

THE DUPLICITOUS TEXT: AN ANALYSIS OF "STAGE FRIGHT"

KRISTIN THOMPSON

In S/Z, Roland Barthes discusses the measures a discourse must take in order not to reveal the truth prematurely (and hence bring the narrative to an abrupt end). The discourse, he says, tries:

to lie as little as possible: just what is required to ensure the interests of reading, that is, its own survival. Caught up in a civilization of enigma, truth, and decipherment, the discourse reinvents on its own level the moral terms elaborated by that civilization: there is a casuistry of discourse.¹

This of course distinguishes between the voice of the text itself (the discourse) and the voices of the characters within that text; the characters may lie outright. But although the classic text may have to keep the truth from its reader, it does so primarily through tactics of delay, concealment, and distraction--the "dilatatory morphemes" that Barthes lists in S/Z: the snare, the equivocation, the partial answer, the suspended answer, and jamming.² "The lie" is not acceptable in this series. Even when the text has no way of avoiding a lie, it has ways of softening it. In "Sarrasine," La Zambinella is occasionally called "a woman" in the text. We eventually discover that this is a lie, yet we may find several motivations (in the Russian Formalists' sense of that term) for it. First, the text may be artificially limiting itself to Sarrasine's consciousness, even though it is theoretically omniscient; we forgive this easily for the sake of having the story continue. Second, the story of La Zambinella is really a story-within-a-story, and it is really the narrator, himself a character in the outer story, who calls La Zambinella a woman. Thus the text justifies its lie and turns it aside.

This concept of Barthes's may be applied to cinema, but with a difference. Cinema has the power to show things that never "really" happened in the story and to present them just as tangibly as the rest of the events which go to make up the plot (again using the distinction of the Russian Formalists between story [fabula] and plot [sujet]). This ontological homogeneity of film images has often been pointed out in discussions of time in cinema. Since flashbacks and flashforwards show things as "directly" as those images given as present time, some have argued that the cinema is actually always in present tense. This topic has thus far borne little fruit, but we may look at this concreteness of film images in relationship to the question of how film texts can lie to the spectator.

Just as Barthes's classic text tries to lie as little as possible, so the cinema has for the most part avoided presenting "false" images that attempt to trick the audience. Such false images do occur frequently, especially in modern cinema, but they are seldom lies--they usually have some cue to let the spectator know that what he or she is seeing is not to be taken as a real story event. An elementary example occurs in Kuleshov's EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS (1924). Here the leader of a pack of thieves (played by Pudovkin) steals Mr. West's briefcase in order to be able to return it and win Mr. West's confidence. After returning the briefcase, the thief tells Mr. West an elaborate fabricated tale of how he had saved the briefcase at great risk to himself; shots of the thief talking to Mr. West are intercut with shots of the thief "saving the briefcase." Here the audience is fully aware that the latter images are embodiments of the lies the thief is telling; they gain a considerable humor from the fact that the audience has this knowledge. This device of showing images that the audience knows to constitute a character's lies is not uncommon. It is a cinematic parallel of the character's lying words in a novel.

Perhaps a more sophisticated approach is exemplified by Alain Resnais's LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD. Here images are presented which are contradictory and thus cannot all be "true" events. But again there is no deception practiced on the audience; the audience realizes the contradictory nature of the images. It may struggle to discover the "true" images, to sort them out from the rest to discover the underlying story behind the plot. But of course no image can ever be settled upon as the "right" or "wrong" one--all are equally possible and impossible. The structural principle at work in a film like LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD is precisely that there is

no one story, no identifiable truth. And since there can be no truth, the images cannot lie either. Again, this device of the shot whose status as truth cannot be determined is common in the modern cinema. The visit of the husband in *PERSONA* is another example.

So the cinema may lie while letting the audience in on it or may present events of undeterminable status. But a third logical possibility is tried only infrequently by filmmakers; that is, the images may be presented as truth but be in fact false. Barthes did not name this kind of presentation, but we may give it a name in a Barthesian spirit: "The Duplicitous Text." One of the most striking examples of a duplicitous text in cinema occurs, oddly enough, in the tradition of the cinematic "classic text," Hollywood. That film is *STAGE FRIGHT* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950).

To be sure, the lie at the beginning of *STAGE FRIGHT* is the lie of a character. But there is a vast difference between having a character speaking untrue words--as would be the case in a novel or a simple speech in a film--and showing a "flashback" to the events spoken about. Hitchcock himself has called it "a flashback that was a lie,"³ and the term seems partially apt. Yet it also is self-contradictory; flashbacks are simply not devices that lie, especially in classical Hollywood cinema. (It is also difficult to imagine a lying flashforward, since the only way we can determine that something is a flashforward--as opposed to a vision or false prophesy--is that it is eventually "caught up to" in the plot and integrated as a present event.) The very definition of flashback seems to imply that it shows a real past event. Perhaps a more accurate description of the *STAGE FRIGHT* device is a false flashback that is in fact a lie.

Perhaps one clue to the scarcity of films employing the duplicitous text device is the adverse reaction of spectators, who tend to feel tricked and therefore resentful. In talking with Truffaut, Hitchcock speaks of the "lying flashback" as a mistake. Truffaut's reply is strangely naive: "Yes, and the French critics were particularly critical of that." Hitchcock then turns around and contradicts his own previous statement, giving a brief plea--in affect--for the duplicitous cinematic text:

Strangely enough, in movies, people never object if a man is shown telling a lie. And it's also acceptable, when a character tells a story about the past, for the flashback to show it as if it were taking place in the present. So why is it that we can't tell a lie through a flashback?⁴

Truffaut then squelches this statement by trying (and apparently succeeding) to convince Hitchcock that the "flashback" was indeed a mistake. In the process he not only misinterprets the action contained in the "flashback" once, but also ends by offering not a single reason why such a device is wrong.

