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Plato's Watermelon: Art and Illusion in The Brothers Bloom

Abstract

Rian Johnson's *The Brothers Bloom* is a sophisticated film about storytelling, pitting the idea that stories are an enhancement of life against the suspicion that stories are a deception. Set in a world of con artistry and illusion, it raises issues similar to those introduced in Plato's allegory of the cave and in the critique of religion as illusion. Specifically, it follows one character's desire for an "unwritten life"—a life free from artifice—through various logical and interpersonal challenges, and ends with a profound meditation on the coinherence of faith and skepticism.

Keywords

Plato's cave, con man films, illusion and reality, Rian Johnson

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Author Notes

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Introduction

Nothing is more unsettling than the suspicion that we are being lied to. Certainly this is one reason why Plato's allegory of the cave is a perennial intuition pump, and more particularly why it is a favorite trope for writers on religion and film today.¹ Plato proposes that ordinary human experience is a kind of lie, a con game we are induced to take for reality. Moreover, the form of that lie is distinctly cinematic, a play of shadows projected onto a wall by a light at our backs. Plato's point is to wake up our will to truth—to disparage our absorption in shadows in favor of the real world outside of the cave. Ordinary life is an illusion, and art, as a representation of a representation, is a double distortion. Better, he thought, to turn away from the show and seek the light itself.

Today we tend to be less censorious in our attitudes toward art and less confident about our ability to draw sharp lines between illusion and reality. Still, the suspicion expressed in Plato's parable persists. In a world swarming with symbolic persuasions—advertising, propaganda, and unedited online information—it has become second-nature to suspect that we are being fooled. Film in particular, as an experience of total immersion in symbolic manipulation, is both especially likely to arouse this suspicion and especially well positioned to reflect on it. Accordingly, filmmakers and film scholars are repeatedly drawn to themes of illusion and reality, truth and lies.² Students of religion are similarly intrigued by this complex of issues, since religion today is so often shadowed by similar doubts. Freud's contention that

religion itself is an illusion has only been strengthened by religion's social placement in the context of other modern media.³ It is increasingly easy to picture the church, like the cave (and like the cinema), as a showplace that offers us symbolic worlds to bask in and invites us to suspend disbelief. Commentators may spin this aspect of religion as either seductive or transformative—as either the way religion tempts us away from the actual or the way it initiates us into a higher truth.⁴ But in either case, the comparison implies that religion, like art, is a realm of shadows that could well be lies. The stories we use to construct a human world—precisely because they are stories—are also what make our hold on that world so slippery.

The Brothers Bloom (2008), written and directed by Rian Johnson, is a film that deals with illusion and doubt in a self-conscious and sophisticated way. Most reviewers dismissed it at the time of its release as little more than a miscalculated summer movie—a lightweight frolic that turned unaccountably awkward in the end. Its playful tone, gorgeous settings, and artistic pretensions reminded just about all the critics of Wes Anderson's shaggy-dog postmodernism (especially *The Life Aquatic* (2004), since *The Brothers Bloom* also involves ocean scenery and a yacht).⁵ This comparison, though, is a non-starter if our aim is to consider this film on its own merits. *The Brothers Bloom* has more on its mind than any of its reviewers were prepared to recognize.

For a better point of entry, consider the following scene. A reclusive heiress, Penelope (Rachel Weisz), is explaining her interest in pinhole photography to Bloom

(Adrien Brody), a con artist trying to inveigle her into his scheme. A pinhole photograph is an image made on film by light shining through a lensless hole in any dark, empty container: a shoebox, a plastic bottle, or, in Penelope's instances, a hollowed-out watermelon. It is, in effect, an image projected on the wall of a cave. Unlike Plato, though, Penelope does not disparage the resulting distortions. Instead, she is fascinated by the special qualities of the twisted image—the value added as a result of the process of representation.

PENELOPE

You can look at the most menial everyday thing, and depending on how your pinhole camera eats the light, it's warped and peculiar and imperfect. It's not reproduction, it's storytelling.

BLOOM

It's a lie that tells the truth.

PENELOPE

I dunno about truth. A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know.⁶

Penelope's statement is complex. It is evident that she is in love with the “peculiar and imperfect” products of her art. She loves them, though, not because they tell the truth or capture the world in any simple sense, but precisely because they transform it in intriguing ways. They tell “stories” that are rooted in the world, but also warp away from it. These stories may or may not be “true,” even on the allegorical level where we might locate “the truth of art.” Rather, they are fantastic, dreamlike, and unreliable—more like the stories spun by an imaginative child. At the same time, though, due to their very indeterminacy or “secrecy,” they represent the secret of the

world better than any direct account could manage. Only a secret can represent a secret, the point being not to know it but to live it.

