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THE DEVIL, THE MASTER CRIMINAL, AND THE REENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD  
(ON *THE USUAL SUSPECTS*)

Abstract

What is so appealing about the figure of the master criminal? The answer lies in the kind of solution he provides to the problem of suffering. Rather than just *accounting* for affliction—as, for example, does Leibniz’s theodicy—such a figure *enchants* it, transforming mundane objects into actual or potential clues, everyday incidents into moves in a cosmic conflict, random misery into a purposeful pattern. The master criminal (the shadowy villain of *The Usual Suspects*, say) thus constitutes a secular replacement for the Devil, making possible a negative reenchancement of the world.

I

Viewers of Bryan Singer’s 1995 film *The Usual Suspects* often experience a curious sense of euphoria as the story draws to a close. Throughout the film we have been watching a somewhat shady character, one Roger “Verbal” Kint, being interrogated by Federal Customs Agent Dave Kujan about an armed assault that has left twenty-seven dead. Kint cuts a superficially defiant but ultimately rather pathetic figure, being palsied on his left side and (apparently) easily intimidated by the police, willing to yield vital information to Kujan in spite of the immunity that allows him, in principle, to walk away at any time. In the end, Kint sobbingly admits that Dean Keaton, whom he has presented as an unwilling recruit in a robbery gone horribly wrong, was actually the mastermind of the entire plot; he may even, Kint infers, be that man the underworld

knows as Keyser Söze, a larger-than-life criminal genius with origins in Turkey and tentacles everywhere.



*A left-handed killer*

As Kint limps his way out of the police station, we have good reason to believe that the film is essentially over: it has, we assume, been a mystery whose question is one of identity (who is the raid's mastermind? who is Keyser Söze?) and whose solution, in both cases, is Dean Keaton.<sup>1</sup> But at this point the nature of the narrative changes. Gazing distractedly around the interview room,<sup>2</sup> Kujan suddenly becomes aware that its notice board, made by the Quartet Company in Skokie, Illinois, bears a flyer advertising vacations in Guatemala and a description of a fugitive who periodically goes by the alias Redfoot; he recalls (in voiceover) that Kint gave the name Redfoot to a minor character in his story, spoke of picking beans in Guatemala, and mentioned singing in a barbershop quartet in Skokie, Illinois; even the lawyer Kobayashi, ostensible delegate of Keyser Söze, finds an eerie echo in two words on the base of Kujan's coffee cup: "Kobayashi porcelain."<sup>3</sup> Kint, meanwhile, is still walking away from the station, and as he does so his left leg gradually straightens out, allowing him to walk with ease, and his left hand opens up, nonchalantly flicking open a lighter for a cigarette held in his right.<sup>4</sup> At the same moment, the

fax machine in Kujan's office delivers an artist's rendition of the assailant seen by Arkash Kovash, the raid's sole survivor, an assailant Kovash has identified as Keyser Söze; it is the face not of Keaton but of Kint. Kint, meanwhile—or is it Keyser?—is climbing into a car driven by “Kobayashi”<sup>5</sup> and making his exit.

## II

Why is all of this so deeply satisfying? One thing is certain: it is not for moral reasons. In fact ethical critics would, I think, have a bit of a hard time with the overwhelming bliss an audience feels on discovering that the murderer of twenty-seven people (some of whom, like Dean Keaton and Edie Finneran, we have rather come to care for), and indeed the greatest criminal mastermind in the (fictional) world, has managed to evade arrest. We *want* him to escape justice, and even on watching the film a second or third time we *still* want him to escape justice.<sup>6</sup> We are blithely amoral agents as we watch and rewatch the movie. We are certainly not overcoming our own antisocial tendencies in the process, or learning something about the nature of evil, or becoming better at detecting it, or imaginatively experiencing life in another culture, or gaining fine awareness of subtle claims on our moral attention, or anything of the sort.<sup>7</sup> The euphoric feeling is not to the slightest degree or in the subtlest respect a moral one.<sup>8</sup>



*On-screen murder*

It is also not just the satisfaction of puzzle solving.<sup>9</sup> Granted, surprises that makes sense, and that in doing so make sense of everything else, have always been a mainstay of narrative fiction; they may even constitute the very heart of a successful dénouement. And granted, the ending of *The Usual Suspects* constitutes just such a surprise. But the false conclusion—Keaton is Keyser Söze; Keaton is still alive—has already presented a shocker, without providing anywhere near the same yield of pleasure. This pleasure comes, in part, from the fact that the criminal himself has made the truth available—which is to say, the pleasure is that the criminal himself has *dared* to make it available. The deepest mystery of the film is, in fact, why a man who has gone to stunning lengths in order to kill a single would-be informant then goes on to give Kujan, hardly the most brilliant detective who ever lived,<sup>10</sup> the chance to unmask him, by spinning irrelevant stories about coffee beans and barbershop quartets, complete with eminently traceable names, when he is not even obliged to speak to him in the first place. “You think a guy like that comes this close to getting caught,” Kint asks Kujan at one point, “and sticks his head out?” But this, in fact, is just what K. has done.<sup>11</sup> (Let us call the combined Kint/Keyser character “K.,” for the

sake of simplicity.<sup>12)</sup> How can we explain K.'s behavior? Why *would* anyone “come this close to getting caught” and “stick his head out”?



*No Sherlock Holmes*

### III

We are explicitly reminded of this question at the close of the movie, when the action (Kint becoming Söze; Kujan giving chase) is overlaid with an audio montage of earlier dialogue. We hear, of course, about the barbershop quartet in Skokie, Illinois, the beans in Guatemala, Redfoot, Kobayashi, and Keyser Söze. But we also hear the following:

VERBAL: How do you shoot the Devil in the back? ...