Such an argument is absurd, and Hitchcock was perfectly right in his brief defense of the device. Barthes has now given us the tools to realize what a transgressive work *STAGE FRIGHT* is, and how brilliantly its text structures itself around duplicity.

Of course, if Hitchcock had simply put the lie into a "mere" suspense-thriller, it would be an oddity, a gratuitous prank on the audience. But the lie is actually the key to the whole of *STAGE FRIGHT*. It resembles that device Barthes terms the "metonymic falsehood." In speaking of "Sarrasine," he says:

As we might expect, this metonymic falsehood (since by stating the whole for the part, it induces error or at least masks the truth, hides vacuum under plenitude) has a strategic function: as the difference between species and genus, it is La Zambinella's specificity which is silenced: now this specificity is both operationally decisive (it controls the disclosure of the enigma) and symbolically vital (it is castration itself).⁵

STAGE FRIGHT's lie goes further than the equivocation of the metonymic falsehood, but it functions in a similar way. It discloses enough of the truth to get the story moving--the murder has been committed. (It is unthinkable that Jonathan's story could be entirely false. If the film's ending disclosed that no murder had taken place, the film would take on a very different shape; it might be either trivial--the simple discovery that Jonathan is mad and has led Eve on a wild goose chase--or too transgressive for Hollywood to consider producing. Note, however, that the discovery of a lie in the narrative and disclosure that there has been no murder is the basis for another duplicitous film text which we will discuss later--*THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI*. There, however, the lie and its discovery constitute the entire raison d'etre of the expressionistic style of the film, which also lies outside the classical narrative tradition of Hollywood.) Other minor scraps of truth are woven through this remarkable sequence, as we shall see. At the same time, it keeps back the truth about who committed the

murder, thus controlling "the disclosure of the enigma." Here the film transgresses Barthes's model; it doesn't simply conceal--it substitutes a false enigma.

A Transgression of the Hermeneutic Sentence

The method of STAGE FRIGHT's hermeneutic transgression becomes clearer if we compare its narrative with the model Barthes sets up for the classic pattern of enigma: the hermeneutic sentence. Here is the hermeneutic sentence Barthes finds in "Sarrasine":

Question:	"This is La Zambinella." (subject, theme)	Who is she (formulation)	? (proposal)
	I will tell you: (promise of answer)	a woman (snare)	a creature outside nature (ambiguity)
Delays:	a . . . (suspended answer)	relative of the Lantys (partial answer)	
	no one knows. (jammed answer)		
Answer:	A castrato dressed as a woman. ⁶ (disclosure)		

The main difficulty in formulating the hermeneutic sentences of other works in terms of this schema is to determine the difference between the formulation and the proposal of the enigma. Barthes simply separates the question mark from the question "who is she" and places it in the proposal section. But does this imply the formulation and the proposal are simply variations of the same question?

Josue V. Harari's essay, "The Maximum Narrative: An Introduction to Barthes' Recent Criticism," suggests an answer. He divides classical narratives into four types of suspense: of "identity (the problem of the who)," of "kind (the problem of the what)," of "resolution (the problem of the where--toward what)," and of "deciphering (the problem of the how)."⁷ The first two Harari calls questions of being, the latter two questions of doing. Since "Sarrasine" confines itself in its primary enigma to the question of identity, the proposal of the enigma simply states the formulation (who is La Zambinella) as the question of the story.

STAGE FRIGHT, however, assumes the who, the what and the where: Charlotte Inwood (who) killed her husband (what--murder) and must be exposed as the killer (where--the proposed resolution by the protagonist, Eve). The question becomes one of how Charlotte can be exposed. But the transgressive element of STAGE FRIGHT is that the three assumed elements upon which most of the action is based, are shown to be false, and that only at the very end. Thus the film has a sort of doubled hermeneutic sentence, and the point of the narrative is as much to expose the falsity of the one as to provide the resolution for the true one. Because the film's main question revolves around the how of the enigma's resolution, the formulation and proposal of STAGE FRIGHT's hermeneutic sentence may be seen as distinctly separate. Using Barthes's schema, the doubled sentence may be formulated in this way:

False question:	Charlotte Inwood has killed her husband; Johnny has been blamed. (subject, theme)	Will Johnny be cleared? (formulation)	How will Eve deceive and expose Charlotte Inwood? (proposal)
Delays:	Bloodstained dress (snare and partial answer) Microphone in dressing room (snare and partial answer) Johnny's threat to Charlotte (snare and partial answer) Charlotte's reaction to dress at party (snare and partial answer) etc.		
Partial answer:	Original question was false.		

True question:	Johnny killed Charlotte's husband and plans to save self by killing Eve. (subject, theme)	Will Eve be saved? (formulation)	How will Eve deceive and expose Johnny? (proposal)
Final answer:	By pretending to help him, then giving him to the police. (disclosure)		

Several elements of STAGE FRIGHT's structure become apparent here. Firstly, the key delaying devices are all double in function; they are at once snares (since they draw the spectator further into a belief in Charlotte's guilt) and partial answers (since they all provide clues or information which, when read in terms of the true question's subject, help the spectator piece together what "really" happened). Thus the film's delaying devices are doubly complex, since they relate to two enigmas. In addition, their relationship to the "true" subject can only be pieced together retrospectively by the spectator, since the truth is revealed only in the last few minutes. Since there is no "true" flashback to the events earlier shown falsely, it becomes very difficult for the spectator to sort out which elements had been false and which true, particularly in Johnny's lie itself. This ambiguity of truth and falsehood adds a degree of plurality to the film uncommon in a classic Hollywood text.

