into a dangerous passivity of superiority in regards to the victims she sees fall to Mike’s skill, so too the cinema spectator runs the risk of adopting the same perilous relationship to Mamet’s female protagonist.

After Mike shows her the inner workings of a "short con" in which he casually convinces a young military reservist to "give his money to a total stranger," Margaret responds, "You learn something new every day" (37). But it is the medium, not the message of Mike’s performance that Margaret’s off-balance perception is tuned into. She has asked him to allow her to do a study, in Mike’s words, "To see how a true bad man plies his trade...." Yet she cannot hear him when he informs her, with undetected irony, that "The basic idea is this: it’s called a ‘confidence’ game. Why? Because you give me your confidence? No. Because I give you mine" (34). The camera follows them from the brightly lit Western Union Office, along the sidewalk and into the deepening gloom of the night. Correspondingly, Margaret abandons the responsibility of both the professional psychoanalyst and the self-conscious spectator, for the seduction of pure escapism.

MIKE: …everybody gets something out of every transaction. What that nice kid gets is the opportunity to feel like a good man. (Pause.) Now: what do you get out of this transaction?
FORD: I told you, I...

MIKE: Be real, Babe. Let's up the ante here. (He stops.) Do you want to make love to me...?

FORD: Excuse me...?

MIKE: Because you're blushing. That's a tell. The things we want, we can do them or not do them, but we can't hide them.

FORD: And what is it you think I want?

MIKE: I'll tell you: someone to come along, to take you into a new thing. Do you want that? Would you like that?

Beat.

FORD (softly): Yes.

MIKE: What is it...?

FORD: Yes.

MIKE: That's good. (37-38)

Absent from this exchange in the published text, but appearing in the film, is Mike's assessment that what Margaret really wants is "Someone to possess you." What Mike offers, finally, would seem to be the advertised promises of the cinema itself: impersonal intimacy, "real" illusion, the absolute abandon inherent in apparent narrational omniscience. It is in the locating of Margaret at the intersection between the traditional positions of possessed spectator and objectified spectacle that the film and film-maker ultimately consume her potentiality. In the process, they also reveal House of Games, and its use of film form itself, as so very distinct from the organic act of live performance as it is envisioned in Mamet's theatre.

Margaret is thus primed by both the con men and the writer/director to witness the climax of the performance unfolding around her. Immediately following the (successfully)
unsuccessful swindle operation, she returns to her office, as yet unaware of Mike's duplicity. Her distress at the thought of having killed the undercover policeman renders her in a state of distraction. She is now desperate not to be seen by anyone, unconscious that she has, in fact, been 'centre stage' from the very beginning. For the first time in the film she is sensitive to the consequences of her image—of her presence and its detection—and of the complicity inherent in her attendant involvement at the scene of the crime.

What Margaret apparently arrives at is the social/theatrical realization shared by so many of Mamet's theatrical characters. For she is suddenly aware of the collaboration that unavoidably accompanies even passive participation in live performance. Her repeated phrase, "I can't be here" during their discovery by the agent and the subsequent struggle takes on a multiplicity of meaning. On the level of her moral evaluation—or rather devaluation—within the fiction, it stands as a desperate denial of the responsibility that engagement entails. Earlier in the film Margaret in fact declares, with equal intensity, her desire to be present, to be involved—ironically, to be directed by Mike. When she and Mike emerge from their sexual encounter in the hotel, he conveniently remembers that "There's a bit that I'm supposed to do here" (42). Margaret's immediate, repeated response (again, even more emphatic in the film than in the published text) is "I'll do it with you. Just tell me what to...." Thus, her subsequent denial of the very presence that she had previously requested reveals her impossible desire to not merely attend without consequence, but to actually participate without sacrificing her own autonomy. Made explicit is her psychological and (clearly, for her author) moral confusion regarding the phenomenological distinction between a theatrically present engagement and a cinematically absent voyeurism.

However, rather than associated with an act of drastic consequence—the shooting of a
man—the character has rather been drafted into an intricate illusion of consequence. Pulled, unwittingly, into the fiction of a deceit orchestrated solely for her benefit, she appears, initially, not so much a performer as a property. Placing herself too close to the reach of the performance, captured by its inward pull, she is subsumed into its action, all expectations of conventional safety dispelled. However, it is a drama that, ultimately, she does not experience theatrically. The reciprocal relationship between performers and spectators is denied. The playtext is actually an immutable "plan" of only apparent chance and disarray. Margaret perceives her anxiety as that which occurs whenever the conventional frames that separate the participants in a theatrical event are challenged or shift. However, it is a false shift, a fraudulent challenge.

"Joey grabs Ford and hits her viciously in the face" (51). Mike seduces her in an apparently random hotel room. Margaret undergoes this violence inflicted upon her as unpredicted and unpredictable, as real, as it seems to claim her more and more deeply as an active agent into the subterfuge. But these gestures do not represent the powers of accommodation of an attentive and responsive (i.e., theatrically organic) performance. Rather, these are the operation of a self-contained mechanism, already entirely composed, directed, and choreographed, in the arrogant but accurate assurance that its audience will attend and will observe just what it chooses to reveal—in what order, for how long, from which angle. What, finally, she experiences is an eerily cinematic performance, spontaneous only in the past tense, and designed in the certainty of her entirely passive and cooperative, yet essential presence.

In a parallel to her manipulation on the level of story, the p.o.v. of Mamet's camera then conspicuously pushes Margaret about her darkened office. She and the viewer are paced through a series of symbolically loaded shots (of the notes she has made about the 'House of
Games,' of her now discredited medical certificate on the wall, of the blood on her blouse, etc.). From there she is led to the desk drawer, where the gun she took from Billy, her gambler patient, is still resting. The view of the camera continues through this abrupt, directional cutting, and ends up framed upon the garbage pail, into which, inexplicably, Margaret decides to put all the lingering evidence of her nightmarish adventure.

Then, demonstrating conclusively either Margaret's confused trauma or Mamet's singular emphasis on narrative function (or both), she heads out to the disposal dumpster behind her office building, where she apparently intends to leave the implicating objects. However, on her way she sees Billy Hahn leave a pay phone, walk around the corner, and get into the same car that Mike had Margaret steal in order to effect their escape after the foiled extortion. For one of the rare instances in the film, the camera adopts her exact p.o.v. Replicating her movement along the sidewalk, it shares with the spectator her vision, and thus her revelation that the entire, incredible experience has been one very long con, at her critical expense.

The moment of unnerving identification—what Edward Branigan terms subjectivity⁴¹—is a calculated gamble on the part of the director. At risk is too overt an admission of the relationship between Margaret's manipulation by the con men and the spectator's parallel regulation by means of the narrative's visual coding. The result could indeed be a renewed scepticism and self-consciousness in the film viewer. Indeed, empathy for and with Margaret has been encouraged by the audience's shared, progressive experience of the alien and mysterious world of the con men and the mutual inability of both the viewer and the character to detect the parameters of the deception.

However—leaving aside, for the moment, questions of ideological coding—identification has also been consistently discouraged. Particularly damning, in the ethical world of the film, is
Margaret's willful but groundless presumption of immunity from consequence. Her initial willingness to enter into the unfamiliar and likely hostile world of the gambling house seems unmotivated and uncharacteristic for someone in her position (there having been at that point little to identify her own psychological reasons for such a treacherous act). Her coarse stance and tough words to Mike at their first meeting are additionally discrediting: "Let's talk turkey, Pal. One: You threatened to kill my friend. You aren't going to do that because if you do you're going away for Life" (13). Her dialect and manner seem, apparently unintentionally, to be burdened by the most weary cinematic clichés that the film seems elsewhere to be so selectively and self-consciously revisiting (as opposed to revisioning).

Even more significantly, the majority of shots of Margaret capture her looking but not seeing. She constantly glances conspicuously out of the corner of her eye, eager to observe others but anxious not to be identified in her thrilled voyeurism. Yet she is unable to see past the most superficial layer of the artifice around her, while her clumsy surveillance effectively isolates her from the intentionality of the performed deceptions. The only explanation for much of her behaviour is an actual or willed—and highly conspicuous—naïveté. This unqualified or simply false innocence allows her to cling to ignorance of her own presence as a contributing factor in all that transpires—until, of course, Mike denies her this indulgence.

Margaret is seen, thus, as willfully blind to her own central role as spectacle. The momentary consolidation of the camera angle with her p.o.v., then, is definitively contextualized within all her dubious performance. Indeed, this p.o.v. has conspicuously been reserved for Margaret's failures to comprehend what she sees: the tell in the initial poker game; the counterfeit businessman in the apartment (who ultimately is revealed as a counterfeit F. B. I. agent). Consequently, the effect, or at least the apparent intent, moves quickly beyond
identification, into the reinforcement of the spectator's own sense of superior knowledge—specifically, in this case, self-knowledge. The viewers' consciousness of the narrative subordination that they share with the character is thus largely off-set by the reassuring impression that it is Margaret's own discredited motivation and behaviour that have led both her and the audience into this dilemma.

Still, in this moment Margaret is seen as finally seeing. Her understanding of the true significance of the events seems to promise a degree of personal efficacy heretofore denied her by both the narrative and its cinematic telling. Yet, still another seeming reality, this promise is both actual and bogus. Making her way, silently, ominously, back to the 'House of Games,' she finds that Mike is not there. The performance over, he is no longer on stage. She continues along, oblivious to the pouring rain which seems to promise an equally torrential outpouring of emotion and consequence. Through a back door she enters into a restaurant (where else do actors go after the show?). Unseen, for what she and the audience now recognize as the first time in the entire action, she observes Mike and his partners—including the 'dead' F.B.I. agent—dividing up her eighty thousand dollars. Her pain at that moment is real in a manner not previously afforded her throughout the film, yet one deepened and complicated by its cinematic representation.

Hers is an anguish informed by the knowledge that her failure to see—her failure as observer, as interpreter and analyst—has been inextricably involved with her unwitting status as observed, as object, as display. Each of the two polar positions has been undermined—indeed, cancelled out—by the other, and by her ignorance or denial of her own participation in the reciprocal relationship between them. Unable to willfully fulfil either role, she has been swindled out of all sense of presence, of consequence, of meaning or value. And in that instant of
possible efficacy, of the opportunity for empowerment as both unseen observer and emergent seen, the character is instead dealt her most significant and fateful loss.

The image is striking. Standing behind a partition wall, her face in close-up, she seems, indeed, a "woman in a trap." Imprisoned, behind bars, she is forced to witness "the trick 'from the back.'" The men speak in aggressive but deeply affectionate tones to one another (Mike casually slaps one of the other men on the buttocks as he moves away from the table). All are uniformly derisive regarding their cheated 'mark.' References to playing "the straight guy," of becoming "Sarah Bernhardt," and of the "realism" of bruises acquired in the staged scuffle (so radically distinct from Margaret's injuries) all stress the performative and ostensibly theatrical nature of the operation.

In a sense, Mike and his followers do indeed fulfil the playwright's previously noted conception of performance as an objective craft of technical skill. Unburdened by the dead weight of emotions or personal involvement, they enact a flawless representation of catastrophe, turning apparent disaster into handsome profit. However, they are definitively displaced from the acknowledged presence of an audience. They disregard the inevitable consequences of their performance—choosing neither to "breathe" the same air nor "commune" within the same space/time as their unwitting audience/collaborator. Thus, their performance becomes entirely self-sufficient and self-serving. The confused lack of self-awareness of Perversity's Bernie and Buffalo's Teach seems a naive and harmless incompetence when compared to Mike's cool, entirely premeditated detachment. House of Games' central performance thus emerges as a brutal perversion of the ideally transcending dynamic that is embodied in such plays as The Shawl.
A return to Mamet's take on Stanislavsky's typology of actors is warranted here. The second type, as previously noted, "comes up with his own unique and interesting version of the behavior supposedly called for by the scene" while the third "realizes that no behavior or emotion is called for by the text—that only action is called for by the text...."62 This third, organic type of actor is "prepared to act moment-to-moment, based on what occurs in the performance ... to deny nothing and to invent nothing." In addition to the Russian director's classifications, Mamet has offered his own "two subdivisions of the Thespians's art: one is called Acting, and the other is called Great Acting." Paradoxically, however, those who are "universally" deemed "Great Actors, the Premier Actors of their age, fall into the second of Stanislavsky's categories," limited in their craft by an "intellectual pomposity."63

Mamet's discussion of the attraction of these "Great Actors" for the average spectator is particularly relevant: "The audience calls them Great, I think, because it wants to identify with them—with the actors, that is, not with the characters the actors portray. The audience wants to identify with these actors because they seem empowered to behave arrogantly in a protected setting."64 In a sense, Margaret's desire for Mike is presented as the desire to live vicariously through his performance. His allure has less to do with his role as con man (which would support the often argued and gender-biased claims of Margaret's 'need to be bad') than with his ability to offer a seamless performance, as con man, to the world. In effect, it is his status as untouchable spectacle to which she is drawn. But, as the film ultimately reveals, Mike too is contained by the role he plays. John, in The Shawl, emerges as the spontaneous, mutable and authentic—since selfless—third type of actor noted above. Conversely, Mike is unwilling or unable—and ultimately not required—to transcend his self-centred and unalterable portrayal, which proves so fatally dependent upon its "protected setting."
Finally, Margaret is discovered not as a witness to back stage authenticity, but rather as the captive viewer of a living image from which she is insurmountably cut off. She remains a perpetually isolated and immobile spectator. For the first time in the film the con men are seen off guard (though entirely in character—a key indicator of their restricted theatricality and successfully cinematic realization). For a charged, lingering instant, Margaret is seen as potentially freed from the delusions of professional curiosity and personal intimacy. Yet in the same moment the controlling story and stylistics of the film once again, definitively, claim dominance. In a sense, the visual narrative of the film literally enacts its cinematic nature. In the process, its treatment of its central character becomes a metaphor for the cinematic viewing experience itself.

The Shawl's Miss A is seen to employ her considerable powers of observation and active premeditation, in combination with her legitimate emotional response (as audience in Mamet's theatre), to expose John's fraudulent practice. She thereby provokes his apparently authentic vision, as they become joint participants in a "true" theatrical performance. In House of Games, Margaret, driven by similar passion, instead abandons her claim of public and personal consequence. She refuses to challenge the performance before her with the insistence of her presence. Her face is framed twice: once by the wall divider she stands behind, a second time by the camera p.o.v. which holds her in a tight close-up. Unnoticed, she stares at her violators. The image lingers.