Bloom, on the other hand, as we know from immediately preceding scenes, is sick of stories. Like Rachel, he has always lived by artifice—has always had to invent himself as he went along. But Bloom is weary of imposture. He has succumbed to Plato's blues—to the sense that ordinary life is a fraud and that real life must be elsewhere. He longs for something beyond the bounds of his experience. "No more stories," he has said to his brother, Stephen (Mark Ruffalo). No more masks. Instead he wants to be himself. He wants that possibly impossible thing: to be cleansed of illusions, to be a person without a persona or a being free from seeming. He wants...but he doesn't quite know how to say what he wants until Stephen supplies the formula: "an unwritten life" (p. 23).

These two postures—the quest for the honest, unwritten life, free from illusions, versus the celebration of stories as beautiful distortions—are the poles between which *The Brothers Bloom* oscillates. Bloom is the sad-eyed skeptic, yearning for the "real thing" that always eludes him. Penelope is the spritely inventor, dangerously close in spirit to a manic pixie dream girl, but convincingly at home in her adventurousness for all that.⁷ The play between them is the play between our own inevitable use of stories in relating to the world (and the joy we occasionally feel in doing so) and our equally inevitable dark suspicion that we are only fooling ourselves.

Another way in which *The Brothers Bloom* raises questions about illusion and reality is by defining itself as a “con man movie.” The con man movie is a contemporary subgenre of films about illusion—films that tell stories about stories—with popular successes like *The Sting* (1973) and critical successes like David Mamet's *House of Games* (1987) at the heart of the family. The term “con man” or “confidence man” is a fairly recent American invention.⁸ It was only six years old in 1855 when Melville adopted *The Confidence-Man* as the working title for one of his most searching and least popular novels. Nevertheless, the kind of crime to which it refers—a crime that works by deception rather than force or stealth—is as old as human society. Deceit and its detection are deeply rooted concerns of the human species—so deep that our minds may actually have evolved specifically to accommodate its twists and turns.⁹ I would like to be able to rely on you. But I know that you, as a fellow language user, have tricks up your sleeve that are also available to me. You could be lying. You may have been duped by someone else. How can I know? Whatever I think, there is always the chance that I might be mistaken, and that you might be counting on my mistake. My fondest wish may be to stand on firm foundations with you. But on some level, I always know that the ground on which I think I stand could vanish at any instant.

Stories of confidence trickery play on this primal insecurity. In a “real world” worth wanting, identity would be transparent and people reliably sincere. By contrast, the world we live in feels more like a game of hide and seek, a play of

masks. (Thus, the full title of Melville's novel was *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*.) The con artist simply takes advantage of the situation by making the world his theater. Like a magician, he or she creates an illusion, usually by telling a deceptive tale intended to take an audience in. It may be a story about an elaborate investment scheme, a promise of salvation (in the familiar case of the religious con artist), or a sly reference to a pea hidden under a shell. The point is always to deceive and to profit from the deception. Thus, stories about confidence trickery are simultaneously about the urge to believe and the dangers of believing. They allow for a sophisticated take on the problems of illusion—issues that resonate powerfully with contemporary reflections on religion—by considering both the factors that draw us toward stories and the reasons we might want to hold back.

Exegesis: Beginnings

The Brothers Bloom is densely allusive and carefully crafted. I cannot claim to have sorted out everything the film has to say about art, illusion, and the decidedly mixed blessings of stories, because virtually every detail of the film is thematic. Nevertheless, even a relatively brief overview of its plot should be sufficient to give a sense of the philosophical and spiritual resonance of writer/director Rian Johnson's concerns, to give a glimpse of how *The Brothers Bloom* relates to the body of Johnson's work to date, and more generally to argue that the film deserves more serious consideration than it has yet received.

The film begins with its own origin myth—a highly stylized opening sequence about the Blooms' childhood, narrated in rhyming verse and offered to us as a page from some archetypal "confidence man's tome" (p. 1). Clear signals are given, that is, that the story about to unfold is a self-conscious piece of literature—an artifice and proud of it. The tale begins with two brothers, Stephen and Bloom, aged 13 and 10, who are orphans, adrift from one foster family to another. Their problem in life is to find a way to relate to a world from which they feel estranged, and they find it through a kind of art, the art of the con. Stephen devises the plans; Bloom assumes the roles and finds his voice in Stephen's words. On his own, Bloom lacked the confidence to talk to the children he envied—basically everyone else in town—who seemed so well-off, well-loved, and at home in their world. As an actor, however, taking his cues from his brother, he is able to act. Illusion becomes his ticket to a real, engaged life. And this, we are told, was Stephen's plan all along. Stephen's primary motivation as a con artist is to give his brother what he wants, and ultimately, if possible, to fulfill the desires of everyone involved in the plots he writes. "It seems to me that in the end, the perfect con is where each one involved gets just the thing they wanted" (p. 11). If it is good for people to get what they want, then Stephen's trickery is benevolent.