(SERGEANT JEFF) RABIN: This guy is protected from up on high by the Prince of Darkness. ...

VERBAL: To a cop, the explanation is never that complicated. It's always simple. There's no mystery on the street, no archcriminal behind it all. ...

KEATON: Somebody with power. Somebody who was capable of tracking us from New York to Los Angeles. . . .

VERBAL: You think a guy like that comes this close to getting caught and sticks his head out?

VERBAL: The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

The culminating montage thus reminds us of the problem, but it also hints at the solution. Why would a secretive criminal stick his neck out? He wouldn't. But the Devil might.<sup>13</sup> The Devil, who is safe from harm, might, for that very reason, be in need of distraction. K., I suggest, chooses to play his elaborate game with Kujan because that is what those who are beyond the human realm do.<sup>14</sup> They have time on their hands; they cannot die or be harmed; they temper their lassitude by dallying with mortals, sporting with them, taunting them, challenging them to battles of wits, dazzling them with their artistry.<sup>15</sup> (Every artist, as the old saw goes, needs an audience.) "How do you shoot the Devil in the back?"<sup>16</sup> "This guy is protected from up on high by the Prince of Darkness." "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." K., with his carefully groomed widow's peak, is not a two-bit conman; he is in fact the Devil himself.<sup>17</sup>



*The Devil at play*

#### IV

We might very well doubt this. In fact, we might very well doubt almost everything; our

epistemic journey, as viewers of *The Usual Suspects*, rather resembles the tripartite trajectory René Descartes describes in his *Discourse on Method*. At first we naïvely accept as real everything that meets our senses; since, for example, we see Dean Keaton being shot, we assume it is true, in the fictional world of *The Usual Suspects*, that Keaton is dead. But then, having learned that Verbal Kint has been making up all kinds of things—his time as a bean picker in Guatemala, his stint in a barbershop quartet, perhaps Bricks Marlin, Redfoot, Kobayashi—we find ourselves tempted to believe that nothing is true, that all we have seen has been “mindscreen,”<sup>18</sup> merely the thoughts of a character (Kujan’s, in most cases, as generated by K.’s narrative) presented as visual images. To be precise, all we have seen has been mindscreen *not signaled as such*: unlike, say, the famous nightmare sequence in *Vertigo*, in which Scottie’s head is superimposed on an abstract vortex-like background, and unlike the soft-focus, slow-motion sequence recounting the legend of Keyser Söze, the scenes depicting the adventures of Kint, Keaton, Hockney, Fenster, and McManus give no obvious indication of subjective distortion.



*Bricks... Marlin*

This, one might say, is the cinematic equivalent of free indirect discourse.<sup>19</sup> Just as Franz Kafka’s narrator in *The Trial* tells us that “someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested” (p. 3), neglecting to inform us that this is the character’s point of view (is it true that Josef K. has done nothing wrong? and if so, why does it follow that the arrest is the result of slander, rather than, say, bureaucratic error?);

just as Jane Austen's narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* tells us "a deeper shade of hauteur overspread his [Darcy's] features" (p. 63), rather than explicitly attributing this false opinion to Elizabeth Bennett; so too *The Usual Suspects* presents us with a set of subjective events integrated seamlessly into the flow of objective narration.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, fictions in film and television periodically feature fantasy sequences with realistic *mise-en-scène*, but they tend to be brief, with corrections issued early, giving the viewer plenty of time to readjust his or her attitude toward the material represented. Here, by contrast, the subjective inflection affects the vast majority of the work (as in Kafka) and the correction arrives extremely late (as in Austen), too late for us to revise our understanding (at least during an initial reading).<sup>21</sup> The result is a disorientation worthy of Kafka and Austen, not to mention Flaubert, at their very finest.

It is tempting, as a result, to infer that there is no stable ground anywhere. Redfoot may or may not exist; Keyser Söze may or may not exist; Verbal Kint may or may not exist.<sup>22</sup> But here an island of certainty begins to form, rather like the certainty of Descartes's *cogito*, an island from which epistemic confidence gradually ripples out in concentric circles. To be sure, much of the film is indeed mindscreen, with Kujan's mental images presented as if they were objectively real; but not all of it is. It makes no sense, for example, to argue that Kint is an invention of Kint. On the contrary, he lies, therefore he is. And neither is Kujan an invention of Kint (Kint lies, therefore he has someone to deceive). Agent Jack Baer and Sergeant Jeff Rabin are real, as are Dean Keaton, Michael McManus, Todd Hockney, and Fred Fenster; likewise Arkash Kovash, Arturo Marquez, Edie Finneran. Unlike Redfoot and Kobayashi, we have independent evidence for the existence of all these individuals; even a number of facts about them are not in dispute (Keaton, for example, had been a policeman and had faked his own death).

As to the truth of key events, multiple witnesses can attest to the deaths of twenty-seven



people on a boat off San Pedro, California. That there was indeed a lineup involving the five “usual suspects,” a raid on New York’s Finest Taxi Service, and a robbery-murder of Saul Berg we can assume from the fact that Kujan makes no objection to their mention. Kujan himself volunteers the information that Edie Finneran has been killed. We know from the ending that Verbal Kint has a watch and a gold lighter (like the Keyser Söze we see in the very opening scene), is not paralyzed on his left side, and has at least one accomplice. We know from elsewhere that Kint maneuvers through the justice system with eerie ease. We know that some believe in the existence of Keyser Söze (we cannot be certain that Keaton, McManus, Hockney, and Fenster believe this, but we can be certain that Kovash does). And most important, we know from the fax delivered to Kujan’s office that Verbal Kint physically resembles the man Arkosh Kovash identifies as Keyser Söze.