Secondly, all the delaying devices, combined with the text's duplicity in the lie, distort and reshape the true question which would have been posed at the beginning--something like: is Johnny guilty? Without the reassuring "evidence" of the apparent flashback, the spectator would not necessarily take his word and might still suspect he might have been involved in the murder. But since the possibility of Johnny's guilt is raised only when that guilt is confirmed, the true question again becomes involved with the immediate situation of Eve's danger. The true question again involves itself in the how of the enigma: how will Eve deceive and expose Johnny?

The two separate enigmas that combine to form the film's hermeneutic sentence are parallel. In each, a character has killed and tries to save him or herself by sacrificing another. Each enigma is formulated as a question of whether the victim will survive, and the basic proposal involves the how of that survival. Each proposal for how the person will survive involves Eve's (who acts for Johnny throughout the initial proairetic line set up by the proposal) deception and exposure of first Charlotte, then Johnny.

Here we come to the symbolic function (again in terms from S/Z) of the film's lie: it is duplicity itself in a film structured around duplicity. (This is parallel to Barthes's claim that the equivocation in "Sarrasine" castrates in a story about castration.) STAGE FRIGHT sets up an elaborate mechanism of motivating devices to force its transgressive lie into the classic mold.

This is not to suggest that the lie is simply one element appropriate to an overall theme of the film about the duplicity of mankind or some similar "universal message." Quite the contrary: Johnny's lie is the main structuring device of the narrative, and the fact of its duplicity serves also to structure virtually every other element in the film. It is admittedly unusual to have a film in which every element is informed so strongly by the same structuring impulse, but in the case of STAGE FRIGHT, the pervasiveness of the idea of duplicity serves to motivate an extremely transgressive device. A lie in the middle of a classical text would be far too radical unless it were justified by a narrative structuring which would allow it to appear motivated and thus "appropriate."

Having looked at the film's basic hermeneutic sentence and how it transgresses the classical pattern for the formulation of the text's enigma, let us now go on to a specific analysis of STAGE FRIGHT. Here we will examine the lie which creates the duplicitous text and proceed to look at the duplicity which pervades the action on every level in the rest of the film and which serves to motivate the lie itself.

Baring the Device

The idea of duplicity arises quite logically out of the film's genre, the detective thriller. But to this generic convention Hitchcock adds the master motif of the film, the "all the world's a stage" image. This in turn is motivated by the fact that the film's protagonist, Eve, is an aspiring (and naive) young actress. In addition to this, the apparent antagonist, Charlotte Inwood, is an experienced stage performer as well. Thus the idea of deception through role-playing and pretense are introduced into the narrative.

The device of theatricality thrust upon and confused with reality is bared immediately, even before the narrative as such begins. The credits are shown upon a background of a "safety curtain," a device used in theaters to prevent fires from spreading into the auditorium and audience. In the course of the credits, this curtain slowly rises, revealing not a stage setting, but a filmed panorama of the city of London. This abrupt and inappropriate juxtaposition sets up the link of stage and "real life" which will be subsequently explained in terms of the tendencies of the characters to lie, play roles, and at times consciously treat their lives as part of a melodramatic plot. There are other moments in the narrative which restate this quite overtly and further serve to bare this key device; we shall examine these in their place.

The Text's Duplicity: Johnny's Story

The brief opening of the film that leads up to the "flashback" is structured so as to disorient the spectator in terms of its situation. The film opens in medias res, and bits of exposition are mixed with misleading statements by the characters. The car that Eve and Johnny are escaping in becomes visible as soon as the last credit, "Directed by Alfred Hitchcock," leaves the screen; this is a continuation of the panoramic shot of London, specifically St. Paul's, that has been revealed by the rising curtain during the credits. As the car races towards the lower center of the frame, there is a cut to a closer shot of the car. A much longer angle lens is used for this second shot, so that, although the car's position is matched quite closely, its distance from St. Paul's suddenly appears much less; the space of the action has been "compressed" by the lens. The implicit effect of the cut is to place the spectator firmly within the space established by the credits sequence as the "stage" upon which the action of the film will take place. By extension, the change in the perspective on St. Paul's caused by the different lens further carries forward the idea of the city as a metaphorical "backdrop" for the action; the building does not give the impression of maintaining a "natural"--that is, consistent--distance from the characters. This brief shot is followed by another, this time from a low height; the car comes quickly towards the camera, and its front end fills the screen by the time the cut occurs. This cut leads to the main shot of this introductory section of the film, a medium shot against a process screen of Eve and Johnny in a car. Eve speaks the first line, "Looks like we're getting away with it," seemingly implicating herself in whatever the two are running from. Thus the first "information" given the spectator is misleading. Once she asks Johnny to explain, the main thrust of the narrative begins, and expository material begins to be presented, though in a somewhat confusing fashion. Johnny's mention of Charlotte Inwood and Eve's reaction suggest relationships but do not explain them. Here also begin a series of remarks that occur through the narrative and that can be taken in several ways according to whether the spectator knows the "flashback" is a lie or not. In attempting to justify his and Charlotte's actions to Eve, Johnny says, "I had to help her-- anybody would have done." The meaning here is ambiguous. Johnny's meaning is that anybody would have been willing to help Charlotte, but the ironic additional meaning, relevant to the "real" situation with Charlotte, is that she would have exploited anybody to serve her purpose.

