Marvelous Traces in Mundane Spaces: Finding Fantasy in Theater, Film, and Television

by

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Class of 2010

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Theater
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Acknowledgements

Without the incredible help and support of many people, this thesis would not have been possible. To them I am grateful in ways that words cannot express:

First and foremost, to my advisor Betsy Traube, whose classes helped to inspire me to this topic and who agreed to advise my thesis even though I was not in her department. Without her patience, encouragement, and humor, I would have been lost. Her ideas and her insights helped bring this thesis to life, her advice and her thoughtful comments helped it to grow, and her amazing eye for editing and vast wealth of background knowledge brought it to where it is today. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work under her guidance.

To Professor Claudia Tatinge Nascimento, for reading my thesis and for finding the time in an incredibly busy semester to offer detailed and insightful comments. I have learned so much from her over these past years.

To Professor David B. Jaffe, for reading my thesis and for offering thoughts and suggestions. His classes and his wisdom have helped to shape the way I think about theater and about life, for which I will be forever grateful.

To Professor Leo Lensing, for graciously agreeing to read my thesis.

To the Wesleyan Theater Department, for many amazing experiences.

To the Wesleyan Film Studies Department, for an invaluable cinematic education.

To Jack Carr and Kris McQueeney for help with all those little technical details.

To ANTH400 Cultural Analysis, the extraordinary bunch of thesis-and-essay-writing anthropology students who helped make this process a little less terrifying.

To my friends who patiently accepted my absence this semester, and to my housemates who patiently accepted my presence on one very book-filled couch.

To my wonderful parents, for so many years of love and guidance and support. They are my rocks. My gratitude is infinite.

To Mytheos Holt, who has never let me down. I could not have done this without him. Thank you for everything, everything, everything.
Introduction:
Declining Definitions of Reality, Realism, and Fantasy

“In addition to assorted bad breaks and pleasant surprises, opportunities and insults, life serves up the occasional pink unicorn.”
– Benedict Carey

In the summer of 1969, Sesame Street went head to head with child psychology. Determined to create a television show that could pass on educational skills to underprivileged children, the producers of the soon-to-be aired Sesame Street had tested their programming in every conceivable way. They brought in scientists with new experimental techniques to figure out just how to catch children’s attention (Gladwell 102-106). They gave careful consideration to every element of the show’s execution, precisely calculating everything from the number of episodes that could feature each letter of the alphabet to the types of words that would best help children complete a word-matching exercise (Palmer and Fisch 12, 11). Yet in July of 1969, only a month and a half before Sesame Street was scheduled to hit the airwaves, the research team emerged from trial homes in Philadelphia with very bad news. Children just kept losing interest in the show (Gladwell 105). The trouble proved to be Sesame Street itself, the show’s core setting:

The problem was that when the show was originally conceived, the decision was made that all fantasy elements of the show be separated from the real elements. This was done at the insistence of many child psychologists, who felt that to mix fantasy and reality would be misleading to children. The Muppets, then, were only seen with other Muppets, and the scenes filmed on Sesame Street itself involved only real adults and children. What [Ed Palmer, the head of research] found
out in Philadelphia, though, was that as soon as they switched to the street scenes, the kids lost all interest (Gladwell 105-106). Psychologist and co-creator Gerald Lesser knew what they had to do: “We decided to write a letter to all the other developmental psychologists and say, we know how you guys think about mixing fantasy and reality. But we’re going to do it anyway. If we don’t, we’ll be dead in the water” (qtd. in Gladwell 106). The producers duly created roles for Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, and Snuffleupagus, and thus the iconic street, with its “artful blend of fluffy monsters and earnest adults,” was born (Gladwell 106). Today, Sesame Street is in its fortieth season and airs all over the world.

Having grown up watching Sesame Street, I can testify that seeing Big Bird talk to humans did not confuse me about biology or the current state of human-animal communication. I can also testify that the Muppets, particularly those Muppets who mingle with humans on Sesame Street, are just about the only part of the show that I can remember. The producers’ decision to blend fantasy and reality helped to give Sesame Street its wide and enduring popularity.

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Though child psychologists feared that having fantastic characters interact with ordinary human characters might confuse child viewers, the sheer fact that Sesame Street thought to use fantastic characters in the first place is indicative of its status as children’s television. As film scholar Steve Neale explains, “unless marked as high art, many avowedly non-realist genres are viewed as frivolously escapist, as ‘mere fantasy’, and thus as suitable only for children, or for ‘mindless’, ‘irresponsible’ adults” (31). The story of Sesame Street exemplifies a pervasive
cultural mistrust of fantasy. Fantasy enables us to ‘escape’ from reality with all of its social, political, and economic problems. Responsible, mature adults should have outgrown the fantasy they may have enjoyed as children. As for children, of course incorporating fantastic elements into the otherwise realistic setting of Sesame Street would be confusing to them. Fantasy and reality are separate worlds, one imaginary and one real; they cannot co-exist. Elements of fantasy do not belong in reality, and realism, which is “the representation of reality in writing and art,” should not depict them there (Moi 229).

In writing about Modern Theories of Drama, George W. Brandt notes that “realism has been the accepted convention of Western drama for the greater part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (xix). This has also been the case for film and television, two artistic mediums that emerged and developed as commercial industries over the twentieth century. Yet philosopher and film scholar Noël Carroll notes that, in film research, “contemporary theorists” often do not offer much in the way of a definition of realism, “forcing us, in the main, to rely on our ordinary intuitions about what we pre-theoretically consider to be realist representations” (Mystifying 148). If the Wikipedia page on “Reality” is any indication of the layman’s pre-theoretical conception of reality, which realism supposedly represents in art, then when we first think of the definition of reality we think of “everything that is.” Pre-theoretically, we conceive of reality as all encompassing, as our complete experience of the world. Naturally, fantasy is excluded from this category. Yet upon closer examination, the ways in which we use terms that describe reality, such as real and realistic, suggest that the concept of reality does not actually embody our total experience of the world.
Very often, for example, we make a distinction between “appearance and reality,” or we contrast real “not with imaginary but with apparent” (R. Williams 258; emphasis in original). In Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Raymond Williams observes that the word real, “from the beginning, has had this shifting double sense” (258). Its first use in English was to discuss something’s existence in legal terms, such as real estate (R. Williams 258). In its various, historically shifting applications, the term real has never designated the whole of our experience of the world, but only a part or aspect of it. We tell people to ‘be real with us,’ to ‘be realistic about something,’ or we describe something as ‘unreal.’ We use the term to signify a particular, valued aspect of our experience, to distinguish between the legal and not legal, between appearance and truth, between the authentic inner self and outward expression, between what is and is not integral to our lives. Although we seem inclined to define reality as a totalizing idea, as the unified representation of experience, present and past usage suggests that this is not and has never actually been the case.

The concept of realism in art has also had a multifaceted and often contentious history,\(^1\) one that is surprisingly intertwined with the history of non-realist artistic movements. Although Plato and Aristotle wrote about theater and its relationship to mimetic representations of reality in antiquity, the theatrical movement of ‘realism’ only dates back to the mid-1800s. The conventions of realism in theater, such as the famous invisible “fourth wall” that separates the actors from the audience, are only “a

\(^{1}\) In this thesis, I am looking only at the history of Western theater, film, and television. My examples are restricted to Europe and North America.
recent development in theatre history” (Potolsky 75). Before the 1850s, actors and spectators had a very different relationship:

Audiences in ancient Greece, for example, hardly sat in rapt silence. Tragedies were performed during daylight in an enormous and often noisy amphitheatre. Elizabethan theatre audiences entirely surrounded the stage, which was largely devoid of scenery or props. In seventeenth-century France, it was common for members of the audience to sit on the stage, converse with actors during the performance, and request that they perform scenes more than once (Potolsky 75).

In the 1800s, many spectators still came to the theater to watch individual stars perform the parts for which they were well known (Booth 109). Theater companies did not yet have directors overseeing the creative process. They had actor-managers or stage-managers, who were actors that generally handled the business side of the company (Booth 107). Some actor-managers devoted more time to rehearsal than others, but in the end “the star actor, who was frequently the all-powerful actor manager also … could decide upon his interpretation of a role without reference to the cast, or without even taking a rehearsal” (Styan 11). Most stars became known for a single stock character type such as “villain … hero, heroine, comic man [or] good old man” that they portrayed in every show (Booth 126). The nineteenth century was an era of melodrama, “sensational drama of strong emotions and unequivocal moral sentiment” (Styan 3). Melodramas emerged out of the dominating philosophical ideas of the era, romanticism and idealism, which focused on aesthetic beauty and
“spontaneity of feeling and faith in the visionary imagination” (Styan 2). By the 1850s and 1860s, when ideas of realism were beginning to surface, the melodramatic well-made play dominated the landscape. These were plays with formulaic plots and strong, emotionally charged moral polarities, with “scenery [that] became increasingly spectacular” to reflect the excitement of the plot (Styan 3). Romantic theater was “joyfully unreal,” celebrating morality, beauty, and “radical idealism” (Styan 3, 2).

Theatrical realism emerged in response to romanticism, but not as a cohesive artistic movement. It came out of a number of separate aesthetic initiatives undertaken in different countries by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, directors such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, and authors such as Émile Zola, who began a separate movement known as naturalism. Different artists evolved different realist aesthetics, depending on what element of the romantic theater they were rejecting. For some, realism in theater or in literature meant a shift away from the conventional subject matter associated with idealism; thus any story that focused on the middle or lower classes was realist, particularly those with unhappy resolutions. Some, like the Danish theater critic Georg Brandes, called for theater to address contemporary social problems. His words helped to inspire the playwright Henrik Ibsen, who also wrote plays with the intention of challenging the highly conventional plot structure of the well-made play (Styan 19). Ibsen represents two different realist trends: innovations

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2 As defined by Zola, naturalist artworks “scientifically explore the consequences upon … characters of their birth and background” in careful detail (Styan 6). Theater directors who are identified as naturalists typically focus on historical authenticity of settings, costumes, and speech (Styan 8). Although naturalism and realism are distinct movements, a significant number of scholars conflate the terms (Brandt xix, Chinoy 34, Potolsky 98). I think this confusion comes in part from the tendency of Modernists to lump the two movements together (Cardullo 5), and from the fact that realism has far less distinct boundaries than naturalism. Directors like Stanislavsky frequently worked in both modes.
in “subject matter and form of presentation” (Potolsky 97). For some, particularly in England, Ibsen himself came to represent the new realist aesthetic, and many realist theaters began by performing his works (Styan 52-57). Other realists experimented with acting technique. This was the era that saw the rise of the fourth wall and the dimming of the house lights, the first time it became conventional for actors to perform without acknowledging the presence of the audience. German director Otto Brahm desired actors to move away from a gestural, declamatory style of classical acting and “return to a true observation of man in accordance with nature” (Styan 46). Konstantin Stanislavsky developed a system for how actors could achieve a psychological realism in portraying their characters; he was interested, in part, in having actors respond to situations on stage as they would in their own lives (Styan 79-80). The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen pioneered another approach to acting, an ensemble-based method that required stars to subordinate their own personalities and styles to the needs of the play. The Duke focused less on psychology and more on scrupulous choreography; he cared more about creating the look and feel of a rambunctious Roman crowd on stage than about having the spectators hear Julius Caesar or Brutus speak (Chinoy 26). Stanislavsky and the Duke were also interested in naturalistic design, in accurately replicating scenes from real places on stage through authentic sets, costumes, lighting, and sound design (Chinoy 27). As an aesthetic, theatrical realism designates a set of interrelated conventions of narrative, performance, and design, but it was not a cohesive movement when it began and it does not have one single dominant meaning.
In film, as well, the definition of realism is constantly changing. Audiences flocked to the first film screenings in 1896 to marvel at the motion picture’s ability to be a “mechanical reproduction” of reality on screen (Arnheim 37). These short “actualities,” as they were called, had the unprecedented ability to duplicate the outside world, to repeat the unrepeatable event of a wall collapsing or to show someone sitting in America exactly what a street looks like in Paris (Perkins 61). Writing in the early 1920s, French filmmaker Jean Epstein declared cinema’s essence to be something called photogénie, a quality he defined as “any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction” (“Photogénie” 314). Epstein located the power of film in the ‘real’ nature of its images; not only could film replicate phenomena of reality in images, but it could do so in a way as to reveal “the inner nature of things” as the human eye would not have perceived on its own (Epstein, “Photogénie” 315). Epstein’s thoughts echo those of the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, who was writing a similar theory in literature at about the same time, a concept he termed defamiliarization. Epstein wrote that “the human eye cannot discover [photogénie] directly” (“The Senses” 244). Similarly, Shklovsky felt that, in life, “after being perceived several times, objects acquire the status of ‘recognition’ … we know it’s there but we do not see it,” and that art can use certain techniques to “remov[e] this object from the sphere of automatized perception,” to defamiliarize it (6). For Epstein, the experience of seeing a human face in extreme close up, moving and smiling, would defamiliarize the face. It might allow the viewers to glimpse something within the smile of a real person they would not have seen if the person were not filmed and then projected onto a screen.
Yet only a year after Epstein published “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie,” he wrote another article in which he lamented that “the best friends of yesterday become the worst enemies of tomorrow,” and admitted that the specific techniques that he had identified with photogénie, such as close-ups, no longer produced the same effect for him (“Avant-Garde” 349). Writing on “Realism in the Cinema,” Jacques Aumont, et al note that “at every stage of film history (silent, black and white, and color), the cinema was considered realistic. Realism [in film] always seemed to be a gain of reality in relation to a previous model of representation” (109). Cinematic ‘realism’ often signifies whatever technology and conventions are current. When color in cinema was new, producers used it mainly for fantasy settings. Today, we consider color to be more realistic than black and white, which is now mainly used to create an artistic or historical effect, but we regard the emerging technology of 3D as spectacular. Tomorrow, our associations may change once more.

Part of the reason we tend to conceive of realism as “a regime of unified portrayal” (Ellis 10), as simply “the representation of reality in writing and art” (Moi 229), is because this is how it was defined by modernism, a movement that emerged soon after artists began experimenting with realism and which defined itself in opposition to the realist aesthetic. Modernism “relies on a distinctive kind of imagination, one whose general frame of reference resides only within itself … modernism implies historical discontinuity, social disruption, moral chaos, and a sense of fragmentation and alienation, of loss and despair – hence, of retreat within one’s inner being or private consciousness” (Cardullo 3-4). Just as realism vilified romanticism, “all these modernist ‘-isms’ … react against the same common enemy:
the modern drama of Realism and Naturalism” (Cardullo 5). As Ibsen scholar Toril Moi explains:

> The ideology of modernism produces an opposition between realism and modernism understood both as formal aspects of texts and as names for distinct literary and artistic periods … it is as if the ideologues of modernism fear that realism, with its faith in the power of language to signify *something*, is fundamentally threatening to their own enterprise (23-24; emphasis in original).

Modernism, committed to an aesthetic of “fragmentation” (Cardullo 4), frames itself as an advance on the “artistic and philosophical naivety” of realism, which presents a unified image of a concrete, historically grounded reality (Moi 24). Critics who use the term realist today often assign it a negative connotation, pairing it dismissively with terms like ‘conservative’ or ‘Hollywood,’ implying that it is not an innovative aesthetic category but a self-effacing illusion used for commercial purposes. Modernists, however, are far too quick to dismiss realism. The concepts and history of the realist aesthetic are deeply intertwined with non-realist aesthetics, modernist and otherwise.

Theatrical realism and modernism actually share many of the same artists; many of those who stood at the forefront of explorations into realism subsequently went on to investigate various forms of anti- or non-realism. Meyerhold, a disciple of Stanislavsky’s, left the Moscow Art Theatre to pursue his interest in Symbolism (Chinoy 36). Early realist playwrights such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, also began moving towards Symbolism in the latter parts of their careers. Both
Stanislavsky and Brahm invited the expressionistic scenic designer Gordon Craig to design for their theater companies (Chinoy 45). Theater historian Helen Krich Chinoy explains the shifting theatrical practices of the late 1800s as a move away from the dominance of the actor-based star system and towards the dominance of the director more so than as a move towards and then away from realism (13-57). Prior to the rise of realism, creative control belonged to the stars, the individual actors whom audiences flocked to see, regardless of the play. Melodramas, based around a series of sensational situations, allowed these stars to shine. Some theater companies became interested in presenting non-melodramatic plays with historically authentic staging and accurate sets and costumes. This led them to transfer more control to a single member of the group, someone who was more than just an actor-manager, someone who could attend to the cohesion of the ensemble and the specific needs of the given play. Artists of the time, such as Stanislavsky, Saxe-Meiningen, André Antoine, Gordon Craig, and Adolphe Appia, were essentially interested in shifting from a performer-based aesthetic to *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total art, a term coined by German composer and director Richard Wagner. *Gesamtkunstwerk* meant the unification and integration of every element of the theater to create a total effect as conceived by the director (Chinoy 40-41). Realism was an entry point into *Gesamtkunstwerk* for many fledgling directors, because a single person became necessary to oversee the total effect of the play. In seeking to achieve a total effect, however, many artists eventually moved on to explore more expressive, symbolist, anti-real, or not strictly naturalist modes of practice, which proved in some cases even better suited to expressing a codified artistic vision. After all, Wagner himself was an idealist
Thus these seemingly opposing modes, realism and non-realism, emerged from some of the same aesthetic interests. It seems that even in its origins realism was neither unified nor dominant, and not clearly separate from non-realism.

Film has no more clear-cut relationship with the ‘real’ than theater does. From the beginning, fantasy films joined actualities on screen. Less than a year after the Lumièrè brothers showed the first film to the public, professional magician George Méliès expanded his act onto the screen, using every camera trick he could devise, from stop-action to multiple exposures to time-lapse photography, to create the fantastic journeys of *A Trip to the Moon* and *The Impossible Voyage* (Perkins 60-61). On the one hand, “critics were most impressed by the greater illusion of reality created by the photographic medium of film”; on the other hand, they also “quickly recognized cinema’s special affinity for melodrama” and for spectacle (Singer 173). Cinema’s mechanical ability to capture real settings enabled it both to portray realistic events, and to portray spectacular, melodramatic events more realistically. Many classical film theorists focused on the expressive potential of film and attempted to distance the medium from its mechanical link to reality. In the early days of film, when the modernist movement was already in full swing, many argued that “film cannot be art” specifically because “it does nothing but reproduce reality mechanically” (Arnheim 8). German film theorist Rudolf Arnheim wrote a book arguing that film had the capacity to be art “where the conditions of representation serve in some way to mold the object,” when film went beyond simply representing objects on screen (57). Like Epstein, Arnheim believed in film’s power to defamiliarize, but through manipulating an image. He did not think filmmakers
should simply present a “characteristic” view of an object but instead “[reproduce] the object itself from an unusual and striking angle,” therefore “not direct[ing] attention merely toward the object itself, but also to its formal qualities” (44-45). Classical film theorists sought to define the essence of cinema and to claim it as a high art form, but while some embraced its connection to reality, like Epstein or the Russian documentarian Dziga Vertov, others rejected it, like Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein.

In the realm of theater and film, realism is clearly multiple and its efficacy fiercely debated. Thus, one way of understanding realism as an artistic mode may be to look at art works that are premised on the incompleteness of what is presented as reality, works in the fantastic mode.

Reality and fantasy, realism and non-realism, so often these terms are held as opposites, one as the negation of the other. Reality is not fantasy. Fantasy is not reality. Realism is not fantastic. Both are treated as exclusive, totalizing concepts that cannot coexist within one text. Yet they do, frequently. It is ironic that fantasy gets so quickly dismissed as escapist. Many fantastic books, plays, films, and television shows are deliberately set within a world with rules meant to be “similar” to that of the reader (Hume 82). To avoid the ambiguities of the term realism, I will borrow film scholar Martin Rubin’s term to describe such texts: they construct a world that is “mundane … a modern world that is perceived under normal circumstances to be fundamentally not thrilling” and then they introduce a marvelous element into this world (15). These mundane-marvelous texts, as I choose to call them, construct worlds that are mundane, but then violate their rules by interjecting marvelous
elements. Far from being escapist, mundane-marvelous texts create distinctive narrative tensions.

Eric S. Rabkin suggests that the fantastic, as he calls it, presents the “anti-expected,” which occurs when what are previously established as “the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make a 180° reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted” (12). The most dramatic examples of the anti-expected are events that violate the rules of science as established by the narrative, such as when the dead become the un-dead, the inanimate animate, or, in Rabkin’s example, the Wonderland flowers talk to Alice. Rabkin asserts that this reversal must also be signaled to the reader; Alice must react in astonishment when the talking flowers violate her mundane expectations in order for Through the Looking Glass to be fantastic, not fairy tale (24). Other authors use similar language to Rabkin’s expected and anti-expected to describe their view of fantasy. W.R. Irwin suggests that the fantastic “involv[es] an opposition between the ‘anti-real’ and the ‘established real’” (qtd. in P. Murphy 4). Rosemary Jackson writes that “the fantastic is predicated on the category of the ‘real’, and it introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of nineteenth century realism: thus, the impossible, the un-real … un-known, in-visible” (26). Kathryn Hume sums these ideas up in her purposefully “inclusive” definition of fantasy as “any departure from consensus reality” (21; emphasis in original). All of these scholars discuss the fantastic not as escapist fiction, but as a potentially subversive mode that deliberately poses a challenge to the ‘expected’ course of events, to ‘prevailing perspectives,’ to
the ‘established real,’ to ‘consensus reality.’ Mundane-marvelous texts entreat us to critically reexamine widespread expectations and assumptions about fiction and life.

Fantasy is not a genre that can be fixed as high or low art, but a mode that can and does function across genres. Yet despite its pervasive presence, fantasy is under-studied and under-valued. All the terms used to describe it are appropriated; they all have other, primary definitions that are often far better known: fantastic, marvelous, wonderful, uncanny, Gothic, horror. While this series of overlapping terms has been appropriated to explain fantasy’s properties, the small core of literary scholars who do write on fantastical literature cannot agree on how to define them. These authors spend much of their time negating previous definitions and reformulating their own, which vary wildly from the all-inclusive to the all-exclusive.3 Scholarship on fantasy is still in early stages. Although those authors who do write about fantastic literature, such as Eric Rabkin, Kathryn Hume, W.R. Irwin, and Rosemary Jackson, disagree with each other, all concur that fantasy is a neglected domain. Most literary scholars “are curiously blind to its presence,” dismissing it as “subliterature” (Hume 3). While there is a small body of fantastic literature theory, there is “[no existing] body of fantastic drama theory” (P. Murphy 1), even though a significant number of much-studied plays and playwrights draw on fantasy, including those harbingers of realism Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. Patrick D. Murphy began his book Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Modern Drama, because “I heard too many of my colleagues … talking about the realism of drama and then teaching Six Characters in

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3 Unless otherwise indicated, my use of terms like fantastic and marvelous will be inclusive, denoting the general presence of the anti-expected, such as events that violate the natural order or the use of more expressive or poetic techniques within a text. I have chosen to remain broad because the more specific definitions offered in scholarly literature are in flux: “terms get displaced … and seem to substitute for each other from one essay to the next” (P. Murphy 3).
Search of an Author, Waiting for Godot, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

… trying all the while to force these ‘unreal’ plays into the Procrustean bed of reductive realist interpretation” (7). The fantastic is “a significant mode of representation in the modern drama of Western Europe and North America” (P. Murphy 2) and in Western filmmaking. Why is fantasy ignored?

In reference to film, Steve Neale blames “the predominance of ideologies of realism in our culture” (31). Patrick D. Murphy also feels that “in the minds of critics and theatergoers alike, realism has come to set the standards for evaluating the quality of a dramatic performance” (1-2). Yet if there is no set realism, then what standards are we using to evaluate dramatic performance? With this thesis I propose that we seek alternate standards of evaluation for realist and fantastic works alike.

First and foremost, I argue that realism is not a unified textual field that precludes fantasy. I think the potential for realism to have a productive interaction with fantasy is important for theater and cinema, not only because realism has been such a central issue for these mediums in the past century, but also because both are visual mediums, albeit in different ways. Theater and cinema both employ physical bodies in physical spaces. This confronts them with a challenge that fantastic works of literature do not have to face. Literature can conjure fantastic effects by combining words on a page, but an artist depicting the fantastic in a performance cannot leave it to the spectator’s imagination. Some scholars argue that visualizing fantasy detracts from its power, that complex and ambiguous representations of fantasy can only

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4 This is less true for television for historical, cultural, and aesthetic reasons that I do not have time to discuss. What television does have is a history of hybridization (sit-coms in particular have historically dealt with integrating vaudeo techniques into realist narratives) and I think the medium, because it is freed from some of the debates over realism and because its serialized structure gives any mundane-marvelous program significant air time in which to experiment, is a fitting addition to this thesis.
occur in fantastic literature, and that staging the supernatural brings it clunkily down to earth. In my first chapter I look more closely at the ways that one film, Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, and one television show, Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, tell their stories by incorporating the fantastic into a mundane storyworld. I argue that staging the supernatural neither detracts from its fantasy, nor from the power of the stories that employ the visual fantastic. There is a potential benefit to staging fantasy for any play, film or television show that chooses to do so.