*Evidence*

And if Verbal Kint physically resembles Keyser Söze, it is not because Kint has invented Söze and pretended to be him (for the benefit at least of Kovash, and ultimately of Keaton) but rather because Söze has invented Kint and pretended to be Kint, a divinity posing as a mortal for his own amusement. A conman could use his talents to invent the existence of a legendary antihero, but he could not use them to engineer a line-up, to escape prosecution, or to gather exhaustive information on anyone he chooses.<sup>23</sup> K. is more powerful than any mortal could possibly be. And this, I believe, is the source of our immense satisfaction.

## V

Why not rather be horrified? The existence of a malevolent entity wreaking widespread havoc with total impunity should, by rights, fill us with dread. However—and this is the deep paradox of the concept—the Devil is one of the most powerful sources of enchantment that we human beings have at our disposal. To be sure, the idea that there is a quasi-omnipotent being tasked with devising transcendently unpleasant punishments for our misdemeanors, as well as with steadily perverting the course of worldly affairs,<sup>24</sup> is an uncomfortable thought. But it is also strangely uplifting to believe that every single action we take is a scene performed before a deeply invested audience; strangely comforting to feel that much of what we witness, and indeed much of what we ourselves do, derives from a powerful otherworldly source, rather than from human frailty or simple force of circumstance. The slightest incident gains infinite significance, inasmuch as our eternal destiny may turn on it; the slightest action gains infinite weight, inasmuch as it may turn out to be a move in a cosmic struggle between good and evil.<sup>25</sup> What is more, human suffering thereby gains an explanation and loses, accordingly, the best part of its sting. (Thus Nietzsche: “Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it.”<sup>26</sup>) The nightmare is, as so often, a cover for a secret dream; this most terrifying of human inventions is in fact the greatest gift we ever gave ourselves.

Judeo-Christian theologians have, of course, given much thought across the centuries to the question of suffering. Since they must make sense of a God who has mankind’s best interests at heart and is also infinitely powerful, yet nonetheless permits immense distress and misery to take place on his watch, they sometimes argue that distress and misery are a punishment for sin (not

entirely convincing in the case of dying infants),<sup>27</sup> or the regrettable but inevitable byproduct of free will (insufficient to account for natural disasters), or a regrettable but necessary mechanism for testing faith (not particularly effective in cases where the victims die immediately, and silent on the question of why quite so much suffering is required), or made up for in heaven (silent on the question of why it was necessary in the first place).

The most impressive solution, that of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, postulates a God who, at the time of creation, held in his mind all of the worlds he could possibly create; being benevolent, he chose from among his infinite options to actualize the one that contained the most good *on balance*. The reason that our world is the best of all possible worlds is not because it is devoid of pain, or because all of the pain within it has an immediate justification, but because taken all in all, and given the constraints on world creation, this world maximizes the sum of contentment relative to the sum of afflictions. Leibniz's extraordinarily elegant solution has the virtue of (a) maintaining God's benevolence while (b) facing the facts (it bites the bullet on the existence of suffering that is not directly justified) and (c) refusing to invoke a secondary power (it steers clear of dualism, which always risks falling over into Manicheism or Gnosticism).<sup>28</sup> But—and this is the key point for our purposes—it merely *accounts for* suffering. The hypothesis of the Devil, by contrast, *enchants* it. Suffering is not merely a necessary byproduct of maximized happiness; it is *willed* (at least by someone), fits into a plan (at least of someone), forms part of a pattern (albeit diabolical). Every setback potentially points beyond itself to an agent, a brilliant intellect that may have deliberately designed it to be exactly this way and no other.<sup>29</sup>



*Just a pile of ropes?*

Even the contingent finds itself suddenly magnetized by the lurking presence of the Devil. Objects in the world that used to be entirely without significance—that could just as easily be here as there, this as that—now take on the aura of actual or possible *clues*, of indexes to the existence and involvement of a powerful malevolent force. The trivial becomes essential, the contingent necessary (the hand a killer uses to shoot his gun; a pile of ropes on a pier; a subtle smile). Of course, some apparent clues are merely red herrings. But the beautiful thing about detective fictions is that they impart a certain literary necessity even to these *fausses pistes*. So too, perhaps, the Devil might be understood as laying down misleading tracks in order to throw us off the scent and thus secure an ultimate aesthetic triumph; if so, then there really seems almost no limit to what, in the world before us, may bear his mark.

Whereas Leibniz's God is strangely powerless, doing in a sense what he is forced to do by the results of his computations, the Devil is acting on his own volition, wreaking havoc freely, playfully, creatively, not to say beautifully.<sup>30</sup> (K.'s elaborate plan to bring about the mutual destruction of multiple enemies is a work of terrible beauty, and his improvised account of it is a

virtuoso performance in its own right.<sup>31</sup>) To be sure, belief in the existence of God enchants the world in several ways. When it comes to suffering, however, belief in the existence of a Devil is a much more alluring option. It would be transformative even for those who, denying the existence of God, believed in the Devil alone.