What, one wonders, would have been the effect of allowing the character what Paul Willemen has referred to as "the fourth look"—that is, the freedom to look out of the frame, out of the film itself, into the spectatorial space? As Branigan notes, "through an ideology (that is, a reading convention) which takes the camera (and, more broadly, narration) to be invisible
and the character to be real[,] ... characters, by not looking directly into the camera—preserving its invisibility—gain the power to move freely within space and time independently of a 'narrative' or 'spectator' of which they must know nothing.66 What if the character suddenly, explicitly exposed the fraudulent, illusory nature of this "power to move freely"—on the level of narrative and that of narration? What if the camera and, by extension, the writer/director and his audience, were all asked to acknowledge their complicity in Margaret's gendered subjugation, both fictional and phenomenal? What effect would this moment of literal identification—of the self, of the Other—have upon the voyeuristic viewer, suddenly, irrevocably faced with the image of his/her own manipulation within the paradoxically intimate yet impersonal cinematic mechanism?

As Willemen has suggested, "the fourth look has considerable implications regarding the social experience of film going, and may offer an insight into the differences between the subject/object/spectacle relations in cinema and theater."67 Miss A's surrogacy as audience is, in The Shawl's theatrical realization, a vehicle for spectator empowerment (within given ideological parameters). Margaret, in House of Games's over-determined cinematic experience, undergoes an inverse and systematic subordination that, in its totality, must be deeply unnerving for the empathetic viewer. But Mamet would seem to have no such challenging of the cinematic in mind. Rather than meet the gaze of the camera—and that of its attendant spectators—Margaret's eyes are contained within the narrative, initially directed to the side and below the camera's gaze. Then, conclusively, she looks away, closing her eyes tightly, blocking out the vision that she has managed to ignore or deny throughout the film's action. The gesture is at once entirely natural and of final, consequential weight. With it, Margaret relinquishes any claim she may once have had on substance or efficacy. With it she abandons the right of accountability within the social
performance that she has unwittingly facilitated.

Instead, and to her ultimate undoing, she attempts to enter the very same performative realm in which she has been so completely negated. Later that evening she unexpectedly approaches Mike in the airport as he arrives to take a flight to Las Vegas. The camera again adopts Margaret's p.o.v., as she moves towards his cautiously alarmed face. Once again the spectator is momentarily suspended in—indeed, sutured into—the renewed possibility in Margaret's outraged attempt towards self-direction. But the space that is created through this use of subjectivity, although distinct on the level of narrative, emerges as identical, on the level of narration, to that created by the earlier use of the same technique outside of Margaret's office, another deception in the film's strategy of containment.

Mike seems—quite fittingly, as the 'Great Actor' that he proves himself to be—momentarily caught off-guard out of the context of the formal con. There is a general, disturbing sense of disequilibrium as, for the first time in the film, neither character is fully in control. Margaret appears even more repressed and tightly constrained than in the beginning of the film. Her uncharacteristically 'feminine' white dress, formal high heel shoes, and meticulous hairstyle seem a statement of groomed vulnerability so pronounced as to be clumsy. She feigns amazement at 'discovering' Mike. "I can't believe I'm seeing you" (64, emphasis added), she whispers, generating several levels of irony. Combined with her equally ironic, exaggerated concern over being "watched" by the police, her behaviour amounts to a broad and near hysterical performance.

What Margaret offers to Mike corresponds with Stanislavsky's first category of actor, who, according to Mamet, "presents a ritualized and superficial version of human behavior.... This actor will give the audience a stock rendition of 'love,' 'anger,' or whatever emotion seems
to be called for by the text. She delivers a chain of stereotypical lines with an intensity that seems entirely void of conviction—precisely because it is motivated by emotion, which Mamet portrays as destructive to organic performance. Margaret is thus left unequivocally stranded. She emerges as, finally, no longer prepared to play the passive role of manipulated spectator. But the world of the con men is one closed to her angry, emotionally motivated desire for participation, and thus her attempt at performance is doomed to failure.

Mike, in further keeping with Mamet's 'Great Actor' theory, seems largely unconscious of Margaret's histrionic ineptitude. As soon as she tells him that she has with her a quarter of a million dollars with which they can "start a new life," he is drawn into a con so obvious that he and his partners would never think of attempting it. As Margaret hands him the key to the locker holding the money, the visual echo of him placing a hotel key in her fingers creates a sense of narrative and stylistic symmetry. More significantly, it exposes the con man—his earlier cool assurance replaced by nervous, uncertain glances—as dangerously, indeed terminally inadequate in the practice of improvisation. The destabilizing factors as the film concludes thus include a miscasting of roles, a confusion of performative expectations, and an incongruity of representational modes.

Such potentially productive ambiguity is, however, a calculated means as opposed to an end in itself, and is thus inevitably short-lived. Rejecting the dictionary definition ("...on this point, I take issue with that most excellent book..."), the playwright has argued that "Entropy is a logical progression toward the simplest, the most ordered state. So is drama. The entropy, the drama, continues until a disordered state has been brought to rest." Questions regarding the validity of this definition aside, it is clear that the director has no intention of entertaining such phenomenological disorder for long. The rowdy actuality that sustains Mamet's theatre through
expressions of possible liberation must, in his cinema of isolation and containment, finally acknowledge its only ever apparency. The conclusion of House of Games neatly, though with considerable psychological violence, reclaims its medium's equilibrium.

Margaret and Mike are found perfectly, inexplicably alone in a huge storage area—an auditorium without an audience, a performance in a vacuum. Margaret seems determined both to fulfill the role that she has desperately fashioned and to escape its fraudulent constraints. "Cracking-out-of-turn," in Mike's phrase, she announces the instability of her constructed character and its unmanageably emotional basis. "[T]hat knife," which Mike had left upon the hotel bureau as an ownerless prop becomes, as Margaret confesses to stealing it, "Your pocket knife" (66). Thus, it is transformed into a personal, indeed, intimate accusal. Margaret, once again, gives herself away—but her subtle confession marks her inevitable and apparently intentional emergence from an unsustainable artifice. However, her final demand for accountability—a theatrical assertion of self—emerges as too little, too late. In concert, the con men's ethic, the film-maker's narrative and ideological agenda, and, ultimately, the medium of the film all devour their prey.

FORD: I want to know how you could do what you did to me.

MIKE: It wasn't personal. Okay? And, really, funny as that sounds, I'm sorry that it happened. But it did, and we've all got to live in an imperfect world. (He gets up.)

FORD: You used me.

MIKE: I "used" you. I did. I'm sorry. And you learned some things about yourself that you'd rather not know. I'm sorry for that, too. You say I Acted Atrociously. Yes. I did. I do it for a living. (He gives her a salute and starts for the door.)

FORD: You sit down.
MIKE: I'd love to, but I've got some things to do. (68-69)

Mike's systematic impersonality acquires a distinctly metacinematic quality with his next line. In response to her cocking the gun she is holding on him, he informs her that "You can't bluff someone who's not paying attention." And to a degree that lifts Mike out of the narrative causality and logic of the film's story, he retains this untouchable quality throughout his bloody demise. His death takes on an air less of inevitability than of a suitably twisted redemption, a form of ethical constancy that amounts to legitimization. His behaviour is unlikely to the point of surreality. Yet, within the narrative, this is outweighed by its symbolic, ideological coding as a further example of the playwright's familiar male-centred bravado—a perspective that has been readily adopted by some critics. Brewer claims that "Mike dies well....

In the bloody context of the moment, he is persuasive that Ford's mission, from the beginning, has been the self-liberating emasculation of the male. He then calls for his own end with stoic, militaristic toughness in the best tough-guy tradition.... Mike's last address to Ford is masculine, denying her femininity, yet appropriate, ironically, in her embracing of an all-female world where she assumes an aggressive role. Mike's philosophy, representatively male, is, despite its power games, direct and honest in its fashion.70

Such an interpretation seems to accept without scrutiny the film's press notes, distributed with its production information, which proposes that "Mike is a criminal, but he has a lot in common with the self-motivated loner heroes of Hamnett and Chandler, men who create their own code of ethics in order to operate in a dirty world. In short, Mike is a figure of romance."71 In fact, Mike's "code of ethics" is lamentably domestic and pedestrian. In its reductionist condemnation of her ambition and its devaluation of her emotional basis of self-definition, Margaret is effectively set up as a 'straw woman,' to be knocked down by the equally selective, though far more complimentary depiction of the "stoic," "direct and honest" male thieves and liars. More pertinently, Mike's absolute moral inaccessibility represents the final condemnation
of Margaret's attempted transition to his level of performance. As a result, both his metaphorlic
status and her basis of identification for the cinema viewer are reframed. For, just as the
narrative structure seems to lead the protagonist to a point of inevitable catharsis, sound and
image combine to complete the demonstration of denial that the dialogue so strongly
encourages.

Mike's incongruous heroic indignation segues into a forceful, self-serving psychoanalytic
assessment: "Hey, fuck you. This is what you always wanted—you crooked bitch...you
thief...this is what you always...(He starts to cough blood.) You always need to get caught—
'cause you know you're bad...live with this. I never hurt anybody. I never shot anybody...you're
gonna...you're gonna...you're gonna...you sought this out" (69-70). But the reasoning is too
strangely perfect, too much the film's argument (and, if one wished to speculate, apparently that
of its author) not to confess the character's ascension--i.e., disappearance--into a larger design.
And Margaret, in her turn, has already validated all charges by abdicating her own connection to
consequence. Coldly, distantly announcing, "I can't help it—I'm out of control," she
then
proceeds to shoot Mike repeatedly. Her statement suggests both self-awareness and self-
dismissal. She is seen to have acquired, finally, the voyeuristic performative liberation she
initially sought—but only at the cost of all emotional, psychological, and moral presence.

As she tells him, "It's not my pistol. I was never here," the act of self-negation completes
itself. The gun was, indeed, the con men's initial hook into her curiosity. Were it seen here in
the hands of a newly self-possessed character, it could potentially represent the powerful and
ironic bridging of deceitful artifice to consequential accounting. In The Shawl, Miss A presents
John with a photograph of a woman only supposedly her mother. The object operates with a
dual duplicity—as, within the context of story, a trap set by Miss A to test John's authenticity,
and as a symbolic property in the actual production of the play. Thus it functions as the pivotal provocation of, in Mamet's term, "truth" on both levels—within the fiction and its performance.

In *House of Games*, in Margaret's coldly hysterical representation, the gun signifies her own, and her narrative's, absolution from consequence. For, of course, Margaret, as with the entire cinematic representation, was "never here." In both the narrative and its projection, her possession of the weapon, its use, and its effect are all conceded to as consumed illusion.

The formal aspects of the film clearly underscore this impression in a powerful, if theoretically uncharacteristic, display of redundancy on Mamet's part. Just as Margaret's possibility of emotional release is circumvented textually, the camera too recedes, shifting to an elevated and distant rear p.o.v. The sound-track becomes dominated by the swelling rise of a jet engine. Mike's final, mocking "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" ridicules both Margaret's gender and her inefficacy (inseparable within the ethos of the narrative). As she is thus effectively distanced from her own vengeance, both protagonist and viewer are forcibly confronted with their fundamental separation from and helplessness within the cinematic world of the film.

E. Ann Kaplan, in a study of Orson Welles's film noir-styled *The Lady from Shanghai* (1946), notes that that movie does indeed image "the destruction of a cloying, sentimental, and false female ideal," and "that there is something subversive ... in the fact that Elsa resists the men's attempts to dominate her." However, Kaplan adds, the "independence" ultimately realized by the character is one "that no one can admire, since it is based on manipulation, greed, and murder. There is, thus, little that is progressive about a male director substituting for a form of structural repression (submission to the Law of the Father) an independence that ... is based on moral degradation." In Welles's film the paradoxical power attributed to Elsa, although
related to that of Margaret through its narrative and moral consequences, is based upon her conscious and proactive status as spectacle. Margaret, however, denied awareness of her objectification and any suggestion of actual desirability outside of her potential as financial victim, is stripped of even the dubious distinction of seductress. As the crowing con men note while they divide her money, "MR. DEAN: Took her money, and screwed her, too. / MIKE: A small price to pay" (62).

The Margaret of the final sequence appears "tanned, dressed lightly, at the bar, holding a drink" (70). She moves with ease and unprecedented poise—indeed, presence—through the restaurant to sit once again with Maria, in a scene that echoes their meeting, under very different circumstances, earlier in the film. When she greets her friend, it is with the self-assurance of someone who has put a troubled past securely behind her. As she says, in response to Maria's restated concern over her past preoccupation, "That's right—and you said, when you've done something unforgivable, forgive yourself, and that's what I've done, and it's done" (71). But the film has neither forgiven nor forgotten. Momentarily left alone, Margaret notices a woman at the next table using a gold lighter, much like the one Maria had used at their earlier luncheon, and which Margaret had then admired. At that time, Maria had told her to "Give yourself all those rewards you would like to have" (8). Now, ostensibly rejuvenated both physically and mentally, she distracts the woman diner long enough to steal the lighter from her purse.

Brewer discovers in this incident a final confirmation of unspoken and sinister female collaboration:

This is collusion. The woman lights her own cigarette; she "backs up" Ford's position. These simple juxtaposed gestures are charged with sexuality, with support for female dominance, with balance, self-sufficiency, reserve, a charade carried on in full daylight more menacing and deadly than anything perpetrated by the comparatively childlike antics of the con men. Ford does not so much steal
the woman's gold lighter as the torch is passed to her.\textsuperscript{73}

But such a reading seems unsupportable, given the almost nonexistent and utterly uninflected recognition between the two women, and the overt inwardness (as opposed to introspection) of Margaret's satisfaction with her stolen prize. Rather, the stealing of the lighter is more productively interpreted as an instance of a fixation that the narrative and cinematic mechanism alike have facilitated and enforced.

Returning, repeatedly, to the act of transgression (behaviour which, as Terry Mitchell has noted, perpetually and intentionally runs the risk of apprehension\textsuperscript{74}) Margaret emerges in the final moments of the film as a figure entirely subsumed into the seamless, to her inexplicable and inaccessible, representation of two authors: Mike and Mamet. Her cool performance mimics that of the con man she now emulates as a constant, subliminal reminder of her guilt in his death. Yet her behaviour in fact makes the opposite statement than that boasted by Mike's practice. Not a claim of identity, it is portrayed as the ultimate act of denial, a likely recurrent act of repressed and thus destructive emotion that must, of need, substitute for the authentic catharsis that both the male character and his creator have coopted. And in this final submission, in this now full transition of the character to the realm of imposed escapism, Margaret is seen to complete her conceptual symbiosis with the film spectator, who, similarly, chooses either to accommodate or remain forever outside of the intended cinematic experience of Mamet's film.