In my second chapter, I look at three canonical theatrical texts that are known in different ways for being realist: Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, and Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. *Salesman* and *Our Town* are frequently denigrated for what is seen as their ‘social realism,’ while *The Cherry Orchard* is held up as a positive example of aesthetically superior realism. Yet upon closer analysis, all three plays come across more clearly as hybrids of realism and other, more expressive or fantastic styles. I propose that all three can benefit from being re-examined in a new light and evaluated in a way that is not predicated on their adherence or lack of adherence to codes of ‘realism.’

In my first two chapters I argue that fantasy should not be considered a low art. Its use does not inevitably lower the aesthetic quality of a play, film, or television show. Furthermore, just because we assign a text to the category of realism, it does not mean that the text has no fantastic elements. Texts, realist and otherwise, can use fantasy to tell powerful, complex stories.

In exploring the interaction between fantasy and realism, there is a particular sub-category of realism that I need to address. Some artists and critics use the term
realism to designate an artwork that specifically aims to “direct the audience to focus on actuality” (Shank 169). This can mean several different things. An artist might want spectators not “to focus on the illusion being presented [on stage] … [but on] the paint, flats, and theatrical lighting,” to focus on the actors as actors and the stage as a stage (Shank 169). By contrast, an artist might want to present an illusion that is so realistic that it feels literally real to spectators. These two kinds of real realisms have played a significant role in theater and film history. In my third chapter, I look at the writings of two important theoreticians who wrote about these two realisms: Bertolt Brecht, who argued for a theatrical performance to call spectators’ attention to its reality as a performance, and André Bazin, who argued for film’s power as a mechanical reproduction of real space. It might at first seem paradoxical to argue that fantasy can operate within a performance aiming for actuality, but fantasy can be a very effective device for realizing both Brecht and Bazin’s aesthetic aims. I analyze two mundane-marvelous plays, Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* and Sarah Ruhl’s *The Clean House*, and two mundane-marvelous films, Hal Ashby’s *Being There* and Kevin Lima’s *Enchanted*, that use fantasy to call attention to their reality as a performance or a reproduction of real space.

Another way that artists use fantasy or fantastic techniques is in exploring character psychology and subjectivity. Madness also plays a significant role in many mundane-marvelous texts. In my final chapter I explore some of the many ways in which artists draw on the fantastic to bring spectators into or distance them from a character’s subjectivity, and in which marvelous stories explore themes of
psychology and madness. Artistic representations of mental state and of marvelous events are actually closely intertwined.

Throughout, I point to fantasy’s presence in the places we least expect it, in film and theater, in realist texts and in theories of art. With my readings of mundane-marvelous fictions I hope to show that these amorphous fields of fantasy and realism are not separate, that most works we seek to define as realist are actually hybrids, and that we would benefit from reevaluating why we accord so much value to realism, and so little to fantasy. After all, as the fantastic Tiger-lily said to Alice: “we can talk … when there’s anybody worth talking to” (L. Carroll 28; emphasis in original).
Transforming Terrains:
Staging the Supernatural in *North by Northwest* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

The empty landscape of *North by Northwest*’s famous crop duster scene. (MGM 1959)

The Gentlemen of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode “Hush.” (Mutant Enemy 1999)
We were supposed to see the shark.

In 1974, three mechanical shark models were shipped to Martha’s Vineyard for on-location shooting of a film called *Jaws*. If they had been better made, film history might be different today, but these sharks malfunctioned constantly. As soon as the 25-foot full-body model hit the water, it sank to the seabed. The crew quickly dubbed this unpromising movie *Flaws*. As both the budget and the shooting schedule tripled, young director Steven Spielberg took stock of his situation and made several important decisions (Harvey). In the resulting film, the malfunctioning models barely appear. Instead of directly representing the shark on screen, Spielberg chose to imply its presence through metonymy and other indexical representations: shots of its iconic dorsal fin, shots of yellow flotation barrels tied to its body, and underwater shots framed from the shark’s point-of-view, peering up at the legs of its soon-to-be victims. Spielberg accompanied these indirect images with John Williams’s famously understated score. Only towards the very end of the film does the full monster finally surface. According to Spielberg, with these changes “the film went from a Japanese Saturday matinee horror flick to more of a Hitchcock, the less-you-see-the-more-you-get thriller” (qtd. in Harvey). *Jaws* went on to become a Best Picture nominee and a box-office hit, the first film to earn over $100 million dollars (Harvey). In the summer of 1975, tourists stopped swimming.

If Spielberg’s mechanical models had functioned and he had shot the film as originally planned, the shark would have had a much larger presence on screen. Perhaps the film would have been a blockbuster regardless, but its reputation today

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5 Part of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s system of semiotics. An index of an object is a sign that is “directly connected … physically or causally” to that object (Chandler; emphasis in original).
hinges on the decision to build suspense by keeping the shark hidden, turning it from a 25-foot fish into a monster of unknown proportions. This cinematic choice gives the film a certain literary quality. By withholding the shark, Spielberg invites spectators’ to imagine what this fantastic invader actually looks like, a process similar to that which takes place while reading. With no visual images to draw on, readers of a literary text mentally color in the lines to create their own unique, personal vision of the textual descriptions.

Spielberg’s success in utilizing indirect representations of the shark, and the widespread belief that this is what made the film a critical triumph, highlight what many see as “the drawback to staging the supernatural” (Inverso 6). Literature has far more freedom in its depiction of marvelous events than film or theater, because its verbal descriptions do not need to be translated into visual form. A book can describe something impossible long before cinematic or theatrical technology has advanced far enough to visually realize this event, something Steven Spielberg learned all too well when attempting to film *Jaws*. Most often, when artists do go ahead and produce fantasy films, these products get relegated to B-movie status, dismissed as “frivolously escapist” (Neale 31).

I think that part of the difficulty mundane-marvelous stories have in getting acknowledged on a visual level is the high value placed on uncertainty in fantastic literature. For example, Gothic scholar MaryBeth Inverso suggests that the trouble early producers of Gothic stage melodrama had with capturing the spirit of the literary texts they adapted came in part from their disregard for uncertainty and ambiguity. The Gothic genre, known for its eerie settings and supernatural events, has
no clear definition, but Inverso sees the genre as one that “subverts belief in a knowable objective reality” (36). Gothic literature “subverts closure as part of its ongoing program of destabilization and deconstruction,” creating a world where “things are not what they seem. The senses are unreliable … sensory data only serves to deepen ontological confusion” (Inverso 2, 10; emphasis in original). Gothic tales are filled with madness and muteness, two traits that interfere with obtaining an objective description of events, adding to the uncertainty of the narrative. Many things in Gothic literature cannot be described at all. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Mr. Hyde is “not easy to describe … he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn’t specify the point” (Stevenson 9). In *Frankenstein*, “the big creation scene” is rendered in “a cryptic account … so brief as to leave us wondering how it was done” (Lavalley 243). By contrast, early Gothic stage melodramas often relied on “extravagant special effects” to vividly re-create the supernatural (Inverso 7). In Inverso’s eyes, they were actually less Gothic in spirit for attempting to “out-Gothiciz[e]” the books in spectacle (6). As she explains, “the drawback of staging the supernatural … no matter how effectively carried out, is that it actually reduces the audience’s participation in the paranoia of the seer-character” (6-7; emphasis in original).

To explain the appearance of Mr. Hyde or Frankenstein’s monster too closely, to show the shark too soon, would give these characters concrete parameters defined by the artist, not by individual spectators. In his survey of *Frankenstein* adaptations,  

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6 Gothic literature had two main cycles, one in the 1700s which focused on fantastic texts set in the haunted past, such as Anne Radcliff’s *The Romance of the Forest*, and one in the 1800s which focused on texts based in the industrial present, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and the works of Edgar Allen Poe.
Albert J. Lavalley argues that stage and film versions of *Frankenstein* “threaten to simplify the book’s complexities,” as “the multiple points of view furnished by the narrative are removed when we ‘see’ the Monster with our own eyes” (244). While visual representations of *Frankenstein* make the monster seem less complex, visual representations of other fantasy creatures can make them seem less fantastic. Anne Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, writing on the troubled history of *Hamlet’s* Ghost, note that “the more that theatrical companies attempted to capture the spookiness and other-worldliness of the Ghost … the more uncomfortably material appeared the Ghost’s body, clothes, voice” (245). Legendary Shakespearean actor John Gielgud “confesses that he has never seen the part played to his satisfaction” (Jones and Stallybrass 246). Inverso, Lavalley, Jones, and Stallybrass seem to suggest that, in the hierarchy of the fantastic, literature stands at the top for its ability to provide further complexity of representation or to avoid explicit representation altogether. As Spielberg said, the less you see, the more you get.

What does this mean for the fantastic in visual mediums, such as theater, film, and television? Are mundane-marvelous performances at a disadvantage as compared to their literary counterparts? Are these stories actually the least marvelous when they most directly portray their subject matter? The story of *Jaws* demonstrates the powerful effect that withholding visualization can have in a film. Yet even Spielberg chooses to reveal the shark on screen eventually, making its long deferred visual realization integral to the climax of the film. Clearly there is power in staging the supernatural or so many plays, films, and television shows would not do it.
Such arguments against putting fantasy on the stage or screen often focus specifically on visual representations of monsters, ignoring that there is an “element of fantasy inherent in all forms of artistic representation” (Neale 31). Film scholar Martin Rubin points out that the vast majority of stories we choose to engage with as forms of entertainment involve “suspense and action and a sense of departure from the routine world” (5). On one level, almost all descriptive writing invokes the marvelous through use of “figurative discourse,” such as hyperbole (Todorov 76-77). It is helpful to look at fantasy as “a quantitative as well as a qualitative concept” (Rubin 5; emphasis in original). All narratives can be considered marvelous “to some degree” because they evoke a “sense of departure from the routine world” through narrative or language (Rubin 5). In mundane-marvelous works, the figurative simply becomes literal. While high school may feel like hell for the teens of Dawson’s Creek, only Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s high school is actually situated upon a gateway to Hell. Just as the word ‘real’ does not encompass our total experience of the actual world, artists often seek expressive, non-realist techniques to depict a realistic world in order to convey certain emotions or ideas.

Fantasy extends beyond the monsters it creates, its presence transforming the mundane spaces it inhabits. Sigmund Freud has an essay in which he discusses uncanny literature, a genre similar to the Gothic, which he considers to be frightening because it threatens to expose unconscious fears that have been repressed all along beneath the surface of mundane society (124). For Freud, the uncanny emerges from the familiar made unfamiliar. Gothic characters are often indescribable in part because they exhibit this “categorical contradictoriness”: their bodies serve as
battlegrounds between the familiar and the unfamiliar, “inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on” (N. Carroll, *Horror* 43). Mr. Hyde is “an extraordinary-looking man, and yet … nothing out of the way,” deformed and yet not deformed (Stevenson 9). The shark in *Jaws* is a real animal of unreal proportions, and it brings its demonic chaos straight to the angelic beaches of Amity. Amity is a “Disney” town, “a fictional amalgam of Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard and East Hampton. The kind of place Ralph Lauren likes to shoot his models … freckled from a day on the yacht” (Quirke 16, 26-27). The shark is terrifying in large part because it does not occupy a fantasy world or remain in the darkness attacking isolated swimmers, but because it transgresses these boundaries and attacks Amity in broad daylight, killing a child on a crowded beach. By bringing an unfamiliar creature into a familiar mundane realm, these stories transform their landscapes into liminal spaces. Spielberg does not just prompt spectators to construct the shark, but to deconstruct the world around the shark. The film removes the beach “from the sphere of automatized perception” and defamiliarizes it (Shklovsky 6). Suddenly, “each image of bright playfulness conceals a vision of death” (Quirke 23). If Gothic stories “[subvert] belief in a knowable objective reality” (Inverso 36), they do so in part by transforming the way the character or spectator perceives the mundane landscape of the story. A Gothic story may withhold visualization of its fantastic creatures, but this can provoke the spectators to see the mundane setting that is visualized as marvelous.

Some films use these fantastic techniques even when they are not fantasies. For example, in his book on *Thrillers* film scholar Martin Rubin finds that most critics classify a cinematic thriller in part by its use of fantastic techniques to
transform a mundane setting. Rubin cites G.K. Chesterton’s conception of a thriller as a “transformed city,” as “an essentially modern form” that is “situated in the mundane, realistic world … as if this modern, mundane, metropolitan context has become filled with the spirit of older, larger, wilder, more marvelous, and more adventurous realms” (13, 15). Almost all of the theorists he includes discuss the thriller as “a realm that is midway between myth and realism” (Rubin 21). According to Rubin’s overview, the thriller generates suspense in part from this creation of a dual world that is at once mundane / familiar and marvelous / mythic, with an ordinary hero trapped in the middle. Similarly, Noël Carroll defines a horror story, as opposed to a fairy tale or myth, as one in which “the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world” (Horror 16). Thrillers and horror films invoke blurred boundaries and spatial transformations to tell their suspenseful stories.

I do not think that staging the supernatural, or drawing on fantastic techniques more broadly, intrinsically lowers the quality of a story to subliterary to escapist B-movie fare. I would like to look more closely at one film and one television show that I think do the opposite, utilizing their fantastic elements to complicate and enhance their narratives. Alfred Hitchcock’s 1959 film North by Northwest demonstrates how a non-fantasy text can integrate fantastic techniques into a mundane environment on a metaphorical level. Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Joss Whedon’s 1997-2003 television show based off of his 1992 film of the same name, demonstrates how mundane-marvelous stories explore literally fantastic environments. Both use fantasy to subvert their subject matter and to ‘uplift’ it, adding complexity to their stories as opposed to taking it away.
How does one metaphorically infuse a “modern, mundane, metropolitan” landscape “with the spirit of older, larger, wilder, more marvelous and more adventurous realms” (Rubin 15)? One of the most thrilling examples of a film making a mundane landscape marvelous is *North by Northwest’s* famous crop duster scene.

Hitchcock’s 1959 thriller *North by Northwest* follows the saga of Roger Thornhill, an advertising man from New York City. Through pure accident, a gang of villains mistake Thornhill for a secret government agent named George Kaplan. They kidnap and attempt to kill him, but he manages to escape. While attempting to discover more about their leader, Phillip Vandamm, Thornhill winds up framed for murder. He decides to flee the city in pursuit of the real George Kaplan, sneaking onto a train with a little assistance from his seductive new friend Eve Kendall. Unbeknownst to Thornhill, George Kaplan does not exist. He is a red herring, invented to distract the gang from the real secret agent in their midst. Further unbeknownst to Thornhill, Eve is working for the gangsters. Telling him she has arranged a meeting with Kaplan, she sends him off to meet his death. Thornhill, on the run from police who want him for a murder he did not commit, on the run from a gang of criminals who want to kill him for being someone he is not, believed by no one to be innocent or even to be Thornhill, is now double-crossed by the one woman whom he trusted. In short, the world is against him.

Now begins the famous sequence in which Hitchcock metaphorically suggests that even the physical world has turned against Roger Thornhill. The scene opens with an extreme aerial long shot of a barren, dismal, gray-brown landscape; a dusty highway surrounded by dusty expanses and a few meager, wilting corn crops. For a
long moment the spectator watches from above as a bus chugs down the highway, pulls off to the side, lets a tiny figure out, and chugs away. The camera cuts in closer to a ground level shot, revealing Roger Thornhill standing on the side of a flat, blank, dusty expanse that extends to the horizon, the brown-gray of the ground practically blending in with the blue-gray of the sky. Cutting between his face and shots from his point of view, Hitchcock shows the spectators exactly what Thornhill sees: nothing. The landscape is as bleak as his prospects.

The spectator’s knowledge that Thornhill has been sent to his death transforms the dull landscape into a menacing one. Aware that there is danger but unaware of how it will manifest, the spectator looks at everything as a potential threat. This produces a double vision of the field as both a field and a labyrinth, “filled with potential obstructions, delays, wrong turns, and unseen pitfalls” (Rubin 30). Menacing in its sheer emptiness, the environment is the kind of “contradictory space” that defines a labyrinth, as “it connotes both confinement and infinitude,” a totalizing entrapment (Rubin 26). As film theorist Pascal Bonitzer explains, Thornhill is trapped in “an unlimited prison” (qtd. in Rubin 27). He has no escape and nowhere to hide. Mundane becomes marvelous; the innocuous landscape becomes a part of the trap, as though even the inanimate plains are conspiring against Thornhill.

Hitchcock compounds this threat by having the danger emerge out of the labyrinthine emptiness. In one of the early shots, a crop-dusting plane hums in the distance, seeming to serve only as ‘background noise.’ Suddenly, this plane wheels around and starts trying to mow Thornhill down. Hitchcock never humanizes this

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7 I draw some of my analysis on this scene from a class given by Wesleyan Film Studies Professor Scott Higgins entitled Cinema of Action and Adventure, spring 2009.
battle by cutting to shots of the pilot. Thornhill’s adversary in this scene is not the criminals, but an implacable, unstoppable, monstrous plane that seems to have a will of its own. Trapped in a labyrinth and facing a relentless monster, Thornhill’s survival, “the most morally desirable outcome,” seems “to be the least probable outcome,” a factor that Martin Rubin notes is integral to Noël Carroll’s theory of suspense (Rubin 33). Thornhill only manages to escape by almost killing himself, throwing his body into the path of an oncoming oil truck (causing plane and truck to collide), and then by resorting to theft to obtain a getaway car. He does not win so much as he just does not lose. As clever as Thornhill is and as suavely as Cary Grant plays him, the character remains barely in control throughout the film: barely managing to not drunk-drive off a cliff, barely escaping detection by policemen on the train with the aid of Eve Kendall, barely avoiding plummeting off the face of Mt. Rushmore. Hitchcock thrusts his mundane hero into marvelous contests to create the quintessential thriller experience of *North by Northwest*.

In this case, “staging” does not “[reduce] the audience’s participation in the paranoia of the seer-character” (Inverso 7). The way that Hitchcock imbues an ordinary landscape with near-fantastic menace is what makes the crop duster sequence so effective. Hitchcock uses scenery that borders on fantastic throughout *North by Northwest*. Thornhill, an advertising man, makes his way across an American landscape filled with iconic advertisement-like images that turn against him. The original idea for the film emerged from “a set of ideas for scenes in places that seem definitively American: a chase across the face of Mount Rushmore, a car coming off the assembly line in Detroit with a corpse inside … America conceived as
a particular ideological location” (Millington 136). In the film, Thornhill begins in New York City, makes a stop at the United Nations, hops the train to Chicago where he is nearly killed in the Old West environment of the crop duster scene, and then jumps on a plane to South Dakota to wind up dangling off of Mount Rushmore. Each location goes from real and recognizable to grandiose, symbolic, and absurd.

In the film, each of these landscapes starts out as an innocent background and transforms into a labyrinthine attempt to ensnare Thornhill. Early on, he visits the United Nations building in New York City to confront Lester Townsend, the man he wrongly believes to have kidnapped him. He walks through the lobby of the building in a long shot, his tiny figure framed below the immense flowing white lines and checkered patterns of the lobby architecture. When Thornhill discovers that Lester Townsend is an innocent stranger, the two thugs who have followed Thornhill kill Townsend. Thornhill suddenly finds himself accused of murder, and flees the building in a shot framed from directly overhead. If the shot of him entering the building emphasized its looming geometry, this extreme overhead long shot turns the entire frame into an array of geometric shapes with Thornhill a mere dot running through them (Millington 137). These progressively more mazelike shots underline Thornhill’s further entrapment in the labyrinth the villains have constructed for him, almost as though the landscapes are ‘in on it.’ Hitchcock frequently employs extreme long shots to emphasize the vastness of his settings, highlighting their sheer physical presence in a way at once both realistic and absurd, making each both a space and a symbol. This mixture of iconography, fantasy, and absurdity “emerges as a simultaneous, ironic meditation on the condition of the American character”
(Millington 138). Hitchcock’s choice to push his settings to the boundary of fantasy allows the film to stage the conspiracy against Thornhill on a visual level and to use these iconic visuals to evoke questions regarding American character in the 1950s.

While *Jaws* hides its fantastic shark to create its suspenseful structure, *North by Northwest* fantastically frames its mundane spaces to create a similarly suspenseful storyline. Still, *North by Northwest* only metaphorically invokes the marvelous, suggesting a fantastical interpretation of its spaces but not providing literally fantastic landscapes. If *North by Northwest* is on one end of a spectrum, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is perhaps on the other. *Buffy* first aired in 1997 and ran for seven seasons, giving this program about a high school student who slays vampires with a little help from her friends a considerable amount of time to explore the potential of mundane-marvelous storytelling. Over seven seasons, *Buffy* accumulated roughly 103 hours in a literally mundane-marvelous universe, as opposed to the slightly over two hour running time of the metaphorical journey of *North by Northwest*.

*Buffy* follows a high school student named Buffy Summers who leads an ordinary life in Sunnydale, California, except for the fact that her school library stands directly on top of the Hellmouth (a portal into Hell with a dark energy that attracts all sorts of evil) and that Buffy herself is the Chosen One, the Slayer, destined to fight the forces of darkness while still expected to hand in her homework on time. The show revolves around Buffy’s ‘professional’ adventures combating evil and her ‘personal’ adventures navigating the trials and tribulations of being a teenager and later a college student. She does so with the help or hindrance of friends Willow and Xander, mentor Giles, and romantic partners: the vampire Angel, the college TA
Riley (who is secretly part of his own paramilitary demon fighting team), and lastly the vampire Spike. Often, *Buffy* uses the fantastic elements of each episode to bring out personal conflicts and issues, tackling the underlying themes of the show directly by taking them to fantastic extremes. “Hush,” *Buffy’s* first episode to be nominated for Emmys in writing and cinematography, is an excellent example. “Hush,” which aired on December 14, 1999, is the tenth episode of *Buffy’s* fourth season. Buffy has graduated high school and matriculated with Willow to the nearby UC Sunnydale, where she tentatively begins dating Riley. In this episode, a group of elegant fairytale villains known as The Gentlemen sweep into town and steal the voices of all of Sunnydale’s inhabitants so that no one may scream for help as The Gentlemen cut their victims’ hearts out. The main characters spend most of the episode unable to utter a single word, confronting their metaphorical inabilities to communicate with each other on a literal level.

The opening scene embodies how the show plays with literally transforming its landscapes and its metaphors. Buffy and Willow sit in their psychology class, listening to Professor Walsh lecture on the difference between spoken language and communication, the latter being “not the idea but the moment before the idea when it’s total, when it blossoms in your mind and connects to everything. [Communication is] about the thoughts and experiences that we don’t have a word for.” Though the actual psychological merit of this is questionable, the way the scene is filmed reflects visually what the professor is saying verbally. Joss Whedon, who wrote and directed “Hush,” does this first on a mundane and then on a marvelous level. As Professor Walsh expounds on unspoken communication, Buffy glances off-screen at Riley, her
eyes communicating where her attention lies. When Professor Walsh calls Buffy to the front of the room for “a demonstration,” Riley will be the one to follow Buffy with his eyes as she walks. Professor Walsh will then call on Riley for assistance, and as he moves to Buffy the professor will cast her own gaze on Riley, hinting at her unhealthy affection for him. I do not mean that each of these three characters simply looks at the other. Each character takes a moment to run his or her eyes up and down the object of their gaze, their unspoken thoughts reflected in their eyes. Professor Walsh’s words are coming true on the screen in subtle form. Already, Whedon is ‘staging’ the episode’s theme.

The sequence has gone in an unexpected direction, with Professor Walsh interrupting her lecture to instruct Buffy to lie down on her desk for a demonstration, but it remains firmly rooted in the mundane space of the classroom. This is emphasized by wide shots of Buffy’s fellow students at their desks and by an unusually audible undercurrent on the soundtrack of students muttering in reaction to the events. Then, Riley, summoned to assist, comes to the desk and awkwardly bends over Buffy. He assures her, “Don’t worry. If I kiss you, it will make the sun go down.” They start to kiss. As their lips touch, the camera cuts back to a wide shot, reemphasizing the strange nature of events by showing Buffy and Riley kissing in front of an amused and perplexed audience. Can this be real? The camera cuts back to Buffy and Riley. As they continue to kiss, music rises and darkness falls on their faces. Once again, the camera cuts back to a wider shot: Buffy and Riley sit up on the desk, alone in a darkened classroom. Buffy remarks: “Fortune favors the brave.”
In a mundane world, Riley’s statement would have had a metaphorical connotation. His kiss would make Buffy feel as though the sun had gone down, in the same way that someone might say: ‘when he kissed me, I saw fireworks.’ Instead, Riley’s action causes the sun to go down. He transforms the mundane environment, and the unexpected classroom kissing activity turns into an anti-expected magical moment. As promised by Professor Walsh, this moment does demonstrate the fantastic power of unspoken communication, to “[blossom] in your mind and [connect] to everything,” not metaphorically, but literally, indexically. The scene continues. Buffy hears a noise and follows it out into the hallway to find a little girl singing a disturbing children’s song about The Gentlemen. Riley comes up behind Buffy and touches her shoulder. When she turns around, the person touching her shoulder is not Riley but a gray-skinned Gentleman in a suit with an unsettling grin on his face. With that, Buffy wakes up, back in her seat in the psychology classroom.