Their first con, enacted in this sequence, involves hooking an audience by its pure love of adventure. Bloom tells the playground children the story of a mysterious gypsy in the woods, a treasure buried in a cave, and a will-o-the-wisp that

will guide them to it.¹⁰ It is all too wonderful not to be believed, and the children are enchanted. Bloom, too, is caught up in the game—so smitten by one particular golden girl who is the center of the playground clique that he almost forgets that he is acting. So, one Sunday after church (implying a religious dimension to the quest, but mainly insuring that the children are dressed in their Sunday best), Bloom leads the group into the woods, with Stephen out of sight supplying the stage-craft. A light shines from the mouth of the treasure cave—the cave of illusions. Everyone, Bloom included, rushes forward, happily getting filthy in the mud that Stephen has supplied as a key part of his scenario. According to Johnson's stage directions, "they slip and slide, they can't catch the light, but they're having the time of their lives" (p. 10).

But then, for Bloom, the illusion breaks. He catches sight of his brother and remembers his own role in the masquerade. The other children are still enthralled. In what is arguably the pivotal scene in the film, the golden girl, still radiant with delight in the adventure, reaches back to take Bloom's hand. But now he is frozen in isolation and can only watch her move away. Suddenly self-conscious and hyperaware of the artificiality of the spectacle, he feels guilty over his own role in it. Thus, the scheme that was meant to connect him to a common world leaves him feeling more alone than ever.

The plan, then, is a failure in that it falls short of giving either Bloom or Stephen what they really want. It is not Bloom's bridge to love, and so it is not the perfect gift that Stephen wants to be able to give. In a perverse way, though, it

succeeds. It pleases the audience (the schoolchildren who were fooled but delighted), and wins the brothers a small fortune in kick-backs from a local laundry (the point of all that mud). Above all, it gives the brothers an identity, a *modus operandi*, a way to continue through the world. Stephen becomes the Daedalian artist, the deviser of plots, who will grow up to write cons full of elaborate literary allusions and textures. (As Bloom puts it later, Stephen "writes his cons the way dead Russians write novels" (p. 20)—which is not exactly what he means, but then Bloom is not very good with words.) Meanwhile, Bloom (who is never referred to as anything other than "Bloom") has become the actor, the designated agent, a character in his brother's real life dramas.

We should pause to unpack a few of the references piling up here. Stephen is clearly linked to James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, the archetypal artist. Bloom then is Leopold Bloom, the character famously characterized by critics as "Ulysses in a bowler hat." Bloom's true love, like Odysseus' wife, turns out to be named Penelope. And this Bloom, too, wears a bowler hat, even as a child. It is an anachronism of a kind that has already become a Johnson trademark. Like Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) in *Looper* (2012), and like most of the characters in *Brick* (2005), the brothers' costumes and mannerisms come out of remote times and places, mostly out of old movies. Clearly then, these brothers live in literary territory, their fates virtually sealed by the allusions that define them. They are not just a team, but a bundle of

intertextual allusions, a Joycean portmanteau. In fact, as we shall see, they are probably best understood as a single character sharing the two halves of one name.

I have spent so much time on this introductory sequence because it highlights two important features of what is to come. First there is the importance it gives to stories, which are at once the main prop for identity and the primary vector of illusion. Stories connect the brothers to the world but simultaneously divide them from it—giving them a life, but one that is not "real." As actors following scripts spun by the discursive mind, they are always at least one step removed from the immediacy of experience, leaving ample room for doubt. Second, there is the cave, the dark place that Plato taught us to associate with illusions, where desires are ambiguously realized. Bloom and the children go to the cave to act out the con on a Sunday after church, conjuring up an analogy between the church, Plato's cave, and the theatre which also happens to be a staple of contemporary religion and film studies (Loughlin). All are places where we suspend disbelief, immerse ourselves in alternative worlds, and presumably feel better for the experience. But there is a question that haunts this scene, the church as much as the cave: namely, is the illusion justified by its effects—by the pleasing confidence it generates? Is it enough to give people what they want? Are the delighted, benighted children in the cave to be envied? Or is the con, because it is just a story, incapable of producing anything real? Is the cave of illusions a prison from which we should escape, or on the contrary, does it represent our best chance to become whole?