## VI

Is our fictional friend K. the actual Devil, literally speaking? Perhaps not. (Though perhaps our uncertainty on this point, indeed our resistance, is just what the Devil would wish for: in the words of Baudelaire as borrowed by Verbal Kint, “the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”<sup>32</sup>) Even if K. is not Satan incarnate, however, he is still a little more (or less) than an average mortal, “somebody capable of tracking [Keaton and company] from New York to Los Angeles,” somebody capable of engineering a lineup, somebody who knows everything about everybody, somebody who is immune from the justice system. He is, at the very least, a master criminal, a distant descendant of Holmes’s Moriarty.<sup>33</sup> There is no solution of continuity between an ordinary criminal—Todd Hockney, say—and the master criminal: a Hockney does not become a K. by a process of gradual improvement; a James Winter does not become a Moriarty by working his way up the corporate ladder of crime. If the term “devil” is a metaphor in this film, it is not a metaphor for an unusually unpleasant but otherwise unexceptional man; it is a metaphor for something far more terrifying and, therefore, far more enchanting.<sup>34</sup>

Master criminals are impossibly powerful, their reach impossibly broad (Moriarty is “the organizer of every devilry, the controlling brain of the underworld”<sup>35</sup>). They have wildly implausible combinations of talents.<sup>36</sup> And above all, master criminals do not have *motives*, in the ordinary sense. They do what they do merely to prove their power to themselves and

others<sup>37</sup>—if not, indeed, merely for the fun of it. For all these reasons, they are the secular substitute for Satan, and a belief in their existence is accordingly sufficient to reenchant the shadowy side of reality. In the words of Holmes, “With that man [Moriarty] in the field, one’s morning paper presented infinite possibilities. . . . Petty thefts, wanton assaults, purposeless outrage—to the man who held the clue all could be worked into one connected whole” (“The Norwood Builder,” pp. 583–84). If a master criminal exists, then everything evil hangs together (just as everything good hangs together if God exists), and everything apparently trivial, otiose, random, or haphazard may turn out to be a vital indicator of the central cause. “Holmes’s science of observation,” as Michael Saler puts it, “re-enchanted the world by imbuing everything with hidden import” (p. 614).<sup>38</sup> The master detective—along, I would add, with his counterpart, the master criminal—takes on the task of reenchanting a derelict world.

## VII

“The fate of our times,” Max Weber famously wrote in 1917, “is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’”<sup>39</sup> Weber was right up to a point: these days, when we see a rainbow, we don’t see a sign of God’s covenant or the trailing scarf of the goddess Iris, but only a natural process of prismatic reflection; when we see someone claiming supernatural powers for himself, we are more likely to sue him for fraud (or simply to laugh him off) than to burn him at the stake for heresy; and when we see someone foaming at the mouth, we are far more likely to call a doctor than an exorcist. But Weber’s account was also incomplete. What he neglected to mention is that each time religion reluctantly withdrew from a particular area of experience, a new, thoroughly immanent strategy for reenchantment cheerfully emerged to fill the void. The progressive

disenchantment of the world was in fact accompanied, from the start and continually, by its progressive *reenchantment*.

Reenchantment, what is more, in multiple senses: for the idea of a transcendent force regulating human affairs had endowed experience not only with wonder but also with *order* (the carefully regulated *kosmos* of creation), with *purpose* (the providential plan), with a sense of the *infinite*, with *epiphanic revelation*, with a *hierarchy of significance* attaching to objects and events encountered. In their different ways, 19th- and 20th-century writers, thinkers, and performers gradually developed secular stand-ins for all aspects of theistic elevation.<sup>40</sup> What the case of the master criminal shows us is that, surprisingly enough, the God-shaped void left in modernity is also accompanied by a *Devil-shaped* void, that the Devil too requires replacement. We cling to the notion of a larger-than-life malevolent force, sometimes taking the shape of an individual Moriarty type, sometimes that of a widespread conspiracy. (Conspiracy theories, just like the notion of the Devil, are what Borges would call “apparent desperations and secret consolations”:<sup>41</sup> they turn a series of local acts by disgruntled individuals, perhaps not fully thought through, into a network of engineered assaults on everything good, a coordinated system with powerful inner logic and deep significance.<sup>42</sup>) Finally—and with the least necessity for leaps of negative faith—we revel in *situational irony*. We are endlessly delighted when things go not just wrong, but *spectacularly* wrong, as when officers run over the cat they have just rescued from a tree, prisoners dig a tunnel into a courtroom, or robbers get knocked down by their own getaway car.<sup>43</sup> Since all irony implies an author,<sup>44</sup> here too we may be basking not in the shadow of God but in that of the Devil.

Why, then, is *The Usual Suspects* so satisfying? Because it is a negative reenchantment of the world. It graces us, for an hour or two, with the fantasy of all worldly phenomena being

potentially significant, of all baleful forces imbued with charismatic agency. Even if the price were the existence of a diabolical master criminal, if not the Devil himself, many of us would secretly prefer this to the chaos of what is.<sup>45</sup>

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1. This is deliberate on the part of screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie. The question of whether Keaton is alive or dead distracts us, he points out, from the question of whether he is in fact the criminal mastermind (Tod Lippy, with Christopher McQuarrie, “Writing *The Usual Suspects*,” *Scenario: the Magazine of Screenwriting Art* 1995: 50–3, 191–96 [p. 53]; hereafter abbreviated “Writing”); the question of what Kint *knows* distracts us from who Kint *is* (“Writing,” p. 195). Of course, the trick worked in part because Kevin Spacey was, at the time, an unknown. Some more recent viewers of the film have complained about finding it predictable. The reason is simple: Kevin Spacey is now a famous actor, and characters played by famous actors are expected to play a major role in proceedings.

2. It is Sergeant Rabin’s office, borrowed for the occasion.

3. Let us also not forget Bricks Marlin, “that guy that used to talk about Söse in New York,” as we learn from Fenster and McManus; his name recurs in the audio montage, accompanied by a photograph of a man holding a very large fish. “Bricks” is another alias of the female African American fugitive known as Redfoot.