This sequence, Buffy’s prophetic dream / vision, holds the key to the entire episode. Fortune favors the brave. Action speaks louder than words. In the scenes before The Gentlemen strike, the episode shows all of the characters dealing with the frustration of language failing them in some way: talk gets in the way of Buffy and Riley’s first real kiss, Willow attempts to join a Wicca group that is all talk and no real magic, Xander cannot express his feelings to his upset girlfriend Anya, etc. When the Gentlemen glide into town that night, the characters must learn to communicate without words. The inability to speak ends up providing them with solutions to many of their communication issues. Riley and Buffy kiss, Willow meets a fellow witch, Xander’s actions express the depth of his affection for Anya. These successes mirror
a larger underlying theme of many hybrid television shows; characters that balance professional and personal lives can often achieve in action what they cannot achieve through communication: the cop can save the day but not his marriage. In *Buffy*, as soon as the characters get their voices back, the advances they made during the silence lead to further complications. Riley and Buffy, each hiding a secret identity from the other, encounter each other while fighting The Gentlemen. When the episode ends they sit in silence, voices back but with no words to explain. Willow’s relationship with her newfound female witch friend Tara takes a subtly romantic turn as the season progresses, but the definition of this relationship, begun in silence, remains unspoken between the characters for many episodes to come. By making an extreme magical situation out of what is typically an underlying theme, “Hush” is able to depict important character traits and troubles that will persist throughout the season, while also reflexively commenting on the show’s generic hybridity.

Nor does the depiction of The Gentlemen detract from the episode’s power. While much of the episode focuses on language, the way the production team has designed The Gentlemen provides a disturbing contrast, drawing the spectators’ attention to body. These grey-skinned villains with overly large, lipless grins are quite gentlemanly monsters indeed. Floating serenely above the ground they glide in pairs through the town in black suits, politely applauding each other’s successes in cutting the hearts out of the townspeople. Each Gentleman is accompanied by a hunched,
straight-jacketed companion with an unseeing, heavily bandaged face, who flaps shakily along the ground after its floating master. These villains are unsettling because they visually embody the unknowable contradictions of Inverso’s Gothic and Carroll’s horror. “Hush” invokes classic Gothic tropes of doubles, of contradiction, of muteness, and of madness. The Gentlemen’s slow, smooth movement is contrasted with that of their straight-jacketed counterparts, who wander wildly. This duality suggests a separation between their methodical minds and their deranged bodily desire for violence. Though The Gentlemen are emphatically present in this episode, they do retain a Gothic sense of uncertainty. They are explained as monsters from a fairy tale seeking seven hearts, but this does not provide an answer as to why they are split into two creatures, or what they might do with the hearts. *Buffy* draws on tropes from the horror and Gothic genres to create a powerful visual image that does not defy description; it defies explanation. The Gentlemen show how a mundane-marvelous text can create the ontological dissonance of a Gothic tale through visual storytelling. “Hush” shows how making metaphors literal, one of the many means of transforming mundane spaces into marvelous ones, enables *Buffy* to explore important underlying themes of the show in direct and clever ways.

Though *North by Northwest* is metaphorically marvelous and *Buffy* literally so, both fictions start from a common premise. Each takes place in a very mundane environment, one that is designed to be familiar but not strictly verisimilar. Their worlds are recognizable because they employ easily identifiable stereotypes or symbols; they present the ‘real world’ as restrictive, limited and limiting to its
occupants, preparing the way for the revelation within the story that there is something beyond the reality the characters inhabit.

In *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill is an advertising man, a bachelor, and a ladies man; divorced twice, his only lasting relationship is an overtly Oedipal dependency on his castrating mother. Thornhill’s status as an advertiser would be an “instant criticism of [his] masculinity” for the film’s 1950s audiences (Cohan 20). In the 1950s, “advertising … revised what had been presumed to be an absolute gender divide: masculine production versus feminine consumption” (Cohan 19). Advertising men produce nothing, selling images and ideas only: false pictures and false promises that falsify, commodify, and feminize reality. As such, the blatantly immature Thornhill floats through life, failing to fully commit to any kind of masculinity or even to his own advertisements. For example, he spends the opening minutes of the film rattling off a pack of lies that fool no one. Late to a business meeting, he drags his secretary with him for the length of the trip to continue dictation, coming up with a note he acknowledges to be lame to send to his girlfriend, using a trick to steal a taxi from a man who realizes he is being tricked, telling his secretary to inform his mother how much he will have drunk before meeting her that night so she will not have an occasion to catch him in a lie. All of his lies revolve around comestible commodities: he orders sweets for his girlfriend’s “sweet parts,” blames his secretary’s eating habits for her resistance to doing as he wishes, knows in advance exactly how many drinks he will be having that night, believes in ‘thinking thin.’ Thornhill’s failure to commit to anything real and his preoccupation with commodities will later come back to bite him when the villains fail even to believe
his identity as Thornhill and he will be forced to flee through a both menacingly and
iconically exaggerated America.

From the start the film’s narrative sets up Thornhill’s life as inauthentic and
superficial. Visually, the New York space that he occupies is also a superficial
simulation. North by Northwest opens not on an image of an actual space, but upon a
green screen that fills with intersecting lines. This abstract green grid, reminiscent
perhaps of an advertisement template, fades into the mirrored grid of a skyscraper, a
real space emerging from a two-dimensional design. The skyscraper is an actual,
three-dimensional space, but one that refracts another, off-screen space, reflecting and
yet distorting mirror images of cars on the streets below. This image fades into a
series of shots that depict people traveling but not going anywhere or achieving
anything real: exiting and entering doors, going up and down stairs, arguing over
taxi, and, in Hitchcock’s obligatory cameo, missing the bus. These brief snippets hint
at the idea that New York life in general has become commodified and feminized just
as Thornhill’s has, particularly in the image of the two shopping-bag-laden ladies
fighting over a taxi. Thornhill’s journey over the course of the film is often seen as a
maturation narrative, an ordeal that allows him to escape from this limiting, artificial
life he has constructed for himself as he defeats the various exaggerated picture
postcard landscapes that attack him and contemplates leaving his bachelor lifestyle,
and his mother, for a real marriage with a real woman: Eve Kendall.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer exemplifies the mundane-marvelous text’s ability to
make literal the metaphor of its setting, high school as hell. For the first three seasons,
Buffy lives in one of the most recognizably restricted landscapes of American
television: high school. She is always running up against the litany of things that teenagers cannot do, such as go out late at night or skip class. Of course, the restrictiveness of Buffy’s mundane world is magnified by the fact that if her mom does ground her and prevent her from going out late at night, it actually will be the end of the world. From the very beginning, the show “mixes teen dramas and supernatural forces” in ways that “[allow] their themes to reinforce each other” (Mittell 240). The first season especially, but other seasons as well, explore the many ways in which the supernatural can bring out the ordinary dramas in teen life through visually transforming bodies, playing off of traditional horror tropes. For example: some people will kill to get on the cheerleading squad, school bullies can be packs of wild animals, anyone you meet over the internet might secretly be a real monster, being ignored in high school can make you invisible, steroids will really mess with your body chemistry, once you give in and have sex with a guy he’ll lose interest and possibly his soul. Animal possession and Internet demons afford Buffy an excuse to approach episodes centered around classic high school conundrums in a new and playful manner, opening the way for the spectator to recognize and contemplate the issues presented, and to enjoy the often tongue-in-cheek explorations of these conventional high school escapades.

*Buffy* also frequently uses these combinations to reflexively engage with its own televisuality. Beyond its constant references to other television shows (Buffy’s friends call themselves the Scooby Gang), the show asks questions like: What would an episode of television be like if the characters could not talk? What if it were a musical? What would Buffy’s universe look like without Buffy in it? What if it were
all a hallucination? What if Buffy acquired a sister in the fifth season as though she had been there all along? Through its seven seasons, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* challenges and reinvents itself, using fantasy to avoid the repetition inherent in a long-lasting series. For example, episode thirteen of season three, “The Zeppo,” cheekily provides a commentary on Buffy’s use of fantasy and high school tropes by looking at Buffy’s world from an outside perspective. The episode follows Xander, who is upset about his lack of cool and his lack of an important role within his group of demon-defeating friends. Xander’s quest for cool evolves into an iconic high school growth story (only with magic) as he gets a cool car, has sex for the first time, conquers bad boy bullies (who happen to be undead), and finally gains self-assurance. Meanwhile, viewers only catch glimpses of what would ordinarily take up a full episode: the rest of the Scooby Gang rushing to stop a cult of demons from ending the world and nearly sacrificing their lives to do so. Viewed from the outside, the high stakes and emotional tension of this plotline come across as extremely melodramatic. Whereas in other *Buffy* episodes the use of fantasy tends to justify and uplift the high school storyline into something innovative or ironic, “The Zeppo” reverses this hierarchy.

I would argue that the fact that *North by Northwest* operates on a metaphorical level and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on a literal one does not rigidly separate the two texts. Both present limiting, restrictive worlds that their main characters must transcend and both use marvelous techniques to emphasize the underlying themes of their narratives. Admittedly, each one treats space very differently to bring out thematic issues in its story. *North by Northwest* spans the country as Thornhill
journeys from place to place he has never been before. There are many scenes that unfold in cars or on trains, and Hitchcock ensures the swiftly moving world is always visible through windows. As in the opening sequence, though, much of this traveling effectively brings the characters nowhere. They are never able to use transportation as intended: schemes to kill Thornhill using a car or a plane fail, Thornhill’s attempt to get police to drive him to the station fails, the villain Vandamm fails to take off for Europe. Thornhill’s entire journey to find the mysterious spy George Kaplan is really a wild goose chase in pursuit of an empty name on hotel registers. Thornhill is pursuing an identity that does not exist across a landscape composed of excessively exaggerated American images in a film with a title that Hitchcock selected “primarily because there is no such direction” (qtd. in Morris 201).

Hitchcock creates a story that spans a vast space without going anywhere, reflecting his characters’ entanglement in a maze of mistaken identities. Thornhill may be trying to prove his identity by finding George Kaplan, but his identity is rather uncertain to begin with. Midway through the film, Thornhill remarks unconcernedly to Eve that his initials are his trademark, R.O.T., and that the O stands for nothing. The further Thornhill goes to prove himself, the more he ends up playing a role. He escapes one situation by playing a disorderly drunk and another by staging his own death. Vandamm accuses him of over-playing his many parts, from innocent man to fugitive to peevish lover. Eve’s identity is also constantly changing. Her initial seductress attitude is revealed to be part of a trap set up by the bad guys, and then her identity as Vandamm’s mistress is also revealed to be a sham, as she is the secret secret agent. Thornhill and Eve are not only malleable figures, but commodified ones.
Richard Millington analyzes their meeting on the train as a “commercial … as the scene unfolds, the predictable innuendos [of their conversation] develop a ‘scripted’ quality, which the actors acknowledge … Thornhill’s delight at being in the middle of a story he must have sold many times is tempered by a certain incredulity about how smoothly it’s all going” (140-141). He is right to worry. Eve is selling him her seduction under orders from Vandamm; their encounter not only rings false, but also is an actual lie. I think it is no coincidence that the MacGuffin (a central yet essentially meaningless object that helps drive the plot) that Hitchcock chose for this film is a statuette of a human figure with microfilm hidden inside of it.

*North by Northwest* does tell the story of “a male’s movement in the direction of maturation that became a prerequisite for marriage,” but no Hitchcock film can every be quite that neatly described (Morris 199). Hitchcock’s use of extremely exaggerated marvelous spaces, of travel that gets characters nowhere in a film named after a non-existent direction, and of layer upon layer of deceptive identities all combine to suggest that Hitchcock wants the deeper problems of his film to remain unresolved. From start to finish, all of the film’s landscapes are larger-than-life in some way, from Thornhill’s hectic New York home all the way to Mount Rushmore, and any “true alternative to this charade-world is not easy to find within the film” (Morris 206). Though Thornhill may outgrow his immature lifestyle and his desire to create advertising images like the ones that have just attacked him, America still suffers from the same over-saturation of consumerism that he propagated. As I said earlier in this chapter, Hitchcock pits Thornhill against challenges so fantastic that Thornhill just barely manages to navigate each one, often submitting his character to
humiliating solutions, hiding in a tiny overhead compartment on the train, throwing himself in front of a truck, pretending to be drunk and disorderly. He never quite triumphs over his surroundings, not even in the final climactic sequence on Mount Rushmore. At the end of the film, the final villain has been dispatched by the authorities and all Thornhill has to do is pull Eve, dangling over the edge of the cliff, to safety. Instead of allowing the scene to run its course, Hitchcock match cuts from Thornhill dramatically pulling Eve up to safety on the cliff to his pulling her up onto the bed of their honeymoon sleeper car. Yet Hitchcock does not allow this scene to play out either. Thornhill has never come into a fully masculine identity over the course of the film, and Hitchcock gives the film’s final phallic moment over to an image of the train shooting into a tunnel. These sudden jumps destabilize narrative closure, not fully validating Thornhill’s newfound maturity or his happy union with Eve. With this, he leaves Thornhill’s personal quest for identity unfinished. Hitchcock uses the dual landscapes of his mundane-marvelous film to tell two stories, one of Thornhill’s maturation and one that undermines his journey by presenting a world where everything is metaphorical and nothing is quite real.

*North by Northwest*’s expansive journey stands in contrast to *Buffy*, which unfolds in a “nodal” universe (Gwenllian-Jones 90). It remains within “a stable, contained setting,” though its “portal format” enables the show to “[open] the localized world onto an alternate reality” (Gwenllian-Jones 90). Still, the alternate reality remains local; Buffy rarely leaves Sunnydale and serious ramifications occur when she does. Unlike *Through the Looking Glass* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which involve mundane characters tumbling into a marvelous universe, Buffy stays
within a confined mundane space that is itself invaded or transformed by outside
forces. She battles the marvelous on her home ground in ways that affect and interfere
with her attempts at a normal life. In a way, *North by Northwest*’s journeys, which go
everywhere and nowhere at once, reflect *Buffy*’s own liminal home space, always
transforming and yet always staying the same.

Buffy and Thornhill both have problematic identities, straddling the boundary
between mundane and marvelous, masculine and feminine. In order for Buffy’s
universe to remain stable, she must continually straddle the line between being her
mundane feminine self and being a demon fighter, traditionally a male role.

Whedon’s initial idea for creating *Buffy* came out of a desire to invert the character of
“the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror
movie” (Billson 24). Buffy struggles to balance both sides; she remains a feminine
‘little blonde girl’ with aspirations to cheerlead, but with the responsibilities and
strength of a Slayer. She is the ordinary teenage girl entrusted with saving the world.

Though Buffy has the physical power to overcome all that is thrown her way, often
she feels emotionally not up to the challenge, and a recurring motif in earlier seasons
is for her to attempt to run away. Trouble arises when Buffy puts her own desires
first,9 both in attempting to evade her slayer duties and in occasionally enjoying them
too much. First and foremost she must act as a protector of the innocent. Ultimately,
the show rewards her most for making personal sacrifices motivated by a desire to
help her friends. In the first season, Willow’s fear motivates Buffy to stay in
Sunnydale and fight the Master, a vampire destined to kill her. Though she does die,

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9 Much as Buffy stands as an example of empowered femininity, the show struggles with her sexuality. To my knowledge, every time she has sex, disaster results (Angel loses his soul, Professor Walsh tries to kill her, etc.). The sexual assertiveness of rival Slayer Faith is also persistently pathologized.
mouth-to-mouth is able to revive her. In the third season she skips her prom to fight
demons trained to attack tuxedos in order to provide her friends the iconic high school
night they deserve. The episode ends with the senior class bestowing upon Buffy a
‘class protector’ award, the first open acknowledgement of the significant role she
plays in Sunnydale.

In early episodes of *Buffy*, the show operated under the premise that the
denizens of Sunnydale failed to see what was right in front of them, dismissing
vampires as gang members on acid. By the third season, *Buffy* began to open up the
possibility that the magical and often deadly events of each episode do have a lasting
impact on the town. She goes from fighting vampires in the first two seasons to
fighting the town’s mayor in the third season, and several of the episodes begin to
explore the ramifications that living in a mundane-marvelous space has on the town’s
other inhabitants. In “Gingerbread” Buffy’s mother forms her own group of
concerned townspeople in response to the supernatural death of two children. In “The
Wish” one character wishes that Buffy had never come to Sunnydale, and is greeted
with an alternate Sunnydale universe overrun by vampires, its living inhabitants
forced to abandon the mundane lives Buffy had allowed them to leave in exchange
for a world of harsh rules and heavy death tolls. By the end of season three, it is not
Buffy alone who defeats the seasonal villain, as she has done in the two prior season
finales, but the entire high school senior class working together. Where Thornhill is
alone and isolated in his struggles, *Buffy* explores the ramifications of how the
marvelous affects her entire nodal universe.
Television history is populated with shows about families and familial groups of friends and co-workers. Buffy fights with her team of friends for her extended community of Sunnydale. As Buffy struggles to balance her domestic life with her demon fighting, many of the other characters struggle with their own balancing acts, particularly the show’s sympathetic demons, such as the vampire Angel with his soul, the vampire Spike with a chip in his brain that stops him from hurting humans (and eventually a soul of his own), and the demon Anya who loses her powers. The sympathetic demon characters are allowed to become involved romantically with the human characters, but can never successfully balance their demonic and domestic sides enough to fully integrate into the group. Though Anya falls for Xander, she has no understanding of social groups and no desire for them, awkwardly tolerating Xander’s friends as they awkwardly tolerate her and her frequent disclosures of private information in public. Spike may be more socially nuanced, but he actively dislikes the Scooby Gang, only joining them out of a need for his own protection. Angel, Buffy’s first love, comes the closet to being accepted as a member before it is revealed how impossible his integration is; one pure moment of sexual happiness with Buffy and he looses his soul, goes on a sadistic rampage, and kills a major character. Though he gains his soul back, he never fully regains the other characters’ trust, and eventually leaves the series for his own series, Angel. When the human characters venture too far into marvelous territory, ramifications are also dire. When Faith, a fellow slayer and the embodiment of what Buffy would be if she took erotic pleasure in her work, kills a man and then betrays Buffy, she winds up in a coma. When Willow becomes too deeply involved in magic, it costs her Tara and nearly destroys
the world. Buffy’s position in a mundane-marvelous universe allows the show to explore the consequences of a character’s actions, because it can make the outcome so magically extreme. Unlike on a more mundane television show, characters can never do something and get away with it. Magic allows the show to amplify and explore all its characters’ actions and choices. Just as the Sunnydale swim team cannot get away with taking steroids without turning into hideous fish monsters, Buffy cannot sleep with Angel without costing him his soul, she cannot shirk her responsibilities without ending the world, and her friends cannot endanger the group dynamic without facing some serious supernatural consequence. This is one of the powers of the literalized metaphor. **Buffy** can magnify the consequences of any given action, allowing the show to explore all the various ramifications to both comedic and serious ends, developing the show’s underlying themes and character relationships as it does so.

Though *North by Northwest* is a film and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a television show, theatrical stories find just as much potential in staging the supernatural as this film and this television show do. To offer a quick case-in-point, take *Angels in America*, playwright Tony Kushner’s six-hour ‘gay fantasia on national themes,’ written in the early 1990s. It follows the story of Prior Walter, a gay man in the 1980s with AIDS who may or may not also be a prophet with divine visions, and the many other characters in his life, such as the Mormon couple Harper and Joe, Prior’s ex-lover Louis and friend Belize, and historical figures Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg. Like *North by Northwest, Angels* deals with questions of America’s national identity and constructs a visual landscape that uses fantasy to suggest the
country’s in-authenticity. *North by Northwest* playfully flaunts real spaces in a way as to make them feel unrealistic and artificial, ideological locations as opposed to physical ones. *Angels in America* denies America’s reality as a place altogether. In the opening scene, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* asserts, “You do not live in America. No such place exists,” as America is a place built out of the journeys of immigrants (Kushner 10). Kushner also negates his own fantasy. His title comes from a character’s statement that “there are no angels in America” (*Perestroika* 92). Kushner builds a world out of failed performances. The marvelous events in his play come across as somewhat unsuccessfully theatrical. The Angel flies in with her “wires show[ing]” and Prior remarks, “Very Steven Spielberg” (Kushner, *Millennium* 5, 118; emphasis in original). Prior attempts to flash back to the Angel’s visit and gets interrupted by his friend’s comments. Harper attempts to live in her hallucination of Antarctica and ends up on a park bench having chewed through a tree. Late in the play, Harper and Prior meet in Heaven, which is “supposed to look like San Francisco,” but apparently this heavenly landscape, though heavenly, bears little resemblance to the “unspeakable beauty” of the original (Kushner, *Perestroika* 63). This choice of words is apt; throughout the play characters attempt performances of America, but the place is ‘unspeakable,’ un-reproducible, non-existent. Harper and Prior sit in the Mormon Visitor’s Center to watch a diorama of the historical Mormon pilgrimage across America, but Harper mocks it after every line, and then Prior’s ex-lover Louis appears in the middle of it to drag off the dummy being played by Harper’s husband. As Prior’s friend Belize, who calls America “just big ideas, and stories,” points out: “the white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he
was doing” when “he set the word ‘free’ to a note so high nobody can reach it” (Kushner, Perestroika 96). If *North by Northwest* constructs its landscapes out of advertisements gone bad, *Angels in America* reflects the hollowness of our preconceptions about America and the escapist power of fantasy by creating a play filled with failed performances and failed attempts at fantasy.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s use of fantasy to amplify the consequences of peoples’ actions has a long theatrical history. In Elizabethan times, actors performed plays on bare stages with no sets and no CGI, and Shakespeare often used magical elements to explore how characters react in extreme situations. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the fairy Puck accidentally switches around the affections of a group of four lovers, and Shakespeare uses this opportunity to explore how these friends turn against each other and reveal long held grievances and grudges. Puck gives a donkey’s head to another character, Nick Bottom, the amateur performer, and the comedy of this scene is in the physical realization of what has been true all along: Bottom is an ass. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare invokes the ghost of Hamlet’s dead father to offer the prince of Denmark definitive proof that his uncle murdered the king for his crown and his queen. The rest of the play concentrates on Hamlet’s own internal debate as to whether or not to act on the information he has received, to be or not to be. In *Macbeth*, though the witches pronounce their predictions of success unto Macbeth, it is he and his wife who do the deeds that make these fantastic predictions into realities. Over the course of the play, Shakespeare explores the effect their actions and choices have on their bodies and their minds. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the ones who inflict the bodily and mental transformations upon themselves that
eventually cause their downfall. Lady Macbeth makes the decision to call for “you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here” (I.v.38-39). She herself chooses to eradicate her own humanity and to assist Macbeth in murder, and after the deed is done she will drive herself insane. The metaphorical blood on her hands becomes literal in her mind, and she is unable to wash it off. Macbeth will also be plagued by visions of daggers and dead men. While committing the murder of the king, he will find that his decisions have rendered him unable to say Amen to prayers. Lady Macbeth will end the play by taking her own life, and Macbeth will find death at the hands of another unnatural character, Macduff, who was “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped” (V.vii.53-54). Shakespeare uses fantasy to push his characters into extreme situations that allow them to reveal their true natures as ordinary circumstances might not.

To revisit the questions raised in the beginning of this chapter, are mundane-marvelous stories at a disadvantage because they must visually depict fantasy? Are these stories actually the least marvelous when they most directly portray their subject matter? What is “the drawback of staging the supernatural” (Inverso 6)? I hope to show in this chapter, and the rest of this thesis, that there is no inherent drawback to staging the supernatural. Fantastic visuals can be just as complex as fantastic literature, and though we tend to think of fantasy as being limited to fantasy stories, the marvelous is just as much a quantitative genre as a qualitative one. Many non-marvelous stories employ expressive, non-realist techniques to depict realistic spaces. Artists who do stage or film mundane-marvelous stories have developed an enormous number of techniques to visually transform the landscapes of their story worlds.
There is no one way to depict or not depict fantasy, and the choices made in how any given story presents its mundane landscape and transforms it will often reflect larger themes and issues in the text. *North by Northwest*’s pastiche of American iconography reflects its characters personal struggles with finding ‘real’ identities. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s use of metaphors-made-literal allows the show to dramatically and playfully explore the themes of a conventional high school setting. As the series progresses it tackles larger issues, from characters’ development to its position as a television series. *Jaws* created a mundane world imbued with the threat of a marvelous monster by hiding this monster from sight, but *North by Northwest* flaunts its exaggerated, near-marvelous landscapes to create suspense. Artists and authors and spectators invoke the marvelous to aid in describing the real world with every metaphor. Mundane-marvelous stories simply take this kind of description to the next level, both narratively and visually, to create many fantastically successful stories.
Classifying the Classics:
The Problem of Realism in *Death of a Salesman*, *Our Town*, and *The Cherry Orchard*

A preliminary sketch for Jo Mielziner’s set design for the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*. (From an exhibition on Mielziner’s designs at the Wake Forest University Fine Arts Gallery, 1997, courtesy of Jules Fisher NFS)

In the previous chapter, I talked about the efficacy of staging the supernatural … in a horror movie, a thriller, and a teen melodrama. Even without the explicitly marvelous elements, it would be hard to say that *Jaws, North by Northwest*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*\(^\text{10}\) aim for ‘realism.’ As I discussed earlier, all three narratives emphasize the overly limiting, stereotypical nature of their environments and use the marvelous to transcend these restrictions. They take place in recognizable but not realist settings, a beach in New England, a prairie in Illinois, a high school in California. In general, the horror, thriller, and melodrama modes deal with exaggerated circumstances, both in narrative and in style. Staging the supernatural enables *North by Northwest* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to tell certain stories in part because these texts are already located in genres that share a border with fantasy; even when a melodrama does not involve vampires, few people would be inclined to describe it as realistic. Furthermore, though my three examples are acclaimed within their genres, horror, thrillers, and melodramas do not have the best critical reputations. They are typically understood as low cultural forms meant for mass audiences, “amusement art … predicated on raising a specifiable affect [an emotion] in the audience” such as fear, suspense, or pathos (N. Carroll, *Mass Art* 56-57). Fantasy also generally gets dismissed as escapism. Today the plays of William Shakespeare as well as those of Tony Kushner may be considered high art examples of staging the supernatural, but Shakespeare was not considered an exclusively ‘high’ artist until after his death, and Kushner takes an ironic look at fantasy’s failures, showing the strings and harnesses that hold his angels hovering in the air. Few would

\(^{10}\) *Buffy* is actually a hybrid of horror and teen drama, but both the horror genre and the teen drama (which dates back to soap opera melodramas) are exaggerated, non-realist modes.
apply the same standards of evaluation to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as to the plays of a canonical realist like Henrik Ibsen.