A colleague of mine, when presented with this argument, responded that "we should hate this film."\textsuperscript{75} And for all intents and purposes, we should. The position of Margaret Ford consistently simulates the spectator's own, and is thus a persistent reminder of his/her parallel manipulation. Motivated by a specular fascination and desire for vicarious experience, Margaret
enters, with her eyes open, into a fraudulent world of contrived representation, one so tightly orchestrated and meticulously scripted that there exists no room for improvisation. Either the con works, or it doesn't. There she is simultaneously seduced and pacified by an apparent access to the excess of the mechanism, what normally isn't seen around and behind the scenes of the represented artifice. Yet what she perceives as excess is actually neatly and manipulatively contained within the larger frame of both the image and Mike's plans. Willing ignorance, she experiences a false yet hypnotic sense of unseen omniscience. Convinced that she can attend this spectacle unnoticed, her presence an inconsequential absence, she is rudely awakened to the apparent admission fee of participation. Her expectations of purely voyeuristic detachment are met with an uncontrolled and uncontrollably theatrical—i.e., physical, unpredictable, consequential—accounting. But she experiences a fundamental—since narratively enforced— inability to insist upon the truly collaborative obligation that accompanies this apparently theatrical level of living performance. Thus, ironically, she is proven finally, catastrophically correct from the beginning. Surrendering her will, her ability to insist upon identity and input, she ultimately relinquishes all her rights in a total, unquestioned illusion of her own mastery.

*House of Games* can thus be seen as both fulfilling and refuting Laura Mulvey's oft-cited conception of mainstream film as a voyeuristic process that facilitates a dominant male perspective. In a patriarchal society, Mulvey contends, the image of woman, in any symbolic order, "in the last resort, speaks castration and nothing else." Faced with the paradox of the female figure on screen—pleasure of the objectified body, threat of identification with the symbol of castration—the male unconscious, Mulvey suggests, "has two avenues of escape":

... preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue
typified by the concerns of *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star).77

While both of these "avenues" would seem to be operative in a film such as Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (thus supporting Welleman's contention that the first is merely one variation of the second78), it is clearly the first that informs *House of Games*. In its revisit of the "concerns of *film noir,*" the film indeed demystifies, devalues, punishes, and, in its total consumption of her agency, 'saves' its female character. As Mamet has suggested, apparently sincerely, "Mike changes her life. At the end of the film she is dressed beautifully, her hair all done, she is smiling. It takes years of therapy to achieve what Mike gives her in a week-end."79

However, necessary in Mulvey's model is the conception of the cinematic viewing perspective as specifically *masculine*. Male or female, the spectator identifies with the look of the male protagonist.80 Seemingly, in *House of Games*, the overt similarity between the position of the persecuted and disempowered female protagonist and that of the cinema viewer inevitably complicates this conception of popular film. As opposed to the sadistic voyeurism and fetishism of Mulvey's interpretation, the cinema emerges in Mamet's film as a mechanism that parallels and *enacts*, rather than merely facilitates, traditional social and political operations which continue to result in the oppression and subordination of women. As opposed to an illusory empowerment through the encouragement of a dominant male point-of-view, Mamet's cinema can be seen to perpetually, if largely covertly, remind the viewer of his/her complete and definitively 'feminine' subservience. Indeed, were such an identification overtly encouraged, or even consistently acknowledged, *House of Games* could be put forward as a patently subversive work in its forefronting of popular cinematic and broadly ideological manipulation.
But, once again and by now familiarly, this impression must be exposed as only apparent. The film and film-maker have, it would seem, somewhat less radical intentions. For, as noted, Margaret is positioned at the intersection of seeing and being seen. Access to her p.o.v. is highly restricted—thus the sudden, startling quality of those moments when the camera replicates her subjectivity. And in her final, utter displacement from authorship, Margaret fulfills what Kaja Silverman has proposed as the regular fate of the female figure in mainstream cinema. In addition to its own "lack," Silverman argues, the female body is also burdened with that of the male, who denies his anxious awareness of his own distance from any true "point of discursive origin" by projecting it onto the woman: "The female subject's involuntary incorporation of the various losses which haunt cinema from the foreclosed real to the invisible agency of enunciation, makes possible the male subject's identification with the symbolic father, and his imaginary alignment with creative vision and speech." 81

Thus the final moments of Margaret's murder of Mike merely make clear what is more subtly operative throughout the film. Mike is reabsorbed into the narration; Margaret is consumed by it. The distinction is crucial. Mike's ironically 'charmed' presence is finally understood as decoy, as the deceivingly expendable representative of the Absent Other whose p.o.v. provides the film's shaping frames—ideological as well as (by means of) visual. Mike's masculinity is identified as a reclaimed projection of the determining set of preconceptions within the story and its telling. Margaret's femininity is revealed as the ideological excess that must be tamed and contained. Perpetually overwhelming the film's subversive potential is the fact that it reproduces a predominant cultural bias, a set of ideological assumptions that precludes the possibility of its own threatened self-consciousness.

From the first, indignant, and "generally" addressed, "Who is this broad?" (21), barked
out by the gambling Vegas Man (Ricky Jay), through Joey's angry, repeated "You were a fool to've brought the broad" (47) during the staged encounter with the F. B. I. agent, right up to and beyond Mike's "representatively male" and utter refusal to grant Margaret a shred of validity, the film valorizes a socially instituted dismissal of female significance. The message is clear and consistent. Its argument takes numerous forms, including gender denial: the film is bracketed by client Billy's sarcastic remark, "Maan, you're living in the dream" (10) and Mike's already cited request, "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" (70). Less subtle is the equation of femininity with psychological and social deviance that emerges during the 'back-stage' scene in the restaurant: "...the broad's an addict..."; "The bitch is a booster"; "The bitch is a born thief, man,..." (61-62). Mike's final, condemning tirade sums up the pervasive ethos of the narrative's romanticized male culture: "This is what you always wanted—you crooked bitch..." (69).

In a sense, this assumed cultural presupposition operates as the most pervasive of the film's "leading narrative structures," much like those defended by Schafer and deconstructed by De Lauretis as the "primary narratives that establish what is to count as data" within the 'storytelling' of psychoanalysis. Within Mamet's narrative this prejudice is indeed, "taken as certain," and does provide the basis for a "coherent account." However, its legitimacy is a contrivance (if an historically accurate one) so entirely assumed and apparently beyond the film's (though not necessarily the spectator's) range of scrutiny that it all but precludes the possibility of a "a joint enterprise and a joint experience."

Obsessive, compulsive, Margaret is seen as 'driven' by a pathologically repressed and ultimately uncontrollable desire to be taken—financially, physically, emotionally. She is desperate to be "possess[ed]." Even with the shallow distraction presented by her tight coiffure and pseudo-professionalism, she ultimately fulfils a stereotypical male fantasy of subservience
and expendability. Despite—or rather, because of—his heroic last stance, it is Mike whose distinctly cinematic presence lingers upon the imagination. Whereas Margaret has been effectively expunged, not merely from the narrative's realm of effective causality, but also from the field of the film's encouraged empathy and identification.

Ironically, Margaret's femininity emerges as her 'tragic flaw,' that which guarantees that she can never attain the level of performance proposed as the intuitively achieved realm of Mike and his colleagues. For, so the film argues, inherent in that femininity is a level of emotionality, of a paradoxical desire, desire to perform, to be possessed as spectacle, which precludes the cool, uninflected operation of the organic actor of Mamet's philosophy. Thus, Margaret's fate is presented as precisely that: providence, her fulfilment of her gendered destiny.

But Mike's performance, in the final assessment, must be seen as only apparent. Likewise, Margaret's intensely familiar combination of desire and subordination cannot be fully compensated for by any ideological indoctrination. The spectator of Mamet's first film must, finally, to some degree, be fascinated by what s/he sees. Linda Ruth Williams has recently noted a reluctant, yet persistent, almost hypnotic fascination on the part of film viewers with images of violence done to the eye, in films ranging from Luis Buñuel's Un Chien Andalou (1928) through James Cameron's The Terminator (1984).

While the camera might dwell long and hard on scenes of decapitation, disembowelment or the surreal ways in which a body can be turned inside out on screen, the eye, in its violable vulnerability, constitutes the limit of what audiences can and cannot tolerate. Is this because violence to the eye is the image most immediately felt as visual violence 'done to' the spectator?

There seems a clear parallel between this preoccupation with assaults upon the organ of sight and the response of the spectator watching the psychological violence inflicted upon his/her proxy in Mamet's film, who is ceaselessly and with inevitable futility attempting to engage with a
mechanism of artifice which, by its very nature, not merely will not but cannot accommodate itself to his/her desire.

Mamet's engagement with this perpetually threatening excess of signification, however, emerges as polar to his utilization of transgressive physicality in his theatre. The playwright relies upon the always imminent eruption of spontaneity, the pivotal volatility that he incorporates into his challenge to and revalidation of theatrical convention. Conversely, the film author's practice is one dependent on the systematic containment of all signification that threatens to disrupt or complicate his premeditated and immutable "plan." The degree to which Mamet, as theoretician, is aware of the enigmatic tension operative in his films is difficult to ascertain. His discussions in On Directing Film are alternately fascinating and frustrating, but at all times entirely pragmatic. These, added to observations in the following study of his next film, Homicide, (which explores remarkably similar thematic terrain), suggest that his understanding of and engagement with the cinematic viewing experience are largely intuitive and unconscious. This factor, however, only increases the significance of these ambiguous and disruptive issues within his insistently practical poetics of cinematic representation. Further, this situation argues all the more convincingly that Mamet's movement to the medium of film has played a large role in the nature of his work—this despite the 'one-size-fits-all' attitude towards theatrical and cinematic composition that frequently characterizes his argument in On Directing Film.

*
David Mamet made clear from the outset his intentions and aspirations for his second motion picture, *Homicide* (1991). Speculating that "this case is gonna define the nature of evil...," he also suggested that "It's a myth: a symbolic exploration of the unconscious—it purifies and cleanses through enabling the auditor to respond on other than a conscious level." That the resulting film does not perhaps attain all that the writer/director had hoped, therefore, does not diminish its many achievements. In a number of ways, *Homicide* is a more accomplished work than its predecessor, one that offers an often rich interweaving of both the familiar and the uncommon for those who follow Mamet's efforts. However, *Homicide* is clearly a *Mamet* film, and more specifically, a *Mamet film*. The cinematography, if more subtle and confident, is equally painstaking and premeditated in its execution. And the story told exists once again in an integral, reciprocal relationship with the precise visual mapping of its expression. As in *House of Games*, *Homicide'*s tale is one of the entrapment and consumption of individual agency and efficacy. As with the earlier film, Mamet's second feature is a muscular exercise in the containment of cinematic excess, on the levels of narrative and visual narration. Yet even more than *House of Games*, *Homicide* reveals a film-maker too fascinated with the cinematic process to not incorporate the evidence of its inherent viewer manipulation into the very act of that manipulation, in a perpetual game of concession and denial.

Bobby Gold (Joe Mantegna) is an inner city police officer. (The film's shooting location.
was Baltimore, the street names suggest Mamet's native Chicago, but the film-maker's mythic aspirations are accommodated by the city's sustained anonymity.) The sole Jewish officer on the force, Gold maintains a paradoxical status as outsider and insider. His ethnic identification leads to his being labelled as "the orator," and he is seen as a specialist in the art of persuasion when dealing with alienated criminals. At the same time, however, his perpetual denial and ignorance of his heritage allows for his assimilation into his new "family" of fellow members on the Homicide squad.

On the way to the high priority arrest of Randolph (Ving Rhames), a black suspect whose case is causing city-wide racial tensions and anxiety in the Mayor's office, Gold finds himself unexpectedly drawn into what seems a routine corner store robbery and murder. The victim, an elderly woman, is Jewish. Her shop is in a distinctly wrong part of town. When her family discovers Gold's (clearly lapsed) religious affiliation, they exert their political influence in order to have him reassigned to their case.

What follows is a series of actual and contrived conspiracies that makes *House of Games* appear straight-forward. The Jewish family claims that there is a sniper taking random shots at them from the roof across the street from their home. When Gold shows up to investigate, he is initially dismissive and confrontational. However, he ends up chasing a phantom gunman through the dark. Although he finds no one, he discovers a piece of paper with the letters GROFAZ on it. This leads him into a deepening spiral of clues and diversions, as he uncovers the possibility of both an organized neo-Nazi war of anti-Semitism (GROFAZ is revealed as the acronym for 'The Greatest Strategist of All Time,' the title adopted by Hitler at the end of WWII) and an equally armed and dangerous Jewish defence league. His initial attitude towards
the Jewish family changes (with often-noted abruptness) to a desperate desire to participate in the protection of what he belatedly identifies as 'his people.' Taking upon himself the task of blowing up a secret neo-Nazi printing press, he turns away from his police community in the name of his newly discovered heritage.

However, his new home proves as tenuous as his last. The Jewish organization has tricked him into incriminating himself. Their intention is to extort from him evidence that he has already logged at police headquarters: a list of names which identifies both the dead woman and several other prominent Jewish citizens as involved in the illegal purchase and sale of munitions. Finally, completely ostracized, Gold realizes that he has missed a rendezvous with his partners at the arrest of the black suspect. He had earlier convinced the suspect's mother (Mary Jefferson) to aid in her son's capture in an effort to keep her "boy" alive, on the condition that Gold was to be the central figure in the fugitive's apprehension. When Gold arrives late at the scene, he discovers general mayhem and Sullivan (William H. Macy)—his partner and closest associate on the police force—dying from a gunshot wound. Single-handedly, he chases down the suspect who is escaping through the basement. However, Gold discovers that his gun is missing, and he is shot twice by the fleeing Randolph, before the suspect too is shot by the police. The film ends with Gold in disgrace, relieved from Homicide duty. Two black children admit to killing the elderly Jewish woman for the "fortune in her basement."³ In a final, absolute humiliation, Gold is handed a file containing an advertisement for "GROFAZT PIGEON FEEDS--NUTRITION, QUALITY, VALUE" (126), casting further, unresolved doubt on the entire anti-Semitic conspiracy theory.