At this point Johnny begins his story of the murder and subsequent events. As he speaks of being in his kitchen at five o'clock, a dissolve leads into a direct presentation of the situation; at the end of the dissolve, his words fade out quickly, as he speaks of the doorbell ringing and there follows the sound of the doorbell itself. This suggests that the "flashback" is to be a direct replacement for Johnny's words, a straightforward version of the events which will stick more-or-less to Johnny's vantagepoint. But an examination of the "flashback" shows that this is only one element of several. In fact the sequence goes beyond Johnny's telling in several ways; there almost seem to be two separate and contradictory forces contributing to the "flashback." This is perhaps most simply apparent in the sequence's use of point-of-view (POV) shots which place the camera physically in Johnny's place. This happens only when Johnny is alone: first in his exploration of the Inwood house, when POV shots are used as he looks into the den, looks at the photo, and sees Nallie discover the body and look in at him; later when he descends the stairs to answer the door when the police arrive, there are POV tracking shots down the stairs. Numerous other non-POV shots also stay close to Johnny and still restrict the spectator fairly closely to what he knows, as with the long tracking and craning movement with him as he enters the Inwood house and ascends the stairs. Yet at other points in the sequence, the camera is placed opposite to Johnny in the scene, or even showing things he has no way of knowing. In the first shot back in Johnny's apartment after he has returned from the Inwood house, the set-up presents Charlotte in close-up in the foreground, with her face clearly visible, while Johnny is placed deep in the frame (in fact the deep focus is achieved by process work) with his back to the camera. Later, in the police chase, the camera pans as Johnny's car passes, then holds on a view along a sidestreet as Johnny's car disappears and a slow dolly pulls across the street to block the police car. The point here is not that Johnny could not know what was happening behind him, but that the camera set-up is exactly opposite Johnny (and any potential POV shot) in terms of the action. Other compositions with

Johnny in the background and other action in the foreground occur in the RADA scene: as Johnny disappears in the distance along a corridor, the police come into close-up in the foreground; Johnny's unscheduled entry onto the stage is filmed with Eve in the foreground and Johnny in the wings behind; finally, the exit of the two from the stage is framed with the dramatic coach in the foreground. The high angle shot of Johnny escaping down the Inwood staircase might be seen as a variation of this device. Also note that there are several shots from Eve's POV during the RADA scene. Clearly the "flashback" is not stylistically presented as a subjective vision or memory, and the spectator cannot take it to be so, even before the lie is known.

The sequence contains other scenes about which Johnny clearly could have no knowledge. The telephone call he makes trying to contact Eve crosscuts shots of him with shots of Mrs. Gill, even though it is made clear in subsequent action that he has never met her and could have no way of knowing what she looks like. Similarly, the scene of the police stopping outside the RADA after spotting Johnny's cracked window takes place completely in his absence. When the shots from Eve's POV occur, Jonathan is looking the other way and never sees what she sees.

This ambivalent nature of the "flashback" is pointed up by the superimposed shots of what Johnny "imagines" to be happening; although the first supered shot simply repeats the high angle shot of Johnny's escape down the stairway--and can be taken to be a memory--the images of Nellie explaining to the police what she saw and of hands flipping through a phonebook seem to be Johnny's vision of what may be happening. Yet the fact that the phone rings immediately after the third supered image seems to imply that these events were in some sense "actually" happening as well. This is reinforced by the fact that the police show up at his door shortly after. The status of these images remains ambivalent; are they simply subjective, or do they somehow simultaneously represent Johnny's fear and what is presumably happening elsewhere?

Perhaps the most important departure in the "flashback" from Johnny's vantage is the portrayal of Charlotte. As we learn in his later scene with her in her dressing room, he has been going under the assumption that she will run away with him after suspicion of her has died down. So at the point where he tells Eve the story, Johnny still has faith in Charlotte. Yet the "flashback's" portrayal of her is not always consistent with this. At her first entrance, she appears fairly sympathetically, in the sense that emphasis is placed upon the fact that her husband had struck her--her act of killing him seems somewhat justified. This continues until Johnny's reluctant suggestion that he might go to get her a dress to change into. From this point her character seems appear to undergo a change; she becomes far too eager to push him into this dangerous action, and finally gets him to consent by implying their affair is ended if he will not. She goes abruptly from the victimized wife to the selfish lover. Several times the camera is placed to emphasize her indifferent or even callous expressions, as when Johnny kisses her neck and she continues to powder her nose. This is much closer to the Charlotte we see trying on her widow's weeds in a later scene; there she is even more callous and cold. Thus the "flashback" presents Charlotte in such a way that her calculated exploitation of Johnny is apparent to the audience, even though Johnny has not himself realized it yet. This device removes the "flashback" another step from being Johnny's subjective version.

Naturally there are aspects of the "flashback" that are subjective. Johnny's relationship with Charlotte is idealized. He presents himself as the selfless lover, willing to protect a defenseless woman, able to make all the plans for them both ("Your job is to try to forget everything. Let me do the worrying."), and quickwitted in his evasion of the police. As with Charlotte, the Johnny of the "flashback" is a different character from that of the rest of the narrative.

One key reason for this balance between subjective and non-subjective viewpoints in the "flashback" is to reinforce its "truth." It is essential for the narrative structure of the rest of the film that the spectator not think to question the "flashback" while viewing it. Possibly if the sequence were too obviously a subjective memory, the spectator might be more inclined to take it as a questionable version. But this is not the case; as the scene is constructed, there can be no question of this being simply Johnny's lie--the filmic text participates quite definitely in the lie as well.

The credibility of Johnny's story is further reinforced by the inclusion of Eve in the "flashback." The sequence could easily end with Johnny's initial evasion of the police. A line of dialogue to the effect that Johnny had then come to pick Eve up at her rehearsal would be enough to cover the information conveyed in the comparatively lengthy scene at the RADA (lengthy in terms of the amount of narrative information conveyed); a more conventional film might have started the film with the RADA scene, thus giving more of an introduction before the "flashback" would begin. But by placing the RADA scene at the end of the "flashback" scene, the film gives it a "full-circle" structure. The sequence ends with Eve and Johnny on their way to her car, and it is in that car that the spectator had first seen them. Thus Eve's presence at the beginning confirms at least that much of Johnny's account. The RADA scene at

least is true, because Eve herself knows it to be true. And her implicit verification of this part of the sequence casts an air of credibility over the others as well.