4. This is actually a further hint identifying Verbal Kint with Keyser Söse. In the opening sequence of the film, a shadowy figure approaches the wounded Dean Keaton, who—clearly for the first time—recognizes him as Keyser Söse. The shadowy figure transfers his gun from right to left hand before pulling the trigger, then flicks open his lighter, again with his left hand, to ignite the gasoline on the boat: just what we might expect from Verbal Kint, who has been pretending all along to be paralyzed on the left side (when he lights a cigarette, and when he shoots the jeweler Saul Berg, he does so with his right hand), but who may if anything be *stronger* on his left side (at one point during the interrogation, he clumsily drops a cigarette lighter). Interestingly, in the semimythical sequence about the Keyser Söse legend, Söse himself is depicted killing with his left hand, and the sequence concludes—almost inexplicably, were it not part of the strategy of implication by handedness—with a close-up of his left arm.

5. There is of course a big question as to who is actually waiting in the car for Verbal Kint at the end of the film. The character at the wheel is played by Pete Postlethwaite, the same actor who plays Kobayashi in the earlier sequences based on Kint’s narration. It is tempting to say, therefore, that since he looks like Kobayashi, he must be Kobayashi; that, indeed, is what Ernest



Larsen says, without the slightest hesitation, in *The Usual Suspects* (London: British Film Institute, 2002, p. 75). The problem is that Kobayashi is a brand of china. This leaves us with a number of options: (1) “Kobayashi” is a pure fiction, and we are merely seeing an anonymous accomplice; (2) “Kobayashi” is real (whatever his actual name is), and we are indeed seeing him again; (3) “Kobayashi” is real, but we are seeing here a *second* accomplice (from whom, perhaps, Kint has borrowed the features for his description of “Kobayashi” in the story he tells Kujan). Some possibilities, however, are ruled out. (4) “Kobayashi” is not Dean Keaton, in spite of the fact that Keaton has a talent for staging his own death; the reason is that the opening sequence of the film represents what actually happened, rather than what K. says about it (if K. were actually narrating, he would be giving an awful lot away by mentioning the name “Keyser”) (5) “Kobayashi” is not Keyser Söze, as has been claimed by Veronica Lee, “Nailing the Suspects,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 1996, p. 41; and Michael Adams, “The Usual Suspects,” in *Magill’s Cinema Annual, 1996: A Survey of the Films of 1995*, ed. Beth A. Phaner and Christopher P. Scanlon (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), pp. 551–52; the Photofit drawing done by Arkosh Kovash is conclusive evidence against such a hypothesis.

6. What would an ethically minded critic have to say about *The Usual Suspects*? She might, following Kendall L. Walton (“Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 68 [1994]: 30), suggest that since the fictional world establishes or violates our moral standards, we simply refuse to engage with it. But of course large numbers of well-adjusted individuals positively delight in engaging with it; indeed, delight in the victory of a mass murderer. Acknowledging that fact, our critic might counter—following Tamar Gendler this time (“The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” *Journal of Philosophy* 97.2 [2000]: 55–81, pp. 67–69)—that those individuals do so only because they do not *notice* that K. is a mass murderer. Still, we do see him killing Saul Berg, an unarmed man who, as far as we can tell, merely happens to be standing between K. and a briefcase full of money. So let us imagine our ethical critic adopting a third strategy, again borrowed from Gendler (p. 77), and pointing out that Saul Berg is a shady figure; none of K.’s victims, she might claim, is an innocent. It is not clear, however, that Saul Berg (however corrupt) deserves to die, and it is absolutely certain that Edie Finneran does not. Perhaps we do not connect K. directly with the death of Edie the first time we watch the movie, but on repeated viewings (and those who enjoy *The Usual Suspects* tend to watch it at least twice) we are well aware of it, and yet we continue to go along with the fiction and with the protagonist. Does this mean (a fourth option for our tireless ethical critic) that *The Usual Suspects* is corrupting? Hardly. Rather, I think that, as Gendler would say (pp. 73–76), we do not “export” immoral values from the film. Neither, though, do we export anything positive. As screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie has stated (personal communication), the biggest misconception about film is that it educates. “It’s an extremely self-important medium,” he says, “that is largely incapable of expressing the truth.”

7. Intriguingly, the most “finely aware” character in this film is Kint/Söze, a man who uses his quasi-omniscience purely for the purposes of manipulation (e.g., the elaborate dossiers on each “usual suspect,” designed to coerce acquiescence). Fine awareness is no guarantee of morality; as Orwell knew, it can easily be used in the service of more effective cruelty.

8. When pressed, viewers are perfectly happy to come up with all kinds of ways in which the film is morally improving: it warns us that evil is often disguised, it challenges us to examine our

own antisocial tendencies, it elicits our empathy for Edie Finneran, and so on. This, I think, says far more about social norms than about the social efficacy of the work itself. (Everyone, from high school teachers to professional critics and representatives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, encourages the moviegoer to find the “message,” just as the Nun’s Priest, in Chaucer, urges his listeners, hilariously, to “taketh the moralitee.”) On this and on ethical criticism in general, see my “A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction,” in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry Hagberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 63–94.