As has frequently been noted in reviews, Homicide attempts to be a number of different
things which do not seem to be immediately compatible. Mamet suggests in the film's production notes that "'Homicide' is ultimately a cop movie, so I wanted to be true to the genre with plenty of action involved." Jack Matthews of the Los Angeles Times suggested that this does indeed describe the "first" of the "two movies here," which he characterized as "an episode of 'Starsky and Hutch' that pays attention to detail." Journalistic hyperbole aside, Matthews is correct that there is no shortage of action, and, significantly, it is of a type distinct from that of the director's previous film. House of Games deals conspicuously in an insular and abstracted (as opposed to abstract) sense of event and consequence. Its self-conscious 'staging' thus results in the unnerving distance and objectivity previously noted. In contrast, Homicide is brutally realistic. Its relentless and apparently indiscriminate violence is executed with graphic naturalism.

The director's affection for the meticulous visual choreography of his story's progression is once again in evidence, as is his use of material and conceptual motifs to suggest both formal symmetry and causal inevitability. In particular, Mamet's camera displays a fascination with Gold's gun, as both a metaphor for the detective's strengths and insecurities and as a consistent, integrative preoccupation within the narrative. In his idiosyncratic version of Eisensteinian principles, Mamet juxtaposes a variety of close-up framings on the weapon—lost, regained, and in action—with shots of Gold in differing states of distress. In the first part of the film, an attacker tears the leather strap on Gold's holster, thereby allowing for the officer's repeated missing and misplacing of his firearm. Thus offered is an early, conspicuous prediction that his final loss of the weapon will likely provide the film's climactic circumstance.
As noted, Mamet's insistence on 'uninflected shots' and subtextless performances for *House of Games* did not preclude considerable atmospheric use of location within his primarily unintrusive use of the camera in that film. So too in *Homicide* Mamet combines a consciously (if not self-consciously) mobile point of view, long duration takes, and depth of field shots, with carefully controlled and often unnervingly modulated performances. Phillip Lopate, amongst others, has speculated on the resulting aesthetic tension, one he suggests that is not uncommon in the work of writer-directors. Lopate, in fact, offers a comparison of Mamet's overt stylization with the Japanese Kabuki, a theatrical form that combines impassioned melodrama with precise, symbolic choreography. While extreme, this assessment accurately suggests the overtly constrained and regularly eruptive emotion perceived within and between the characters.

The movie opens in eerie silence, the screen filled with black clothed, hooded, and heavily armed men. The director's maturing sense of the visual is quickly apparent, as the camera follows geometric patterns of stairwells and door frames. The action cuts between shots as a hand reaches out and turns a bare lightbulb, which is instantly seen from below and the opposite direction as its illumination fades. This heightened sense of the ability to create and manipulate space through such mutually supportive angles and points-of-view informs Mamet's camera work throughout the film. Thus, the suturing of the spectator into the impossible yet naturalized space at the centre of the depicted action is executed far more seamlessly in this second feature. Equally, this normalized space, despite the increased activity expended in its creation, more successfully denies the absent authority behind its composition. Finally, the continuing preoccupation with the spatial unity of the narrative also announces, despite the increased confidence and fluidity of Mamet's images, his continuing determination "to record
what has been chosen to be recorded. It is the plan that makes the movie."

When the initial silence is quickly and explosively broken, however, the film generates the same sense of confusion that surrounds the relationship between action and consequence—performance and effect—so thoroughly exercised, and exorcized, in *House of Games*. The method employed to create this intentional ambiguity, however, is conspicuously different. In the earlier film it becomes increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible to identify a verifiably consequential action—up to and, arguably, including Mike's murder. Conversely, in this next film, *all actions are seen as wildly consequential*. All interaction operates as a form of unpredictable and crippling violence. *House of Games'* Margaret, the victim of a premeditated and clinically impersonal performance, is progressively removed from a sphere of operation in which she is capable of either choice or effect. *Homicide*’s Gold is from the outset an unwitting pawn in a chaotic, unmanageable, and entirely *de*personalized storm of brutal activity. Margaret is denied the authority inherent in the role of either voyeur or performer, and is ultimately mastered by the remotely directed mechanism that is paradoxically dependent upon her attendance. Gold is, finally, revealed as equally incapable of perceiving his own role in either the individual, multiplying mysteries in which he is cast, or the global outline of the apparently *directorless* riot that makes up his volatile world.

But while ostensibly a "cop movie," *Homicide*’s central action is, as with its predecessor, centripetal. The "second" film identified by Matthews "is a probing psychological drama about a man questioning his own ethnicity and values." The bruising quality of the film's physical activity emerges as a forceful metaphor for the considerably more complex and ambiguous intellectual violence that is inflicted upon its protagonist (and its cinema viewer). Indeed, Orion
Pictures originally agreed to finance Mamet's adaptation of the William Caunitz novel *Suspects*. However, they retreated when presented with a script that had, after three years of effort, so far departed from the original source's formula action-picture potential as to render it unrecognizable.\(^8\) No reference to Caunitz's novel appears in the film's credits.

Financing was also complicated by the fact that Mamet's first film had not been a box office success. Thus, although *House of Games* was the recipient of considerable critical acclaim,\(^9\) and was subsequently popular on video, there was little interest on the part of any of the other major American studios in Mamet's proposal for an intellectual action picture. It was not until independent producer Edward R. Pressman (*Wall Street, Reversal of Fortune*) agreed to provide a budget of $6.5 million that production began. Although this brought the combined budgets of all three of Mamet's directorial projects (including the co-scripted *Things Change* [1988]) to only $15 million, *Homicide* went on to open the 1991 Cannes Film Festival to a standing ovation.

Ostensibly, what the director has never less than provocatively combined with his action-picture is an exploration of the oppression and complicity of Jewish Americans in a society that Mamet suggests both envies and scorns them. Mamet laments the stereotypical and/or incongruent attempts to deal with this issue in previous American films: "[T]he joke about 'Gentleman's Agreement' [1947], for example, is that he ain't Jewish. It's an anti-Semitic movie about anti-Semitism against non-Jews."\(^{10}\) Further, Mamet has argued the need to localize and make contemporary overly familiar but increasingly distanced points of reference:

And as a Jew it kind of burns me that the only way that the Jewish experience is ever treated in American films is through the Nazi murder of the European Jews. It's the Jewish equivalent of 'Mandingo'—you know, tie a black man to a post and beat him. 'Oh, my God,' we in the audience say. 'How can they do that?' That's a very good point, but there's more to it than that.\(^{11}\)
The status and self-image of Jewish Americans has indeed been a consistent subject of concern for Mamet. His plays that address these issues directly include *The Disappearance of the Jews*, *Goldberg Street*, and *The Luftmensch* (published together in *Three Jewish Plays* [1987]). The 1989 essay "The Decoration of Jewish Houses," makes clear the depth of this preoccupation, as well as its provocative implications for inter-racial relations:

We did not and we do not believe in the—let alone excellence—existence of anything which could even remotely be referred to as a "Jewish Culture." We American Jews have been, and remain, quite willing to have the populace-at-large consider us second class citizens....

In our lack of self-esteem, we, as a race, are happy and proud that our country has progressed to the point that we can see a serious presidential candidate in Jesse Jackson. And this in spite of Mr. Jackson's rather blatant anti-Semitism.12

Further, as Toby Silverman Zinman has suggested, the playwright's aggressive stance regarding his ethnicity has been a determining factor in both the language and the tone of his writing:

"...Mamet is second-generation Jewish sensibility; he is without the entitlement of either the angst of Miller or the enraged grief of Rabe. Mamet has carved out for himself new psychocultural territory: he flies in the face of every stereotype of the Jewish intellectual, the Jewish artist, the nice Jewish boy. Mamet has invented Jewish tough...."13

Certainly, *Homicide's* representation of racial tensions has received considerable scrutiny, much of it negative. J. Hoberman has noted that "*Homicide* retails a generic asphalt jungle in which African-American officers run the police department and black cops routinely blame the white victims of senseless violence."14 And, indeed, the likelihood of two black representatives from the Mayor's office wielding the kind of absolute and unquestioned authority that Gold encounters early in the film seems remote in most contemporary American cities. When one of
the officials, Patterson (Louis Murray), snarls, "Hey, pally, I don't need you to wax my car, I need you to go out and do what you're paid to do...," and follows it up with the dismissive "Little kike..." (11), the reverse (or rather cross-) racism is startling. The rarity of its appearance in mainstream American film allows Mamet's employment of this unexpected social inversion to somehow be at once both reactionary and subversive. Conservative protest on Mamet's part seems in evidence as Patterson blatantly abuses his only recently imaginable authority. But social revisionism is also encouraged, in that prejudice is exposed as a mode of behaviour informed more by political than ethnic privilege, and thus indiscriminate in its infectious spread.

However, the author's entry into the complexities and conflicts of increasing multiculturism seems, finally, a secondary concern, a vehicle for his central character's far more individual sense of dislocation and alienation. The real weight of Patterson's remarks is felt not in their initial novelty in popular film (very real), or in the potential for a significant and considered exploration of the issues they call into play (largely unexplored). Rather, they provide the first in a series of increasingly significant opportunities for Gold to deny his own self-worth through the denial of his ethnic origins. His characteristic self-deprecation is emphasized by the immediate reaction of his Irish partner:

SULLIVAN: [...] What did you fucken say...?

GOLD holding him back.

PATTERSON: ...you want to step out in the alley...? I'll tell you what I said.

SULLIVAN: Step out in the alley? You fucken faggot, I'll kill your ass right here... talk to my partner that way...

GOLD: ...Tim. Leave it... leave it...

SULLIVAN (to PATTERSON): ...you know what this man has done... in the line...? (12)
Gold's refusal to respond to the racial slur is, in the moment, an apparent sign of personal restraint. However, it soon emerges as the indication of an overall pattern, in which his total lack of a fixed or rooted self-image ultimately leads him to otherwise inexplicable acts of demonstrated commitment.

It is, in fact, possible to perceive of the question of Jewish American identity as metaphorical within the film's more abstractly philosophical speculation. Gold's sense of displacement and confusion is never satisfactorily resolved nor even contained within the social and ethnic parameters established by the film's narrative. Rather, Gold emerges as a pseudo-mythical figure, ostracized by and baffled before the same intangible forces that define his alienation. As Hoberman notes, "Bobby Gold may not be the only Jew in the world ignorant of Hebrew, but it's hard to imagine any Jew so baffled by the mere existence of other Jews. Bobby has no companion, no family, no childhood memories. His background is a void...." It is not the traditions from which Gold has lapsed, but rather those that he abruptly, inexplicably realizes he has never known, which suddenly contextualize his isolation. In a sense, it is the concept of tradition, of communal structure (as opposed to congregate faith), of participation in ceremony (as opposed to established belief), that both outlines and overwhelms Gold's perpetually vague and unpredictable characterization. Distinct from any specific doctrine, it is the consistent Mamet preoccupation with belonging that becomes in the film an almost non-denominational holy grail.

Once again, Mamet is exploring thematic terrain that is highly familiar within the tradition of American drama. Winifred L. Dusenbury, for instance, has written of what Thornton Wilder referred to as "the American loneliness":

Transplanted from his homeland, unattached to soil, distrustful of authority, the
American ... has been thrown back upon himself. His penchant for joining fraternities and clubs is a result of his being able to feel himself in relation to theirs only when he is united with them in a project and propelled toward the future. He lives not on the treasure that lies about him but on the promises of the imagination.16

Implicit in Wilder's "promises of the imagination" is a degree of idealistic purpose and individualism that survives (however muted or futile it may appear) in Marnet's theatre, and which demonstrates its heritage in much of twentieth century American drama. Julie Adam, in her study of heroism in the works of Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Sherwood Anderson, has observed that "[T]he prerequisite for heroism [in these authors' plays] seems to be the total alienation from the general population. This takes the form not of banishment but a self-imposed exile and estrangement."17 As Eugene O'Neill asserted, "A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his struggle is his success! He is an example of the spiritual significance which life attains when it aims high enough, when the individual fights all the hostile forces within and without himself to achieve a future of nobler values."18

However, Bobby Gold's is a very different sort of attainment towards 'heroism,' one that has little to do with "self-imposed exile" or the comforting presumption of moral superiority that validates such "estrangement." Rather, involuntary alienation appears to foster in Gold an inverse, total loss of identity, which in turn inspires a degree of irrational and ultimately self-destructive desperation. In this, he exhibits the significant influence of a much more recent preoccupation in American narrative, one which has been articulated in specifically cinematic models. As Robert Philip Kolker has argued, the frustration and anxiety regularly associated with this sense of dislocation in American society has given rise, within much of that culture's cinema, to a darker and more cynical sense of destructive futility. In A Cinema of Loneliness,
his study of the work of five of the foremost directors of American cinema throughout the 1970's and 1980's, Kolker observes,

These filmmakers have created a body of exciting work, formally adventurous, carefully thought out, and often structurally challenging. But for all the challenge and adventure, their films speak to a continual impotence in the world, and an inability to change and to create change. When they do depict action, it is invariably performed by lone heroes in an enormously destructive and anti-social manner, further affirming that actual change, collectively undertaken, is impossible.19

Thus, the immediate focus in Homicide on the Jewish American condition and its multi-racial implications seems primarily a suitably controversial and autobiographically relevant focus for questions both larger and smaller. Issues of, on the one hand, physical and spiritual displacement, and, on the other, personal loyalty and friendship, become equally existential in significance. Driving away from the above noted confrontation, Gold and Sullivan, employing what Edmond Grant in his review of the film referred to as the author's "perfect union of Dragnet and Brecht,"20 neatly place the racial conflict in the perspective of the film's world:

GOLD: The man's got no call to question my loyalty.

SULLIVAN: How's your head?

GOLD: ...and he had no fucken call to get _racial_ on me...