Exegesis: End Games

The story proper begins 25 years later. Bloom, now a seasoned con artist, has become weary of artifice, weary of being nothing but the roles written for him by his brother. He wants out of the bargain. "No more stories," he says to Stephen (p. 23). A life of pure experience, free from fiction, has become his goal. But even his name for this ideal—"an unwritten life"—is something with which his brother supplies him. The only alternative to illusion that Bloom can imagine is already tainted by the artist's brush. The real world that he desires is itself an imagined possibility, another romantic elsewhere. Bloom's problem, then, and the problem that drives the film as a whole, is to find a way out of this double-bind. How do we get from illusion to reality if the desire for reality is itself a romantic illusion? Could there be such a thing as an "unwritten life," if all the world's a stage?

Stephen's proposal for helping Bloom out of his quandary is, not surprisingly, another con—not just any con now, but the perfect con, the supreme fiction that will break down all the limits of a mere story, become the truth, and give everyone what they want. Bloom is skeptical. If there is one thing he thinks he has learned, it's that "trying to get something real by telling yourself stories is a trap" (p. 51). If what he wants is an alternative to fiction, it would seem obvious that no story can give him what he wants (p. 29). Stephen, however, has something more subtle and ambitious in mind—a story that transcends its own limits. He plans to bridge Bloom's

impossible gap through a radical move that becomes clear only in the film's ultimate "reveal."

Meanwhile, the con that Stephen devises focuses on a young woman whose problems partially mirror Bloom's own. Penelope is a "beautiful intriguing elusive girl" (also fabulously wealthy) who has been cut apart from virtually all contact with others since she was six. Like the orphan brothers, she has had to invent a way to relate herself to the world through artifice. In her case, it is by "collecting hobbies"—mastering a series of eccentric skills, from DJ'ing and fiddling to archery and acrobatics. The results, presented in a dizzying montage, are certainly impressive, but she has not found them particularly satisfying. What Stephen plans to give her, then, is "a grand adventure" designed to "bring her back to life" (p. 28) (and to skim off some of her money in the process). Bloom, in spite of himself, is attracted to both the rebirth narrative and to her. And so he goes along with the plan.

As he gets to know Penelope (under false pretenses, of course), even more connections with his own preoccupations emerge. For example, in addition to pinhole photography, another one of Penelope's skills is card trickery, one of the staples of the con man's repertoire. In a conversation with Bloom about her unhappy childhood, while masterfully fooling around with a pack of cards, she delivers another significant monologue, this time on issues of deception:

PENELOPE

The trick to not feeling cheated is to learn how to cheat. So I decided [my life] wasn't a story about a miserable girl trapped in a house that smelled like medical supplies.... It was about a girl who could find

infinite beauty in anything, any little thing. And do anything I decided to do.... So I told myself that story until it became true. Now did doing that let me escape a wasted life, or did it just blind me so I wouldn't want to escape it? I don't know. But either way, I was the one telling my own story. So I don't feel cheated. (p. 43)

Penelope, again, seems hyperaware of the issues that are bugging Bloom. However, she has thought them through to a different conclusion. Bloom denies that you can "get something real by telling yourself stories" (p. 51). Penelope thinks otherwise, or at least she is determined to suspend judgment. It doesn't matter to her whether the stories she uses to spin her life are "real." All that matters is that they improve her situation, keep her from feeling hopeless and undermined. Just as with the pinhole photographs, truth is not the issue. What matters is the beauty or power of the effects.

Penelope's confidence proves to be a little too glib, however. Granted: people sometimes thrive on deceptions (witness the delight of the children in the cave). But it is something else entirely to try to will yourself into credulity. If it were really possible to believe on purpose—to simply "own your own story"—Penelope should have been content with her solitary life. Instead, she was restless and diffident. By contrast, as Stephen comes to understand, what she needs is precisely what her sure-footed, aesthetically rationalized life can't give her: something to "sweep her off her feet" (p. 56). She needs an adventure to get her out of herself, because real belief, like real life, comes from beyond your will. The story can't fool you—can't trick you into life—unless you are actually fooled into

forgetting that it is just a story. In a sense, then, Penelope's desire to will away a meaningful distinction between truth and fiction is as paradoxical as Bloom's desire for an unwritten life. Her desire is self-contradictory, ruled out by her very awareness of it. As for Bloom, the burden of her subsequent story will be to find a way out of this trap.