Other aspects of the "flashback" story are confirmed as well. The blood-stained dress is seen in the car after the film returns to the "present"; again, its tangible existence adds more evidence that the story was true. Naturally much of what happens in the "flashback" is true. Information is planted which will be important later in figuring out the "real" situation. The photo Johnny finds in the desk at the Inwood house is our only piece of evidence through the entire film as to how Johnny came to know Charlotte in the first place. Similarly, Johnny's attempt to make the crime look like a robbery attempt and Nellie's witnessing of his flight are both confirmed later in the film. One of the complexities of viewing set up by the film's structure is the necessity for the spectator to retrospectively sort out the bits of truth planted in this earlier scene. Ultimately it is impossible to completely determine the truth and lies in this scene; the first part of the sequence, Charlotte's visit, is the hardest in this sense. Johnny's later explanation to Eve in the coach near the end seems to explain some parts of the "flashback," but others remain confused:

Eve, I hated to tell you that phoney story in your car that time, but there was no other way. Charlotte did go on to my flat after I'd killed her husband. Her dress was stained a bit, so I brought her a clean one. Then, when she went to the theater, I made a big stain on it, to make you believe me. I'm telling you the truth.

But at what point did Johnny try to cover the murder, when did Nellie spot him, and when did Johnny get the second dress? These and other questions remain unanswered. In this way, the "flashback's" blend of lies and truth tend to "open out" the film (in Barthes's sense of a partially plural text), since they never achieve complete closure and consequently may support multiple readings.

In addition to carefully setting up the assumptions the spectator will carry for the greater part of the subsequent action, the "flashback" also sets up several major strands which will be important to the narrative. Lies are mentioned several times in the course of the sequence, and, as we shall see in the next section of this essay, lies permeate the film as part of its complex structure of motivation for the device of the duplicitous "flashback." The first mention of deception is Charlotte's suggestion that Johnny, "call the theater. I can't play tonight. Tell them I'm ill." The duplicity is marked when she adds, "Heavens, it'll be true enough." The next reference to lying comes when Johnny talks to Charlotte of their future: "Then we'll start again, won't we? You and I. No more stealth and cheating and lies." The implication here is that their entire affair has been based on deception (far more, in fact, than Johnny realizes). Charlotte evades answering him by simply saying, "I must hurry, darling," suggesting that the lies are not over for her part.

Another key element of the film set up here is the theater. Both Charlotte and Eve are revealed to be actresses--Charlotte a professional, Eve an aspiring student. The relation of this to their "real-life" actions is first made explicit here in the "flashback" sequence when Johnny says to Charlotte: "You're an actress. You're playing a part. No nerves when you're on." This idea will be referred to again and again as the characters compare themselves and each other to characters in a play. The two dresses Charlotte changes even set up her constant changing of clothes in other scenes, an extension of the "quick-changes" of stage costumes she makes at the theater.

The "flashback" provides the only time we see Eve actually performing on a stage, in the rehearsal at the RADA. All her other performances are in "real-life" situations later in the film. Here, Johnny's precipitous entrance onto the stage causes the dramatic coach to remark, "This cast seems to think that acting is just fun and games." This relates to Commodore Gill's later bantering about Eve's love for getting into melodramatic situations. And, although sincere in their attempts to help Johnny, both Eve and Gill take pleasure in creating dramatic situations and roles for Eve to play in them. The "fun and games" image is literally worked out later in the film when Gill resorts to the target-shooting game and employs a doll in setting up a scene to try to implicate Charlotte in the murder.

As the "flashback" ends, the scene returns to the car seen at the beginning, and the love interest between Eve and Johnny is made explicit (having been strongly suggested in the embrace onstage at the RADA, when Eve seems more annoyed at being embarrassed than taken aback). The blood-stained dress in close-up ends the scene. The spectator's expectations are set up concerning future events by these devices and are diverted away from the details of the "flashback"; no possibility is left of questioning the story just shown. This scene provides a transition into the sequence at Gill's cottage, where the motivating structure of duplicity begins to function more systematically.

Motivating the "Flashback": Structures of Duplicity

As we have seen, the "flashback" is doubly motivated. The pattern of lies in the action tends to "recuperate" the comparatively radical devices of the "flashback." More indirectly, the film justifies the characters' (and text's) obsession with lying through the master motif of theater and performing. The theater imagery motivates the pervasive lies, and the lies in turn motivate the use of the "flashback."

Yet the "flashback" is not simply an "appropriate" device rising out of the lies. It only seems so (and can be justified to a naive audience member most easily in this way). It is not really a logical extension of duplicity, but rather the determining device of the whole film's structure of motivating devices. It determines the lies and the theatrical metaphor. STAGE FRIGHT depends on the spectator asking the false question outlined in an earlier section. The "flashback" plants that false question, and everything in the rest of the film is at the service of keeping the deception going; the motivating devices are key, since they recuperate the "flashback" and thus divert the spectator from the possibility of asking other questions. How are these motivating devices of lying and performance structured?

Virtually every scene in STAGE FRIGHT relates to deception, to theatrical performance, or to both. Eva is the center of this schema. She is presented not only as an actress, but also as a woman who approaches life as though it were as romantic as a play. The motif of theatricality and its association with deception is set forth in the scene at Commodore Gill's cottage. Eve never questions Johnny's story. When her father jokingly calls her "a murderer's moll" he characterizes her attitude accurately, for she does enter into the situation as though she were in a melodramatic adventure. The fact that Eve is convinced that she is in love with Johnny indicates her self-deception. (Not all the characters' lies are to other people.) When at the end of their conversation Gill asks Eva if Johnny can mean enough to her to go through all this, she replies, "but he does, father." Jane Wyman's acting in this and other scenes may appear inadequate and conventional, but it underlines the romantic theatricality Eve is using as a model for her life. Eve's behavior in the taxi with Smith is silly; she goes on in a later scene to describe to him how she felt: "as though I were on a great golden cloud." This image recalls the clouds of the stage setting of Charlotte's number, "Laziest Gal in Town." Eve continues through most of the film to fail to distinguish clearly between theater and life.