SULLIVAN: So he called you one, you called _him_ one.... (21)

It is in this added dimension of cultural and philosophical speculation—which the characters' determinedly prosaic interaction only serves to emphasize through its denial—that Homicide initially appears to surpass its predecessor. The contrast with House of Games is instructive. Margaret's personal motivations remain a sketchy, insignificant afterthought, hinted at through awkward Freudian slips. Even these last function more to undermine her personal self-awareness and validate her professional and gender-based susceptibility, than to establish
causality. Yet while Gold's actions are contextualized, they are conspicuously lacking in self-reflexiveness. As New York magazine film critic John Powers observed, the distinction between the protagonists of the two films may be less than it at first seems. Comparing Margaret's rapid fall "into run-amok criminality" with Gold's sudden transformation into "a militant Zionist," Powers concludes that "A psychologist, Mamet isn't."\(^{21}\)

Numerous reviewers in both the popular press and cinema journals have expressed this same confusion (i.e. dissatisfaction) with the haste of Gold's transformations. Vincent Canby suggested that "New aspects of [Gold's] personality are not revealed; instead, they are arbitrarily imposed on Bobby by the writer to make his points."\(^{22}\) Lopate, curious as to why the entire series of events is compressed into a single twenty-four hour period, wondered, "Could it be that Mr. Mamet, respectful of the Aristotelian unities, over-condensed the plot? Whatever the reason, we learn so little about Gold—and he is so incapable of introspection—that we are left with the transformation of a cipher."\(^{23}\) And Bob Campbell of the Newark Star-Ledger noted, "From a denying, self-hating Jew, Bobby turns into a passionate Zionist avenger.... Bobby's transformation happens with fantastic speed, and from this point on, 'Homicide' goes crazy."\(^{24}\)

However, while all four writers accurately describe the character's remarkably sudden shifts of commitment, frustration over Gold's apparently inconsistent behaviour seems misdirected. "[M]ilitant" and "passionate" Gold does indeed become, but the central role of Zionism in his motivation is far less certain. When he finds himself amongst the Jewish defence league-styled group in their hidden headquarters, he is mesmerized by their evident commitment and singular purpose. Immediately he is challenged, asked to bring to them the list of names that he has already submitted as police evidence—and thus to betray the only 'family' he seems to have ever known. Confused, he resorts to his oath to the municipal force in what emerges as an
ultimately irresolvable conflict of loyalties. Yet only moments later, after he has been escorted, speechless, from the premises, he encounters Chava (Natalija Nogulich), the woman whom he had met earlier at the home of the murder victim's survivors. With startling spontaneity he delivers his first in a succession of deeply impassioned pleas for the opportunity to act:

CHAVA: Yes?

GOLD: I need ... I need to help...

CHAVA: In what way?

GOLD: I want to help you. In your work.

CHAVA: I work for the airlines...

GOLD: Please. Please. Let me help. With whatever you do.

CHAVA: What I do, Mr. Gold, you don't want to know.

GOLD: No, but I do. I need to ... please ... please ... whatever you're doing. What you're doing tonight. Let me help. Please. (Beat.) I'm begging you. (102)

The conspicuous distinction here between Gold's desperate sincerity and the distracted, self-centred curiosity of House of Games's Margaret is only one aspect of a complex relationship that both unites and separates the two protagonists. Superficially similar to her "I'll do it with you," Gold's request moves beyond Margaret's opportunistic and voyeuristic fascination. Rather, what Gold is seen to desire is the chance to participate, to demonstrate his potential for commitment and collaboration. What Gold "need[s]," finally, is to define his individuality through communal, consequential action. What Chava does is far less important to Gold than the fact that she indeed does—that she accomplishes "work" with immediate effect ("what you're doing tonight")

We are a long way, here, from what is seen as Margaret's willing, indeed willful
escapism. What Mamet portrays as the feminine, excessive emotionality that emerges in *House of Games* as (literally) the object of a systematic, cinematic exercise of sutured containment is, in *Homicide*, replaced by tightly controlled, subjective, masculine desire for context, shape, order.

In place of Margaret's cold, unfocussed irrationality, Gold is presented as all enthusiastic purpose, awaiting direction.

In many ways the situations are very similar. Like Margaret, Gold is a form of psychologist, who listens to the expressions of fear and pain from those most badly abused by the forces of society. And like Margaret, Gold perceives his occupation as spurious. In a manner that Margaret only distantly approaches, Gold operates with full knowledge that his acts of audience will likely provide little help and may well do much harm. For he has lost his faith (or perhaps, as with his Jewish heritage, has never known one) in the chaotic and arbitrarily destructive proceedings of a law enforcement system that he specifically identifies as self-propagating. When asked by a confessed murderer, "Would you like to know how to solve the problem of evil?", Gold sardonically replies, "No, man, cause if I did then I'd be out of a Job..." (20). However, Margaret is seen to quickly reject the consequences of her actions, and through the process her sense of self. Gold, in distinct contrast, lunges toward the possibility of significant action.

Thus, Gold desires the revelation experienced, to varying degrees, by the majority of Mamet's *theatrical* male protagonists. He too knows a fascination with the possibility of actual contact beyond the realm of merely conventional, socially constructed and constrained behaviour. Indeed, Gold's confusion around the very fundamentals of Judaism becomes for him its greatest source of attraction. The entire system of belief is thus allowed to remain, within the film's narrative imagination, without the tedious rules and regulations of mundane convention.
Rather, it occupies the necessarily vague, overtly nostalgic and, for Mamet, highly prized realm of "tradition." What Gold is intoxicated with—a particularly fitting metaphor, given the now familiar abrupt loss of inhibitions and paradoxical, prerequisite abandoning of personal investment—is an authentic or *organic* mode of performance.

If, in particular, it is this sudden, largely intuitive revelation that connects Gold with earlier, specifically theatrical figures, it is also the pivotal point through which the films and film-maker distinguish the character from Margaret of *House of Games*. Gold's conscious, quietly impassioned drive for authenticity stands in stark contrast to the earlier character's portrayal of duplicity and self-deceit. Gold's constant self-exposure "in the line" of duty is validated when compared to her refusal to identify either her profession or intention. His personally unexplored and nihilistic determination to be "the first one through the door" is conspicuously polar to her hypocritical desire to live vicariously through Mike's performance, to attend the event yet deny the fact, let alone the consequences, of her presence.

Margaret is allowed, right up until *House of Games'*s literally consuming moment of her understanding, the illusion of her invisibility—of, in fact, her absence—within the workings of the narrative's performance system. Gold, conversely, is made definitively self-conscious of the incongruity in his initially proclaimed stance of distance and objectivity. In an early scene he takes a phone call from Sullivan in an apparently empty sideroom in the Jewish family's home. Indignant at being pulled from the more important case, and clearly fearful of the threat posed to his tenuous police force kinship by his unwelcome identification as one of "their people," he proceeds with a bitter litany of cultural and self-negation: "(Into phone:) You tell me. Ten more bucks a week they're making lettin' her work down there? Not ... 'my' people, baby...

*Fuck 'em, there's so much anti-Semitism, last four thousand years, they must be doin* *something*
bring it about" (61).

But Gold is not alone, and he learns—so much more quickly in his narrative than Margaret in hers—of his status as both misplaced performer and unwilling spectacle. The camera first identifies, over his shoulder, his *other* spectator, the granddaughter of the dead woman (Rebecca Pidgeon), sitting on a couch behind him. In a sense, she mirrors the cinema viewer in her undetected silence, and for a fleeting second the spectator is acknowledged as complicit in Gold's narrational containment. The camera angle then switches to her p.o.v., suturing the viewer into his/her own reflection, erasing the momentarily overt authority of the camera's gaze, and verifying Gold's status as inescapably observed. The quickly consequential presence of the viewer's proxy—as Miss Klein confronts Gold—further sutures over the film's mediation. And, ironically, in his confusion over his 'miscasting' by both the police and the Jewish family, it is Gold who is incapable of engaging—equally with Miss Klein as with the viewer. When she quizzes him about his incongruent anti-Semitism, the strange, angry, yet darkly amused smile on her lips is doubly disturbing. For while it seems without basis on the level of story, within the narration it appears to betray the spectator's own momentarily threatened yet quickly, conclusively regained superiority. Once again without answers, it is Gold who must admit to being displaced, insubstantial, *absent* from efficacy.

Looking ahead to the same dynamic as that within and outside of the defence headquarters, Gold resorts to pained and painfully sincere declarations of intention and need.

**MISS KLEIN:** [...] Do you belong nowhere...?

*Beat.*

**GOLD:** I...

*She turns away.*
I'll find the killer.

*Beat.*

I'll...

MISS KLEIN *starts out the door.* GOLD *follows.* [...] GOLD *chases after MISS KLEIN.*

GOLD: I swear, I'll find the killer, I swear, I ... Listen to me, please, I... (63)

By contrast, Margaret's first *apparent* moment of detection, during the successfully disastrous F. B .I. agent set-up, sees her deny first her involvement—"I have to get out of here"—and then her very existence—"I can't be here." And, as previously discussed at length, her second, accurate understanding of her persistent visibility results in an even more enduring disappearing act.

If there was any possibility that this divergence between the two protagonists in character motivation and behaviour were not conspicuous, *Homicide*’s concluding action eliminates any remaining doubt. Seated in what the published screenplay calls a "*small sleazy roadside diner*" after he has apparently persuaded her to let him assist in her "work," Gold explains to Chava the influence that his ethnic origins have had in his life. In a single, short speech he identifies the remarkably consistent bias that informs the entire dynamic of *House of Games*, and which would seem to provide the key to an audience's intended understanding of, and empathy for, his character in this second film: "What can I tell you about it. They said ... I was a *pussy* all my life. They said I was a pussy, because I was a Jew. Onna' cops, they'd say, send a Jew, mizewell send a *broad* on the job, send a *broad* through the door ... All my goddamned life, and I listened to it ... uh-huh...? I was the donkey ... I was the 'clown'..." (103).
The repetition is conspicuous, the reasoning unvarying. The equation of Jew with woman, with "pussy" and "broad," as the ultimate insult, as a realized justification for the ostracizing and alienation that his racial background has imposed upon him, would seem to verify the systematic reliance upon this anticipated cultural prejudice in the 'logic' of *House of Games*. Further, it clearly seems intended to deepen both the injustice of Gold's situation and the propensity of the audience to both sympathize and empathize with his character. Unlike Margaret, who emerges within the global narrative of *House of Games* as the legitimate victim of her gendered (apparently undistinguished in Mamet's reasoning from biological) predetermination, Gold is identified as helplessly, unjustly oppressed and isolated because of a grand, historic cultural misconception.

Irony is clearly intended on the initial level of the narrative, as Chava nods in deceitful agreement while Gold speaks of "Doing Other People's Work." However, the immediate, plot-based significance of this duplicity is both undermined and multiplied as the Jew/Woman analogy is, apparently unintentionally, extended.

CHAVA: ...you were the Outsider.

GOLD: ...yes...

CHAVA: ...I understand.

GOLD: They made me the hostage negotiator, 'cause I knew how the bad guys felt.

CHAVA: Doing Other People's Work for them...

GOLD: ...that's right.

CHAVA: ...in their country...

GOLD: Yes, that's right.
CHAVA: ...and never working for yourself.

GOLD: Yes. Now—why would I do that? (103-104)

That this protracted insensitivity opens itself up to an extensive feminist critique is irrefutable. However, more specifically, what is overtly established within these eliding narrative and ideological registers is the conclusive *cinematic* commonality of the two protagonists.

Gold may be a valid member "In the Company of Men" (the title of Mamet's 1989 essay in which he compares the "intrafemale activities of invidious comparison, secrecy, and stealth" with "Male Society ... where one is understood, where one is not judged, where one is not expected to perform"). This group clearly comprises the majority of the playwright's authenticity-hungry, male protagonists. But Gold is also irretrievably exiled into a shared cinematic existence with his female counterpart in *House of Games*. Thus, despite the large and emphasized differences in their drives and desires, both Gold and Margaret are finally seen to be constrained to remarkably similar fates of psychological and physical dispossession.

Gold is seen, ultimately, as defeated by neither a lack of sincerity nor a failure of will. Rather, it is the relentless manipulation and containment of what he can and can't see which determines his pathetic outcome. From the moment when, searching for the possible roof-top sniper, he stoops and picks up the small piece of paper with the puzzling letters GROFAZ running to and cut off by its edge, Gold is doomed to making decisions based upon what is revealed within the frame of what is made visible to him. Yet what quickly becomes clear is that anything approaching actual, comprehensive meaning inevitably lies beyond that circumscribed vision. The absence of what is not contained within his limited viewpoint consistently renders it impossible for him to fully understand the significance of what, indeed, he is allowed to see. Thus, despite the divergence in their motivations, Gold's dilemma is twinned with Margaret's as
metaphorical for the cinematic viewing experience itself.

As with the ostensibly privileged movie spectator, whose omniscience is both the fundamental condition and 'essential' illusion of her/his participation, Gold too enjoys at times the apparent authority of his unseen seeing. After requesting library information regarding anti-Semitic activities, he speaks with a Jewish scholar (Alan Polonsky), who then asks him to replace a volume on an upper shelf. Climbing the small ladder, Gold looks through the narrow opening where the book normally rests, and sees a conspicuously framed view of the librarian (Steven Goldstein) and his assistant (Charlotte Potok). Through this bracketed space he sees and overhears the two discuss in hushed tones the confidential request by "Two Twelve" for the same material as Gold is seeking (92). Gold is subsequently able to identify this new and characteristically cryptic reference—by looking, again unseen, at the librarian's clipboard—as "212 Humboldt Street," the address of the defence headquarters.

However, this apparently unauthorized observation is soon revealed as predicted by and incorporated into the overall mechanism of deceit and conspiracy that eventually consumes him. His anticipated discovery of the headquarters, seemingly the result of his detective work, actually ushers him into a series of mini-performances, carefully casual glimpses of technology and personal commitment. Each room is presented to Gold, and the movie spectator, in succession, as accumulating and, for Gold, seductive images of purpose and preparedness. Indeed, Gold's bombing of the model train store/neo-Nazi printing house—his most desperate and challenging attempt towards personal consequence—seems itself a 'staged' performance. Apparently it is precipitated for no other reason than to incriminate him so completely as to make impossible his return to any other community than that of the activists.

Richard Coombs has suggested that this last sequence presents Homicide as "Mamet's
most theatrical film to date....

When Gold enters the targeted premises, the scene is very neatly laid out.... There are several possible interpretations. One is that Mamet's scene-setting is inevitably theatrical but thematically meaningless. Another is that Gold is being forced to enter a 'theatre' of the self by suddenly being confronted with what it means to be a Jew. And another is that the scene looks so stagy because he is being set up.27

As with House of Games, Mamet's use of 'staginess,' rather than simplifying the signification of his cinematic medium, instead generates expanding meaning, as the two radically different conceptions of space interact. Gold's—and the spectator's—attempt to come to terms with this overtly theatrical setting is determined less by its formality than by its construction through visualization.

Gold precedes the camera through the doorway—the common order of progression through all the various portals in the film. Yet as he passes from the front of the shop into the ominously neat and organized printing room, he finds the film's gaze already inside, waiting for him. In this—again, the predominant pattern of shot combinations throughout the movie—the film offers one of the far fewer moments, in this second film, in which the viewer's cinematic experience of visual space is openly contrasted with that of the character's singular—i.e., theatrical—understanding of his environment.