Finally, rounding out the crew of cons and marks, there is Bang Bang (Rinko Kikuchi), Stephen's silent partner. She is another kind of artist, described by Stephen as "an artist with nitroglycerin" (p. 72). Going a step beyond Nietzsche's philosopher with a hammer, she takes delight in literally blowing things up. And as a character who virtually never speaks, she serves as a comic foil for the wordy, hyper-literary quality of the rest of the film. As Harpo to Steven's Groucho, she helps keep the madness grounded through her physical immediacy.

The specifics of the plot that follows are less important for present purposes than its general tone. It unfolds in a Kiplingesque realm of adventure where people still cross the ocean by steamship, travel across Europe in wood-paneled railroad cars, and wear costumes appropriate to no particular decade. The sites and scenery are all gorgeously romantic, larger than life. And the point, precisely, is to flaunt the artificiality of the experience that we—the audience members—are having. The film, like one of Stephen's stories, is a con, an illusion, designed by a highly self-aware artist both to put us where he wants us and to give us something we want—to manipulate and fulfill us. Accordingly, some of the film's favorite reference points

are self-reflexive works of modernist literature like *Ulysses*, and like *The Confidence-Man* which Stephen has woven into his plot by naming his yacht *Fidèle* (a reference that Penelope happens to catch, nearly giving the game away). Even the awkward grammar of the film's title—*The Brothers Bloom* rather than *The Bloom Brothers*—is a tip-off that this story takes place in some slightly stilted literary neverland.

So, to review the discussion so far in preparation for the final plunge: the issues that emerge on this artfully prepared stage are issues pertaining to the status of art and illusion, specifically the stories by which we con ourselves into life. The central characters represent distinct positions. Penelope is the willful fantasist who holds that a story can become the truth as long as you "tell it like you own it" (p. 58). Accordingly, she wants nothing more than to get into "the life" to which the brothers introduce her—to *become* the smuggler or the con man of fable. Bloom is the skeptic, who believes he has had his fill of that life and found it wanting. For him, "real life" only occurs off-script, as in the scene where he spontaneously steals an apple from a vendor (and describes the experience to his brother as an "epiphany" (p. 83), a word Stephen Dedalus would surely appreciate). Real life is unwritten and unscripted. Bloom concludes, then, that the best thing he can do for Penelope is to push her away, to preserve her from the artificiality of the con artist's life. Thus, towards the end of the film, following a series of misadventures, he asks his brother to devise a final plot-twist to get Penelope out of the game once and for all. Bloom

feels he has to renounce her precisely because "I love her.... I don't want to turn her into me" (p. 95).

Stephen's predicament as the writer and director of the plot is even more complex than Bloom's. As the consummate manipulator, benevolent but proud of his powers, he is in an ambivalent relation to his own stories. On the one hand, he enjoys being the master trickster. He won't let others forget that the roles they play in the world are scripted for them by him. Accordingly, part of him is content to believe that the world is nothing *but* a story, and therefore fully under his control, as when he taunts his brother,

every moment you shared with [Penelope] you were just playing the part of a man falling in love. That's what you're afraid of, right? That you don't know the difference? Or maybe that there is no difference. That that's what love is. (p. 89)

To Stephen, that is, it hardly matters whether there is a difference between love and the illusion of love. Bloom's tortured confusion over the distinction of illusion and reality is the briar patch in which the trickster-artist thrives. On the other hand, though, even Stephen has to "believe" in his stories, in the same sense that he must believe in himself, for the stories *are* his life. It may all be an act, but a certain chutzpah—a reckless suspension of caution and disbelief—is necessary to carry it off. Too much self-awareness could spoil the game. Stephen's special jeopardy, then, is the classic dilemma of the confidence man, described for us by the brothers' mentor, Diamond Dog (Maximilian Schell). If the con man loses confidence, he will

blink and realize that it's a fiction, and like Peter walking on water or Wiley Coyote running off a cliff, if you look down in doubt, you'll fall. That's the price of our lives, the wax in our wings. (p. 67)

The Icarus metaphor here identifies the flaw built into every artifice, or more precisely, the flaw inherent in the confidence necessary to keep the game going. Incautious enthusiasm is necessary to get you off the ground, so to speak, but that same enthusiasm can blind you to the artifice on which your flight depends, with disastrous Icarean consequences. Stephen is at once Daedalus and Icarus, meticulous planner and fearless entrepreneur, and the two roles pull him in different directions. Thus, Diamond Dog can easily prophecy: "One day Stephen is going to fall" (p. 67).