Then again, as I said in the introduction, the term realism is notably overburdened; with no set application, it is used equally to celebrate and to condemn. It is not the most reliable standard of evaluation. For instance, one would assume that any play given the designation of realism, regardless of what kind of realism, would not have fantastical elements in it. Upon closer examination, though, many plays or playwrights discussed in connection with realism do not fit neatly into that category. Some playwrights deliberately insert fantastic elements into their texts. *Our Town*’s third act takes place in the world of the dead. Chekhov interrupts *The Cherry Orchard*’s second act with the inexplicable sound of a breaking string. August Wilson ends *Fences* by allowing Troy’s mentally ill, would-be prophet brother to actually open the gates of heaven. Tennessee Williams originally included titles and images in his script that he wanted projected onto the set of his “memory play,” *The Glass Menagerie* (1041). Eugene O’Neill often chose to adapt mythical subject matter to contemporary settings, as in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms*. The original *New York Times* review of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* hailed it as “a form of epic literature” and as “tragedy” (Atkinson 138, 139). In some plays, characters mentally construct fantastic worlds. Willy Loman’s confused memories control the scene changes of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche desperately reinvents the details of her life, attempting to construct an illusory world for herself, and the audience often hears the music inside her mind. Fifteen years after *Streetcar*, Edward Albee wrote about a couple named
George and Martha who invented an entire life for their imaginary son in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* These plays can just as well be classified as Symbolist, expressionist, or out-and-out fantastic as they can be classified as realist. They are all hybrid works, mixes of the mundane and the marvelous. What do critics mean when they label any given play realist?

Henrik Ibsen is a case in point of how the values behind the term realism change. When Ibsen’s *Ghosts* premiered in 1882, critics responded with outrage to his unsettling tale of a family torn apart by morbid secrets and to his rejection of melodramatic construction and presentation. One reviewer lamented that Ibsen’s new style “now wants to offer us … what it calls ‘truth,’ that is to say the naked, even stark naked reality in its most repellent form. It wants to smash all illusions, all so-called ideals” (qtd. in Moi 92). Critics were unused to the kind of plays that Ibsen wrote. He very deliberately challenged philosophical and aesthetic conventions of the time to tell many of his most famous stories, such as *Ghosts, A Doll’s House,* and *Hedda Gabler,* refusing to create an aesthetically beautiful and uplifting vision of life, as was “a more or less compulsory master discourse about literature and art” in the 1800s (Moi 82). If Ibsen’s art concerned itself with ugly truths, it was therefore ugly art. Ibsen’s interest in experimenting with elements that would come to be known as realist, such as unresolved or unhappy endings, the use of the fourth wall, and socially relevant subject matter, was widely seen as both a dramatic and moral failure, setting off waves of censure and censorship.

Luckily for Ibsen, his radical departure from the idealist conventions of his day took hold, and his contribution to this shift in theatrical practice earned him “an
unquestioned status as a classic of the stage” (Moi 1). Unluckily for Ibsen, he may have succeeded too well. Ibsen’s realism, in his day a daring and innovative challenge to conventional forms of artistic practice, became the style that modernist artists began to rebel against half a century later. Modernists framed realism as the enemy, “as at once formally naïve and historically passé, and in any case as incompatible with modernism” (Moi 2). Ibsen went from detestable portrayer of naked reality to “boring old realist” (Moi 2). Ibsen scholar Toril Moi points out that there is “a case of historical amnesia” over why Ibsen gained his status within the theatrical canon in the first place, as so many now regard him as stodgy and “incapable of self-conscious metatheatrical reflection” (2). Bertolt Brecht, the paragon of metatheatrical reflection, rejected *Ghosts* out of hand “as irrelevant to an age that had invented a cure for syphilis” (Moi 100).  

Now that the idealism Ibsen challenged has ceased to dominate art or philosophy, “we are no longer able to see that *Ghosts* is not just about family sickness and family secrets, but about aesthetic norms” (Moi 94). Ibsen went from being ridiculed for his shocking, morally bankrupt innovations to being ridiculed because his innovations are not aesthetically innovative enough. Today, academics focus on Ibsen’s subject matter or his place in the history of women’s rights, and retroactively dismiss his performative experimentation as ‘boring.’

Two playwrights in particular stand out to me as sharing the same unfortunate fate as Ibsen. When academics write about Arthur Miller and Thornton Wilder today, particularly about their Pulitzer Prize winning plays *Death of a Salesman* and *Our Town*, they focus almost entirely on content rather than form. Miller suffers from “the

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11 This is ironic, inasmuch as the 1882 reviewer who felt *Ghosts* “wanted to smash all illusions, all so-called ideals” could easily have been talking about Brecht’s own aims (qtd. in Moi 92).
perception of his work as an outmoded form of social realism” (Kakutani AR1).

Miller himself has been dismissed, much like Ibsen, as “a preachy, pompous, and, yes, portentous writer who belongs … to a middlebrow, premodernist past” (Kakutani AR1). Most critics regard Thornton Wilder as “a purveyor of a Norman Rockwell-like vision of America … totally out of touch with the dark realities of human existence” (Bryer 4, 11). He is another playwright tarred with the brush of “social realism,” and “even Arthur Miller calls [Our Town] … ‘an idyll of the past’” (Bunge 349, 353). Technically, social realism is a neutral term for “realism with a political conscience,” a movement very popular during the Depression (Jacobus 888). Yet academics and journalistic critics appear to use the term more often for plays that, in their opinion, fail in some way to offer a successful social commentary, particularly plays that seek to teach the audience a specific social message. According to critics, these plays, while realistic, are moralistic and didactic, and therefore bad.

Reflecting back on Death of a Salesman after the opening of its 50th anniversary Broadway revival, New York Times literary critic Michiko Kakutani wrote, “both the play and its author have maintained a less than stellar reputation among many highbrow critics” with “Salesman … debunked as a didactic commentary on the bankruptcy of the American dream of success” (AR1). Since Salesman’s debut, a debate has raged over what status to assign the play. Theatrical scholar Lois Gordon explains that “the intellectual sophisticate … has belabored Death of a Salesman to no end with two questions: Is the play primarily a socio-political criticism of American culture, or, does Willy Loman fall far enough to be a tragic figure?” (98). Arthur Miller himself spurred this debate on initially by writing a
short piece calling for Willy to be regarded as a tragic hero, but his call for an expansion of the ways in which we classify plays actually contributed to a very narrow interpretation of *Salesman*. The debate frames the play as either a tragedy or something that “falls short of tragedy” because it is too mired in “social realism” (Welland 19). Dennis Welland, an authority on Miller, points out that locating tragedy and social drama on opposing sides implies “that the mixture of social drama and tragedy is unintentional, and … if Miller had only been clear-minded enough to concentrate on one … a better play would have resulted” (19). Furthermore, both sides frame main character Willy Loman as a symbolic figure and as the only figure of interest in the play, forestalling examinations of the characters from different angles. The debate around *Death of a Salesman* admits only two interpretations of the play, one that focuses on its content as offering a didactic social commentary, and one that focuses on how its form either emulates or fails to emulate a tragic structure.

By contrast, *Our Town* seems to get categorized as social realism because its content and message are too sweet. Academics and critics alike dismiss the play as an overly sentimental depiction of the past as “a lost golden age” (Bunge 353).

According to Nancy Bunge, author of “The Social Realism of *Our Town*: A Study in Misunderstanding”:

Clive Barnes describes it as ‘a literary dream with wish fulfillment truths’ (38). Harold Clurman says the play is ‘a memorial to the myth of the sweet past in rural America’ … some critics even manage to forget the last act [set at a funeral], as does Anthony Hilfer: ‘Wilder merely mirrors the refuge of the collective American psyche; a
simplified and idealized small town, a not too spacious womb in which
the realities of time, history, and death can be evaded’ (Bunge 353).

If *Death of a Salesman* is considered too blatant a socio-political critique of
*America, Our Town* seems to be considered not enough of one.

Perhaps looking at a playwright received positively for his realism will help
elucidate why *Death of a Salesman* and *Our Town* fall so short. Anton Chekhov is
one such playwright, celebrated for his form as well as his content. Stanislavsky saw
in Chekhov’s plays a platform from which to explore stage naturalism, particularly in
terms of lighting and sound: “Chekhov needed twilight, sunrise, storm, rain … the
striking of the hour, the chirping of crickets, the tolling of bells” (195). In his book on
Chekhov’s plays, Richard Gilman recalls a *New York Times* review of a Chekhov
play in which Brooks Atkinson declared “the plays hadn’t ‘been written at all’ but
were simply *there*, ‘as life exists, without conscious purpose or design’” (167;
emphasis in original). Gilman writes that *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, gives the
impression “that this is *the way things happen*” in life by creating scenes of “loose,
unplanned, serio-comic behavior, without immediate discernible causes or
explanations” (240; emphasis in original). In Gilman’s eyes, Chekhov does not
succeed because he has more successfully pulled off a social critique than Miller or
Wilder, but because he has avoided politics altogether in favor of a more complex
style without a clear message. Chekhov’s plays defy easy description, lacking
“immediate discernible causes or explanations” and “conscious purpose or design”
(Gilman 240, 167). The critics who applaud these attributes in Chekhov’s plays deem
them lifelike. Yet when critics dislike Chekhov’s plays, they cite these same stylistic
elements and deem them “failed naturalism” (Senelick, “Stuffed Seagulls” 287). Some complain that the seemingly unconnected and unplanned events of his plays come off as too random and too bizarre, or that the atmosphere Stanislavsky found perfect for his crickets and bells proves too atmospheric. In writing about the critical reception of Chekhov’s plays, Chekhov authority Laurence Senelick notes that “commentators referred to his dramas as ‘the most undramatic plays in the world,’ their dominant note one ‘of gloom, depression and hopelessness’” (“Stuffed Seagulls” 286). A 1911 review “concluded that the play was ‘a slice of life comedy, but the life was very foreign and the slice rather big’” (Handley 566). For many, the term “‘Chekhovian’ has come to mean the twilight zone, a dim and moody penumbra peopled by feckless and maundering eccentrics” (Senelick, “Stuffed Seagulls” 287). Chekhov may be celebrated for his realism in some circles, but he is just as easily condemned for those same techniques in others.

Clearly, Chekhov is no ‘better’ at achieving realism than Miller or Wilder, but his methods are more frequently praised. His often commented-on complexity might provide a key to the positive reception of his work. In his book *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, philosopher Noël Carroll examines the basis up for the hierarchical separation of high art from low in aesthetic philosophy and cultural criticism. He argues that for most modern philosophers high art, or “genuine art,” means “difficult art”: aesthetic works that appeal to a restricted audience (97). While critics find it hard to perceive a particular message in Chekhov’s work, Wilder openly admits that he had a message in mind for *Our Town*: to encourage spectators to live in the moment, “to find a value above all price for the smallest
events in life” (*Writings* 686). Far from being difficult to discern, this message is explicitly spelled out in the play. In terms of popularity, Chekhov’s works are frequently produced, but not in comparison to a play like *Our Town*. CBS News Sunday Morning reports that *Our Town* is America’s most produced play, garnering an average of 400 productions a year (“Lasting Impact”). Ironically, though 4,000 productions of *Our Town* went up in the past ten years alone, *American Drama Colonial to Contemporary*, the “only currently in-print anthology of American drama,” took Wilder off its list in the 1990s (Wheatley 21). *Our Town*’s popularity, signaling its easy accessibility, may have cost it its academic reputation. Similarly, the frequently produced *Death of a Salesman* is thought by many to be one of the great American plays, but only a “middlebrow” one (Kakutani AR1). Not only are *Our Town* and *Death of a Salesman* considered popular, accessible pleasures and high school level shows, but also they fall into another mass art category. Along with horror films, thrillers, and melodramas, *Salesman* and *Our Town* elicit very strong emotions: they are “sob-stuff” (N. Carroll, *Mass Art* 56). The legendary director Elia Kazan remembers the original production of *Death of a Salesman* as “the only play I ever directed where men in the audience cried” (1193). *Our Town*’s third act jerks so many tears out of its audience members that “some critics accuse Wilder of manipulating his audience into this inappropriate emotional response” (Bunge 355). The idea that reason and emotion are antithetical has never been unambiguously transcended in Western thinking; how can plays that manipulate audience members into such knee-jerk emotional responses be stimulating them on an intellectual level? If *Salesman* and
Our Town are so accessible to audiences as to cause tears and be deemed appropriate for high school productions, they must not be as complex or deep as The Cherry Orchard.

I do not think that accessibility is the sole reason for the problematic reputations of Miller and Wilder, but I think it does play a role. Many scholars talk about Death of a Salesman, Our Town, and even The Cherry Orchard in ways that close down avenues for further interpretation, particularly in the attempt to frame each play as a success or failure at realism. I would argue that perhaps one reason that critics often find fault with these plays when trying to fit them to the rubric of realism is because none of the playwrights wrote their plays as specifically ‘realist’ projects. Upon further examination, Death of a Salesman, Our Town, and Chekhov’s plays are all more complex and less realist, socially or otherwise, than academics often suggest.

For the rest of this chapter, I would like to take a closer look at Death of a Salesman, Our Town, and The Cherry Orchard in order to offer readings of these plays as complex and as hybrid works, and to look at three productions that have paid specific attention to this hybridity in their staging and won critical acclaim for their efforts.

Death of a Salesman

Though Arthur Miller’s 1949 play can function as a social critique of consumerism and the American Dream, this was only part of Miller’s inspiration to write the story. His initial concept for staging the play shows how far from social realism he was focused. Miller wanted to explore Willy Loman’s psyche, his subjective experience of the world as his mind slowly falls apart; the idea came out of an image Miller had of “an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which
would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man’s head. In fact, *The Inside of His Head was the first title*” (qtd. in Jacobus 1128). The title changed, but the idea remained the same. What the audience sees on stage is not only Willy’s present-day life, but also his memories and dreams superimposed over his current reality.

*Death of a Salesman* could be described as having a flashback structure. In the 1940s, especially in film noir, flashbacks were common structural devices. Traditionally, the present-day plot would pause, and perhaps the camera would zoom in on an actor’s face to make clear a flashback was about to begin. The flashback would occur, showing a scene exactly as it unfolded in the past, and then the present-day storyline would resume. This is not the route that Miller took. Instead, *Salesman’s* plot structure is as messy as Willy’s mind. He is in control of neither his life nor his memories and his internal confusion translates into a spiraling narrative structure in which the spectator is just as caught up in Willy’s subjectivity as he is.

The first time a flashback occurs is in the first scene of the play. Willy has returned home after failing to reach his next sales location. His wife leaves him alone in the kitchen and the scene shifts upstairs to his adult sons Biff and Happy. Meanwhile, Willy begins to talk to himself. At first, spectators watch Willy from an outsider’s perspective, seeing him through his sons’ unhappy eyes. Miller does not indicate that Willy’s monologue has become a flashback, but as he talks his sons enter the kitchen dressed as teenagers. The flashback, like Willy’s mind, is unstable. While talking to his wife, another memory pulls him into another space, the hotel room in which he had an affair with The Woman. When he returns to the initial
flashback, her laughter follows him and what started out as a seemingly objective presentation of the past turns into more of a nightmare. All the characters suddenly unleash a stream of criticism against Biff to a more and more bewildered Willy: “he’d better give back that football,” “he’s too rough with the girls,” “Mr. Birnbaum says he’s stuck up,” “if he doesn’t buckle down he’ll flunk math” (Miller 1139). The spectator is left uncertain as to what is memory and what is dream, nightmare, or wishful thinking; the boundaries between the past and the present, one memory and another, begin to blur. This continues throughout the play. Figures from Willy’s past walk unseen through his present. His deceased brother Ben makes frequent visits, but whether the audience is seeing Ben as he was or as Willy envisions him is unclear. Miller makes good on his promise to depict the inside of someone’s head, and the complicated method that he chooses reflects Willy’s interior dilemmas.

Elia Kazan, director of the original production, notes that “the viewer is immediately made aware, first by the title, then by Willy’s revealing that he found himself driving off the road [which is why he returned home from his trip], that we are gathered together to watch the course of a suicide” (1193). Miller uses the spiraling plot structure to anticipate this conclusion. Willy cannot make progress in his life or in the plot. He is unable to move towards anything, constantly dragged backwards or sideways into another memory, unable to stay in and manage the present. The scenes are cyclical; in both past and present Willy has the same conversations with Linda, the same totaling of their debts, the same argument over stockings, the same trouble at the office. His present day failure is not a reversal of his past fortune, but simply the continuation of a pattern he seems unable to break; his
life is as cyclical as the narrative. Even his dream of fleeing to Alaska with his brother Ben would get him nowhere; although Ben told Willy he was heading to Alaska, he never made it, instead finding his fortune in Africa. Miller continues to shift in and out of Willy’s subjective perspective, allowing the spectators to see the world as he sees it, and to see how the world sees him. The present and the gaze of others always hang over his memories of the past. The characters who populate his memories are played by the same actors as those from his present, not by younger actors. The play may function as a social drama, but Miller tells a deeply personal story. He creates a landscape of the American dream in which the dream aspect is as important as the American one.

The original 1949 Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman* ran for 742 performances and won “virtually every prize available for drama” (Jacobus 1129). What distinguishes the play’s original production team from the critics today who focus mainly on *Salesman*’s social realism, is that the production team placed great importance upon realizing the play’s hybrid nature, trying to blend its objective and subjective elements and find ways to shift between reality and memory on stage. Director Elia Kazan wrote that “the imaginative qualities of Art’s play, the nonrealistic aspects … added a great deal to the force of the theme” (1195). Both Kazan and designer Jo Mielziner looked at *Salesman* as “a play waiting for a directorial solution,” whose central conflict needed to be realized visually on stage (Kazan 1195). Though *Salesman*’s scenes shift rapidly through time and space, Miller “had made no attempt to say how the transitions from one scene to another would be made” (Mielziner 1179). This presented a challenge for Mielziner, who worried about
using a conventional approach with a realistic set design, “point[ing] out to Kazan how difficult it would be in an office scene, for instance, to remove two desks, two chairs, and a hat rack … and at the same time have an actor walk quickly across the stage an appear in ‘a hotel room in Boston where he meets a girl’” (1179). It would be complicated, distracting, and detract from the focus of the story. Mielziner’s solution was to create a hybrid set design, physically manifesting the central conflict of the play. He aimed to have the “scenery [juxtapose] realism with symbolic abstraction” just as “the play … juxtaposed ostensibly objective reality with a character’s fantasy” (B. Murphy 1186).

Mielziner did not discard realism all together. His final design for the show combined both elements, a “juxtaposition of the abstract and poetic with the real and prosaic,” the marvelous and the mundane (B. Murphy 1188). Mielziner and Kazan made sure that the props they selected “were authentic, battered objects” that grounded the play in an authentic time and place, but kept use of these props to a bare minimum so those that did appear “took on a symbolic appearance” in the otherwise spare setting (B. Murphy 1188, 1187). Thus these ordinary objects, the silk stockings that evoke Willy’s mistress or the gold fountain pen that shock Biff into feeling his failures, took on hidden, deeper meanings for both Willy and the spectators.

Mielziner applied this juxtaposition to the set as a whole. He made Willy’s house the central focus of the stage. Instead of creating an accurate replication of an individual room or of the house as a whole, as was conventional, Mielziner placed only the skeleton of the house on stage. His set “went, as the eye traveled upward, from drab realistic interiors to light delicate frameworks that were mere suggestions
of buildings” (B. Murphy 1185). Like the props, Willy’s house functioned both as authentic and as symbolic, both as his actual house that he had paid for and repaired and as “a specter behind all the scenes of the play, always present as it might be always present in Willy’s mind” (Kazan 1195). This became for Kazan “the single most critically important contribution” to the production and “the key to the way I directed the play” (1196). Mielziner’s design even prompted Miller to rewrite the opening stage directions to introduce the house as “a dream rising out of reality” (1130; emphasis in original). A dream rising out of reality is exactly how the play functions, and how the set visually represented the conflicts between Willy’s hopes and memories and his cold harsh realities.

Without a director and designer who embraced both sides of the play, *Salesman* easily could have failed as a performance from the starting gate. Its shifting plot structure was just not well suited to staging conventions of the time. Instead, the innovative visual design of the play helped bring out its deeper meanings.

Much has been made of *Salesman*’s success in other countries. *Salesman* seems so clearly American. How could this didactic commentary on a particular moment in American history appeal to audiences in a country such as China, which did not even have salesmen when Miller directed the play there in 1983 (Jacobus 1127)? Yet it has been successfully produced “around the world, from Baltimore to Beijing” (Kakutani AR1). Perhaps international productions liberate the play from its American context, allowing them to more easily explore the themes behind the seeming social realism. A 1992 Taiwanese production directed by Yang Shi-eng at the National Theatre, for instance, “did not challenge the audience to reflect upon
these [social] problems or the social values that cause them” or “[reduce the play] to a political message” but instead “stressed the pathos of the Loman family” (Diamond 1204, 1205). Perhaps the “perception of [Miller’s] work as an outmoded form of social realism” comes from attempting to place the play in an aesthetic category it was never intended to occupy (Kakutan AR1). Given the success of Kazan’s production and *Salesman*’s international legacy, “attention must be paid” to the complexities and fantastic techniques Miller uses to tell his story (Miller 1143).

**Our Town**

On one level, critics are right to look at *Our Town* and its setting, Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, as a quintessential example of small town America. Wilder did want his play to feel universal, and aimed to have his characters “be pretty near the norm of everybody” (*Writings* 671). Set in the slightly distant past to add just a hint of nostalgia, Grover’s Corners is “a very ordinary town, if you ask me. Little better behaved than most. Probably a lot duller” (*Our Town* 29). Wilder’s narrative follows a story as conventional as the town: a boy-and-girl-next-door romance between George Gibbs and Emily Webb, the two teenage children of the play. Yet Wilder delivers the sentimental content of his story in an utterly unsentimental form.

The opening stage directions of *Our Town* read: “No curtain. No scenery” (Wilder 9). Wilder presents his audience not with the image of a small town, but with a stage. He eschews a realistic set in favor of an empty playing space with a few bare tables and chairs, and asks for all action to be mimed. His narrator is a Stage

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12 At least for audiences in 1938, when the play first opened. Now the turn of the century is further away.
Manager, and the opening lines specifically introduce *Our Town* as a play, with the Stage Manager reading the names of all involved in the production. Wilder repeatedly reminds the spectators that they are not eavesdropping on *Our Town*, but that these scenes are being purposefully played for their benefit, and throughout the play the Stage Manager will cut off scenes and dismiss actors with a “That’ll do. That’ll do” or a “Thank you … we’ll have to interrupt again here,” when he thinks the spectators have seen enough (Wilder 26, 38). He never wants spectators to forget that there is no Grover’s Corners and that these are not real individuals but fictional personae to be examined critically.

The Stage Manager’s opening monologue situates Grover’s Corners by way of longitude and latitude, religious statistics, and building locations. This is an anthropological introduction, constructing the town as a subject for study and asking the spectators to examine its contents just as critically as the archaeologists who examined the ancient societies that the Stage Manager compares to Grover’s Corners (Wilder, *Our Town* 40). This alienating approach allows particular details to catch the spectator’s ear, such as one of the earliest pieces of information that the Stage Manager provides, that “Polish Town’s across the tracks” (Wilder, *Our Town* 10). Critics often cite this moment as one that “reminds the audience briefly of social and economic divisions based on ethnic prejudice” but note that “it is not a subject that Wilder develops in the play” as economics and race are “not [injustices] that Wilder is prepared to engage” (Wheatley 24). While it is true that Wilder does not develop these themes in the play, the existence of Polish Town is one of the first concrete

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13 Wilder may have been familiar with two well known sociological studies of small towns: Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd’s *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* published in 1929 and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* published in 1937.
details provided about Grover’s Corners. Later in the first scene, Polish Town will come up again when one character returns from delivering a baby there, though Wilder could have had him returning from anywhere. It might be more accurate to say that Wilder leaves themes of class, race, and social status not undeveloped, but as elephants in the room. If Wilder does not pursue these social themes, neither does he dismiss them, keeping them as occasional jarring reminders of the dark aspects of sweetly nostalgic Grover’s Corners. Part way through the first act, the Stage Manager again reminds the spectators of their role as anthropological observers by halting the narrative to have characters deliver lectures on the demographics and history of Grover’s Corners. Again Wilder pushes the spectator to notice the not so nostalgic elements of this “ordinary town” that is “a little better behaved than most,” planting actors in the audience to ask pointed questions about town drinking, “social justice and industrial inequality,” and the lack of “culture of love of beauty in Grover’s Corners” (Wilder, *Our Town* 29, 30, 31). The ‘audience members’ who refuse to passively accept Grover’s Corners serve as a model for the real spectators, who should hopefully also be examining the town with a critical mindset and making connections between the problems in this “ordinary town” and in their own (Wilder, *Our Town* 29).