The illusory omniscience of the spectator—always actually the selective prerogative of the absent authority of the film—here overtly contextualizes Gold's curtailed p.o.v. As in House of Games, this is made all the more conspicuous by the 'theatrical' nature of the environment the character moves through. But whereas the earlier film utilized overtly stylized stagings throughout, Homicide's generally realistic locations further naturalize the viewer's alignment with the camera's governing gaze. Similarly, subjectivity—direct, self-conscious matching of the
camera's and the character's hypothetical p.o.v.--is even more rare in this second feature. It is as if Mamet has learned the dangers of encouraging too much empathy, too clearly perceived an understanding of the manipulation that the viewer shares with his protagonist.

Thus, as in House of Games, this same ability to (always only apparently) look beyond the edges of what the character perceives, to see outside of the frame of Gold's experience, is always dual in its signification. Under the enforced guidance of the camera's gaze, the viewer is perpetually sutured into a space only slightly bigger than that of the protagonist. Thus, the spectator shares Gold's sense of confusion and desire, yet also maintains a superiority of movement and vision (movement through vision). This superiority, then, is experienced simultaneously as merely the transient privilege afforded at the film's permission and the incriminating evidence which renders the movie audience complicit in Gold's delusion. This tenuous illusion of omniscience thus draws the spectator into the protagonist's dilemma and encourages a sense of Gold's continued alienation.

The greatest irony, of course, is found in the fact that there, amongst the overtly 'stagy' German uniforms, huge swastika, and strangely sinister antique printing press, Gold in fact seems convinced that he is passing beyond artifice and into actuality. And, indeed, in contrast to Margaret's excessively emotional inability to achieve significant action, Gold moves through his initially enraged reaction to a state of quick, cool precision. His first response is to angrily destroy the toy train display in the front of the shop. But once this brief outrage has been vented, he smoothly activates the explosive device and calmly walks away from the building as it goes up in flames.

This would seem a sufficiently committed and sincere performance to qualify as organic in the world of Buffalo, Edmond, and The Shawl. Few of Mamet's previous characters have so
directly dedicated themselves to the demonstration of selfless—and thus, in Mamet's ethic, self-full-action. But Bobby Gold exists in quite another environment—or, more specifically, medium. And, indeed, Homicide spends much less time than House of Games considering the behavioral prerequisites for authenticity in a cinematic society. Margaret's failure to achieve efficacy is located squarely in her (apparently inseparable) gendered and moral short-comings. Thus, the possibility of the cinematic representation of organic performance, as it is manifested in Mamet's plays, survives her fouled attempt. Homicide's perspective emerges as less equivocal, and considerably more cynical.

In a fashion alien to Mamet's theatre, the scope of the conspiratorial and distinctly cinematic mechanism is revealed as that much more encompassing in this film, as it absorbs Gold and his desire for self-authorship into its premeditation. Gold's determination is central to the narrative's progress—and disregarded within its outcome. Apparently intoxicated with its own manipulative powers of cinematic expression, the film is ultimately little interested in its protagonist's ambitions or achievements. For these are repeatedly recontextualized in such a way as to empty them of all significance. For the spectator, the image of Gold's containment in the film quickly becomes a familiar one, as it extends systematically beyond the specifics of the story to the cinematic nature of its telling.

Midway through the film Gold and his partner are preparing to break into an apartment in a run-down building where they suspect that Randolph is hiding. As they move across the rooftop, the view of the camera first awaits their approach and then falls in behind them. Initially at a distance, it then follows progressively more closely as they near the doorway, crouching with them as they drop down to the appropriate level on the roof. By the time Gold has thrown himself up against the outer doorframe—Sullivan and the camera's p.o.v. several
steps behind him—the close-ups deliver the spectator into the midst of the pre-raid anxiety. Sullivan's comment, perhaps out of place in a secret police entry, nonetheless then identifies Gold's definitive behavioral tendency: "How come you always gotta be the first one through the door? So brazen..." (45).

Running from the fear and rejection of the outsider and thus, through an insatiable desire to prove his worth, towards a perpetually elusive authenticity, Gold repeatedly fulfils his role as sacrificial offering. The camera, no less than his partner, attentively, anxiously waits for him to clear the way. Yet, unfailingly, as he follows his short-nosed pistol into the new space he is charting, the camera, the narrative, and the spectator are all there ahead of him. All three members of this cinematic triad—the first two convincing the third of its illusory, transparent omniscience—contextualize Gold's trepidation within its cinematic projection. Thus, not merely the character but the spectator as well are contained within this unacknowledged yet definitive regard. The description of the following action as it appears in the published screenplay, faithfully reproduced in the finished film, accurately captures Gold's visual management.

*Pause.* GOLD starts to go through the door.

*Interior: Hallway of abandoned tenement—Day*

A narrow hallway. One door off the hallway to the left. Camera follows GOLD down the hall to an empty room. He turns back and retreats to the door off the hall. Beat. He kicks the door in and goes in the door.

*Interior: Empty room—Day*

Extreme close-up of GOLD coming into the frame. Stops. Looking at something.

*Point of view: RANDOLPH'S MOTHER sitting on the far side of the room.*[...]

RANDOLPH'S MOTHER: You want to kill my baby. (46)
Gold's attempts to surprise and capture actuality, to gain the upper hand on a world that remains one step ahead of him, are invariably met by an anticipating and defining gaze that is both narratively and formally motivated. The technique here described is hardly novel. The practice of following and leading a character in motion is clearly a staple of mainstream cinematography, a primary method of controlling "difficult" narrative space. Yet within Mamet's films this takes on a conspicuous thematic significance—thus rendering the practice both more and less transparent. The moment brings together Gold's directed and curtailed vision with the sense of his absolute visibility. Whether that of Miss Klein, the suspect's mother, the Jewish activists who photograph Gold as he is exiting the exploding building, or the film audience itself, the protagonist is, as was Margaret in *House of Games*, perpetually the victim of observation. Again and again he is seen by those he cannot see, their power of undetected attendance uniting them in a metanarrative of detached domination.

As Gold, in the film's penultimate sequence, makes his way through the tenement basement in search of the escaping suspect, his is the only figure that the camera follows. Randolph is a fleeting spectre that is repeatedly, momentarily visible, then permitted to elude the camera's gaze, to slip beyond Gold's, and the viewer's, frame of vision. Gold clings to his desire to get a step ahead of his always predetermined fate as "*He goes to head RANDOLPH off*" (118). But with remarkable consistency, the mechanism and its accomplice audience are waiting for him around every corner: "*GOLD runs into the room...*"; "*GOLD comes through the door...*"; "*GOLD emerges from a tunnel...*"; "*GOLD comes out of another tunnel...*" (117-18). The spectator is thus systematically teamed with Gold and assured of his/her superior sight and insight.

Finally, deprived by events of his partner, his weapon, and his last vestiges of identity,
Gold is shot by a black man in the shadows. His accumulated rage and frustration explode in a tirade of self-incrimination. Even his successful attempt at robbing Randolph of faith in his mother's good intentions (in trying to help him escape) emerges as another form of self-loathing. Indeed, the two characters are clearly aligned in the extremity of their ignorance and incomprehension. Randolph operates as an unmistakeably symbolic character who manifests Gold's relentless descent and final, bitter acceptance of his own blinded and constrained potential. As Gold finally catches up to the escaping fugitive, "RANDOLPH is levering off a metal grate. Light coming from above indicates that the grate leads up to the street level and to freedom" (118). But, of course, it is a light neither will see, a freedom that lies perpetually beyond the frame of Gold's experience.

For one of the rare times in the film, the camera then adopts Gold's p.o.v. As in House of Games, however, the moment of possible empowerment is ambiguous, even ironic. The potential for identification by a suddenly self-conscious spectator is at once doubled and diffused by Gold's visual pairing with his equally doomed opponent.

Gold's point of view: RANDOLPH, holding the lever, turns toward the sound.
He levels his gun on GOLD.

Randolph's point of view: GOLD standing, holding the chain. (118)
As Gold lies bleeding from the first of several bullet wounds, a police siren begins to wail.
"That's Death calling, baby," Randolph assures Gold, "For you and for me" (119). Yet these are only the most overt statements of parallel. On a more fundamental level, both characters are seen as outcasts from a society that seems to care little which side of its laws they position themselves on. Thus, both are seen as looking beyond transient social structures in a desire to achieve a sense of purpose and efficacy. Both seek a context for consequence that is structured
instead along the more permanent, traditional lines of community—of family. And the failure of both takes the form, ultimately, apparently 'naturally,' of betrayal by a woman.

"That's right. I'm a piece of shit." Gold concedes, "It's all a piece of shit. I killed my partner. And your momma turned you in, man" (122). Gold repeats this last sentence three times, with minor variations. Thus, he apparently discovers a perverse consolation in his and Randolph's mutual experience of treason at the hands of a woman who represented the possibility of liberation through traditional community. The converging responses of the two characters to the discovery of this feminine duplicity are expressed in a visual fusion of fear and confusion:

GOLD: You want your passport? I got it. It's a phoney. All that shit, man—we made it up. Look at it. Your momma turned you over, Man. Look at it! That's right.

RANDOLPH picks it up.

Insert: The passport marked FORGED DOCUMENT OFFICIAL USE ONLY.

Close-up: RANDOLPH looking at the passport.

GOLD, looking at him.

Beat.

Extreme close-up: RANDOLPH, looking at the passport.

Close-up: GOLD.

RANDOLPH, looking lost, takes a tentative step toward GOLD. (122)

In House of Games, Margaret's gendered insincerity and emotionality are seen as the insurmountable obstacles in her futile attempt at organic performance. In Homicide, the same female attributes emerge as key impediments to efficacious male performance.
But women in *Homicide* are, finally, only agents of a much larger, culturally instituted conspiracy of domination, one which is enforced by the calculated manipulation of sight. The most dangerous place in such a system is inevitably 'in the sights' of powerful, unseen social forces that are as omnipotent as they are inaccessible. As Randolph approaches Gold—whether in violent anger or shared hardship, or both, is difficult to ascertain—the scene shifts to an exterior shot: "*The back of an F.B.I. jacket, as a SNIPER moves into position. The sniper's eye moves closer into the eyepiece. Pan down to his trigger finger tightening*" (122-23).

Once again, as in *House of Games*, Mamet almost calls his audience's bluff. Once again, his film almost concedes the powerful, indeed life or death relationship between its absent, controlling authority and the characters who exist only because and only when they are being 'shot at.' Once again he comes close to displaying *sight*—that of the film and that of the spectator—in a self-conscious challenge to the complacent omniscience enjoyed by the audience of mainstream American film. But, once again, he does not show his hand. His camera does not place the viewer behind the sniper's scope (even though this is a familiar cinematic trope). Rather, with the shattering of a window as a bullet passes through it, the spectator is returned to the position of a ground level onlooker, outside the building looking in, another innocent bystander at the scene of the crime.

The significance of the dying black man's words are difficult to miss. Gold's own desperation and confusion are echoed in his plea, "God ... God ... Help me ... What did you do to me?" (123). And although the scene's final lines in the published script do not make it to the screen, they only verbalize what the image of Gold, half-cradling Randolph's head, makes clear visually. Mamet's noted aversion for such narrative redundancy thus apparently led to the exclusion of Gold's request, "Don't hurt him ... don't hurt him...." With the revelation that
Randolph too can claim neither the insight nor the communal, familial support he had assumed, there can be little doubt about the ironic, mutual mirroring of the two men. Racially alienated, unwittingly monitored and manipulated by both broad social forces and the intimate representatives of the same, each man, finally, sees himself in the other's ignorance and mortality. Revealed, finally, as powerless, unwilling spectacle, they jointly sink into the brilliant darkness of relentless exposure: "Wide angle of the scene in the room, medical personnel entering. Spotlights, police officers crowd in to look on. Eventually they obscure the scene and it goes to black" (124).

As noted, the differences between Gold and House of Games's Margaret are many. Yet shared between them is this final consumption by both narrative and cinematic mechanism. As previously discussed, Margaret's thematic demise, first at the airport and then at the final restaurant scene, is facilitated by cinematography that emulates, indeed enacts the story's possession of her agency. Gold's representation clearly follows the same pattern. Before he even enters into the final scene back at police headquarters, his perpetual containment is signalled by the eerie anticipation by both camera and characters: "Two policemen are talking; they sense something and look away from the camera. Rack focus to GOLD, who is coming into the police station" (124).

In a final, absolute affirmation of Gold's subordination to the forces of Homicide's narrative and filmic priorities, the limping, overtly shunned, and demoted protagonist is handed an advertisement for GROFAZT birdseed. This ironic, impossible, yet forcibly conclusive solution to the puzzle of the discovered note is handed to him by a fellow officer who is, significantly, "(offscreen)." "We've been holding this for you," Gold is informed. Like the
disembodied voice, as with the note's missing 'T,' Gold's fruitlessly pursued goal of effect—of communal, collaborative, organic self-performance—remains just outside the periphery of detection. Both meaning and nonsense, understanding and deception, the purpose perceived within masculinity and the deceit argued as fundamentally feminine—all are thereby located in the excess, beyond what can be seen and thus known, and in the force that excess exerts upon what is in fact revealed.

Yet this consequential confession on the part of the film has been consistently contradicted through the very process of its representation. The challenge in excess to Homicide's visual authority is presented as a distinctly caged animal, a domesticated, displayed threat that is effectively neutralized in its acknowledgement and premeditated employment. Thus, in the film's final admission of the inherent limitations in its own contrivance, the screenwriter is seen tipping his hat to the director. For it is the auteur's entirely conventional control of the visual frame that has created coherence through the simultaneous denial of and dependence upon the existence of what exceeds the camera's gaze.

Despite such assurance, however, as the final shot moves backwards, away from the tight framing of Gold's complete bewilderment and resignation, the spectator's identification with the character's sense of coerced comprehension resembles the dispossession shared by the viewer with House of Games's lead figure. In each case, the positioning of the precisely central character is absolute, unvarying, and essential. Each protagonist, on the level of both narrative and cinematography, is itself an audience perpetually defined by its controlled perception. Its seductive, illusory omniscience is a skilfully crafted hallucination. Each character thus replicates the motion picture viewer—as that viewer is conceived and largely created within Mamet's highly predetermined conception of narrative film. In an even more disquieting sense, it is Margaret
who emerges the satisfied or, rather, satiated spectator. Her sense of authority and control over her experience is seen as completely, if dubiously, confident in the totality of its self-deception. By comparison, Gold stands, paradoxically, as both the superior and the sorrier of the two, understanding only his own ignorance, conscious only of his profound failure to see, to perceive, to interpret and comprehend.