There is another possibility inherent in art, however, that could avert or finesse this disaster. As already noted, the main audience for Stephen's art has always been Bloom (p. 118), and Stephen's ultimate purpose has always been to give Bloom what he wants. What Bloom wants now is "an unwritten life." Thus Stephen's fiction can give Bloom what he wants only by cancelling itself out. To fulfill his own purposes, that is, Stephen has to become the kind of artist described by Wallace Stevens: a writer who "represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself."¹¹ Ordinary art, like the ordinary narrative clamor of the mind, abstracts us from the world. But there is another way to use words and images that is designed precisely to overcome the limitations of abstraction and achieve transparency to the world. Thus the Zen master uses words to undercut the discursive mind. The apophatic mystic (or the pinhole photographer) creates

imagery that respects the world's inviolable secrecy, recognizing, like Lao Tzu (or like Penelope, as quoted above), that the more you tell, the less you know. In short, the artist's ultimate gift on this model is the end of art, the disappearance of artifice. Art gives us a true world only when it puts itself under erasure. And so, Stephen comes to believe that his purposes will be achieved precisely in and through his fall. His final gift to Bloom—the thing by which he hopes to defend his brother against himself—will be his own death.

Evidence of Stephen's death-wish is scattered throughout the film. For instance, there are several scenes that associate him with the ace of spades, and one that poses him in the middle of a graffiti mural with a painted gun pointed at his head. Bloom once comments, presciently, "Sometimes I think he'd love to die on a job.... That's his dream, to tell his story so well it fulfills itself. It somehow would make it finally real for him" (p. 51). Finally, Stephen himself makes the principal explicit in a sly double-entendre: "The day I con you is the day I die, Bloom" (p. 49). The day I give you what you want, that is, will be the day I can cut myself out of the loop.

The climax of *The Brothers Bloom*, then, is Stephen's death—on the empty stage of a cave-like, abandoned theater. This death is supposed to be the solution to Bloom's double bind. Bloom cannot move forward because his involvement in artifice has made him suspicious of life, reluctant to act. He cannot believe that Penelope's love is real, since winning it was a part of Stephen's script. Thus he is afraid to act on that love—"scared to ride off into the sunset," according to Stephen's

taunt (p. 89)—for fear that it would only compound the lie. Stephen's challenge, then, is to find a way to undo the artifice using the only tools he has available—that is, through yet another story. And the only story that can do the job turns out to be one involving his own actual death. Only by erasing himself from the picture can he save Bloom and Penelope from an infinite regress of doubt and hesitation. Here again, we come across a Johnson trademark, for it is precisely the same ploy that ends *Looper*. Joe kills himself to release the people he has come to love from the sad ending of a story that he, in effect, has authored. So, in *The Brothers Bloom*, the artist can only achieve his ultimate aim (releasing Bloom) by canceling himself out.

Beyond the sadness of Stephen's death, then, *The Brothers Bloom* ends on a romantic and even redemptive note—on the note Penelope has been plugging for—with Bloom and Penelope literally riding off into the sunset. It is Penelope's memory of what Stephen stood for that gets the last word: "He said to me, there's no such thing as an unwritten life. Just a badly written one.... We're gonna live like we're telling the best story in the whole world. Are you ready" (p. 121)? Thus it seems that Stephen was right about something else as well: that there is such a thing as the perfect con, the supreme fiction, in which everyone gets what they want.

Sample Conclusions

Given the complexity of the issues with which it deals, the happy ending of *The Brothers Bloom* provokes reflection—or I almost want to say, demands justification.

How exactly does the death of the artist get Bloom out of his double-bind? What is Johnson saying, finally, about how illusion contributes to or detracts from reality, and thus about the status of stories in our lives? At least three different lines of thought are opened up by the film itself, all of them contributing to the impression we take away from the experience.

First, there is the fairly obvious observation that the trick Stephen pulls off is essentially a version of the Christian mythos. Like Jesus in the gospels, Stephen dies so that others may live, giving his life for his friends. Why death should make such a difference is of course open to interpretation, just as it is in Christianity itself with its multiple theories of atonement. I see at least two possibilities implied in the film. First, there is a fairly clear train of psychological cause and effect. Stephen's death shocks Bloom out of his paralysis, wakes him up to the ultimate stakes of the game he is playing, and so gives him back his life. Bloom's redemption, on this reading, is the result of an effective drama (climaxing in the moment when Bloom realizes that the blood on his cuff is not stage-blood, and that Stephen's death was for real). A more profound interpretation, though, hinges on seeing Stephen's death in connection with the mystic's quest for transparency, noted above. The artist, like the mystic or Zen master, may well be aware that words distract from the ultimate truth of things. But by using words against words or stories against stories, the artist hopes to reveal a secret that words themselves can only obscure. An instructive parallel for this in Christian thought would be the theology of the cross developed by

Paul Tillich and some of his postmodern followers, according to which Jesus' death on the cross puts his own story under erasure, X'ing out everything limited and misleading in the myth in order to release its truth.¹² The dying savior—like Wallace Stevens' poet—wants to defend us against the artificiality of his own role. Similarly Stephen, in order to give his brother what he wants, has devised a story that cancels out his own role as storyteller. His death at once symbolizes and realizes that intention. Like Jesus, then, Stephen, in and through his death, achieves the perfect con, the trick that gives everyone what they want.