Gill points this out explicitly in the scene at his cottage. Eve tells him, "You're just dying to get into a part of this; you know you are." Gill replies:

A part in this melodramatic play, you mean. You know, that's the way you're treating it, Eve, as if it were a play you were acting in at the Academy. Everything seems a fine role when you're stagestruck, doesn't it, my dear? Here you have a plot, an interesting cast, even a costume-- a little the worse for wear. Unfortunately, Eve, in this real and earnest life, we must face the situation in all its bearings.

Just as the actions are referred to as a play, certain characters are set up as performers, while others function as audiences. When Gill meets Eva backstage at Charlotte's performance, he tells her, "You're giving a good show, a very good show indeed. A pity you've no audience." Eve replies, "You're my audience. I wish you'd give me a little applause now and then." This sets up the final sequence, in the middle of which Gill does applaud her after her confrontation with Charlotte.

But Gill is not the only audience to a performance, though he is the most conscious that what he is watching is a performance. Other characters are performers, audiences, or even at times directors of the action. Divided as performers/non-performers, the major characters function in this way:

	Performers (marked X)			Non-Performers		
	Eve	Charlotte	Johnny	Smith	Gill	Nellie
Innocent accused	Audience		X		Audience	
Faithful mistress		X	Audience			
Distraught widow	Audience	X		Audience		
Sick woman	X			Audience		
Reporter	X					Audience
Doris	X	Audience		Audience (later Director)	Audience and Director	Director

Eve takes her first role, that of a "sick woman," after her father jokingly suggests that she simply ask the police what they are thinking. At first he serves only as the source of inspiration for the parts she will play; later Gill will stage Eve's scenes with great care, specifically the garden-party scene and the "blackmail" scene in the bugged dressing room.

Eve plays her role as a sick woman poorly; her confidence and ability grow with each part she assumes, until at last she is capable of saving her life through performing. In the pub, however, she "botches her lines" and drops character several times. When Smith offers to leave if sitting with strange men bothers her, Eve replies, "No, I love strange men," and feebly tries to cover this by adding, "I mean, I'm very fond of them." She also almost reveals that she knows Smith is a detective and gets off on a personal sidetrack about her acting career.

But Smith turns out to be her ideal audience, since he accepts all explanations and is ready to overlook her faux pas up until the end of the garden party. In fact, he is the only character in the film who neither acts nor deceives anyone. He tells Eve as he gets up to escort her home from the pub, "To be quite honest, it isn't really kindness at all. I mean, I'm afraid I maneuvered it." The fact that Eve had maneuvered the situation herself points up Smith's naive credulity and accompanying honesty. Smith's lack of role-playing is necessary to the narrative structure, since he is the character that holds the information vital to clear up the false enigma: the fact that Johnny has killed before. Smith does not reveal this information prematurely, but neither does he lie to conceal it. Instead, it is withheld from us precisely because Eve withholds the truth from Smith; she spends most of her time with him trying unsuccessfully to cast suspicion on Charlotte. In addition, this information in itself is not enough to convince us that Johnny is the murderer. Yet because Smith is an absolutely honest character, he can name Johnny as the killer. Johnny is guilty because it is Smith who tells us so.

Eve's second role, as a reporter trying to get a story on Charlotte, proves more successful. Significantly, she also resorts to more outright lies to accomplish it. She tells Nellie that she needs to use these tactics in order to compete with male reporters, that she has played character roles (her slight pause before answering signifies that this is untrue), and that she is an old friend of Smith. Her facility at lying and acting has improved, and she temporarily fools the cynical Nellie.

Immediately after the scene with Nellie, Eve takes on the role of Doris, which will be her main role through the bulk of the film. Here she plans much more carefully, donning a complete costume and even learning lines ahead of time. (Hitchcock's cameo appearance serves to foreground the real-life rehearsal as he passes her and glances curiously at her.) Eve manages to juggle her identities successfully while playing Doris, so that she is several times able to escape being found out. She reveals her role to Smith only at the moment she also succeeds in implicating Charlotte. Even then she maintains Charlotte's belief in her as Doris, enabling her to play the blackmail scene later.

Eve's final success comes as she is finally snapped out of her romantic visions by the revelation of Johnny's guilt. Here she begins to act once more, but the role is no longer a persona other than herself. She simply repeats earlier events ("I'll take you to my father's boat. Come along.") and reveals him to the police. Her final walk down the backstage corridor remains ambiguous. The hanging lamps and circular patterns of light are similar to stage spotlights. The suggestion may be that Eve is able now to leave behind the melodramatic events she has helped to cause. Yet there is also the possible implication that she continues in her romantic visions, that even in leaving the stage her theatrical outlook pursues her, signified by the lighting. Her relationship with Smith has been based primarily upon role-playing and deception, yet she has also been brought out of her illusions about Johnny's innocence. The film's ending remains somewhat open.