Once again, the powerful parallel between protagonist and viewer is both direct and displaced, as the film both depends upon and discourages the spectator's recognition of its authority. However, the equation in *Homicide* of Jew with woman—with the subordinated and demeaned Other—seems intended to elicit, through the viewer's identification, a quite different effect than in the previous film. In *House of Games* Margaret's outcome is, perhaps, sufficiently distanced from the viewer through her narrative degradation to largely dissipate, if not dispel, the viewer's sense of shared containment. Empathy with Gold, inversely, is encouraged through the argument of his undeserving victimization from the same gendered stigma. But in both cases, the self-conscious spectator may find it very difficult not to discover a disturbing recognition in both characters' final, forced accession to the definitive cinematic parameters of the seen image.

Yet complete identification with either character—as Other—is forever forestalled. The spectator is at all times suspended between the portrayed presence of one Other and (with intentional redundancy) the transparent absence of another. For the powerless scapegoats of Mamet's narratives exist in a polar relationship with the *other* Other of their representation, one that is their opposite in positioning and power. Residing at the other end of the camera's lens, never quite the film-maker nor his technical machinery, the absent authority of the film is discovered in the medium's inherent restriction of vision, which bestows and delimits meaning.
through its framing power of containment. Claiming precedent over the captured performance, the material medium, the film maker, and the eventual audience, this dominant Other paradoxically relies upon the compliance of all involved in the cinematic experience in order to achieve the magic show of film. In contrast to David Mamet's persistent rebelliousness in relation to the conventions of theatrical (re)presentation, the writer/director has emerged as an extremely well-behaved participant in this cinematic process.

In direct contrast to their theatrical counterparts, both Gold and Margaret are perpetually and conclusively denied the possibility of transgressing or transcending the frame of their experience, and of attaining towards a communal, collaborative, consequential--organic--sphere of performance. The present and potentially self-insistent Other of theatrical (re)presentation is replaced, within Mamet's practice, by an absent and definitively contained and containing Other of cinematic representation. Margaret's complete succumbing to the self-negation of voyeurism may seem polar to Gold's relentless attaining towards the substantiality of purpose. But both characters are finally rendered inconsequential through narratives that find their complement in a medium that precludes phenomenal collaboration between performer and audience.
CONCLUSION

Winners and Losers

David Mamet, playwright. David Mamet, film auteur. A study of selected plays and films by this writer/director suggests that there are, indeed, strong similarities between his efforts for the theatre and those composed for the cinema. In many ways, both the creative works and the critical commentary provided by the author argue a common aesthetic, thematic, and overtly ethical basis of conception across formal differences. However, clear, even definitive distinctions are also evident. Central to an understanding of these distinctions, and of the resultant implications for the experience of Mamet's work in each medium (or media complex), is the question of the author's engagement with the conventions of composition, production, and reception.

Mamet's conscious stance on issues ranging from the theatre to politics to religion is that of the iconoclast. Idiosyncratic, out-spoken, even arrogant, Mamet presents himself, both in his work and his public life, as a social critic "in a bad, bad world." His dismissal of "trends" and "fashion" is expressed throughout his essays and articles as a rejection of the transient and superficial aspects in contemporary American culture. Opposed, in these writings, to the misguided, even sinister "political urge" towards the imposition of special interests and individual priorities, is a nostalgia for a lost community of "traditional" American values. At the heart of this loss, and of the possibility of reclamation, is "the human capacity for choice," and the accompanying questions of responsibility, obligation, and liberty.

Translated into dramatic and theatrical terms, these attitudes result in a performative model that similarly poses a consistent challenge to the adoption of unquestioned and
unexamined conventions of composition and production. Mamet's theatre is one that is at all
times invested in the inherent physicality of live performance. As (re)presentation, his theatre
partakes of the volatility and spontaneity inherent in that fully present form of expression.
Further, however, Mamet's theatre overtly enacts the definitive, dialectical tension between, on
the one hand, this unpredictability, and, on the other, the established conventions (and thus
spectator expectations) that the practice of theatre employs to contain and channel its rowdy,
impetuous energy.

Repeatedly Mamet's plays display characters who have undergone a near total process of
unconscious social conditioning. Reduced, in their language and physical behaviour, to the
recitation of unscrutinized and irrational prejudice and aggression, characters such as
_Perversity's_ Bernie and _Buffalo's_ Teach are seen as highly animated puppets of a perverse
socialization. Through the desperate, culturally sanctioned deferral of self-authorship, these
characters struggle to avoid the necessity to _act_. Thus they remain outside the realm of the
actual. By refusing to acknowledge the obligations of personal presence—contact, intimacy,
responsibility—they fundamentally absent themselves from all meaningful interaction.

Yet, in a progressive, near evolutionary manner, the central characters of successive
plays approach—cautiously, tentatively—a more authentic mode of self-performance. Bernie is
seen to survive a momentary, deeply disruptive glimpse of his own self-negation. His
manifestation of willed ignorance thus remains intact within a determinedly narrational
avoidance of dramatic action. Teach, however, embodies the inevitably eruptive spontaneity of
his (re)presentational expression. Intuitive, consequential physicality insists upon an end to
deferral in this character's final, if equally momentary, transition to suddenly self-ful action.
_Edmond's_ title character performs a full, painfully consequential realization of the potential in
Teach's temporary emergence. Thus, the enigmatic authenticity of his personal presence is at once undermined and verified by the image of his utter social exclusion and defilement. In his portrayal of initially misguided but committed violence and final, naked objectivity, Edmond seems to (re)present an end and a beginning. The accretion of transient and unconscious convention is stripped away sufficiently to permit the genesis of self-aware self-performance.

It is in *The Shawl* that this promise is realized. Self-conscious performance is united with self-insistent observation, as the two requisite components of what the playwright has proposed as *organic* performance. Grounded in a persistent physicality, social and theatrical performance merge in this play in an explicit model of authentic personal interaction. Symbolic fictional (re)presentations of their own theatrical embodiment, John and Miss A perform "true" performance. In their initially cautious and guarded, yet ultimately intense and intimate engagement is imaged that which, for the author, constitutes a fundamental act of "communion." John and Miss A enter into a mutual acknowledgement of self and other that is seen to both concede and transcend the conventions and expectations of their overtly theatrical relationship. Thus, the living, fully present Otherness of (re)presentation is identified, validated, and argued as both the goal and prerequisite of theatrical and social experience. The exposing of convention's subordinate function—in the service of established structures of ritual—allows for the transgression, reformulation, and revalidation of a traditional basis of practice and belief.

Mamet's cinema, however, works in the employ of a radically different Other. His cinematic characters are represented in a use of the medium that systematically denies its distance from actual physicality. The power of illusion, and thus—in both the classical Hollywood set of conventions and the variation of these employed by Mamet—the film's very
existence, is predicated on the seamlessness of this denial. Thus, the conventions of cinematic exposition are conceived of as in opposition to those of theatrical performance, where the techniques of phenomenal containment are openly and mutually contextualized in relation to (re)presentational unpredictability. For the narrational technique of Mamet's cinema is employed primarily in the maintenance of its own transparency. The cinematic signifier thus forever attains towards "imaginary" status, its work displaced beyond the visible. Consequently, the cinematic viewer is similarly contained within a subjectivity of imaginary omniscience—one which is maintained within the paradoxically partial field of view demarcated by the image's absent frame and the "difficult" narrational space of cinematic suture.

The heightened degree of authorial control implicit in this process is multiplied within Mamet's cinematic fictions of personal enervation and manipulation. Individual attributes emerge as irrelevant within the characters' common subordination to, and consumption by, unknown and unknowable forces. Margaret, in House of Games, is initially seduced by a specifically cinematic desire for 'safe' voyeurism. However, her eventual, desperate attempt towards physicality proves an equally inconsequential mode of behaviour. Homicide's Gold is relentless in his pursuit of authentic action. Yet his perceived superiority in relation to the earlier film's protagonist lies in an ironic moral nihilism. This last is exhibited in his painful awareness of his own disappearance within the mysterious causal workings of the film's narrative. Thus, Margaret's actions, portrayed as deviance, do not preclude the possibility of redemption through "the human capacity for choice." But Gold's defeat, in the following film, bespeaks a pervasive predeterminism—one readily facilitated and perhaps definitively influenced by his cinematic representation.

"I tried to put the audience in the same position as the protagonists," Mamet notes
regarding his writing for film, "led forth by events, by the inevitability of the previous actions."

Unlike the attentive, interactive, and present audience engagement with theatrical convention embodied in *The Shawl's* Miss A, the viewer in Mamet's cinema shares the film protagonist's experience of undetected manipulation within the medium's transparent stylistics. *The Shawl's* John (re)presents the possibility of attaining organic performance in a paradoxically self-less—and thus self-full—interaction, through his profession's established practices, with that same equally present spectator. *Homicide's* Gold represents, conversely, the apparent impossibility of attaining personal consequence and authenticity of action within a medium that precludes contact with the absent forces of one's own authorship.

The contrast is perhaps most stark, and thus most illuminating, in Mamet's representations of women in both forms. As noted, Mamet's portrayals of female figures in both drama and film have often been lamented. It can also be argued, however, that most of Mamet's male theatrical characters, particularly the early ones, are subjected to severe social and moral criticism. However, in the advanced theatrical dynamic proposed in *The Shawl*, the patriarchal presumptions of male dominance and female subservience are not so much transgressed as reclaimed and revalidated. Miss A is seen as both successful in her fiction-based desire for belief and in her performative desire for participatory status as dual rewards for her willingness, quite literally, to be a spectator. Apparently intuitively conscious of what is presented as her 'natural' role as audience, she facilitates what is proposed as John's equally intuitive role as self-authored performer. These positions—clearly debateable—are presented as instinctive. Further, they are realized within a theatrical form that initially strains, yet ultimately revalidates basically realistic, illusionistic traditions. Thus, the organic status of the characters' interaction argues a social as well as theatrical process that, if ideologically re-affirmative, is valorized as stable and
collaborative. For it is one that offers presence and effect to those prepared to test, to fully realize, and to re-ratify traditional gender and more broadly social structures.

Conversely, Margaret is from the outset presented as *unnatural*. Her cold (i.e., frigid) manner, her ironic professional as well as private inability to see, to perceive and interpret, and her distinctly perverse, voyeuristic fascination, announce throughout that she is unfit for either role, performer or spectator. Her distaste for, and refusal to acknowledge, the consequences of her physicality guarantee that she is barred from participation in *organic* performance in any capacity. Her ostensibly unmanageable emotionality condemns her to hollow imitation as actor, hysterical and easily dismissed protestation as spectator. And it is this similarly "traditional" prejudice against female efficacy that is superimposed over Gold's equally ill-fated attainment towards *organic* self-performance. There is, thus, as previously noted, unwitting irony as the Jewish officer complains "...send a Jew, mizewell send a broad on the job, send a broad through the door...."

But, as *Homicide* makes clear, the total consumption of Mamet's cinematic characters extends beyond questions of misogyny, or racial discrimination, or any other specific anxiety on the author's part. The emergent physicality of live performance--theatrical or social--is ever present in Mamet's theatrically expressed fictions. Thus the persistent challenge to the conventions that shape and channel that physicality is equally fundamental. Conversely, Mamet's films (specifically, those projects uniformly conceived and produced as films) discover diverse means to a common end: the portrayal of personal erasure by undetected, highly elusive and impersonal forces.

For the films intentionally display only periodically and with overt premeditation the excess that they simultaneously concede and claim to domesticate. Thus, these calculated
admissions of the protagonist/viewer parallel initially encourage a disturbing identification with the fictional figures. Yet this is eventually, systematically supplanted by a placating sense of superiority as the protagonist's containment is discovered in full, as it were, contained within the spectator's own. Still, this intentionality can never be fully contained, as cinematic excess is often most apparent within the most strenuous attempts to eradicate it. Thus, the writer/director's work must forever be contextualized within that which it strives to deny or integrate.

Mamet's plays thus embody the theatre spectator's definitive, interactive approach towards the living, present Other of the stage within the consensual, conventional context of live (re)presentation. Mamet's films employ—and are in the employ of—the cinematic mechanism's inherent (if not obligatory or 'essential') powers of transparent narrational control. Thus, they ensure that the governing, absent Other of the image and its containing frame maintains its invisible, though hardly unspoken, authority. Finally, it would seem that, indeed, medium matters in selected plays and films of David Mamet.

***
NOTES

Notes to Introduction


3 See Bigsby, David Mamet; Carroll; and Brewer (Works Cited).

Notes to Section One: Part One


4 Carlson, Semiotics 79.

5 Metz, "Signifier" 783.


9 Carroll, "Power" 81.
Notes to Section One: Part Two


4 Aristotle 29.


6 Aristotle 98.


10 Hugh Rorrison has written about the reception of Mother Courage and Her Children in Zurich in the late 1940s:

[Brecht] was always willing to revise his plays if they did not work to his satisfaction in performance, which happened not infrequently.... It was no comfort to Brecht that the Zurich critics who saw in Mother Courage 'the heart-rending vitality of all mother creatures' and called her 'Niobe-like' ... might be responding to the rich complexity and the contradictions of her character, so his revision set out to demonstrate more clearly than ever that Mother Courage's sense of motherhood is vitiated by her commercial instincts.

11 States 94.


15 Brockett 379.


18 Blau, "Universals" 148.

19 Blau, "Universals" 144.

20 Blau, "Universals" 144.


23 Suvin 325-34.

24 Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington:


Notes to Section One: Part Three


3 Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972) 122.


6 Heath, "Narrative" 391.

7 Heath, "Narrative" 391.


13 Metz, *Imaginary* 40.

14 Metz, *Imaginary* 45.


16 Baudry, "Ideological Effects" 289.

17 Metz, *Imaginary* 51.

18 Metz, *Imaginary* 60.


20 Metz, *Imaginary* 64-65.


22 Metz, *Imaginary* 72.

23 Both *disavowal* and *fetish* are directly related to a concept central to psychoanalytic studies, emerging in Freud and re-articulated by Lacan—that of *castration*. The degree of preoccupation with this issue in much film theory is difficult to overestimate, and presents a fundamental difficulty for those who find its predominant influence within Freudian and neo-Freudian thought questionable. The clinical definition of castration has been explored exhaustively: at the risk of oversimplifying, it can be said that castration represents, in Freudian
psychology, the ego-determining sense of lack in women who, as children, discover through exposure to the male physique their nonpossession of a penis, and the equally definitive anticipation in male children, upon witnessing the female body, of the loss of the same organ. In Lacanian theory, the penis is replaced by the more conceptual phallus, so that, as Metz notes, "castration takes over in a decisive metaphor all the losses, both real and imaginary, that the child has already suffered (birth trauma, maternal breast, excrement, etc.)" (70). The child's primary response to this realization (of either perceived or threatened castration) is dual. Through disavowal, the child will, before this "unveiling of a lack (we are already close to the cinema signifier)," attempt to "double up its belief (another cinematic characteristic)." The result is a permanent, simultaneous contradiction of beliefs—one held, in Metz's model, beneath the other; one based on knowledge, the other on the powerful denial of that knowledge (70). The second principle option is to arrest the revealing look, to substitute another object, a "just before," a fetish which will essentially "cover up" the threatening vision. But, as with disavowal, the fetish too is founded on actual knowledge of the 'missing' penis or phallus—in effect signifies its absence—and thus "resumes within itself the structure of disavowal and multiple belief" (71).