Another way to understand the ending owes more to the mythos of positive thinking than to Christianity. This line of thought is represented most clearly by Penelope. It works from the broadly relativist premise that we have nothing but stories and no "real world" to judge them by (as per Penelope's final quotation of Stephen to the effect that "there's no such thing as an unwritten life...just a badly written one"). All lives are artifice, that is, so the point of life is to live artfully—to run the con as smoothly as possible, and not to hold out for some impossible alternative. The point is to live passionately, to "own" your private dream. The price of the ticket, however, is a total erasure of the distinction between illusion and reality, duplicity and sincerity. Your story becomes real to you only if you can forget that it is a story. On this reading, then, Stephen's death could be taken to represent a different kind of erasure of the artist—one that removes the very distinction between art and reality. The artist dies, and full fathom five, merges into

the landscape. The story becomes the world. Of course, the "real world" is lost in the process, but on this reading it is a world well lost. If the result is that "everyone gets what they really wanted," is it such a terrible price to pay?

Positive thinking is certainly the best known confidence racket in America today. To get on in the world, its logic goes, we must believe, especially in ourselves. Otherwise, like Bloom, we may find ourselves paralyzed by doubt and fear. It may be difficult to find anything on which to base this belief, but no matter. Conveniently, belief in oneself—self-confidence—is a genuine tautology, a self-fulfilling circle. To believe in oneself, one simply has to believe in oneself. To overcome anxiety, one simply has to stop worrying. The fruits of the act are immediate in the act itself. Self-help is therefore an attractive option in a world felt to be without foundations, because it teaches us how to float in mid-air. Its less attractive side emerges, however, when the principle that "believing makes it so" is applied to anything outside the purely psychological realm. To contemplate "the law of attraction" or the implicit metaphysics of *Think and Grow Rich* is to realize that the Enlightenment critique of illusion as wishful thinking still has its uses.

But there is another way to understand the film's finale that remains more dependably in tune with the finite. Bloom's final release from paralysis may be less a celebration of the triumph of illusion over reality, that is, than an acknowledgement of the ways in which reality and fantasy are inextricably interrelated. On this reading, Stephen's death is neither a critique of the story-telling function nor the erasure of

our awareness of it. Rather, it is the final merger of Stephen and Bloom into a single character—the overcoming of a false dichotomy. As noted above, there is something odd about the use of names in this film, with “the brothers Bloom” consisting of one character with only a first name and another called “Bloom.” This puzzle is easily solved, however, if we take the two characters as aspects of a single person. Stephen, let’s say, is an alienated aspect of Bloom, his own dormant creative power. In Feuerbachian fashion, then, what Bloom needs is to reappropriate that power, to take it back into himself. Stephen’s death as a separate character would thus be what allows Bloom to become whole—a paradoxical and inconclusive whole, but a recognizably human one. The realist and the artist—the skeptic and the believer—meet on a middle ground that is neither stern realism nor soft relativism, where the claims of illusion and the desire to get along without it can both get a hearing.

This middle ground between faith and skepticism has had many names in modern religious studies: broken myth, second naiveté, and disenchantment among them.¹³ All these formulations, in effect, split the difference between Plato’s will to truth—the desire to escape from the cave of illusion—and a resolve to take the world as we find it. They argue for neither complacency nor a final resolution. Instead, they encourage a kind of critical dialogue between the halves of a divided self—the part of us that loves stories and the part of us that is suspicious of them, believer and skeptic, Mulder and Scully. *The Brothers Bloom* moves towards this rather abstract *coincidentia oppositorum* in a very human and concrete way. Recall the crucial

scene of young Bloom in the cave. His sadness was born in the moment he held back from taking the hand of the golden girl. He held back because, in a sudden attack of epistemological puritanism, he came to see the scene that he and his brother had created as false. Perhaps, though, his hesitation was itself based on a false expectation—a desire for an unmixed reality that is itself unreal. Perhaps the truly false or falsifying moment was his failure to hold out his hand—his failure to accept life in all its ambiguity. Throughout the film, it is Bloom's subsequent hand-clasps with Penelope that gradually heal his mind, and a final hand-clasp that takes them "off into the sunset." Thus, to defer to the wisdom of a popular song (a song and a film named after it that were very much on Johnson's mind as he was writing *The Brothers Bloom*¹⁴), there may be "only a paper moon," a world of seeming and uncertainty, "but it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me." On this model, that is, the ultimate cure for illusion sickness is not a theological or a philosophical position—not a matter of either faith or skepticism—but the middle ground of our being-together in all our shared perplexity. Illusion and reality are not exclusive possibilities. They are the alternately contentious and loving poles that define the common field of our lives.