9. Franco Moretti, in “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 207–27, takes it to be the “First Commandment” (p. 214) of the successful detective story—of the kind that “survives” in the Darwinian space of the literary wild, being “fitter” than its rivals—that it have decodable clues; that is, clues the reader/viewer could use, if she worked hard enough, to solve the mystery for herself. But *The Usual Suspects* does not contain such clues. To be sure, we know that Kint is a professional conman; we see him taking a long look around the room before the interrogation (his gaze rests on, among other things, a cigarette box depicting an orientalist scene); and if we are very alert, we may notice him using his ostensibly useless left arm, at one point, to defend himself against Kujan. But the names on the notice board (“Redfoot,” “Skokie,” “Quartet”), the real clues to the mystery, are entirely withheld from us. Verbal Kint provides them, as it were, to Kujan, but director Bryan Singer does not provide them to the viewer. More important, however much we suspect that K. is playing fast and loose with the truth, we can have absolutely no way (short, I suppose, of speaking Turkish, since *sözel* means “verbal” in that language) of working out that he is, or has invented, the criminal mastermind Keyser Söze. We do not know so much as the meaning of the name Keyser Söze until an hour into the film. It is not, then, the existence of “decodable clues” that generates the pleasure we take in *The Usual Suspects*—or, for that matter, in such television series as *Colombo* and (more recently) *House M.D.* It turns out that no feature of individual detective stories ensures their “survival.” On Moretti’s overvaluation of clues, see Elif Batuman, “Adventures of a Man of Science,” *n+1* 3 (2005). On the Turkish for “verbal,” see “Writing,” p. 52.

10. Kujan admittedly comes across as more talented than Jeff Rabin, who is simply willing to let the whole matter drop, but he is surely not as sharp as Jack Baer. As Ernest Larsen points out (p. 85), Kujan allows his obsession with Keaton to blind him to all other ways of interpreting the data before him.

11. He is also doing it literally. As he says the words “You think a guy like that comes this close to getting caught and sticks his head out?” he is, delightfully enough, leaning out across the table.

12. The Kafkaesque overtones are surely inescapable in a film whose main characters are named Keaton, Keyser, Kint, Kobayashi, Kovash, and Kujan. As for “K.,” some ambiguity exists as to which of the features of each entity we need to preserve in the composite. K. needs to have the physical appearance of Verbal Kint (and hence *not* of the “Keyser Söze” we see in the Turkish sequence) as well as the latter’s criminal record; he needs to be known to some in the underworld—Arkash Kovash, for example—as Keyser Söze; and he needs to have tremendous

power (the power to collect an encyclopedic file on any individual, to summon a spurious lineup, to escape serious charges, and so on). But he does not need, say, to have killed his own family.

13. There seems to have been some disagreement between screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie and director Bryan Singer over the nature of Keyser Söze. McQuarrie stated that he views Söze as a fairly average human individual driven to desperate measures by circumstances (“Writing,” pp. 51, 52, 53) and at risk of legal sanction (“Writing,” p. 192). Singer, however, sees things differently, as is clear from his highly stylized direction of the scene involving Söze killing his own family. My impression is that Singer carries the day. After all, both Singer and McQuarrie considered a series of “alternate names for the Devil” as surnames for their protagonist (“Writing,” p. 52), and both wrote the first two lines of the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil”—a song whose speaker is the Devil—on the front of every version of the script (Larsen, p. 7).

14. K.’s choice of names from the notice board—his playful improvisation—is surely evidence that he is sporting with Kujan, as opposed to, say, defending himself. The best evidence, however, is the little smile he gives when Kujan is not looking at him, a smile he carefully removes when Kujan can see him again. K. is clearly enjoying the battle of wits. McQuarrie worried that this smile would be too obvious (“Writing,” p. 195); it is not, however, something a viewer typically notices the first time round.

15. It is tempting to say that the Devil produces his handiwork simply in order to prove his own existence, just as God proves his, according to Aquinas, via the elaborate design of the world; this, however, goes against the Baudelairean claim that the Devil (more like the God of Pascal) seeks concealment. *Diabolus absconditus*.

16. The full line: “It was Keyser Söze, Agent Kujan. I mean the Devil himself. How do you shoot the Devil in the back?” Note that Arkosh Kovash, speaking in Hungarian, also calls Keyser Söze the Devil: “én láttam az ördögöt, szemtől-szembe láttam őt” (“I saw the Devil, saw him face to face”). Note too that when Hockney dies, an unexplained bright light illuminates his face.

17. A detective story that mutates into a metaphysical tale, epistemological questions shading into ontological ones, is what Brian McHale calls “limit modernism.” (I leave aside here the issue of whether “modernist” and “postmodernist” are really temporal categories, or indeed useful ones.) Other examples include *Angel Heart*, in which a detective story essentially gives way to a retelling of *Faust*, and *Twin Peaks*, as well, perhaps, as Robbe-Grillet’s *Les Gommages* (though McHale’s own example is *Dans le labyrinthe*). See Brian McHale, “Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing,” in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986) pp. 53–77 (p. 64).

18. The term was coined by Bruce F. Kawin, See Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

19. Free indirect discourse takes a sentence that a character says, to herself or to others, and transposes tenses and references to the speaker, on the model of indirect discourse, while preserving word order, idiolect, and punctuation, on the model of *direct* discourse. Thus in the

opening sentence of Joyce's *The Dead*—"Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet"—we clearly hear Lily's voice in the solecism, but the third person and past tense belong, as it were, to the narrator. (We infer that Lily said to herself "I [first person] am [present tense] literally run off my feet.") The overall effect is the (often highly subjective) thought of a character presented in the same manner as various objective statements delivered by the narrator. In the Joyce case cited, the subjective component is obvious, but in other cases—such as the opening line of Kafka's *Trial*, cited in the main text—it may temporarily escape attention and/or remain deeply ambiguous. The mindscreen segments of *The Usual Suspects* are closer to free indirect discourse than to "unreliable narration" because it is so easy for us to forget, after a few moments, the very presence of a narrator. For further discussion of free indirect speech, see Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