24 Metz, Imaginary 77.

25 Metz, Imaginary 94.

26 Metz, Imaginary 94.

27 Metz, Imaginary 96.

28 Metz, Imaginary 97.


31 Heath, "Narrative Space" 387-88.


33 Heath, "Narrative Space" 389.

34 Heath, "Narrative Space" 403.

35 Heath, "Narrative Space" 404.

36 Heath, "Narrative Space" 402.

37 Metz, *Imaginary 95*.

38 Heath, "Narrative Space" 403.

39 Heath, "Narrative Space" 403.

40 Heath, "Narrative Space" 403.


*Notes to Section Two*

2 Samuel Goldwyn, *Behind the Screen* (NY: George H. Doran, 1923) 179.


4 Staiger 90-91.


7 Julius Epstein, with his brother Philip, scripted director Michael Curtiz's 1939 *Four Wives* (in which Jeffrey Lynn plays a composer completing a concerto begun by a doomed John Garfield in the 1938 *Four Daughters*). He offers the following reminiscence:

Everybody expected us to write the concerto as a success.... We argued that Garfield was a failure in life and would be a failure in death. The concerto should fail. Warners liked the way we turned the cliche around. Then Max Steiner says, 'This picture has a flop concerto? And the credits will read Music by Max Steiner?' Suddenly we were back in our office, typing, *The audience leaps to its feet, yelling 'Bravo!'* That tells you the status of the writer.


9 Brady 11-12.


11 Refer to Works Cited and Works Consulted for appropriate titles.


16 Studies of the Astoria Project can be found in: Ian Hamilton; Fine; and Martin (Works Cited).


18 Both Ian Hamilton and Fine also explore Odets's time in Hollywood. Additional sources include: Weales; and Demastes, *Clifford Odets* (Works Cited).

**Notes to Section Three: Part One**


2 David Mamet, "I Lost it at the Movies," *American Film* June 1987: 18.


6 David Mamet, "Film is a Collaborative Business," *Some Freaks* (New York: Penguin, 1989) 139.


Notes to Section Three: Part Two


2 Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 75.

3 Bigsby, David Mamet 21.


6 Mamet, "Decadence" 59.

7 David Mamet, Sexual Perversity in Chicago (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974) 8. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


10 John Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge:


12 Austin, Things With Words 14-16.

13 Elam, "Much Ado" 264.


16 Selden 88.

17 Mamet, "Capture-The-Flag" 6.


23 David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (NY: Grove, 1982) 38. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


26 Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," Barthes 460.

27 Barthes 461.

28 Barthes 461.


30 David Mamet, *Speed-The-Plow* (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985) 70. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

31 Elam, "Much Ado" 262.


34 Mamet, "Dream-Life" 11.

35 Alter 19.

36 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin,
Barton 289

37 Brook 44.

38 Pinter encouraged Mamet to proceed with *Glengarry Glen Ross* after the younger playwright had anxiously sent him a draft, seeking his comments. In 1994, Pinter directed a highly successful production of *Oleanna* in London.


40 David Mamet, qtd. in *Village Voice* 5 July 1976, cited in *File on Mamet*, eds. Nesta Jones and Steven Dykes (London: Methuen, 1991) 18. I have drawn on Jones's and Dykes's extremely helpful compilation for short extracts from a small number of elusive reviews. The original periodical names and publication dates accompany these entries.

41 Elam, "Much Ado" 270.

42 Elam, "Much Ado" 270.


1988) 194.


50 Austin, Things With Words 15.

Notes to Section Three: Part Three


4 David Mamet, American Buffalo (NY: Grove, 1975) 4. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

5 King 541.


11 Kerr, "Supercharged" D3.


18 Barbera 274.

19 Michael Billington, rev. of Buffalo, Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre, Guardian (Manchester) 29 June 1978, qtd. in Jones and Dykes 26.

20 Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 74.

21 Mamet, "Acting" 129.

22 Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 75.

23 Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 94.

24 Aristotle 27.


28 Bigsby, *David Mamet* 33.

29 Bigsby, *David Mamet* 128.


32 Jan Mukárovský, "On the Current State of the Theory of the Theatre" (1941), qtd. in Bennett 13.

33 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (NY: Grove, 1961) 62. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

34 Kerr, "Supercharged" D3.


37 Vanden Heuvel 35-36.


40 Raynette Halvorsen Smith, "*night Mother* and *True West*: Mirror Images of Violence


**Notes to Section Two: Part Four**

1 Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 94.


4 David Mamet, *The Woods, Lakeboat, Edmond* (NY: Grove, 1987) 224-25. All future citations from *Edmond* will be taken from this edition, page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


6 Mamet, qtd. in Shewey 4H.

8 Richard Christiansen, rev. of Edmond, Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Chicago Tribune 7 June 1982, qtd. in Jones and Dykes 51.


10 Dean 188.

11 Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 94.

12 Savran, In Their Own Words 133.

13 Mamet, qtd. in Fraser L7.

14 For extended considerations of this subject, see Bigsby's section on O'Neill in Critical Introduction, Volume One 36-119; Chotia; Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama; and, in particular, Blumberg (Works Cited).


16 Colin Stilton, qtd. in Dean 153.

17 Growtowski 16.


Notes to Section Three: Part Five


2 Brewer 6.

3 Mamet, *Directing Film* xv.


5 Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 93.


8 Frank Rich, rev. of *Speed-The-Flow*, Lincoln Center Theatre Co., Royal Theater, NY

9 David Mamet, *Reunion and Dark Pony* (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1979) 10. All future citations from *Reunion* will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


11 David Mamet, *Reunion and Dark Pony* 53. All future citations from *Dark Pony* will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

12 Bigsby, *David Mamet* 35-36.

13 Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 94.

14 David Mamet, *The Shawl* and *Prairie du Chien* (NY: Grove, 1985) 4-5. All future citations from *The Shawl* will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


16 David Mamet, "Realism," *Restaurants* 130.

17 David Mamet, qtd. in Nuwer, "A Life in the Theatre" 1.

18 Mamet, "Realism" 133.

19 Mamet, "Realism" 133.


22 Mamet, "Acting" 127.
Abel's seminal *Metatheatre* attempts to establish a general definition of the term. More narrowly focussed works include separate studies on the significance of metatheatricality in Shakespeare's plays—Calderwood, Egan, and Homan—and Schlueter's similar focus on modern drama in *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (Works Cited).


Mamet, "Theater as Art" 21.


Mamet, *On Directing Film* 85.


Mamet, qtd. in Nuwer, "Life in the Theatre" 7.

Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 76.

Mamet, "Principles" 25.

Mamet, "Realism" 134.

Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 90.

Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 75.


Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 90.

Mamet, qtd. in Schvey, "Celebrating" 90.

Mamet, "Decadence" 57.
40 Mamet, "Decadence" 57-59.

41 Like Bernie (whose escapades have their source, Mamet has claimed, in "just, unfortunately, tales from my life" [New York Times, 5 July 1976: 4D]) the playwright's assertions can occasionally seem so extreme as to be sustained only within an impenetrable insularity of self-performance. Like Teach, Mamet regularly resorts to seemingly familiar terms, turns of phrase, and lines of reasoning which are then abruptly transformed (and at times rendered inaccessible) through idiosyncratic usage (Mamet's decision to oppose the dictionary in his definition of "entropy" comes to mind [On Directing Film 29]). Like Edmond, Mamet has cultivated an image of himself as frustrated reformist and observant 'outsider.' Essays such as "A Playwright in Hollywood," "Observations of a Backstage Wife," and, in the following example, "Some Thoughts on Writing in Restaurants" [Restaurants 75, 142, 34] repeatedly offer the self-description of "the writer scowling naively and the diners wondering, What the hell is he doing?" (34). And like John, Mamet presents himself as having discovered an at once empowering and humbling sense of his own dependence on and integration into a larger "Universal Will."

It is in the interest of the Whole, and, I think, in the pursuits of something beyond the whole, that some are driven to pursue the arts, that some are driven to pursue power, or wealth, or solitude, or death.

I always felt proud, and not a little arrogant, that I was one of those freaks privileged to live in the world of the Arts. As I become older, I feel still happy, and quite privileged to be working in an area where I am happy; but I am, I hope, a bit less proud, and, increasingly, awed by the way the universe has been thoughtfully construed even to include a freak like me. ("Some Freaks," Some Freaks 5)


43 Mamet, "Stanislavsky" 29.

44 Mamet, "Stanislavsky" 28.
Notes to Section Four: Part One

1 Mamet, *Speed-The-Plow* 42.

2 "There are ebbs and flows in any civilization. Nothing lasts forever. We had a good time. We had Tennessee Williams. We had the hula hoop. We had the Edsel. All kinds of good stuff. The Constitution. To name but a few. Shelley Winters. Now you've got to pay the piper. Big deal." (David Mamet, qtd. in David Savran, "Trading in the American Dream," *American Theatre* Sept. 1987: 18).


4 William A. Henry III noted in his review for *Time* that "right up to the end it is impossible to tell whether the book is brilliance or bilge. If it is the former, then the ending is uncommercially tragic. If the latter, then the ending is a foregone conclusion, and, however brief, takes too long in coming." ("Madonna Comes to Broadway," *Time* 16 May 1988: 99.)

5 Mamet, qtd. in Savran, "Trading" 18.

6 Mamet, "I Lost It" 19.

7 Mamet, "I Lost It" 19.

8 Steven H. Gale, "David Mamet's *The Verdict*: Opening Cons," Kane, *Casebook* 163.


11 David Mamet, qtd. in Jean Vallely, "David Mamet Makes a Play for Hollywood,"
Rolling Stone 3 Apr. 1980: 44.

12 Duka D15.


14 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 21.

15 Mamet, qtd. in Duka D15.

16 Mamet, qtd. in Vallely 46.


18 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 24.

19 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 24.

20 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 21.

21 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 21.

22 Mamet, qtd. in Vallely 46.

23 Mamet, qtd. in Vallely 46.


26 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 23.


28 Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 23.
Mamet concedes in his introduction to *On Directing Film* that "I had just finished directing my second film, and like the pilot with two hundred hours of flying time, I was the most dangerous thing around" (xiii).

Mamet, *On Directing Film* 71-72.


Mamet, qtd. in Yakir, "Words" 22.

Mamet, "Principles" 24-27.

*Notes to Section Four: Part Two*

1 David Mamet, *House of Games* (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985) 62. All future citations from this play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

2 Dave Kehr, "'House of Games' Stylishly Meshes Stage, Film," rev. of *House of Games*, *Chicago Tribune* 16 Oct. 1987: 7A.

3 Mamet, qtd. in Stephen Silverman 15.

5 See Higham and Greenberg; Kaminsky (Works Cited).


7 Schrader 170.

8 Schrader 170-74.

9 Schrader 175-77.

10 Schrader 170.


14 Haskell 168.


16 Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 3.


18 Christine Gledhill, "Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," Kaplan, Women in Film Noir 19.

19 Gledhill 19.


22 Mamet, "Women" 23.

23 Mamet, "Women" 23.


28 "What's really at work here ... is the montage-effect; that is, the result of an association, arbitrary or not, of images A and B which, brought together, determine in the mind of the spectator an idea, emotion, or a feeling that neither in itself contains." (Jean Mitry, qtd. in Brian Lewis, *Jean Mitry and the Aesthetics of the Cinema* [Michigan: UMI Research, 1984] 20.)


30 Mamet, introd., *House* xi.


32 Mamet, introd., *House* x.

33 Mamet, introd., *House* ix.

34 Mamet, qtd. in Roudane, "An Interview" 79.


39 Pryluck 228.

40 Mamet, introd., House vi.

41 Eisenstein, "Dialectic Approach to Film Form," Film Form 53.

42 Eisenstein, "Cinematographic Principle" 37.

43 Eisenstein, "Cinematographic Principle" 37.


45 Carroll, "Power" 89.

46 Bordwell, "Cognition" 185.

47 For a more complete discussion of these concepts, see Bordwell, Making Meaning 129-204 (Works Cited).

48 Bordwell, "Cognition" 192.

49 Mamet, introd., House vii.

50 Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," South Atlantic Quarterly 88.2 (Spring 1989): 346.


Read 143.

Brewer 24.

Brewer 25.

Brewer 11.


De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t* 130.

Branigan 73.

Mamet, *On Directing Film* 85.

Mamet, *On Directing Film* 86.

Mamet, *On Directing Film* 86.

Willemen 217. The "fourth look" that Willeman proposes follows from the three categories of spectatorial gaze suggested by Laura Mulvey in her seminal feminist essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18, rpt. in Mast and Cohen 803-816.

Branigan 74.

Willemen 217.

Mamet, *On Directing Film* 85.
69 Mamet, *On Directing Film* 29.

70 Brewer 25.


73 Brewer 27.

74 Dr. Terry Mitchell, Community Psychologist, Memorial University of Newfoundland, in conversation with the author.

75 Professor Marc Thackray, Dept. of English, Memorial U of NF, in conversation with the author.

76 Mulvey 804.

77 Mulvey 811.

78 Willemen 213.

79 David Mamet, qtd. in unpublished interview with Nesta Jones and Steven Dykes, 28 May 1989, cited in Jones and Dykes 88.

80 Mulvey 803-04; Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects" 26.

81 Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects" 28.


Notes to Section Four: Part Three


3 David Mamet, *Homicide* (1988; NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992) 125. All future citations from this screenplay, unless otherwise indicated, will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be inserted parenthetically into the text.


7 Mamet, qtd. in VerMeulen 13: 1.


10 David Mamet, qtd. in Brunette H13.

11 Mamet, qtd. in Brunette H13.


15 Hoberman 15.


23 Lopate H13.


25 David Mamet, "In the Company of Men," *Some Freaks* 86.

26 Mamet, "Company of Men" 88.


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