So what is the meaning of Stephen's death, and what does it have to do with Bloom's liberation? I don't have a definitive answer to that and I suspect Johnson doesn't either. Nevertheless, the film leaves us with a wealth of possibilities, and with a familiar sort of confusion. We will always make use of stories and we will

always suspect that we are being lied to. Neither state of mind can be resolved by means of the other, but together they constitute our common predicament—the unfathomable uncertainty in which we meet. Thus, what the film finally offers is nothing so dichotomous as Plato’s distinction of illusion and reality, and nothing so conclusive as the truth. Rather, like one of Penelope’s photographs, it is a “secret about a secret,” an illuminating sample of the paradoxical interplay of realism and fantasy by which we live. If this unresolvable paradox is in fact what defines our condition, then the playful inconclusiveness of *The Brothers Bloom* is appropriate. The best way to be true to a secret is to keep it.

¹ The most sophisticated treatment of the cave’s relevance to religious thought is Gerald Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), pp. 41-57. It is put to more typical use in S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2008), pp. 29-30.

² A raft of films take on the theme of illusion and reality directly—films as different as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Gaslight* (1944)—and many more reflect on the roles stories play in our lives. There are films that celebrate stories (*Big Fish* [2003]), films that interrogate stories (*Roshamon* [1950]), and films that critique the urge to tell stories in the first place (*Adaptation* [2002]).

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 30-33. Important work on religion’s place in relation to modern media has been done by Stuart Hoover: e.g. *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Loughlin is a good example of the attempt to give these matters a religion-friendly spin.

⁵ Significant reviewers who disparaged the film include Stephen Holden, “My Brother, My Partner in Crime,” *The New York Times* (May 14, 2009) http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/05/15/movies/15bloo.html?_r=0; Roger Ebert, “The Brothers Bloom: When a Con Cons a Con,” <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-brothers-bloom-2009>; and Dana Stevens, “Buddhist Stalkers, Orphan Con Men,” *Slate* (May 15, 2009) http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2009/05/buddhist_stalkers_orphan_con_men.html. A favorable exception to the rule was Robert Wilonsky, “*The Brothers Bloom* Is No Joke,” *Village*

Voice (May 13, 2009) <http://www.villagevoice.com/2009-05-13/film/the-brothers-bloom-is-no-joke/full/>.

⁶ Rian Johnson has made a .pdf file of the screenplay available online at <http://rcjohnso.com/bloom.html>. This quote is from p. 37. Subsequent references to the script are given parenthetically in the text.

⁷ The indispensable concept of the manic pixie dream girl was introduced and defined by Nathan Rabin in "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*," *The A.V. Club* (January 25, 2007) <http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-eliza,15577/>.

⁸ The term "confidence man" first appeared in 1849, when newspaper writers throughout the United States used it to hype the story of an unusually inventive New York swindler. From there, it caught on quickly. In July of that year, the New York *Herald* ran a satirical piece comparing the techniques of a "confidence man" with standard operating procedures on Wall Street. See Johannes Dietrich Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man," excerpted in Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, Norton Critical Edition, edited by Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁹ This line of thought about the evolution of human intelligence is especially identified with the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, e.g. *The Inner Eye* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986). A good overview of recent work in cognitive science on human "social intelligence" is Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 91-107. As a good illustration of how well our minds are adapted to issues of deception, consider how well we handle matters of second-guessing when other people are involved. "I know that you suspect that she believes that he is lying" maps out as an absurdly complex piece of logic, but it is the sort of thing a soap-opera viewer takes in stride. See Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), pp. 110-112.

¹⁰ The screenplay says "will-o-whisp" (p. 8), but this seems to be a variant.

¹¹ Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 174.

¹² Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 33-34; Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 142-145.

¹³ These three classic terms, respectively, are from Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*; Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); and Sam Gill, "Disenchantment," *Parabola* 1:3 (1976), pp. 6-13.

¹⁴ See Rian Johnson, "Sympathy for Mr. Con Man," *The Huffington Post* (May 15, 2009) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rian-johnson/sympathy-for-mr-con-man_b_203661.html; and Christopher Monfette, "Rian Johnson Interview," *IGN* (May 12, 2009) <http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/05/12/rian-johnson-interview>.

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