Gill, although allied with Eve, is presented as having some distance on the situation and as realizing that she is romanticizing it. Without this distance, Gill's involvement in the action would simply duplicate much of Eve's function. After Eve declares she loves Johnny, Gill teases her by playing exaggeratedly sweet "hearts-and-flowers" music on his accordion; he also plays a standard melodrama theme when Eve calls Charlotte "an evil spirit." Yet Gill also enters into the scheme to save Johnny; his motives are partly his concern for his daughter and partly the pleasure he takes in manipulating the "melodramatic play." To an extent Gill lives in a romanticized world, fancying himself a criminal figure because he smuggles brandy now and then: "The customs people rely on me." He is also a musical performer, as are the other central male figures (Johnny a member of a chorus line and Smith a pianist).

This dual quality of Gill's character seems crucial. His distance on the situation, conveyed primarily through his humor, tends to foreground Eve's romantic notions and provide a perspective in which the spectator can view them. Beyond this, his apparent objectivity tends to lead the spectator unquestioningly to accept his own conclusions about the case. His lines in the cottage scene are central: "My child, I am not deceived. If there's one thing I cannot bear, it's insincerity." Since some of Gill's premises are plausible--the blood looks like it was smeared on the dress, we suspect Charlotte of being two-faced--the spectator tends to assume his explanations of the situation to be correct and will believe this through much of the film. Thus the narrative is able to proceed.

But in spite of his ability to laugh at Eve's naive involvement, Gill also begins quickly to be caught up in this "melodramatic play." As he and Eve make their plans, Gill quotes a classic melodrama line, "At last we are alone and unobserved," adding, "You know, I'm beginning to enjoy this." And while Eve's skill and involvement as an actress increases, Gill also becomes more and more a determining force in the action they have planned together and set in motion. At first he simply makes suggestions as to Eve's general strategy. Later, when Gill arrives during Smith's visit for tea, it is he who inquires as to the police's view of Johnny's innocence; Gill even enters briefly into the acting game by pretending to forget Johnny's name. When Johnny escapes from the detective at the theater, he ends up at Eve's house; again it is Gill who takes over and makes the arrangement for his stay.

But Gill comes into prominence primarily in the last scenes Eve plays. From his arrival at the garden party, he takes over the direction of the drama. Here the characters have switched functions to a large extent. At his cottage, Gill had recommended going to the police, but Eve had held back. Now she meets Gill and tells him, "I think I'll get hold of Smith and tell him the whole story." But she has not accomplished her purpose of implicating Charlotte, as Gill points out. Instead, she has gotten herself into a corner where her real identity and her role as Doris conflict too much. From this point on, she acts only as Gill directs her. (It is indeed Gill's voice, heard in the distance by Eve and Johnny in the coach, that finally alerts her to Johnny's guilt. His final direction--"Come away from him."--is also his final moment in the film, and introduces her to her last, crucial role.) As Gill and Eve stand outside the tent in which Charlotte is singing, Gill offers her a scene:

Call yourself an actress? There's your big scene, if you've the pluck to take it. You've the law on your arm. All you've to do is rush in there and shout, "Stop, that woman is a murderess." And then she'll say, "How dare you?" and you'll say, "I'll dare and dare again. What about the bloodstained dress, ah, Charlotte Inwood?" And then she'll say . . .

Eve interrupts with, "Please, this is serious, father," but this speech outlines the situation Gill does use to get Charlotte to break down at the sight of the bloodstained doll's dress (though Eva's part in this is simply to persuade Smith to be present). Gill sets up the situation, the actor (the little boy), the audience (Smith), and the essential prop (the doll with Gill's blood smeared on it).

The final scene Gill plans is the false blackmail attempt on Charlotte. He suggests it to Smith, once again urging Eve to continue her role. Again Gill puts his plan forward by giving hypothetical lines:

I mean, suppose she went to Miss Inwood and said, "Look here, I've got a certain dress . . ." Oh, you needn't be afraid that Doris couldn't do it, she could do it, all right, Doris could--I mean, Eve could.

This confusion of Eve with "Doris" marks the furthest stage of Gill's progression towards an obsession similar to Eve's--an inability to see the situation except in terms of the plot he has concocted. By this point, Eve and Gill have become thoroughly immersed in the process characterized by Gill in the cottage scene as "transmuting melodrama into real life." Their play-acting has come to determine the shape the real events have taken.

Charlotte is a foil to Eve in that she too is an actress who plays roles off the stage in order to deceive. A key difference is that Charlotte is continually aware of the purposes and implications of her roles; she is calculating where Eve is self-deluded and naive. When Eve first arrives at the Inwood house as Doris, Charlotte is performing her characteristic gesture, trying on and changing clothes (which she uses as costumes, just as Eve does). The arrival of the police leads her to set up the little scene in which "Doris" announces the fictitious arrival of a doctor at Charlotte's signal. Charlotte's interview with the police is linked to her stage performance through the mise-en-scene. The black flowing negligee she wears and the curved divan she reclines on in the police scene are echoed by the white negligee-like costume and three divans in her number, "Laziest Gal in Town." The film also uses this musical number to repeat the theater-versus-life motif by cutting several times from frontal, audience-oriented views of the stage to shots taken from backstage, emphasizing the theatrical paraphernalia. In fact, it is part of this stage equipment that traps Charlotte; the microphone used by her back-up vocal group allows the police to record Charlotte's revelations about being involved in the murder.

Finally, Johnny plays the role of an innocent accused man. This is the only role the spectator does not recognize as such and hence is taken in by. We are the most important audience for his performance, since the whole filmic structure depends on our being taken in. (This is not to suggest that the film is "used up" by one viewing. Repeated viewings reveal more of the structure of duplicity, but the knowledge remains that the basic device is the deceptive function of the "flashback.") Because Johnny is the guilty person, he must not be allowed to retain the position as the central character of the film; the Hollywood narrative system could hardly tolerate a protagonist with whom the spectator is persistently led to identify and who turns out to be guilty. (At least it apparently couldn't in the classic period; by 1960 Hitchcock came much closer to using such a device in *PSYCHO*.) Once Johnny's story is told, the narrative keeps him in the background, diverting the spectator's attention to Eve and Gill's machination and particularly to Charlotte's performances. Eve is the protagonist rather than Johnny because her belief in his story structures the entire narrative. This structure largely restricts the spectator to Eve's knowledge and consciousness (and Gill's to some extent). Consequently, the spectator is led away from the possibility of questioning Johnny's story and hence recognizing his role-playing.