20. At the end of the opening sequence of *The Usual Suspects*, during which a shadowy figure kills Keaton and sets fire to the boat, the camera slowly—and rather mysteriously—focuses in on a pile of ropes; we dissolve from that pile of ropes to Verbal Kint's deposition, so that for a brief moment, Kint's head is superimposed upon it. We may already suspect, based on cinematic convention, that Kint himself is behind the ropes, even before he claims, much later in the movie, to have been hiding there; and we may well infer that his testimony has some authority, being that of an eyewitness. But in reality, of course, Kint is not behind the ropes watching Keyser Söze kill Keaton; he *is* Keyser Söze killing Keaton. (And in fact the opening scene is not even part of his testimony.) What is so extraordinarily elegant about the zoom-in technique is that it belongs, as it were, to the narrator, and not to the character. The novelistic equivalent of this specifically cinematic device would be a sentence such as "He was hiding behind the ropes": an apparently objective description of a state of affairs which, being in fact a case of free indirect discourse, is simply the transposition of a mere belief or claim.

21. See Larsen, pp. 56–57, 83. *The Usual Suspects* has at least one precursor in film history, in the form of Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950). Intriguingly, however, Hitchcock considered the false flashback at the start of that film a *mistake*, indeed the second biggest mistake of his career. For discussion of *Stage Fright*, see Seymour Chatman, "The Cinematic Narrator," in *The Philosophy of Film*, ed. Angela Curran and Thomas E. Wartenberg (London: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 190–97 (pp. 194–96).

22. With sad inevitability, one or two viewers have fallen into this trap. Mark T. Conard, for example, claims that "we the viewers have no way of knowing whether anything we've been watching is true"; Richard Martin agrees that "there is a possibility that the story Klint [*sic*] narrates to Kujan, in effect the plot outlined above [including the lineup, the New York's Finest heist, the twenty-seven dead . . .], may be pure fabrication"; Veronica Lee thinks that "all the names of the characters and places in Verbal's false history of Keyser Soze and the heist . . . are there on the notice board"; Leonard Maltin excitedly exclaims, "the final twist negates the entire film!"; and Georgia Brown calls the film a "a nasty shaggy dog story . . . in which nothing made sense or mattered." See Mark T. Conard, "*Reservoir Dogs*: Redemption in a Postmodern World,"

in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 111; Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1997), p. 124; Veronica Lee, “Nailing the Suspects,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 1996, p. 41; Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin’s 2001 Movie and Video Guide* (New York: Signet, 2000), p. 1503; Georgia Brown, “Great Pretenders,” *The Village Voice*, August 22, 1995 (quoted in Larsen, p. 54).

23. Federal agencies do, of course, collect extensive information on criminals. But notice that even Keaton and company are stunned by the level of detail in Kobayashi’s files. (McManus: “They got my whole life in here. Everything I’ve ever done since I was eighteen.” Hockney: “They fucking know everything.”) As Joe Morgenstern rightly puts it, in “Not Your Usual Thriller” (*Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 1995, p. 8), Kobayashi is “preposterously omniscient.”

24. I leave aside here Mikhail Bulgakov’s rather disappointing *Master and Margarita* (trans. Diana Burgin and Katherine O’Connor [New York: Vintage, 1996]), whose “Devil” (“Woland”) goes to inordinate lengths—highly unworthy of such a powerful being—to bring pitifully mild distress to a handful of people. Those who suffer a crueler fate, like the atheist Berlioz, have it coming to them anyway. This “Devil,” who is even happy to grant a request from Jesus to reward the central couple (pp. 324–5), might as well be God. The epigraph from *Faust* sums it up: “I am part of the power which forever wills evil and forever works good” (p. 1).

25. As Kobayashi chillingly reveals, individuals can be agents of K. without even realizing it—can serve his purposes, that is, merely by serving (or attempting to serve) their own. I am grateful to Ben Wolfson for suggesting this idea.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1969 [1888]), p.162.

27. There is a remarkable shift, in the Old Testament, from this confident providential picture to a flat-out agnosticism. In Deuteronomy, it is quite clear that the righteous individual will receive his rewards right here on earth, in the very tangible, material form of offspring, land, and crops: “It shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall . . . bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep . . . And the Lord will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none the evil diseases of Egypt, which thou knowest, upon thee; but lay them upon all them that hate thee” (Deut. 7:12–16); “it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day . . . That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full” (11:13–15; see also 4:40, 5:33, 11:16–23, 28:1–68).

Conscientiously following these pronouncements, which could after all hardly be any clearer, Job’s three so-called “friends” and “comforters” (2:11) are quite justified in assuming that if Job is doing poorly, he must have sinned. Thus Zophar the Naamathite: “God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth” (Job 11:6). And Eliphaz the Temanite: “Who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same. . . . Happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise

not thou the chastening of the Almighty” (4:7–8, 5:17). And, for good measure, Bildad the Shuhite: “If thou wert pure and upright; surely now he would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous” (8:6). Although Job invokes a life after death (19:25–27), no one concerned—not Job, not the “friends,” and not God—invokes it as compensation for hardship endured during this one. Nor does God explain to Job that there is at least a cosmic significance to, if not justification for, his ordeal. Instead he just pulls rank: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:4) God must be obeyed because he is God; his ways may or may not be just, but it is not up to us to complain. The magnitude of the chasm between the Deuteronomic worldview and this Babylonian picture cannot be overstated.