Wilder uses form to disrupt the way an audience member might conventionally perceive content. As Nancy Bunge points out, “when one looks closely at the community in this play, it undermines rather than supports its members” (358). In the first act Wilder uses a series of lectures to encourage his spectators to think critically about the society of Grover’s Corners, and in the second act he uses a
flashback structure to challenge spectators’ understanding of the play’s romance. The second act takes place on the day of George and Emily’s wedding. Under the guise of showing the audience “how this all began – this wedding, this plan to spend a lifetime together,” the Stage Manager guides his flock through a series of increasingly unromantic moments in nearly-weds Emily and George’s courtship (Wilder, *Our Town* 69). First he shows spectators “the conversation” they had “when they first knew that ... they were meant for each other,” which turns out to be a fight (Wilder, *Our Town* 69). In the next flashback, the spectators see how concerned George’s parents were about letting him get married so young, having had a difficult time as a young married couple themselves. They eventually decide to ignore these concerns because “that’s none of our business” (Wilder, *Our Town* 87). Back at the wedding, Emily’s mother worries that “there’s something downright cruel about sending our girls into marriage [without sexual education]” but, like George’s parents, she decides to let Emily go through the same ordeal she did (Wilder, *Our Town* 90). By this point, it is unsurprising that both the groom and the bride are having doubts about getting married, which Wilder suggests might come over George like a dream, perhaps using this moment of fantasy to imply the cyclical, universal nature of George’s fears; they are not his fears, but the fears of all grooms put into this position unprepared. Instead of helping to resolve these fears, though, the parents push their children off to the altar. The final words of the act ring out ironically: “Aren’t they a lovely couple? ... I’m sure they’ll be happy” (Wilder, *Our Town* 97).

Upon re-reading *Our Town*, fellow Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Lanford Wilson exclaimed: “Where in the hell did [Wilder] ever get the reputation for being
soft?” (qtd. in Bunge 349). After all, the play is so starkly anti-realist in its presentation of small town America that it seems extremely strange that critics fixate on its so-called nostalgia. As with Death of a Salesman, an answer might be found in the play’s staging. Just as Miller initially provided no solutions to Salesman’s transitional problems, some of the problems with Our Town may actually stem from Wilder’s own vision of the set design. Our Town is performed on a bare stage with only a few tables and chairs. This choice is part of a larger theme in the play of not-seeing, Wilder’s message being that people never appreciate their lives when they have them. Throughout Our Town characters ignore each other’s strengths or individuality; Mrs. Gibbs never gets to see Paris, the town tries “just not to notice” Simon Stinson’s drinking, Polish Town is hidden across the tracks (Wilder 47). Wilder hoped that by not furnishing the stage with the trappings of a small town, he would make his story universal. Unfortunately, the bare stage also affords spectators the opposite opportunity, to fill in the empty spaces with their own highly individual interpretations and memories, just as they filled in the shark in Jaws. Death of a Salesman’s realistic props functioned effectively because they were juxtaposed against an unrealistic set. Wilder’s actors are miming on an empty stage, with nothing to play against. As many productions have shown, the bare stage will not necessarily help to create critical distance for the spectator or draw out Our Town’s universality and contemporary relevance; it can be made to emphasize the play’s nostalgia.

Our Town’s strongest act is its final one, which is its most hybrid, most fantastic act, set beyond the grave. Here, the audience is given an even more privileged position than before. They are now shown the town’s dead sitting in chairs
that represent graves and watch as Emily takes a seat, having died in childbirth. By looking at life in Grover’s Corners through the eyes of the dead Wilder can achieve his starkest defamiliarization. Before he could only suggest to the spectators a critical interpretation of events, but in this act Emily can step away from the narrative and examine it with the spectators, literally standing in the middle of a scene from her life as an outsider. Now even a character can see the problems pointed out to the audience all along. Emily’s reaction is highly emotional, and spells out Wilder’s idea that the spectators need to stop and appreciate their lives before they slip past. The final image before the Stage Manager draws the curtain is the heartbreaking juxtaposition between a deeply emotional moment that might be a conventional way to end a tragic narrative, and the extremely defamiliarizing reaction to it:

George enters from the left, and slowly comes toward [the dead]...

George flings himself on Emily’s grave.

THE DEAD: Goodness! That ain’t no way to behave! – He ought to be home.

EMILY: Mother Gibbs?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, Emily?

EMILY: They don’t understand much, do they?

MRS. GIBBS: No, dear, not very much (Wilder, Our Town 127-128).

In this final act Wilder shows how well the marvelous can function to alienate a conventional narrative, and perhaps it is a sign of his success that critics who see Our Town as sentimental and nostalgic tend to dismiss the ending as “inappropriate,” and that most audience members find it extremely powerful (Bunge 353).
Out of the 4,000 productions of *Our Town* in the last ten years alone, one in particular stands out. Directed by David Cromer for the Chicago theater company The Hypocrites, this production arrived at the Barrow Street Theatre Off-Broadway in February of 2009. In December of 2009 it officially became the longest-running production of *Our Town* in the play’s history, and is still going strong as of this writing (Isherwood, “Fanfare”). Cromer’s direction strips away any nostalgia in the text. He dresses his characters in contemporary clothing “identical to those worn by the members of the audience” (Teachout). He rejects a traditional proscenium set up that would separate the spectators from the stage, and instead surrounds his playing space on three sides with an intimate audience of 150. Not only do the actors blend in with the audience, but also they walk among them, and the house is so small that “even if you’re in the back row you can probably read the headlines in Doc Gibb’s morning paper” (Isherwood, “21st Century”). For much of the show’s run, Director David Cromer himself played the Stage Manager. Emerging every night at the top of the show in jeans, Cromer’s first act is to hold up his cell phone for spectators to see, and then shut it off. For theatergoers used to brief pre-show announcements and cell phone warnings, Cromer initially comes across as the actual stage manager of *Our Town*, not the Stage Manager of Grover’s Corners. Throughout the show, Cromer “giv[es] the impression that he is not playing a character but merely playing himself,” a director explaining his own show in “an unsentimental, utterly matter-of-fact way,” as a director would (Teachout).

Comments from many reviews attest to the efficacy of these staging choices in encouraging spectators to study the performance and to resist the temptation to
sentimentalize. Cromer took Wilder’s suggestions and heightened them. If, previously, physical distance between spectators and the stage allowed for spectators to fill the empty space with a sweet small town, Cromer removes that space. Many other productions abide by Wilder’s no scenery rule, but put their actors in turn-of-the-century dress, with New England accents and folksy affects. Cromer keeps the actors as actors and as contemporaries in costume and style, allowing “the wall that separates illusion from reality [to become] as porous as the one that separates the actors from the audience” (Teachout). Rather than planting actors in the audience to ask questions in the play’s first act, Cromer has actual audience members perform the task. Placing the audience on the same level as the actors, literally and figuratively, makes it much harder to see them as characters from a distant golden age as opposed to actors in the here and now whose stories have contemporary relevance.

The production received nearly universal praised from audiences and critics alike. What element elicits the most admiration? The fantastical final act. Again, Cromer “departs from tradition” in his staging choices in a way that “transmits the essence of Wilder’s philosophy” (Isherwood, “21st Century”). In the final act, Emily chooses to revisit the day of her twelfth birthday. The Stage Manager takes her back, and at this moment [Spoiler Alert] a previously innocuous-looking curtain is pulled aside, revealing a fully realistic kitchen. Emily’s mother, in period dress, stands at a functioning stove making real bacon, the sizzling smell of which fills the entire auditorium. Suddenly, Emily’s heartfelt realization that “all that was going on and we never noticed,” her plea for her mother to “just look at me one minute as though you really saw me,” take on a new, painfully immediate meaning (Wilder, Our Town 124,
Cromer has found a way to visually realize Wilder’s message. The spectators go through the play with the actors, seeing a world filled with only a few tables and folding chairs and mime. Suddenly, this final moment suggests that the characters were living full, richly detailed lives all along, but they, like the spectators, just could not see it. Cromer provides the juxtaposition between the mundane and the marvelous that many productions of *Our Town* lack, and makes these ordinary details of an ordinary ‘realist’ moment feel magical. He appears to have found a way to stage *Our Town* that brings out the complexity present in a play with a straightforward message and an overwhelmingly emotional climax, to show its simplicity is only deceptive.

**The Cherry Orchard**

Laurence Senelick argues that those who see Anton Chekhov’s plays as moodily atmospheric misinterpret his writing, often because productions of his plays in the Stanislavsky / Moscow Art Theatre tradition go overboard with “elaborate sound effects, frequent and interminable pauses, and [a] general air of muted despondency” (Senelick, “Bubble Reputation” 288). Looking at Chekhov’s oeuvre as a whole, however, it becomes harder to classify his style as strictly realist. Academics who write about his literary works often do not. The literary scholar Bitsilli can “[demonstrate] how Chekhov uses the whole arsenal of the lyric poet: metaphor, symbol, emphasis, nuance, hint, loaded syntax, significant detail, and so on” (Terras 177). The opening lines of Chekhov’s famous “Ward No. 6” paint the industrial hospital setting in Gothic disrepair. Inside the asylum dwell patients who have

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14 Wilder thought Emily’s memory should be staged by removing even the chairs and tables from his set, because “our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind – not in things” (*Writings* 686). Considering that he has Emily say good-bye to “Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths,” and that he asks spectators to appreciate the details of theirs lives, perhaps he would have changed his mind upon seeing Cromer’s interpretation (*Our Town* 124).
metaphorically lost their place in human society. Chekhov introduces the ward by comparing it to a “zoo,” one patient is “an automaton,” and another “like a bullfinch, he chirrups, softly sings and titters” (Ward 31). Other of Chekhov’s works “suggest or actually show the process by which many lose their identity as human beings and become associated with or are transformed into objects … animals … pagan idols or the walking dead” (Lindheim 64). Donald Rayfield comments, “critics lay such stress on Chekhov as an ironic, detached observer that they fail to see the mystic, apocalyptic vision one can find” in many of his stories (38). In some ways, the misinterpretations of Chekhov do recognize themes that are prevalent in his stories.

Since the days of Stanislavsky, “psychologized realism remains the preferred format” for many productions of Chekhov’s plays (Senelick, “Bubble Reputation” 12). Yet, though Chekhov’s plays may be less clearly fantastic than his stories, this does not necessarily make them realist. Scholar of absurdism Martin Esslin sees “only a small step” from Chekhov’s plays to those of “Beckett, Genet, Adamov, or Ionesco” (143). Chekhov frequently clashed with Stanislavsky over what he saw as the director’s excessive employment of naturalistic stage effects. One anecdote reveals very clearly that Chekhov’s interest was never in realism for its own sake:

Meierhold reports that one of the actors told Chekhov that Stanislavsky intended to have frogs croaking, the sound of dragonflies, and dogs barking on the stage [because it was realistic] …

“Realistic,” Chekhov repeated with a laugh and after a slight pause he said: “The stage is art. There is a canvas of Kramskoi in which he wonderfully depicts human faces. Suppose he eliminated the
nose of one of these faces and substituted a real one. The nose will be ‘realistic,’ but the picture will be spoiled’ (Simmons 430).

When scholars talk about Chekhov’s gift for realism, they tend to mean that the overall effect of his work conveys “lifelikeness,” as though Chekhov’s technique brings his plays closer to replicating life as the spectator experiences it (Gilman 167). Gilman writes that “Meyerhold knew as well as anyone that Chekhov was in a sense a ‘realist’ … he was faithful to appearances, yes, but for purposes beyond them; the fidelity wasn’t to any obviousness of the surface or to readily available likenesses … but to the rhythms, tensions, flexions, and interplay of the deep human world” (206). Chekhov’s lifelikeness comes not from a faithful representation of the world, but from a faithful representation of the human experience of the world, an experience often marvelous, contradictory, and surreal.

Chekhov, in a way, is a pointillist playwright. The grass in Seurat’s paintings appears to be green from a distance, but take a closer look and the dots of paint turn out to be a myriad of colors, yellow, brown, red, not green at all. Chekhov juxtaposes rather than blends elements, and, when examined closely, these juxtapositions come across as far from realistic. The complexity of Chekhov’s plays that marks them as high art seems to have the most to do with these unrealistic choices. Moments abound in Chekhov’s plays of the marvelous, the absurd, the grotesque, the symbolic. Nina confuses her identity with that of a seagull, Uncle Vanya shouts “bang!” as he fires a gun (Chekhov, Plays 212), the three sisters always dress in the same colors, the strange sound of a snapped string hovers over the cherry orchard. Chekhov juxtaposes the mundane and the melodramatic, things banal and things important, the comic and
the tragic, various plots, various characters, various non-sequiturs. His refusal to present unified characterizations or scenes is what demands complex interpretation. At the very moment in the first act of *The Cherry Orchard* in which Chekhov introduces the central dramatic conflict of the story, when Varya tells her sister that they have not yet been able to stop the sale of their estate to pay their debts, a friend of the family, Lopakhin, “peeps in at the door and moo's like a cow” (*Plays* 327; emphasis in original). The bizarre, seemingly disconnected things the characters do say belie the things they do not say. Lopakhin’s mooing prompts Anya to ask if he has yet proposed to Varya. Later, when Liubov comments on Varya and Lopakhin’s potential wedding in front of them, Lopakhin’s response is to unromantically misquote Hamlet, telling “Aurelia” to get to a nunnery (*Chekhov, Plays* 359). Chekhov is not afraid to use characters that moo or recite pool table maneuvers, as Gayev does, to create his world. He does not hold a mirror up to nature so much as he finds expressive means of communicating the characters and their conflicts.

While Chekhov has suffered less outright dismissal than Wilder, his plays remain problematic for those intending to stage them. As has become clear with *Death of a Salesman* and *Our Town*, to successfully stage these complex, hybrid stories is no easy feat. As Laurence Senelick sees it, the production history of Chekhov’s plays since the Moscow Art Theatre’s performances has been an alternation between productions that “doggedly trudg[e] in the footsteps of Stanislavskii” and those that are “wildly eccentric,” a trend in which directors “extract a given aspect” of a play “and lend it inordinate attention” (“Chekhov on Stage” 220, 225). Though Gothic themes are present in Chekhov’s writing, Senelick
is probably right in arguing that the stereotypes of Chekhov as gloomy or random may come from these polarized productions, which fixate on and emphasize one aspect of Chekhov’s plays. Richard Gilman may see *The Cherry Orchard* as Chekhov’s “best-loved play,” but in many ways it has also had the most turbulent history; performances “[swing] between interpretive polarities: naturalism and poetry, social lament and social prophecy, most controversially comedy and something very closet to a tragic mood,” the last part of an on-going debate begun between Chekhov and Stanislavsky as to the play’s generic status (Gilman 203). Chekhov’s plays balance many different and contrasting aspects, and a production might be better off to seek a balance between elements than to try to achieve a single overall tone.

Part of that balance involves embracing the marvelous. Buried within *The Cherry Orchard* is a challenge to do just that, and it has become one of the most famous moments of the play. Richard Gilman observes that “no single detail of the text, maybe of any Chekhov text, has elicited so much comment” as this single stage direction in Act II, which returns in Act IV (241): *All sit lost in thought. The silence is broken only by the subdued muttering of Firs. Suddenly a distant sound is heard as if from the sky, like the sound of a snapped string mournfully dying away* (Chekhov, *Plays* 357). The snapped string practically demands that any director of *The Cherry Orchard* take at least one step away from realism. Though the sound could be of mundane origin, Chekhov seems to want it to take on expressive significance. The many explanations that the characters offer for it cancel each other out, reflecting each character’s thoughts more than providing any answers. As “J.L. Styan famously noted, ‘to interpret the sound is to interpret the play’”, and staging this moment can
help to bring out important themes, just as evoking the marvelous aided Our Town’s third act (Handley 565).

Chekhov is famous for his use of subtext, for calling attention to the words characters do not speak and to the things they do not do. In The Cherry Orchard, all of the characters are poised on the brink of doing something important, that, inexplicably, they do not do. Although Lopakhin lays out for the family the only solution that will save their estate, they will not act upon his strategy. Although the family pushes the willing Lopakhin into a room with Varya to propose to her, he does not. Anya and Trofimov also refuse to quite be lovers. In the past, The Cherry Orchard has suffered from political interpretations that regard it “as a satiric farce mocking the estate owners and their parasites” and turn the characters into whiny parodies, particularly the bourgeois family (Senelick, “Bubble Reputation” 11). Yet within the play, Chekhov spreads the inexplicable inaction around; industrious peasant Lopakhin is as incapable of proposing to Varya as the family is of taking his advice. No character has all the answers. The second act, the string act, is an entire act of inaction. The characters lounge on a hill and share deeply personal thoughts. Charlotta wishes for someone to talk to, Yepikhodov wishes for a better fate, Dunyasha wishes for Yasha, Liubov wishes for G-d to forgive her, and no one on stage responds. Trofimov, then Lopakhin, then Gayev all present impassioned speeches, only to have their idealistic words “deflated” by the next person to speak (Gilman 229). Throughout the act, everyone seems to be trying to explain the
condition of mankind, and their own place in society, and all fail. Suddenly, in place of words, comes this enigmatic, inexplicable sound.\textsuperscript{15}

Sound enables Chekhov to do something unique with this moment. The spectators may express frustration over these characters and their puzzling failure to act, but by using this sound Chekhov brings the audience into the characters’ subjective perspective. All experience the sound together. Both spectators and characters struggle for an explanation; this one moment is inexplicable to all. Almost immediately afterwards, the character of the Stranger enters, a tramp who begs for money, the one character who stands entirely on the outside of the other characters’ world. The marvelous enables Chekhov to both bring the spectators into the subjective world of the characters and to juxtapose this perspective with a glimpse of how the group appears from the outside.

According to Senelick, Giorgio Strehler’s 1955 Italian interpretation of The Cherry Orchard, which he revisited and restaged in 1974, is “arguably the most influential Chekhov production of modern times” (“Bubble Reputation” 12). The production exemplifies a balanced approach to the play, exploring both its comedy and its tragedy, and particularly juxtaposing the real and the unreal. Strehler places his actors in a “white-on-white décor”; above the stage floats the cherry orchard, a “membrane of petals in a diaphanous veil, breathing with the actors and audience” (Senelick, “Bubble Reputation” 12). As in Death of a Salesman, Strehler “insisted that props and set pieces be realistic, giving us background information about the characters and actions portrayed on stage”; his interest was in “the combination of

\textsuperscript{15} Expressive sound and music play an important role in all of Chekhov’s plays. I have to wonder if this is in part a response to his problems with Stanislavky’s excessively naturalistic soundscapes.
abstract, universal images and precise historical indications” (Kleber 581). How did Strehler choose to represent the sound of the snapping string? With silence:

The characters shuddered and looked around – nothing could be heard – then the veil of cloth trembled and billowed out. The entrance of the tramp immediately after this – speaking in Russian [in an otherwise Italian translation of the play] with a slightly drunk but deeply melodious expression – extended the strangeness of the atmosphere, hinting at an unknown ominous future (Hirst 31).

Strehler does not evade the sound by choosing silence, but instead engages with the meaning behind it. The moment becomes extremely unreal in its seemingly sound-filled silence, and brings something new to those in the audience awaiting the famous noise. Instead of choosing a particular sound for the moment, he creates a visual interpretation of a breaking string by vibrating the cherry orchard veil, which extends over actors and audience both. This suits Strehler’s highly visual interpretation of the play as a whole. Then, in the character of the stranger, he fantastically creates a true outsider for both the characters and the spectators by having the actor speak Russian. As with Kazan, Strehler brings out the hybrid nature of this play, and he uses this suggestion of the marvelous to create a powerful moment within his production; one of many mundane-marvelous moments he creates out of the text.

**Conclusion**

None of the three plays considered in this chapter aim to be realist. All three are hybrid works, defying any single categorization, and all three employ overtly fantastic or non-realist means within their stories. These plays still unfold within a
recognizable reality, but explore characters’ more subjective or expressive experiences of their world. Yet Salesman and Our Town in particular face critics who frequently disparage the plays on the basis of their use of realism, even though these interpretations seem far off base upon closer examination. Why do critics focus so much on realism when none of these playwrights seem to have done so? Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, O’Neill, Wilder, Williams, Miller, Albee, Wilson: all these playwrights experimented in many different genres of theater, and many of their most famous works are hybrid stories. Nor has realism been the focus of many other of the great playwrights of the past century, such as Beckett, Stoppard, Pinter, or Churchill.

If these authors use a recognizable, seemingly mundane reality within their plays, it is often to deliberately juxtapose it with something else in order to bring out the deeper themes and meanings of the story. It is not a mistake that we value such playwrights as Ibsen, Wilder, Miller, or Chekhov, but I think that often we look past what gives their plays such power and we misrecognize the pervasive use of the mundane-marvelous in our art. Perhaps this comes from the way the binary model of high and low continues to be used to disparage plays that come across as too accessible, too emotional, or that have a particular message to transmit. Clearly these plays can have complexity, and part of what gives them this complexity is using techniques from the equally devalued realm of fantasy. Some critics do discuss the works of Miller or Williams as ‘expressive realism,’ or ‘poetic realism,’ or ‘impressionism.’ I think, however, that we can go further, and reevaluate our system of categories to open up new possibilities for the interpretation and understanding of hybrid art.
Perceptions of Presence: Two Theorists and Four Stories That Call Spectators’ Attention to the ‘Real’


*Below:* Chance takes a walk across water in the final moments of *Being There.* (BSB 1979)
In the last chapter I looked at Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder, and Anton Chekhov as problematic examples of realist playwrights. Scholars who write positively about Chekhov’s playwriting style, however, tend to view him as a naturalist, discerning something beyond the conventional depiction of a recognizable world in his plays. Richard Gilman identifies a “lifelikeness” in Chekhov’s work, suggesting that Chekhov’s technique borders on documentarian, as though his plays do not just feel realistic, they feel real (167). This characterization is very similar to that of French author Émile Zola’s naturalism. Zola, who was a contemporary of Chekhov’s, viewed the fields of literature and drama as “clinical laboratories” (Styan 6). Influenced by “the new scientific methods,” he saw art as an opportunity to give “an exact analysis [of man], taking into account circumstances, environment and physical attributes” (Zola 354). He desired “absolute objectivity,” which he thought would be best achieved in the theater by rendering “setting, characterization and dialogue … so close to actual life that an audience would be convinced by the illusion of its reality” (Styan 8). Naturalism effectively creates its own set of artistic conventions with the specific intent to reference reality in a direct manner. Kathryn Hume, writing about fantastic literature, explains that “some fictive worlds … do not seriously call attention to the differences separating them from the reader’s own world … we [do not] fell drawn to compare … because its world is too similar in values to our own” (82). Naturalism deliberately calls attention to the similarities between the artistic world and the world of the spectator, inviting the spectators to compare and to appreciate naturalism’s accuracy. While Chekhov did not see himself as a naturalist, several important theater directors of the late 1800s were known for
their interest in achieving naturalism, which in its theatrical manifestation is also sometimes called “external realism” (Chinoy 34).

The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen worked hard to achieve a “historical authenticity” for whatever play he staged (Styan 13). When directing _Ghosts_, the Duke had Ibsen send him “a detailed account of a middle-class Norwegian house” and he “actually visited Fotheringham and Domrémy before designing the sets for Bjørnson’s _Mary Stuart in Scotland_ and Schiller’s _The Maid of Orleans_” (Styan 13). French director André Antoine took Meiningen’s naturalist aesthetic even further in his productions at the Théâtre-Libre, which became known as “the theatre of Antoine’s Back” because Antoine dictated that his actors ignore the audience and move about the set as though all four walls were still intact (Styan 35). In attempting to portray a ‘slice of life,’ Antoine would go to extremes: he would borrow furniture from his own home (Styan 31), bring in a functional water fountain, and even hang meat carcasses on stage for a butcher shop (Chinoy 31). Stanislavsky also began his directing career with an interest in external realism. The first production he directed at the Moscow Art Theatre, _Tsar Fyodor_, “became a sixteenth century research project of the first magnitude … the audience was treated to replicas of rooms in the Kremlin, the Cathedral and a bridge over the River Yaousza with barges passing beneath” (Styan 72-73). These directors worked diligently to give spectators the impression that what they saw on stage was as accurate a depiction of reality as possible.