The preceding analysis of character functions is a fairly traditional one, yet this is precisely the point. *STAGE FRIGHT* does indeed use a set of classic techniques--character oppositions, thematic motifs, multiple motivating devices, and so on--to try to recuperate the radical device of the lying "flashback." By creating a dense weave of these devices, the film makes its own textual duplicity seem simply a logical extension of its overall "meanings."

Other Duplicitous Filmic Texts

Although filmic texts rarely contain duplicitous structures, STAGE FRIGHT is not unique in using this device. A number of films present actions which appear to be "real" within the proairetic chain of the narrative, but which are subsequently revealed as false. But most films justify their use of duplicity in a more "realistic," less jarring way than STAGE FRIGHT does; that is, they resort to character subjectivity. The false events are later explained as having represented mental process, usually of insane or overwrought persons.

Curtis Bernhardt's 1947 film POSSESSED is a good example of a "cautious" use of duplicity.⁸ The narrative tells the story of a mentally disturbed woman, Louise. In one scene, she has a confrontation with her stepdaughter; she strikes her, causing her to fall down a staircase and die. But as Louise stands staring in horror at the body, it fades away, and the stepdaughter, unharmed, comes in. The entire previous scene between Louise and her stepdaughter is revealed to be Louise's hallucination. The "real" scene that follows parallels the "vision" scene, but this time relations between the two women are cordial. POSSESSED lies briefly, but in a less radical way than STAGE FRIGHT. Firstly, the "lie" is revealed immediately through the presentation of the "real" scene and the revelation that the murder was Louise's mad imagining. Also, POSSESSED is explicitly a story of a descent into madness. In a remarkably systematic way, the film's flashbacks present events with a gradual increase in the use of subjective devices. Finally, the scene just before the false murder contains a series of intense subjective effects used as "madness" cues, particularly a manipulation of volume on the soundtrack. This subjectivity prepares the spectator to accept the murder as a false occurrence.

POSSESSED uses this isolated duplicitous scene simply to motivate Louise's recognition of her growing insanity. But another film which uses insanity as a motivating device makes its duplicity a central structuring element: THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI. Here the "false" story forms almost the entire film; as in STAGE FRIGHT, the fact of the (here probable) lie is disclosed only in the last minutes. But in one way CALIGARI remains more conservative in its recuperation of the central story; the text justifies its lie by making it the subjective view of a mad character: the text shows things this way only because Francis sees them thus. In STAGE FRIGHT, as we have seen, the text lies without sticking to Johnny's subjective viewpoint. Yet from another point of view CALIGARI's use of duplicity goes beyond STAGE FRIGHT's because it remains more ambiguous at the end. Is the doctor the kindly man he appears to be, or could Francis's story contain some elements of truth? CALIGARI remains open as to the status of its own lie.

Preminger's LAURA (1944) is another classic film with one duplicitous element which structures much of the narrative. Partway through the film comes the moment when the police detective, having fallen in love with the dead Laura, falls asleep one night in her empty apartment. The film then apparently signals the beginning of a dream: after the detective's eyes close, the camera tracks in, pauses, then tracks back as the detective's eyes open. A cut reveals Laura coming in the door. The spectator may here be led to expect that this is the beginning of a wish-fulfillment dream and that the film will eventually come to a point where the detective will awaken. In fact the film continues to its conclusion without closing the apparent dream. Here the device remains completely ambiguous, since it is not clear whether the events from the point of the duplicitous device are "actual" or "dreamed." Again the device is motivated by the repeated dream imagery of LAURA (paralleling the theater imagery of STAGE FRIGHT). Lydecker even remarks that the detective has "dreamed of Laura" as his wife, just before the scene described above. The film's thematic material supports the dream imagery, since several of its key figures live through self-deception and unfulfilled desires.

Dreams that are not revealed as such until the dreamer awakens are a common device for camouflaging filmic duplicity. Griffith's THE AVENGING CONSCIENCE (1914) provides a typical example. The hero, resentful against his uncle for opposing his marriage, sits down and dozes off in his office. No "dream" cues are given, and the action continues. The young man apparently kills his uncle and goes mad from guilt. Near the end of the film there is a return to the hero asleep in his chair; now he awakens, revealing that the intervening action had been a dream.

Conclusions

These examples do not exhaust the list of films employing duplicity. But they do serve to indicate different ways that duplicity can be used. In no case does the film simply, "lie as little as possible, just what is required to ensure the interests of reading, that is, its own survival," in Barthes's words. The lies presented in these films do not simply divert the viewer from the truth that would end the narrative. In each film, there is some structural purpose served.

Thus the cinema seems to offer unique possibilities for the structural use of textual duplicity, for it has the ability to present "false" events indistinguishably from "real" ones within the proairatic chain. The naive viewer may protest that a filmic lie somehow violates the "rules" of narrative, but "rules" of art only exist within individual, limited systems, and obviously exist to be broken.

Notes

¹Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), p.141.

²Barthes, p.75.

³Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), p.139.

⁴Truffaut, p.139.

⁵Barthes, pp.162-163.

⁶Barthes, p.85.

⁷Josue V. Harari, "The Maximum Narrative: An Introduction to Barthes' Recent Criticism," Style, 8, No.1, p.65.

⁸I wish to thank Serafina Bathrick, a fellow graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, for pointing out POSSESSED as a film using textual duplicity.