28. As Elaine Pagels points out, the Gnostic approach resolves the problem of theodicy by attributing suffering to the deeply flawed creator (demiurge) rather than to the perfect God above him. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 28.

29. As Baudelaire says, the sum of suffering in the world is evidence “que le Diable / Fait toujours bien tout ce qu’il fait!” (that what the Devil does, he always does well). Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980).

30. I am grateful to Mélanie Walton for helping me to see this point.

31. We should, however, not confuse the two, as does David Blakesley in “Sophistry, Magic, and the Vilifying Rhetoric of *The Usual Suspects*” (*The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film*, ed. David Blakesley [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003], pp. 234–45), who takes *The Usual Suspects* to be making an “equation between rhetoric and evil” (p. 234). To be sure, K. is both evil and rhetorically gifted, but the two features are quite clearly separate: after all, we are quite happy to accept for most of the film that Verbal Kint is a highly effective conman who is guilty only of theft. One can be rhetorically gifted, then, without being evil.

32. In Baudelaire’s 1864 prose poem “Le joueur généreux,” the Devil admits to having felt fear only once in his life: when he heard a preacher warn his fellow Christians “Mes chers frères, n’oubliez jamais, quand vous entendrez vanter le progrès des lumières, que la plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu’il n’existe pas!” (*Oeuvres complètes*, p. 191). Bryan Singer alerts us to this allusion on the commentary track.

33. Recall K.’s taunt to Kujan: “To a cop, the explanation is . . . always simple. There’s no mystery on the street, no archcriminal behind it all.” To a more astute observer, he implies, there sometimes is.

34. It should be noted that the Devil, while immune to physical harm, still has something to lose. In Marlowe and Goethe, Mephistopheles is anxious to win as many souls as possible, and can fail in any given instance. Here, K.’s capacity for wreaking havoc can be diminished if he is unmasked (“the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist”); that is what makes it worth his while to dispose of Arturo Marquez. The Devil has to be almost, but not quite, omnipotent, and not just for theological reasons (the supremacy of God, the

possibility of free will), but also for literary reasons: if victory were assured at every turn, all drama would evaporate.

35. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear and Selected Cases* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 6. See also “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes Long Stories* (London: John Murray & Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 583–84, and “The Final Problem,” pp. 539–40.

36. “His career has been an extraordinary one. He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty. At the age of twenty-one he wrote a treatise upon the binomial theorem, which has had a European vogue. On the strength of it he won the mathematical chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearances, a most brilliant career before him” (“The Final Problem,” p. 539). Moriarty is thus a rival for the equally impossibly talented Holmes: “At the end of three months I was forced to confess that I had at last met an antagonist who was my intellectual equal. My horror at his crimes was lost in my admiration at his skill” (p. 540).

37. “‘I can tell a Moriarty when I see one. This crime is from London, not from America.’ ‘But for what motive?’ ‘Because it is done by a man who cannot afford to fail—one whose whole unique position depends upon the fact that all he does must succeed’” (*The Valley of Fear*, p. 157). Blakesley (“Sophistry, Magic,” p. 243) takes K. to be similarly motivated: he *wants* Kujan to solve the mystery, says Blakesley, so that Kujan, in telling the story to others, will increase K.’s reputation for brilliance, brazenness, and control. This reading gains some plausibility from the fact that K. left alive a witness to the killing of his own wife and children; it conflicts, however, with the ambition of preserving the ambiguity over his own existence. (“The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”)

38. See also Elif Batuman, “‘A Case of Identity’: Authorship as Whodunit” (unpublished), which I found greatly inspiring, even though our views on Moriarty are ultimately divergent.

39. Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 129–56 (p. 155).

40. See Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, “The Varieties of Modern Enchantment,” in *The Reenchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–14. In setting up the issue of reenchantment here, I have borrowed some of the language from that introduction.

41. Jorge Luis Borges, “A New Refutation of Time,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962a), pp. 217–34 (p. 233). In a recent set of experiments, Jennifer Whiston and Adam Galinsky have shown that a feeling of powerlessness leads to the detection of spurious patterns in random data, suggesting that conspiracy theories may indeed be fantasies of order conjured by the anxious. See Jennifer A. Whiston and Adam D. Galinsky, “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception,” *Science* 322:5898 (2008): 115–17.

42. In the early years of the twenty-first century, many Americans preferred to imagine that there was only one anti-American terrorist group in the world (Al Qaeda); that it was a highly organized entity, rather than a rhizomatic network of semi-autonomous cells; that its actions were all fully deliberate (that the two planes, for example, were *designed* to bring down the World Trade Center); and that its leader, Osama Bin Laden, was a larger-than-life figure whose capture would damage the organization immeasurably. Others expanded the conspiracy to include the United States government, rather than face the reality of a relatively isolated gesture of anger from a relatively small number of people, with relatively unintended consequences, thanks to a relatively inefficient security apparatus and a relatively fragile building design.

43. These examples are all taken from Stephen Pile, *The Book of Heroic Failures* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

44. I owe this observation to Herbert H. Clark's lecture "Irony and Cognitive Science," at the Literature and Cognitive Science roundtables, February 22, 2008.

45. I am grateful to Elif Batuman, Deborah Donig, Eric Messinger, Michael Saler, Angela Sebastiana, Blakey Vermeule, Mélanie Walton, and Benjamin Wolfson for their extremely insightful comments and suggestions, as well as to Martón Dornbach for his help with the Hungarian. Thanks also to the students of Philosophy 81—including Kim Liao, who first pointed out the bright light on Hockney's face—and to R. Lanier Anderson, who has taught the film with me for so many years, and to whom I owe (among many other things) the example from Austen.