The effort that these directors put into achieving external realism sometimes had un-intended side effects. This was often the case when they would import real objects from the outside world to serve as props or set pieces. Spectators, it seems,
were more likely to focus on the spectacle of having real objects on stage than on the impression of authenticity that the objects were meant to enhance. Helen Krich Chinoy notes that Antoine “could not understand, why, for example, his real butcher shops and real water fountains fascinated audiences. To him these effects were part of a philosophy; the audience … simply enjoyed the stage trick” (31). Stanislavsky encountered the same problem when spectators at Tsar Fyodor were “dazzled [by the authentic settings], so much so that [they] were hardly aware of the natural speech, realistic acting and teamwork” that the actors had worked so hard to accomplish (Styan 73). Conventional set designs in the 1800s often consisted mainly of painted flats. Bringing in objects from the outside world was distracting in its novelty, “disrupting the very illusion it was imported to serve” (Garner 92). For George Bernard Shaw to write an automobile onto the stage of Man and Superman in 1903, when “an automobile observed on the street would still have attracted notice … acquired a technological weight that was … profoundly disruptive” (Garner 93).16

Theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte explains this disruption as a shift in the spectators’ perception of the objects from regarding them as “semiotic … a ‘text’ composed of signs which exclusively point to” the objects’ role within the world of the play, to focusing on the objects themselves and their “bodily being-in-the-world,” what she calls their “phenomenal” presence (5). Phenomenologist Stanton B. Garner explains that naturalist “illusionism sought to suppress the mundane materiality of the object” (93). Spectators are meant to look past the fact that they are watching actors and objects on a stage to see the characters and fictional world that is represented. A

16 Popular stage melodramas of the time recognized the sensational potential of transposing real objects onto theatrical space and would use the spectacular reality of actual props to further heighten dramatic situations, for instance, putting an actor in danger of being run over by a real pile driver (Singer 176).
realist actor, for example, is meant to “[transform his or her] phenomenal body completely into a semiotic body, into a ‘text’ composed of signs which exclusively point to the character embodied” (Fischer-Lichte 5). The naturalist style of acting cultivated by André Antoine or Konstantin Stanislavsky “demanded that the actor … avoid anything that would draw the attention of the spectator[s] to his vital, organic body, his own bodily being-in-the-world” (Fischer-Lichte 13). Though the spectators are aware on some level that they are seeing an actor, ideally, “the actor’s body is eclipsed … by the character’s fictional presence” (Garner 44). Spectators who become distracted by the presence of real objects can no longer focus on the objects as props within the semiotic world of the play, and only see them as the objects they are. The spectator’s gaze can also be turned from character to actor if the performance calls attention to the actor’s corporeal presence (Garner 44). Garner notes that the “staging of pain” frequently directs attention to the body of the actor, as the threat to the body of the character often serves to highlight the body itself (45). In this theory of spectatorship, a spectator watching a realist performance registers the body of the actor but sees the body of the character. Yet because this perception is dual, any event on stage that foregrounds the phenomenal, corporeal body, such as violence or suffering, can refocus the spectator’s gaze.

Yet, just as seeing unexpected, functional, or technologically advanced objects on the stage can also create a spectacular or fantastic effect, so can focusing on the body of the actor. Erika Fischer-Lichte begins her analysis on the tension between the phenomenal and semiotic bodies of the actor by discussing Max Reinhardt’s 1903 production of Sophocles’ *Electra*. Lead actress Gertrud Eysolt’s highly physical
performance “both enchanted and shocked audiences and critics alike by an intense
display of corporeality” (1). Eysolt’s very violent and sensuous use of her own body
forcefully reminded critics of her phenomenal presence as an actress, preventing them
from engaging in the conventional illusion of seeing her as a character. Furthermore,
Fischer-Lichte observes that “critics … seem to have great difficulty in describing
and defining [their experience as spectators] … they repeatedly take recourse to
dream in order to characterize more precisely the particular modality of the impact”
(5). For example, she quotes one reviewer as saying “the events stormed past us like a
dream fantasy” (5). Just as audience members found something fantastic in seeing a
functional fountain on Antoine’s stage, spectators of Electra described the experience
of witnessing an actress drive herself to exhaustion by resorting to the language of
dreams and fantasy.

Once again, the fantastic appears in an unexpected place. Fantasy is generally
defined as requiring some sort of break with the physical rules that govern reality. By
definition, fantasy is only possible in a fictional universe. It would seem
counterintuitive for a performative emphasis on the ‘bodily being-in-the-world’ of an
actress to give the spectator the impression of having seen something marvelous. Yet
in the instance cited above this appears to be what happened. Director David Cromer
found a way to use this effect to his advantage in the last act of Our Town, giving his
realistic kitchen an “extraordinary” air by revealing it after two acts of very sparse,
unrealistic staging (Isherwood, “21st Century”). Two of the most prominent artistic
theoreticians of the 1900s, Bertolt Brecht for theater and André Bazin for film, wrote
at length on the importance of using their respective mediums to foreground reality in
different ways. Brecht was interested in calling spectator’s attention to the actors as actors in a similar manner as that described by Fischer-Lichte and Garner, in order to help the spectators make connections between the performance and the political realities of the day. By contrast, Bazin was more interested in a kind of naturalism on film, in using a seemingly self-effacing form to emphasize how real the events and places within the film appear. I would like to use these theories to explore two plays and two films to see how they mix fantasy and reality, not realism.

**Bertolt Brecht**

Bertolt Brecht was not interested in “realism … where one can (e.g.) smell, look, feel whatever is depicted, where ‘atmosphere’ is created and stories develop in such a way that the characters are psychologically stripped down” (109). He felt that the “bourgeois” theater of Germany in the 1930s was too embedded in the “[A]ristotelian” tradition (96, 91). Brecht felt that Aristotelian theater was a “theatre for pleasure” that allowed spectators to get caught up within the story of the play, to empathize with the characters, and not to think critically about the underlying social dynamics in the narrative (69). Bourgeois theater framed stories as “universal,” whereas Brecht wanted to “historicize the incidents portrayed” (96). Taking this premise from Marxist social theory, Brecht felt that “man [is] a function of the environment” and that “everything must be seen from a social point of view” (97). Theater should serve as a forum for “social criticism and … historical reporting,” not for pleasure (Brecht 98). A spectator of Aristotelian or “dramatic theatre” might think: “Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of man [appall] me, because they are inescapable … I weep
when they weep, I laugh when they laugh” (Brecht 71). Brecht wanted to change this response, and so conceived of what he called Epic Theatre, the theatre of prose, which would use alienating devices to get spectators to think critically about the play they were watching and its representation of the world. A spectator of Epic Theatre should think: “I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of man [appall] me, because they are unnecessary … I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh” (71).

Brecht hoped to encourage spectators to think critically about plays through use of a device he termed the Verfremdungseffekt, or the Alienation Effect. Actors, according to Brecht, should not attempt to fully embody the characters in a theatrical narrative, but “limit [themselves] from the start to simply quoting the character played” (94). An actor should remain an actor on a stage, presenting the audience with a character. The actor should be able to step outside of the part in a “direct changeover from representation to commentary” (Brecht 126). By being able to look at the character from the perspective of an outside “observer,” the actor encourages spectators to adopt the same attitude, “inviting criticism” of the character’s words and actions (Brecht 93, 71). Dramatic theatre encouraged spectators not to question the story of a play, but to accept its course of events as obvious and inevitable. In Epic Theatre, “the artist’s object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic” (Brecht 92). This defamiliarization technique is similar to what happened when André Antoine placed real meat in his
stage butcher shop; what would be obvious and automatic to a spectator passing a butcher shop in the street became strange and fantastic when placed on the stage.

Brecht did not feel that an externally realist play “gave [the working masses] truthful representations of life” (107). He was not interested in presenting spectators with a visually accurate picture of the play’s world, but in having his spectators see the stage as a stage and see the actors as actors, as corporeal beings separate from their characters. He wanted audience members to focus on the actors as actors in order to encourage them to think critically about the social problems addressed in the narrative and to make connections between the play’s world and German society of the 1930s. Though Brecht did not discuss fantasy per se very much in his writings, he made great use of non-realist techniques in acting, staging, and plot structure to achieve the desired alienating effects. He interjected songs and titles and images into scenes and often drew from myth and folklore for his subject matter. Brecht effectively used fantasy in different ways to call spectators’ attention to the ‘bodily being-in-the-world’ of his actors, which he hoped would push spectators to connect the socio-political issues within the play back to those within their own lives.

*Rhinoceros*, written by Eugène Ionesco and first performed in 1960 at the Odéon Theatre in Paris, is an absurdist play about a French man, Berenger, who

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17 Even though Brecht opposed the realist theatre of his day, he did write an article in support of reclaiming the word realism. He argued that “one cannot decide if a work is realist or not by finding out whether it resembles existing, reputedly realist works … In each individual case the picture given of life must be compared, not with another picture, but with the actual life portrayed” (112). Both he and Bazin were interested in the term realism, even though both desired a very particular kind of effect in their work that, at least in regards to Brecht, many do not consider traditionally ‘realist.’

18 Ionesco is a member of the Theatre of the Absurd, a term coined by dramatist Martin Esslin. As defined by Bert Cardullo, absurdistists “strive to express their sense of metaphysical anguish at the senselessness of the human condition in a form which mirrors that meaninglessness or ultimate lack of purpose … rather than chronicling the connective quality of events in a linear narrative, the action … tends to be circular or ritualistic … problems or dilemmas are seldom resolved” (32).
becomes witness to the mass metamorphosis of humanity into rhinoceroses. *The Clean House*, written by Sarah Ruhl and first performed in 2004 at the Yale Repertory Theatre, takes place in a whimsical suburban world of metaphors made literal, in which people find love at first sight and die laughing. Both plays seek to comment on social issues. Ionesco has often stated that he wrote *Rhinoceros* “to show the Nazification of a country as well as the confusion of a man who … witnesses the mental metamorphosis of the community in which he lives” (*Notes* 206). Ruhl’s play examines ethnic prejudices and elitism in the world of the upper-middle class, and she has said that she began writing the play because she “was mostly interested in the pure politics of it” (Ruhl, “Invisible Terrains” 32). Both Ionesco and Ruhl play with their audience members’ dual perceptions, focusing spectators on the bodies of the actors and the space of the stage, as well as on the characters and the represented world of each play. By manipulating the contrast, Ionesco and Ruhl both create fantastic effects and encourage spectators to consider the socio-political issues present in each play. Although neither is strictly Brechtian, both plays employ a mix of Brechtian defamiliarization and fantasy to address spectators.

**Rhinoceros**

In Ionesco’s plays, fantasy frequently takes the form of the “acceleration, and proliferation” of ordinary objects (Hesson and Hesson 88). *The Chairs* revolves around an Old Man and an Old Women setting up chairs for their invisible guests. The more guests that ‘arrive,’ the more chairs the pair must set up, until they are forced against the wall by a sea of seats. In *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, another couple has to deal with a gigantic corpse in the middle of their living room, which
grows inexplicably throughout the play. In *Rhinoceros*, every human being on the planet, except for the main character, transforms into a rhinoceros. All of these fantastic elements are both prolific and profoundly present on the stage: a mounting abundance of chairs, a mounting abundance of corpse, and a mounting abundance of rhinoceroses. Ionesco does not suggest or allude to their presence; he represents it to a spectacular extreme. Whenever directors asked him for permission to reduce the size of the corpse in *Amédée* or “to keep the number of empty chairs within the bounds of reason,” Ionesco refused (Hesson and Hesson 87). To the first director of *The Chairs*, Ionesco responded, “do not minimize the effects, whether it be the large number of chairs, the large number of bells … everything should be exaggerated, excessive, painful, childish, a caricature, without finesse … go all out” (*Notes* 187). In general, Ionesco wrote that he felt he needed to “push drama out of that intermediate zone where it is neither theatre nor literature” and to do so meant “magnifying its effects … underlining and stressing it to the maximum” (*Notes* 26). As opposed to “staging the supernatural” in a way that “reduces the audience’s participation in the paranoia of the seer-character,” Ionesco has found another way in which fantasy can benefit from being staged (Inverso 7; emphasis in original). Ionesco’s plays are fantastic because of the overwhelming spectacle created by seeing that many chairs piled onto a stage, or hearing the stampeding of rhinoceroses all around. Similarly to Brecht, Ionesco felt “we need to be virtually bludgeoned into detachment from our daily lives, our habits and mental laziness, which conceal from us the strangeness of the world … the real must be in a way dislocated before it can be re-integrated” (*Notes*
Ionesco dislocates the real by taking real or ordinary objects and emphasizing their ‘bodily being-in-the-world’ to an absurd extreme upon his stage.

In the *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco does not relegate his rhinoceroses to an off-stage life. The entire third act revolves around the on-stage transformation of one character into a rhinoceros, laying bare the transformational process for all spectators to see. Later, as the fourth act progresses, Ionesco writes that on “the up-stage wall stylized heads appear and disappear; they become more and more numerous from now until the end of the play … until eventually they fill the entire back wall” (*Plays* 94). The rhinoceroses’ presence is enforced aurally as well, their trumpeting noises, “rushing feet,” and “panting breath” often so loud as to drown out the characters and cause “plaster [to fall] from the ceiling” (*Ionesco, Plays* 101). The play never explicitly references its nature as a play; Ionesco never utilizes some of the more classic Brechtian devices such as breaking the fourth wall, but the corporeal intrusion of the fantasy elements continually alienates spectators from the world of the text, urging them to think critically in order to draw conclusions about what they are seeing, which often overwhelms and contradicts what is spoken.

Ionesco establishes in *Rhinoceros* a mundane, constrained, mundane world into which he can introduce his very unconstrained, marvelous elements. The show opens upon a provincial town square where respectable businessman Jean and his less respectable friend Berenger meet for lunch. The opening dialogue emphasizes this world’s bourgeois social structure as Jean berates Berenger for not “fulfil[ing] his duty … as an employee” and as a properly attired, properly worldly, properly sober gentleman (*Ionesco, Plays* 9). Then, suddenly, a rhinoceros stampedes past. Then a
rhinoceros speeds past again, coming from the opposite direction. In the first act, the rhinoceroses that run past are represented indirectly, indexically, through sounds of “galloping” and a “dust” that “spreads over the stage” (Ionesco, Plays 8, 9). The spectator may be expecting the townspeople to try and figure out where these creatures came from, but Jean quickly dispenses with all rational explanations: no zoo, no circuses, no swamps. Instead, a heated discussion flares up displaced onto a far less important issue. Was there one rhinoceros or were there two? Were they Asiatic or African? Did they have one horn or two? Does the Asiatic rhinoceros have two horns or is that the African, and the Asiatic has one? As with the sheer number of chairs, the sheer unimportance and repetitiveness of this argument becomes absurd.

Even when the existence of the rhinoceroses has been established and it has been ascertained that they are the result of a magical human metamorphosis, the incongruous language continues. The characters talk about the disruptive, fantastic transformation from human to rhinoceros as a personal choice, a change in profession, a rational decision, making the magic seem mundane. The language and dialogue of the characters directly contradict the visuals Ionesco offers the spectators. Never does the visualization of the rhinoceroses match up with the language used to refer to them; the transformation is never made to appear mundane, never portrayed as a “disinterested gesture” or “a bit of relaxation after all these years of office life” (Ionesco, Plays 82, 83). The constant stampeding noises heard throughout the final act are loud and overwhelming, shaking the stage and drowning out the characters, and the “stylized heads” that cover the back wall have a “monstrous

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19 I think Ionesco purposefully refrains from letting spectators see the rhinoceroses in this act so that spectators, not having seen the rhinoceroses, cannot participate in the absurd argument that follows. Although, for the record, Berenger is right: African rhinos have two horns, ‘Asiatic’ rhinos have one.
“appearance” (Ionesco, *Plays* 94; emphasis in original). At the end of the play, Ionesco writes that the rhinoceroses become “beautiful” and their trumpeting “melodious,” but if anything this sublime shift only serves to underline Berenger’s defeat and isolation (94, 104; emphasis in original). This dynamic juxtaposition between word and image is strongest in the third act: Jean’s transformation into a rhinoceros. Ionesco easily could have written the scene in a way that allowed some sort of theatrical trick, a bait and switch with Jean disappearing offstage for a long enough time to fit him with a rhinoceros suit, for example. On the contrary, for much of the scene Jean leaves the stage for, at most, several lines. He spends the majority of ten pages of dialogue on stage, transforming before the audience’s eyes.

In the first act, Jean is a character who celebrates the rituals and trappings of civilized human society, insisting on proper dress and various other social formalities. In this scene, the actor’s disturbing displays overwhelm the conscientious character. Ionesco’s stage directions demand that Jean’s metamorphosis be embodied by the actor, who must push his performance to both violent and farcical excess. Though helped by green skin and a horn on his forehead, the actor’s body must supply the rest, creating the physicality of the angry rhinoceros and hoarsening his voice drastically. What Ionesco demands of his actor in this scene is very similar to Gertrude Eysolt’s “hoarse roaring” and “convulsive spasms” from Fischer-Lichte’s discussion of *Electra* (2, 4). Jean’s transformation is framed not as a decision so much as a disease, with his hoarse voice and sickly green color. Spectators will carry this performance fresh in their minds when the next act begins, an image that will serve to contradict the return to calm discussions of the “pros and cons” of metamorphosis
(Ionesco, *Plays* 87). Though the actors never turn and directly address the audience, in this scene the actor playing Jean uses his physical body to achieve the effect Brecht would have wanted, giving spectators a very strong reminder to turn a critical eye onto how the play’s use of language explains away its rhinoceroses.

Ionesco encourages his spectators to think critically about the ideas presented in *Rhinoceros* by creating an excessive physical presence on his stage with actors, props, and sound design that is so overwhelming and so alienating that these moments can be seen both as Brechtian and as fantastic. It is this mix that enables Ionesco to impart a political message. He takes the metaphor of “collective hysteria” as “collective disease,” and makes it physical, phenomenal, present, and inescapable (Ionesco, *Notes* 199). Ionesco makes his use of the marvelous central to the success of the message. His play is political and fantastical.

**The Clean House**

Brecht’s theories are not often discussed together with those of magic realism. The two are seeming opposites. Magic realism is primarily a literary mode. Magic realist stories take place in a realist world, a recognizable world that is similar to that of the spectator except for the fact that the characters also accept marvelous events as part of the norms of their reality. By contrast, Brecht wrote primarily about theater. He sought to question the events occurring in a realist narrative, not to broaden the scope of acceptable events within a realist world. Still, Anne C. Hegerfeldt’s definition of magic realism reads almost as though it could belong to either mode. For her, “magic realism’s dual aim of exploring the possibilities of knowledge while simultaneously showing up its limitations, thereby prevent[s] an uncritical suspension
of disbelief … ceaselessly drawing attention to its own constructedness without thereby invalidating itself, magic realist fiction self-consciously presents itself as ‘lies that tell the truth’” (7). Much of Sarah Ruhl’s work, particularly Pulitzer finalist *The Clean House*, is identified as magic realist (Royce). *The Clean House* demonstrates how her brand of magic realist fantasy can be highly political and highly metatheatrical. Even more so than *Rhinoceros*, *The Clean House* draws spectators’ attention to its theatricality, its “bodily being-in-the-world” as a theatrical space, and through this creates its fantasy (Fischer-Lichte 13).

On a narrative level, Ruhl uses magic realist devices to draw spectators’ attention to the social and economic issues underlying the play. She constantly challenges any assumptions the spectators might have had of how this story should conventionally unfold. We are introduced to Matilde, a cleaning lady from Brazil who does not like to clean. The solution becomes Virginia, Matilde’s boss’s sister, who asks to secretly clean Lane’s house. Lane may feel that she “did not go to medical school to clean [her] own house,” and spectators probably find this understandable, but both are confronted with Virginia’s counter-position, that Lane “has given up the privilege of cleaning her own house. Something deeply personal – she has given up” (*Clean House* 10). When Lane discovers that her husband Charles is having an affair, the audience might not expect his lover to be a sixty-seven year old Argentinean mastectomy patient, or for the Christian Charles to explain that he is obligated to leave Lane under Jewish law because he has found his *bashert* (his soul mate). Ruhl’s play asks spectators to reevaluate their assumptions about how a story like this can unfold and about things they might take for granted: who should be cleaning and who
should be falling in love. *The Clean House* addresses questions of cultural misinterpretation\(^\text{20}\) and stereotype. Ruhl’s characters suffer from a breakdown of communication; they are lost in translation. Lane cannot see Matilde as a person, only as a cleaning lady. Matilde cannot bring herself to be a cleaning lady. Virginia looks at ancient Greek ruins and thinks, “why doesn’t somebody just sweep them up!” (Ruhl, *Clean House* 22). The Christian Charles uses a Jewish custom he learned about on NPR to justify his affair. No one can pronounce Matilde’s name correctly. Matilde cannot translate her Portuguese jokes because they are “not funny in translation” (Ruhl, *The Clean House* 48). Ruhl never offers a ‘solution’ to these problems, but by challenging rules of logic, she pushes spectators to open up their ways of thinking and not to revert to their own cultural assumptions.

*The Clean House* takes place in “a metaphysical Connecticut” (Ruhl 7). Its set is a “white living room” with “white couch, white vase, white lamp, white rug,” a hyper-suburbanized stereotype that serves as Ruhl’s version of a constrictive mundane world (*Clean House* 8). In talking about her Connecticut, Ruhl says, “if you’ve got a living room, as in *The Clean House*, I’m interested in what’s below it and what’s above it … stage space can be transformative, and there’s so much beyond the living room walls” (“More Invisible Terrains” 31). Indeed, *The Clean House* living room has a beyond, an above, and a below, which is the world of the stage. The characters often break the fourth wall, stepping outside of the living room to talk directly to the audience. This direct address is coupled with a general invitation to the audience to view the inner world of the living room as something to be observed from

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\(^{20}\) By exploring magic realism at all Ruhl asks spectators to consider issues of cultural misappropriation; there is fierce debate over whether anyone not Latin American is allowed to use it.
the outside. Ruhl writes that several of her stage directions should be projected onto
the set at various points in the play, offering captions for the action taking place that
frame each moment from an almost anthropological viewpoint: “Lane and Virginia
experience a primal moment during which they are seven and nine years old,”
“Virginia takes stock of her sister’s dust,” “Virginia has a deep impulse to order the
universe” (Clean House 30, 37, 19). The moments Ruhl chooses are often silent ones
that might, without the projected directions, have an ambiguous meaning for the
spectator. With the directions, Ruhl frames the way that she wants her spectators to
interpret these moments, asking them to watch the scenes from a privileged
standpoint as a scientific observer. Ruhl may have taken this idea directly from
Brecht, who both suggested that actors speak stage directions out loud and advocated
for “projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said
… figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear”
(71). The characters also prompt the spectator to adopt a scientific mind frame by
performing their own anthropological analysis:

    VIRGINIA. This is good coffee.
    MATILDE. We make good coffee in Brazil.
    VIRGINIA. Oh – that’s right. You do!
    MATILDE. Does that help you place me in my cultural context?
    VIRGINIA. Lane didn’t describe you accurately.

    How old are you?
    MATILDE. Young enough that my skin is still good.

    Old enough that I am starting to think: is my skin still good?
Does that answer your question?

**Virginia.** Yes. You’re twenty-seven (Ruhl, *Clean House* 20).

The breaking of the fourth wall, the projection of subtitles, and the anthropological framing all ask the audience to remain active observers, encouraging them to think critically about the unfolding narrative.

In *The Clean House*, Ruhl demonstrates how a play can both call attention to its theatricality and be fantastical. The audience is all the more aware that the narrative is unfolding on a stage because its marvelous events could only take place in the unique physical space of the theater. The set of the play is primarily the living room, but includes a balcony, which represents part of Ana and Charles’s house. Though conventionally the spectator is meant to assume that spaces set on a stage are further away from each other within the world of the play than they are within the physical dimensions of the stage, Ruhl cleverly violates this convention; when objects get tossed off of the balcony, they land on the stage floor below, which happens to be the living room, which happens to be occupied by other characters, who see and interact with these fallen objects. These moments feel marvelous because a space within a fictional world is obeying the rules of its actual setting: as the balcony and the living room are side by side, objects can fall from one to the other. When Lane imagines how her husband and Ana must look together and they appear on the stage in her fantasy, Matilde can come in and see them. Again the magic of this moment comes from the fact that the fantasy characters refuse to appear only in Lane’s mind; they appear on the stage, visible to all. Similarly, Ruhl’s stage directions, which are something that usually go unspoken in the theater, are physically projected into the
space. For these moments to feel marvelous spectators must be aware of the play as
taking place in a theater, otherwise it would not be defamiliarizing for them to watch
Ana toss an apple off her balcony into Lane’s living room. This is a marvelous effect
achieved by calling attention to the real and present nature of the stage.

In many ways, Brecht’s critical project and the marvelous are well suited for
each other, as both challenge the rules of a realist world, both ask the spectator not to
take this world for granted, and both seek to defamiliarize what we typically accept as
mundane.

André Bazin

As Brecht took issue with conventional forms of theater in 1930s Germany,
the influential French film critic André Bazin disliked the classical Hollywood style
of cinema in the 1940s. According to Bazin, “from 1930 to 1940 there seems to have
grown up in the world … a common form of cinematic language” (Vol 1 28). He
called this language “analytic,” because “scenes were broken down for just one
purpose, namely, to analyze an episode according to the material or dramatic logic of
the scene” (Vol. 1 24). Filmmakers would break each scene within the film into an
establishing wide shot, to give the viewer a clear understanding of the space, and
various close ups, to help the viewer follow the action. Bazin and Brecht disliked the
conventional use of their respective mediums for similar reasons. Bazin felt that the
analytic director “[chooses] for us … we unconsciously accept his analysis because it
is consistent with the laws of attention; but it deprives us of the privilege” of feeling
able to make our own choices of interpretation within the film (Bazin, “Wyler” 42).
Analytic filmmaking creates an unambiguous space upon the screen; each shot
becomes only a “sign brought into arbitrary relief by the camera,” meant to advance
the plot of the film (Bazin, Vol. 2 37). Bazin offers the example of a scene in which a
man sits in a prison cell waiting for his executioner: “at the moment the executioner is
about to arrive we can be quite sure that the director will cut to a close shot of the
doors as it slowly turns. This close-up is justified psychologically by the
victim’s concentration on the symbol of his extreme distress” (Vol. 2 28). The
spectator is given a symbol, not a doorknob, and “the color of the enamel, the dirt
marks at the level of the hand, the shine of the metal, the worn-away look are just so
many useless facts … fittingly dispensed with” (Bazin, Vol. 2 37).

Yet Bazin felt the power of cinema was in its ability to show the viewer a
doorknob. Unlike Brecht, Bazin did not want to call viewers’ attention to the
constructed nature of film and to the fictional nature of its characters. He thought that
humanity had pursued art for centuries out of the desire for “the preservation of life
by a representation of life,” which led to our obsession with realism (Vol 1. 10). As
film is a mechanical process with no human interference, “we are forced to accept as
real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us … in
time and space” (Bazin, Vol 1. 13-14; emphasis in original). While “a very faithful
drawing may actually tell us more about the model … it will never have the irrational
power of the photograph to bear away our faith” (Bazin, Vol. 1 14). Bazin wanted
filmmakers to use a self-effacing form, to call attention to the reality of the place and
people being filmed. Cinema, in Bazin’s vision, should seek the “perfect aesthetic
illusion of reality,” even though this impression is artificially constructed by the
director (Vol 2 60). He wanted each shot within a film to appear as “a fragment of
concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact” (Bazin, *Vol 2* 37). He did not want realism, but reality.

Bazin favored the cinematic styles of William Wyler, Jean Renoir, and the Italian neorealists. These directors employed much longer takes than were typical of the analytical style, creating a palpable sense of “life time” as opposed to “artificial … theatrical time” (*Vol. 2* 76). They employed deep focus, keeping many planes of action visible on the screen, creating a more ambiguous, multivocal image. Bazin wanted the image on screen to never feel composed, but instead simply like a “space, vertically sectioned and limited by the frame on the screen” (“Wyler” 47). He felt a scene should always give the impression that it is being “played independent of the camera in all its real dramatic expanse” and that the camera is not omniscient, but simply an “invisible witness” to real events (Bazin, *Renoir* 89, 87).

For Bazin, the use of analytical editing over a style of longer takes and deeper shots “[ran] the risk of threatening the very ontology of the cinematographic tale … When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out … [Montage] would change it from something real into something imaginary” (*Vol 1* 50). To show the spectator a chase scene in which the camera cuts between shots of a little boy and shots of a lion following him does not have the same impact as a single image of the boy and the lion together, as “this single frame in which trickery is out of the question gives immediate and retroactive authenticity to the very banal montage that has preceded it” (Bazin, *Vol 1* 49). One film Bazin appreciates for this reason is *Le Ballon Rouge*, a fantastic tale of a young boy who befriends a big red balloon that magically follows
him around Paris. Director Albert Lamorisse does not cut between images of the boy and the balloon, implying through editing that the balloon is following him, but presents the spectator with impossible images of the boy and the balloon together. Though trickery must be involved, the use of a single shot with both characters in it lends “something concrete” to the magic: “illusion is created here, as in conjuring, out of reality itself” (Bazin, Vol 1 45). Although Bazin’s main interest is in advocating for the “perfect aesthetic illusion of reality,” he is the first to admit that it is exactly this evocation of reality that can also create fantasy (Vol 2 60).

**Being There**

Bazin wanted filmmakers to give the impression that the camera is present simply to record a “concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity” (Vol 2 37). Filmmaking should “never [make] reality the servant of some *à priori* point of view” (Bazin, Vol 2 64; emphasis in original). In Bazin’s ideal film, the spectator would feel as though he could “see everything” and “choose ‘to his liking’” (“Wyler” 43). Hal Ashby’s 1979 film *Being There* follows the exploits of Chance, a gardener forced to leave the house he has grown up in when its owner dies, only to be taken in accidentally by the wealthy elite of Washington DC who mistake his simple-minded gardening aphorisms for cutting-edge political advice. For the most part, *Being There* is conventionally shot and edited, but Ashby does employ a slow pace and longer takes to allow spectators to contemplate the world that they are watching. Ashby invites spectators to look critically at the influential politicos who grasp so quickly and so desperately at the words of an uneducated and mentally handicapped gardener. Though these longer, slower moments may feel to spectators as though they are
giving them time to form their own opinions in response to the events of the narrative, Ashby mainly uses these moments in service of the film’s satire. *Being There*’s humor comes from its un-ambiguity. Spectators know Chance’s true identity and thus can enjoy watching high-powered businessmen make fools out of themselves around him. For most of the film it is clear what conclusions Ashby wants his spectators to make about this story, with its dry mockery of politics, elitism, and television.

Yet there is more to this movie, and to Chance, than meets the eye. The closing moments of the film suddenly cross over into unexpected fantasy, casting a retroactive ambiguity on Chance’s character and on the film as a whole. The scene takes place at the funeral of the wealthy patron who has just left his business to Chance. Ashby allows the spectator to take in the scenery, highlighting the looming forest, the looming mausoleum, the looming mansion, and the vast lake in several long shots. The general quietness of the soundtrack underlines both the silence of the forest and what sound there is, such as a plane passing overhead or the footsteps of the pallbearers. Ashby is already allowing his spectators to expand their focus of the scene from simply paying attention to the narrative to “see[ing] everything” (Bazin, “Wyler” 43). Partway through the funeral, Chance wanders away from the mourners. Intercut with the funeral service and the gossiping pallbearers, he meanders through the forest in several wide shots. Once Chance wanders away, Ashby never cuts to a closer shot of him, keeping Chance at a distance in the frame, surrounded by the trees. This provides further ambiguity. The spectator watches Chance from a distance, unable to cut closer, unable to get inside his head through a close-up. The camera and director will no longer interpret Chance’s journey; spectators can only watch and
attempt to form their own conclusions. The final shot of the sequence and of the film is a perfect Bazinian boy-and-his-balloon moment. The shot is a long take, over a minute, and in deep focus. The spectators watch in a long shot as Chance walks forward towards the lake. Slowly, it becomes clear that Chance is walking on water. When Chance himself finally notices this, he stops and bends over to test the water, pushing his umbrella straight into the lake, all the way to the handle. Chance pulls the umbrella out and begins walking again. The screen cuts to black. It is an impossible image: Chance surrounded by the vastness of the lake, his feet making sloshing noises as he walks. Ashby further emphasizes the impossibility of the image by showing the spectators that Chance’s umbrella can sink all the way into the very same lake he is standing upon. This moment is a brilliant example of “illusion … created here, as in conjuring, out of reality itself” (Bazin, Vol 1 45).

Up until this point, nothing has occurred to suggest that the film takes place in anything other than a fictional version of contemporary American society. This final moment casts a retroactive air of fantasy over the entire film and its whimsical storyline, lending it the ambiguity of a reality that has suddenly become “in itself multiple and full of ambiguity” (Bazin, Vol 2 37). While the spectator may have come to love Chance over the course of the film, this final moment brings new hesitation to his character. He is not quite the simple-minded gardener any more, nor is the film any longer pure social satire, but something more fantastic and more ambiguous. In 1997 Roger Ebert gave voice to some of the many questions this moment inspires in a thoughtful reminiscence on the film: “What are we to assume? That Chance is a Christ figure? That the wisdom of great leaders only has the appearance of meaning?
That we find in politics and religion whatever we seek? That like the Road Runner (who also defies gravity) [Chance] will not sink until he understands his dilemma?” (“Being There”). His list of questions goes on, as can the viewer’s. In the end, *Being There* gives spectators the final say in their interpretation of the film and of Chance by creating a moment of fantastic reality that Bazin might truly have appreciated.

**Enchanted**

Though Bazin gives specific reasons for why long takes, wide shots, and deep focus create a more ‘real’ picture of life than analytic filmmaking does, a significant part of what makes these techniques ‘real’ to him is that they broke with the dominant artistic conventions of the 1930s and 1940s. Kevin Lima’s 2007 film *Enchanted* is a conventionally filmed and edited Walt Disney Pictures release, an unlikely candidate to benefit from Bazin’s theories. Yet an analysis of *Enchanted* shows that Bazin’s ideas can function beyond the realm of his specific list of techniques and that his interest in representing reality lends itself well to representing fantasy.

*Enchanted* begins as an animated film, a tongue-in-cheek imitation of Disney classics such as *Sleeping Beauty*. The lovely Giselle lives in a little hut in the woods, dreaming of her true love and making princess dresses for herself with the help of her woodland creature friends, who come to her musical summons. When Prince Edward rescues Giselle from an ogre and immediately proposes marriage, his evil stepmother decides to stop the wedding and pushes Giselle down a wishing well. Giselle falls from the wonderful world of a Disney fairytale into the very mundane world of New York City, pushing her way out of a manhole to emerge in Times Square. She meets and is taken in by Robert, a divorce lawyer, and his daughter Morgan. The film
delights in applying Giselle’s naïve Disney sensibility to real world situations: her interpretation of Robert’s ironic ‘welcome to New York’ as a sincere welcome or her teary-eyed shock, when encountering one of Robert’s clients, that a married couple would have to be separated forever. *Enchanted* derives much of its comedy from the fact that, surprisingly often, the mundane New York objects and inhabitants that Giselle encounters end up conforming to her rules. Giselle can whip up perfectly tailored princess dresses for herself out of bed sheets and curtains. When she sings for creatures to help her clean up Robert’s apartment, they still come to her call, just not the endearing woodland creatures she expected. Viewers are treated to the hilarious juxtaposition of rats, flies, cockroaches, and one-legged pigeons willingly joining in Giselle’s cheerful *Cinderella*-esque cleaning session. This is not Bazinian per se, but the pleasure of *Enchanted* as a whole comes from seeing ‘real’ people and animals in a mundane setting participating in squeaky-clean Disney events.

One of the highlights of the film is a scene in Central Park that subtly emphasizes the reality of its space and its inhabitants in a very Bazinian manner in order to create a joyfully fantastic effect. In this scene, Giselle and Robert are walking through Central Park. Giselle, trying to explain to Robert that he needs to express his affections for his girlfriend Nancy more often, bursts into a song called “How Does She Know.” Robert shushes her, but a Caribbean calypso street band nearby has heard Giselle and joins her in the song. The scene is not a typical song-in-a-musical scene, a magic realist moment in which everyone apparently knows all the words and dance steps and spontaneously joins the impromptu song. Instead, the *Enchanted* scene implies that the calypso band has actually recognized Giselle’s lyrics – that it is
a real song. This first moment is filmed in a Bazinian manner. Instead of cutting to the band, the camera pans to follow Robert and Giselle as they walk towards the Caribbean street singers and get intercepted. Lima frames the image with three planes of action: the band, Giselle and Robert, and the crowd that starts to grow in the back. The entire song-and-dance number is constructed as a performance, albeit impromptu and bordering on the magical, of a real song, with a large audience always present and with various artistic groups simply lending their talents (the calypso band, break-dancers, Bavarian dancers, a children’s theater group) to the festivities. Giselle’s magic is not in completely changing the universe of New York City, but in charming the people around her into doing un-New-York-like things. By the end of the film, she has converted Robert to her way of thinking; he appears in a period costume at the King and Queen’s Ball and saves Giselle’s life with true love’s kiss. If Robert is representative of a white, adult, male, mundane rationality, Giselle’s conversion of him is facilitated through scenes like the one in Central Park, in which she is first able to recruit socially subordinated groups: racialized and ethnic Others such as the Caribbean dancers, as well as children and the elderly. All of these groups are traditionally associated with the irrational. First with animals and then through this scene Giselle and a stereotypical multicultural ensemble help to make fantasy safe for the audience within the film and for the spectators. Lima helps to cement the presence of fantasy in the mundane through how he films the sequence, emphasizing the reality of the space in which the performance unfolds.

“How Does She Know” could not take place anywhere other than Central Park. Bazin explains the power of the final scene of Jean Renoir’s film Boudou in that
Renoir films Boudou playing in the water so that “the water is no longer ‘water,’ but more specifically the water of the Marne in August, yellow and glaucous” (*Renoir* 85). Lima choreographs “How Does She Know” across practically the entirety of Central Park, its paths, its bridges, its lakes, its buildings, its grassy areas, culminating with the song’s dramatic finale at the landmark of the Bethesda Fountain, celebrating the park’s iconic landscapes. All the events that Giselle dances through are also iconic of Central Park, from the street musicians and dancers to the group wedding to the outdoor theater performance to the boating and the picnicking. Granted, *Enchanted* presents a sanitized version of Central Park, but Lima uses his camerawork to reinforce the reality of the space that he represents. In the shots leading up to the song he frames Robert and Giselle’s conversation so that many of the shots are in deep focus, allowing the spectator to see the park in the background. In these shots and in the shots during the song, Lima makes sure that the various landscapes that will be incorporated into the musical number are visible. Before the song begins, Giselle and Robert walk over a bridge and past a lake that will both show up again. During the song, while Giselle sits singing with a row of elderly bachelors, visible directly behind her head is the big white outdoor stage she will later visit, with its huge attention-grabbing plume of balloons. In two shots before Giselle notices the ticket booth for the King and Queen’s Ball, it is visible behind Robert. This visual repetition and reinforcement is even stronger for the people whom Giselle and Robert meet. From the first moment that the Caribbean band joins in with Giselle, Lima makes sure that a crowd of onlookers is consistently visible in the background. As soon as
another group joins the song, it can be seen in the background of almost every new segment of the song thereafter.

Musical numbers in general benefit from wide shots and long takes, which give the spectator a chance to take in the entire visual picture of the dance and to appreciate the performers’ virtuosity. Lima goes further, carefully framing and composing each shot to repeat and reinforce the presence of his extras. Lima allows the spectators to “see everything” and gives them the opportunity, if they so choose, to hunt in each new segment for the old couples or the brides and grooms or the little Rapunzel girl from the previous segments (Bazin, “Wyler” 43). Lima’s framings also emphasize the sheer number of people who have joined in these festivities, a crowd that could rival Ionesco’s herd of rhinoceroses. The joy of the scene is in the overwhelming emphasis on its Central Park location, a site where, in this moment, divisions can be overcome and a multi-class, multi-racial population can become a festive collectivity. Lima repeats and reinforces his spaces, using wide shots and multiple planes of action to emphasize the people and the places of the song.

What Lima does not use are long takes. “How Does She Know” is a very heavily edited sequence, something of which Bazin might have disapproved. The editing, however, does function to add to the fantasy, and it can only do this because Lima has evoked a very palpable sense of space. The editing contrasts the real sense of space with a fantastic sense of time. Giselle’s song takes her from beside the lake to a large gazebo to a wide-open field back to a paved path then onward to a boat before the song is even halfway over. Lima’s framing and repetition of spaces has made it clear that each space is very far away from the previous one, and yet Giselle
jumps from one space to the other between lines or even during a single line of the song. She instantaneously jumps into the middle of a boat ride, or she instantaneously jumps into the middle of a performance of *Rapunzel*. In the same way that a single shot of a man walking upon water or a boy being followed by a red balloon creates a sense of an impossible event in space, so do these jumps create impossible temporality. Lima juxtaposes real space and cinematic time, heightening the overall fantasy of the scene by having Giselle magically jump from real space to real space. In this sequence of *Enchanted*, not only does the editing not destroy the scene’s concrete reality, but also it helps to create it. *Enchanted* is not a film Bazin might pay much attention to in that it explores fantastic subject matter in a conventionally edited way, but nevertheless, this sequence creates a sense of Bazinian reality.

*Enchanted*’s blend of the mundane and the marvelous, of New York and Disney, enables the film both to defamiliarize New York and to wryly comment on the conventions of Disney films and romantic comedies. *Enchanted* acknowledges how unrealistic romantic conventions are. Giselle’s utter sincerity works because she is from another world, specifically a Disney cartoon, which justifies her belief in true love and love at first sight. Her childlike naïveté fits her association with fantasy. Yet the film actually tends less to challenge Giselle’s beliefs than to question why these conventions have to be unrealistic in New York. The joy of the film is in seeing how Giselle enchants New York. When, towards the end of the film, New York tries to transform Giselle, straightening her hair and putting her in a modern gown, the charm is lost. The film gets bogged down in the need for a traditional Disney climax in which Giselle destroys a villainous dragon on top of a skyscraper in the pouring rain.
Generally, the film works extremely hard to engage the participation of mundane elements in its fantasy; *Enchanted*’s power is not in the simple fact that it sends a Disney princess through a New York manhole, but in its clever translation of fantasy into reality, in making curtains into dresses and poison apples into apple-tennis. In the end, though, Giselle’s final battle is with a clearly computer-generated dragon in a very familiar riff on the climax of King Kong. Nor does the film seem certain what to do with its female dragon-turning villain, a self-aware character who seems like she belongs in New York to begin with, but arrives there with all her fantasy powers intact and unaffected. When Giselle calls for creatures, she gets rats, but when Queen Narcissa turns into a dragon, she turns into a dragon. *Enchanted* is only able to question and reinvent its conventions up to a point before it simply enacts them, but until this point it is an extremely interesting example of a film that works to bring fantasy into a mundane reality and uses Bazinian techniques to reinforce this transformation.

**Conclusion**

Brecht and Bazin both advocate for artists to disregard current conventions and try to elicit in spectators a feeling that they are watching something that is actual and present before them; something that is not an illusion. The four fantastic texts discussed here, *Rhinoceros, The Clean House, Being There*, and *Enchanted* explore the aesthetic of Brecht and the aesthetic of Bazin in notably different ways, finding within them new means of calling attention to reality, and new means of being marvelous. Brecht and Bazin are giants in their fields, their ideas debated by

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21 Different though they are, film directors of the French New Wave, such as Jean Luc Godard, found ways to integrate Bazinian and Brechtian aesthetics within their films.
academics and explored by performance artists and auteur film directors. While discussions of actuality in theater and cinema often fall under the designation of ‘high art,’ discussions of fantasy as a mode are typically relegated to the realms of the low or the commercial, if discussed at all. Even when Bazin brings up the idea of the fantastic, he does so only in the context of reviewing *Le Ballon Rogue* and other children’s films. Yet, as texts like the ones examined here show, not only may calling attention to the real in a performance help to create an atmosphere of fantasy, but also fantasy can be a great tool in focusing spectators on the corporeal presence of the actors and the stage or on the politics of the narrative. Be they considered low or commercial art, as is *Enchanted*, or high art, as is the absurdist *Rhinoceros*, these fantastic texts suggest that the marvelous can make an important contribution, ironically, to naturalism. As the Duke-of-Saxe Meinigen, André Antoine, and Konstantin Stanislavsky discovered accidentally in the late 1800s, it is a mistake to take the mixing of fantasy and reality lightly. Although fantasy may, by definition, be unable to be truly present in the spectator’s world, seeing can sometimes be believing.
Marvelous Madness:
Artists who use fantasy to portray insanity, and insanity to question fantasy

A stylized, surreal depiction of a subjective fantasy in *Shutter Island*. (Paramount Pictures, 2010; iTunes Movie Trailers)

A seemingly objective shot from *The Sixth Sense*, which gives no visual indication that one of these characters is not like the others. (Barry Mendel Productions, 1999)
Before moving on to my final chapter, I want to make one thing completely clear. Vampires do not actually walk the streets at night. French townspeople do not actually turn into rhinoceroses. High school is not actually Hell, much as it may seem to be. Disney cartoons cannot actually fall from their world into ours through a manhole in Times Square. If you try to sell your estate in Russia, you will not actually hear the sad sound of a snapping string at appropriate moments. Dropping an apple off of your balcony will result in the apple landing below your balcony, not in someone’s living room across town. These things are impossible. According to the accepted laws of biology and physics they cannot actually happen in the world that you, the reader, and I, the author, inhabit. You would have to be crazy to think they could.

This is not a disclaimer. It is a prescription. By definition, a fantastic event violates the prevailing understanding of natural laws. We cannot see human beings transform into rhinoceroses; it is impossible.\textsuperscript{22} We can only imagine such a metamorphosis or see it performed in a production of \textit{Rhinoceros}. Yet there are altered states that we can be in, in which we might believe we are actually seeing this transfiguration: under the influence of dreams, drugs, or illnesses such as schizophrenia, the human brain can hallucinate something marvelous so convincingly that it appears indistinguishable from reality.

Fantasy and psychology are closely intertwined. After all, the word fantasy signifies both the artistic genre of fantasy and the products of private mental activity such as daydreams. For Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, wishful thinking in conscious, waking life is determined by unconscious desires that seek expression in

\textsuperscript{22} If it were not impossible, it would not be considered fantastic any more.
dreams and symptoms of mental illness, as well as in fairytales and other cultural forms. Although Freud asserted that “only rarely does the psychoanalyst feel impelled to engage in aesthetic investigations,” he found at least one literary phenomenon compelling enough to discuss at length (123). As I mentioned in chapter one, Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny” explores “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar”: stories whose marvelous elements, such as doubles, severed limbs, or dead bodies, come across as eerie and unsettling, at once familiar and unfamiliar (123). Drawing on the theory of primal patricide presented in “Totem and Taboo,” Freud concludes that the fear these stories provoke has its source in “something that has been repressed and now returns” (124). Uncanny stories, Freud argues, remind the reader of “the old animistic view of the universe,” which held that our thoughts and spirits were capable of controlling worldly events (Freud 147; emphasis in original). The uncanny is a fear of danger from within, the interiorized threat of a subject’s unconscious fantasies; uncanny monsters threaten to release something repressed and unwanted from inside of ourselves that might topple our carefully constructed social order. The horror genre is well known for its frequent use of magical and / or psychotic antagonists who somehow defy or invert the order of things. Fictional works frequently treat madness and the marvelous as monstrous, both of which forewarn the release of something that has been repressed in our society and ourselves. They are dangerous Others meant to be avoided at all costs, “threats” to the normative order (Bellin 139).

Half a century after Freud, Tzvetan Todorov returned to the concept of the uncanny in his book, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,
which is widely considered “the most important and influential critical study of fantasy in this post-Romantic period” (Jackson 5). Todorov devised a very specific definition of what he considered to be fantastic literature. He argued that a fantastic text “must obligate the reader to … hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). Henry James’s 1898 novella, The Turn of the Screw, tells the story of a governess who believes she is seeing ghosts on her employer’s property. Todorov would define this story as fantastic because the reader can never be certain as to whether the ghosts actually appear or whether the Governess is hallucinating them. If at any point it became clear that the Governess did indeed hallucinate the ghosts, Todorov would define the story as fantastic-uncanny, as “the supernatural explained” (41). If it became clear that the ghosts did exist, the story would be fantastic-marvelous. In Todorov’s uncanny, which he notes is not quite the same as Freud’s (47), events happen that are “incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected” but prove to have a mundane explanation (46). Todorov singles out two methods to explain away uncanny events: the events either prove to be “illusory,” tricks set up by labyrinthine conspiracy or pan-deterministic coincidence, or “imaginary … the fruit of a deranged imagination” (45). Though Todorov does not attribute all uncanny events to deranged imaginations, he comments that the uncanny, more so than the marvelous, “is uniquely linked to the sentiments of the characters” (47). As uncanny stories do not have “a material event defying reason,” the focus of an uncanny text becomes the characters’ reactions and emotions as they attempt to deal with whatever events are actually occurring (Todorov 47).
Freud and Todorov both see a link between fantasy and “the fruit of a deranged imagination” (Todorov 45). This general view is often echoed in art; artists frequently represent a character’s mental state in a fantastical manner, particularly if this character is psychologically troubled. Ghosts haunt the distressed minds of Willy Loman and Macbeth. In chapter two, I discussed Chekhov’s short story, “Ward No. 6,” in which he introduces two mental patients as “an automaton” and “a bullfinch” (Ward 31). In Melancholy Play, a 2001 play by Sarah Ruhl, characters who become too depressed transform into almonds, reflecting the almond-like shape of the amygdala, the brain’s emotional center. In film, directors often use elements of fantasy to visually or aurally represent a character’s subjective perspective. Martin Scorsese’s 1980 film Raging Bull takes spectators into the mind of boxer Jake LaMotta while he is in the ring, not with a voice over of his internal monologue, but by creating a soundtrack of roaring animals to represent his emotions. Scorsese reaches beyond the mundane to find a somewhat fantastical way of communicating the violence and anger of LaMotta’s psyche. By contrast, the film A Beautiful Mind elegantly visualizes all of mathematician John Nash’s pattern seeking; he mentally combines the patterns of light shining through an ornate drinking glass and the lines of a cut lemon in order to compare them to the patterns of a hideous tie, and visually these lines rise out of each object in turn, just as patterns of numbers will light up or go dark later in the film as Nash breaks codes for the government. These are the beautiful moments of Nash’s beautiful mind, and their fantastical presentation comes back later, in this fantastic-uncanny film, to haunt Nash and the spectator when many
of these patterns turn out to be literal fantasies, distorted products of Nash’s schizophrenic mind.

In general, film shots can be divided into two loose categories: objective and subjective. Objective shots are ostensibly objective representations of the cinematic world of the film in the sense that they are filmed from no single character’s specific point of view. Subjective shots, on the other hand, are filmed from a particular character’s perspective. When a character looks at an object and a shot of the object follows, this is a loosely subjective shot, revealing what the character sees. In other basic examples, the camera substitutes more directly for the character’s eyes, ‘looking around’ a room, or shakily ‘walking’ down a hallway. Subjective shots often use an exaggerated visual style to suggest a character’s altered mental state. Blurry, wildly moving cameras convey drunkenness or dizziness. Color filters may convey flashbacks. In general, subjective shots are much more stylized than objective shots, particularly in films that generally exhibit a restrained, self-effacing, zero-degree style, marking any subjective shots as a clear departure from the ‘realist’ style of the film as a whole. This was especially true of television for much of its history. Film and television scholar John Thornton Caldwell writes that television prior to the 1980s “approached broadcasting primarily as a form of word-based rhetoric and transmission” (4). Television shows overwhelmingly valued “content” over form, giving rise to an “antistyle” that favored “serious issues and quality writing and acting,” while ignoring visual aesthetics (Caldwell 57). Only with the onset of the financial crisis of the 1980s did television networks begin to expand the definition of

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23 An exception to this are films that deliberately invoke the presumed objectivity of a documentary by stylizing the film to look like one via techniques such as clearly hand-held camerawork. Even so, these films do imply a subjective point of view behind the camera (the hand causing the hand-held look).
television to include “a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme self-consciousness of style” in order to attract specific demographics (Caldwell 4). Prior to that, fictional shows “corralled expressive images into special narrative boxes as ‘altered states’” (Caldwell 52). These “stylistically coded ‘altered states,’” especially altered mental states such as flashbacks, hallucinations, hypnosis, or dream sequences, were the only moments permitted to be stylized within an episode (Caldwell 63).

Filmmakers use stylized subjectivity in conveying characters’ altered mental states to visually or vocally signal how these moments go beyond the characters’ everyday experiences of reality. In a way, subjective shots tend to be very obvious. This is not to say that they are bad or the obvious choice for the moment. Often, their use is very innovative, but they are meant to be noticed, meant to signal a clear difference from the film’s realist style and therefore from its ‘real,’ ordinary world. These shots or sequences often break up the visual pattern of the film as a whole; most films do not employ direct subjectivity for very extended intervals. These kinds of shots can both bring the spectator into the character’s vision of the world and distance the spectator from it, particularly if the stylization is jarring, as with the distorted perspective of a drunkard.

By contrast, mundane-marvelous films and television shows often utilize generally objective shots to present marvelous elements. After all, in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the vampires are actually there; they exist in the same physical spaces as the human characters, and Buffy sequences that contain supernatural elements are filmed in the same manner as those that do not, unless a director is
aiming for a specific effect, such as suspense. *Buffy* frequently derives comedy from deliberately presenting the vampires or demons as mundane characters in mundane situations, carrying groceries back to their tombs. When *Buffy* does invoke explicitly stylized camerawork, it tends to be to deal with characters’ psychological problems. In the season four episode “Who Are You?” two characters, Buffy and the highly disturbed fellow Slayer Faith, switch bodies. Joss Whedon, who wrote and directed the episode, employs jarring jump cuts to visually express the fracturing of Faith’s mind. As I have noted, fantastic, stylized camerawork in television is more associated with subjective storytelling, and zero-degree camerawork with objective representations of both ordinary and fantastic events.

*Vertigo*, Hitchcock’s famous thriller from 1958, flirts with blurring the lines between subjectivity and objectivity, fantasy and reality. The film follows John Ferguson, a detective who has recently developed a vertigo-inducing fear of heights. He gets involved in a case trailing a client’s wife, Madeline, who is either going insane or possessed by the ghost of her dead ancestor. He falls in love with her, but his vertigo prevents him from chasing after her to stop her from leaping to her death. Her suicide compounds his own psychological problems, which include a disturbing obsession with Judy, a woman who looks just like Madeline. By this point in the film, the audience knows the truth: Judy is the woman he fell in love with, hired by his client to impersonate his client’s wife Madeline and ‘commit suicide’ in an elaborate cover up for the real Madeline’s murder. All fantastic illusions and mystery dispelled, the audience watches as the monomaniacal Ferguson obsessively attempts to recreate Madeline in Judy by giving her new clothing, shoes, and hair. Though Hitchcock has
already revealed that *Vertigo* is not a ghost story, he engineers a fantastic moment to convey Ferguson’s feelings when he first sees Judy completely made over as Madeline. Hitchcock starts the sequence from Ferguson’s point of view: he sees Judy appear hidden behind a ghostly green haze (ostensibly the glow from the neon lights outside) and walk forward, revealing a perfect image of Madeline. Hitchcock films the next shot from outside of Ferguson’s subjective perspective. Ferguson and Judy come together in a passionate kiss and the camera begins to circle around their embrace, a very conventional stylization used in romances. Only, as Hitchcock circles, the room around them goes dark, and the camera continues circling to reveal them standing in the stable where Ferguson kissed Madeline just before her death. If this were not fantastic enough, Ferguson looks up, confused, and registers his strange new surroundings, before returning to the kiss as the circling camera returns the characters to the room. Given Ferguson’s confused glance at his fantastical surroundings, he did not expect to look up from Judy to find himself in the stable, thus a moment that initially seemed to stem from Ferguson’s mind appears to have bled into and transformed the objective world around him. Perhaps this signals that Ferguson’s fantasy is taking control of him, a warning that he must break free of his obsession with Madeline just as he must break free of his vertigo. Though *Vertigo* is an uncanny film, having explained away its hints of ghostly possession already, Hitchcock cleverly blurs the line between madness and the marvelous in this one very famous moment. Using both enables Hitchcock to visualize the extent of Ferguson’s obsession and to signal its danger to him in a way he might not have been able to without blurring boundaries.
In the past ten years, a series of critically acclaimed films have sprung up that cleverly manipulate spectators’ notions of what is objective, what is subjective, what is real, and what is fantastic – not just for a moment but for an entire film. These films, often considered puzzle films or mind game films, create what appears to be an objective reality by contrasting it with more obvious forms of subjectivity or fantasy, revealing only at the critical moment that all the viewer has seen so far has in fact been subjective, not just that which was coded to appear as such. While visually stylized moments of subjectivity often exist only as moments within a longer film, these films have found a way to effectively tell almost an entire story from an indirectly subjective point of view. The viewer, without knowing it, experiences the world as a character experiences it. Joshua David Bellin, in his book *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation*, notes that society’s fear of mental illnesses comes in part “because they are ‘elusive’ both in the sense that they often do not manifest the distinctive somatic/bodily symptoms of physical illness and in the sense that, by causing the ‘collapse’ or ‘dissolution’ of the sufferer’s own cognitive and perceptual apparatuses, they may prevent detection even by the individual they afflict” (142). These films offer a chance to ‘infect’ the viewers, to bring them more directly into the experience of a character than is often possible with more obvious and therefore more distancing stylized subjectivity.

M. Night Shyamalan’s 1999 film *The Sixth Sense* has earned particular distinction for executing its twist narrative. In *The Sixth Sense*, spectators believe that they are watching a ghost story in which a psychiatrist, Dr. Malcolm Crowe, helps Cole, a young boy who can see the dead, come to terms with his gift and help those
who come to him from the afterlife. Only at the very end of the film do the spectators and the psychiatrist learn that he himself is not Cole’s curer, but one of the many dead people who have come to the boy for help. In an excellent essay entitled “Twist Blindness,” Daniel Barratt traces the methods that The Sixth Sense, advertised as “A Real ‘Must See Twice’ Film,” uses to fool spectators, methods that did indeed fool a significant portion of those who saw the film when it opened (62). Dr. Malcolm Crowe, the psychiatrist, gets shot by a former patient in the very first scene of the film. Barratt points out that, instead of letting this moment sink in, the camera immediately cuts to a new scene: a shot of a suburban street with the title, “The Next Fall,” and then a shot of the apparently alive and well Malcolm sitting on a bench (71-73). As Bazin so astutely observed, the cinematic or photographic image has the ability to “bear away our faith” in the reality of its representations (Vol. 1 14). In The Sixth Sense, this shot of Malcolm, filmed in an objective manner with no hints of stylization or subjectivity, implies that Malcolm must have survived the gunshot. Film spectators, trained to trust cinematic images unless otherwise signaled, simply assume that Malcolm survived the attempt on his life. Shyamalan then immediately establishes Malcolm’s relationship with Cole, and the plot of the film gets underway.

Barratt points out that spectators might be tempted to ask questions about Malcolm’s status if he only interacted with Cole throughout the film, so the filmmakers establish Malcolm’s relationship both with his wife, Anna, and with Cole’s mother, Lynn (74-78). Again, Shyamalan relies on Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image: if the spectator sees two characters in the same shot together, with no indications to the contrary, these characters must be occupying the same
reality. So strong is the spectator’s faith in the image that in a film that “lasts for over 100 minutes,” “Malcolm and Lynn only occupy the same frame for approximately 15 seconds” (Barratt 75). Shyamalan then creates an entire subplot between Malcolm and his wife, which he does by playing up a very conventional narrative thread that he had established prior to Malcolm’s death, that his relationship with his wife is “on the rocks” (Baratt 77; emphasis in original). With this familiar context, “we are inclined to interpret the lack of eye-contact and (two-way) conversation as consequences of Anna giving Malcolm the cold shoulder, rather than as consequences of Anna being unable to see Malcolm” (Barratt 77; emphasis in original). Shyamalan uses a seemingly objective style of filmmaking for presenting Malcolm and creates a very mundane context for his actions, forestalling less obvious interpretations of events.

Shyamalan also distracts the audience with a clearly fantastic plot: the dead people. Each time Shyamalan presents a sequence involving his ghosts, he does so in a more stylized manner, all of which “follow a similar pattern … forewarning, entrance, and threat” and involve special effects and music (Barratt 83). Shyamalan trains his viewers, presenting them with a clear, if misleading, pattern for how to deduce when something fantastic is occurring on the screen and when it is not, relying upon familiar horror conventions to do so. This training is so effective that it ends up overriding the viewer’s ability to pick up on other signals. In the famous hospital sequence in which Cole confesses to Malcolm, “I see dead people,” the camera zooms slowly in on Malcolm’s face as Cole spells out how he sees ghosts who do not even know that they are dead. Producer Frank Marshall commented, “I actually thought we had overdone it. I actually thought we’re giving away too much
here” (qtd. in Barratt 62). Yet the film has trained spectators to identify obviously objective camerawork with mundane situations and obviously stylized camerawork with fantastic situations so well that many failed to pick up on Malcolm’s unearthly status here or at any other moment. The Sixth Sense went down in cinematic history as one of the greatest twist films of all time.

Other twist narratives that use similar techniques of misdirection include David Fincher’s 1999 Fight Club, Alejandro Amenábar’s 2001 The Others, Ron Howard’s 2001 A Beautiful Mind, and Cameron Crowe’s 2001 Vanilla Sky, based off of Alejandro Amenábar’s 1997 Abre los Ojos. The trend continues today in many mediums, including episodes from television shows like Medium and House M.D., box office hits like Martin Scorsese’s 2010 Shutter Island, and even the 2009 Broadway musical Next to Normal. Though these are all very different projects, many of them use a similar conflation of objectivity and subjectivity, fantasy and reality, as The Sixth Sense. In Shutter Island, director Martin Scorsese follows the character of U.S. Marshall Teddy Daniels as he pursues the case of a missing patient in the psychiatric hospital on Shutter Island.24 Teddy suffers from frequent flashes, hallucinations, or dreams of his past, filmed in a highly stylized manner, with surreal visuals and saturated color, which are jarringly inserted into scenes from the rest of the film. Even though the rest of the film, taking place in near-apocalyptic weather, might not necessarily be called mundane, it appears objective relative to Teddy’s seemingly self-contained visions. Shutter Island also attempts to distract the viewer from questioning any inconsistencies in the objective scenes by suggesting that Teddy

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24 I draw some of my analysis on this film from discussions held during the Senior Seminar on Martin Scorsese taught by Wesleyan Film Studies Department Chair Jeanine Basinger, spring 2010.
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is at the center of a labyrinthine conspiracy he must expose. [Spoiler Alert] In reality, Teddy is hallucinating many of the more objectively filmed scenes; he is really a patient, the paranoid conspiracy his invention. Shutter Island exemplifies the use of stylized subjectivity to distract viewers from realizing that what they accept as the objective reality of the film is only further indirect subjectivity.

These techniques are not limited to film, as the Tony Award winning musical Next to Normal displayed on Broadway in 2009. The musical opens late at night in the Goodman household, as mother Diana waits up for her teenage son Gabe to return from a night on the town. He appears and she berates him for making her worry, “imagining the ways you might have died.” She sends him up the back way to avoid a confrontation with his father, Dan. The scene evolves into a musical number entitled “Just Another Day,” setting up a scenario that has become very familiar in the past few decades: a suburban family struggling to stay “just the perfect loving family” and failing at it. The musical number continues over to the next morning, as the family gets ready for the day. They start to sing a climactic harmony, but trail off as Diana, who is making sandwiches, gets more and more frantic until she and the food end up on the floor. Dan attempts to comfort Diana. Natalie starts to say, “Dad-” but Dan cuts her off, tells her to get to school. Gabe asks, “Mom?” but in the end they go.

This opening number is extremely clever. Writers Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey have both established the musical’s mundane situation, the struggling modern family, and structured the opening number so that it ends by revealing Diana’s bipolarity.25

25 Both this show and Death of a Salesman follow a family dealing with a member who suffers from mental illness or deterioration. I wonder if Next to Normal’s set deliberately references Mielziner’s minimalist design and Miller’s initial ‘Inside of His Head’ concept: Next to Normal unfolds on a series of levels meant to represent a house that are emblazoned with the pop art design of a woman’s face.
They introduce every major character and the major conflict of the show, and appear to have provided the spectators with all the information they need. The fact that Diana’s illness is revealed at the end of the song only reinforces the idea that Kitt and Yorkey are now showing spectators their hand; whatever secrets they had they have shared. Instead, the writers have hidden an even bigger twist: [Spoiler Alert] Diana’s son Gabe is her hallucination, a teenaged version of the baby who died tragically and thus triggered the onset of her bipolar disorder. When I saw Next to Normal in the summer of 2009, this information elicited an audible gasp from the audience.

How did the production pull off this Sixth Sense secret? Next to Normal benefits, I think, from being a stage production. In the ten years since The Sixth Sense, film viewers have become familiar with similar twists in other movies. While Next to Normal has theatrical precedents in shows like Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, theater has less of an established tradition of twist narratives, and musicals even less so than that. The writers also provide a very mundane context that grounds the son’s reality. The first time spectators meet him it is in a classic teen-parent interaction. Diana tells him that she worried about how he “might” have died, obviously implying that he has not yet died. During the part of the song that takes place in the morning, Diana tells the audience a surprising amount of concrete information about Gabe, listing off his daily activities, cementing his presence as a living person. When Diana’s bipolarity is revealed, Gabe stands next to his sister, as though they are heading off to school together. No one notices that Dan really tells only Natalie to head off to school, and that Gabe only speaks to his mother. In this way the show creates its seemingly objective reality.
Furthermore, *Next to Normal* is a musical. Audiences know the conventions of a musical, which presents a mix of less realistic sequences (the songs) and more realistic sequences (the dialogue). *Next to Normal*’s songs are doubly differentiated for being composed in a more contemporary/rock style and sung directly to the audience. Thus spectators are primed to look only for these predictable and consistent unrealistic sequences, and regard the spoken scenes as relatively more objective. Furthermore, in the opening musical number Gabe appears alone, without his mother, to sing a solo. This moment puts him on equal footing with the rest of the family, who all sing solo parts, in a way that I would argue is not ‘cheating,’ because the musical world of this play is established as a less realistic, more theatrical world in which a figment of Diana’s imagination could have an ambiguously worded solo, as he does. The play very slyly manipulates its varying levels of reality and fantasy, objectivity and subjectivity, successfully enough to evoke audible astonishment from naïve audiences and to entangle them in the varying levels of reality that Diana struggles with, similarly to Teddy in *Shutter Island*.

Though films like *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* and stories like *Shutter Island, Next to Normal*, and *A Beautiful Mind* employ similar twists, they explain them differently within the world of each film. The former stories are marvelous, their events the results of ghosts, while the latter are uncanny, their events the result of a character’s mental instability. The two fantastic films are structured so that the Malcolm-is-dead twist gets revealed only at the end of the film, providing the story with narrative closure. By contrast, *A Beautiful Mind* and *Next to Normal* reveal their major twists with at least half of the plot to spare. *Shutter Island* reveals Teddy’s
insanity very late in the narrative, but Scorsese chooses to end the film on a different twist, raising the question as to whether or not Teddy knows he is insane and denying narrative closure. Of the insanity-based mind game films that I am aware of, only Fight Club sets up its big reveal as an integral part of the film’s climax. As I have established, when filmmakers present a character’s subjective viewpoint on screen in a very stylized manner, it can alienate the spectator from the character, whereas conflating objectivity and subjectivity enables directors to bring viewers into a character’s perspective. To reveal the twist earlier in the narrative means that the spectator will have more time in which to view this character, whose subjectivity they have been sharing, from an outside perspective. Shutter Island, Next to Normal, and A Beautiful Mind all concern characters who are framed as ill within the narrative and who must attempt to fight against their illness and their hallucinations. Though Next to Normal and A Beautiful Mind play with the spectator for a time, treating them to a vision of the main character’s subjective world, in the end the spectator watches from the outside, to see whether the character can assimilate back into reality. Perhaps Scorsese withholds the revelation of Teddy’s insanity in Shutter Island for so long because the film ends by suggesting that Teddy has chosen not to fight against his illness. Similarly Fight Club, which ends in the glorious destruction of much of America’s financial infrastructure, suggests that though the narrator has realized his own split personality, he may continue the work that his alter ego had begun, not becoming himself again, but becoming his double, Tyler Durden. This question of societal assimilation does not seem to affect the fantastic films in this manner. While The Sixth Sense presents a conventional ‘unfinished business’ narrative in which Cole
enables Malcolm to move on to another plane, *The Others* ends with the film’s ghost family remaining in their house and sending the living family packing. From these few examples, it seems that the presence of insanity affects the film’s structure the most. If the artist wants to address the issue of overcoming mental illness, the artist reveals these subjective tricks earlier, bringing the spectator again to the outside looking in and again making the illness and the character Other. Stories about a subjectivity that does not stem from mental illness, or stories that are asking different questions, strive to keep the spectator enmeshed in this indirect subjectivity for as long as possible.

In a way, these stories could be categorized according to Todorov’s schema as fantastic-uncanny or fantastic-marvelous, as they all eventually reveal either mundane or marvelous explanations for their events. Yet, for Todorov, the important factor in a fantastic story is textual hesitation, making the reader unsure of what kind of explanation to attribute to the narrative events. These stories, by contrast, are designed to prevent hesitation. On first viewing, twist films depend on the spectator not realizing that hesitation is possible, but accepting the film’s code for what events are mundane and what events are fantastic. Nor does the pleasure of viewing these films for the second time, with foreknowledge of the twist, come from readerly hesitation but from writerly delight in the “operational aesthetic”: getting the chance to “watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics” (Mittel 35). Whereas a small subset of books and films depend on unresolved hesitation, such as Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*, hesitation is antithetical to how puzzle films achieve their effects. Some mundane-marvelous
stories employ a variation on Todorov’s hesitation. Todorov looked primarily at stories based around characters who live in mundane worlds and are suddenly faced with the question of whether marvelous elements can occur within this world or not: a challenge to their belief in the mundane. These mundane-marvelous stories take place in a world wherein the characters have already accepted the premise that marvelous elements exist within their mundane world, and are suddenly faced with the question as to whether they have made the wrong choice: a challenge to their belief in the marvelous.

Altered mental states and particularly madness play an important role in hybrid genres that mix the mundane and the marvelous. Even when the audience has no doubt as to the marvelous nature of events within the narrative, the characters still must often battle against accusations of insanity. Although the town of Sunnydale gradually becomes more aware of the supernatural activity on its streets, Buffy must still conceal her identity as a Slayer. Giselle from *Enchanted* does not conceal her identity as a fairytale princess, and the characters treat her less as though she is from a physical, enchanted “state” than an unhinged “state of mind,” as one receptionist complains. Little harm comes Giselle’s way, but in science fiction films, characters who publicize the fact that they are from or have knowledge of the future often end up committed, as happens in *12 Monkeys* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

A large number of television series both recent and current have mundane-marvelous premises: *Angel, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charmed, Life on Mars, Lost, Medium, Roswell, Smallville, Supernatural, Touching Daisies, Twin Peaks, The X-Files*, the list goes on. At least three shows from the above list have aired an episode
presenting an alternate universe in which the main character of the series is not magical, but insane. In Charmed, Smallville, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the character wakes up in a mental asylum, told that the marvelous life he or she lead as a witch, a superhero, or a Slayer may just be “the fruit of a deranged imagination” (Todorov 45). So far in this chapter it might be safe to say that I have examined what the marvelous can do for madness. These episodes afford an opportunity to look at what madness does for the marvelous, as each explores different ways in which the introduction of the threat of insanity challenges and changes the marvelous landscape of the show.

The first of the three episodes to air was “Brain Drain,” the seventh episode of Charmed’s fourth season, in November of 2001 on the WB. The series, an imitation of Buffy more explicitly aimed at the WB’s audience of white teenage girls, follows the exploits of three sister witches, the Charmed Ones, as they battle the forces of evil. In “Brain Drain,” the Source of All Evil kidnaps eldest sister Piper Halliwell and projects into her mind an alternate reality in which Piper is a mental patient with no sisters and no powers. “Brain Drain” deals more with characters’ hesitation over explanations for events and less the spectators’ hesitation. During the first fourteen minutes of the narrative, prior to the kidnapping, the viewers see scenes in which the Source plots to do some form of harm to Piper. In the scene that directly precedes Piper’s waking up in the hospital, the viewers see the Source knock Piper out and disappear with her. Already, spectators have been given clear clues to the fact that Piper’s patient status is not real, and if they are thrown into doubt when Piper initially wakes up in the Halliwell house to discover it has become Halliwell Hospital, this
segment only lasts a few minutes before cutting to a scene which reveals the Source levitating Piper in his lair, manipulating her mind. The rest of the episode alternates between scenes of Piper’s mind and scenes of her sisters attempting to track her down. On the whole, this episode is less concerned than the others with asking larger existential questions about the series. Instead, Charmed uses this opportunity to playfully mock itself. “Brain Drain” creates an insane alternate reality built out of elements from the show itself, with each character making an appearance as a comically crazy version of him or herself. As the spectator knows that the alternate universe is not real and because it is presented lightly, the interest becomes “watch[ing] the gears at work” (Mittell 35), seeing how the writers transform the various elements of Charmed: how the sisters’ Book of Shadows becomes a scribbled notebook with crayon drawings inside that reference previous episodes, how Phoebe Halliwell gasps as though having one of her psychic premonitions when choking on a cookie. Serialized television, which must engage spectators’ interest in its storyworld and characters year after year, has a history of using plot devices like amnesia or evil twins to “[allow] characters the temporary freedom to escape their textual prison and engage in activities that violate their character profile, all to the delight of an audience reveling in the characters’ aberrant behavior” (Sconce 101). This episode’s alternate psychiatric universe provides that same temporary freedom.

Though Piper slowly begins to believe in her own insanity, the episode never asks spectators to join her. Charmed presents Piper as the most domestic-minded of the three sisters. All three are magical career women, putting work before children. This episode deals with Piper’s longings for a ‘normal’ life, a life of domesticity and
raising a family. The episode, though, presents this longing as a weakness that leaves Piper open to the Source’s attack, and essentially equates Piper’s desires with insanity. After all, non-magical Piper suffers from schizophrenia. The episode’s final sequence, in which the Source parks Piper in the garden behind the hospital and parades past her a procession of computer generated butterflies, non-magical friends, and an adorable little baby, is so sweet as to be unreal and a little sickening, something the episode wryly acknowledges. The show, built around the premise that the sisters must remain witches though they struggle with their powers, creates a comically insane world that cannot be taken seriously, just as Piper’s longings cannot be taken seriously. Although the episode confirms that Piper must remain a witch for the moment, as is necessary for Charmed to continue producing episodes, its resolution does reassert the overall value of domesticity and family, which is an important theme throughout this show about sisters. In the final scene, Piper grows closer to her new half-sister Paige and the two couples in the family cheerfully head off to have sex.

Charmed happily reaffirms its status quo in these final moments, unaffected by the events of the episode. In Smallville and Buffy, the insinuation of insanity poses a far more dangerous threat to the fabric of each show’s universe. Smallville is another teen-oriented drama that debuted on the WB; it is currently still airing on the CW, the network that succeeded the WB. Smallville presented a very different vision of insanity than Charmed when it aired “Labyrinth” six years later in January of 2007 as the twelfth episode of its sixth season. Smallville follows the adventures of a

26 Recalling Martin Rubin’s discussion of the labyrinths created by thriller movies, in which the mundane world seems to turn against the protagonist, the episode is quite appropriately titled.
young Clark Kent back when he is still a high school student in Smallville, Kansas, living on the farm with his adoptive mother and in love with Lana Lang, the precursor to Lois Lane. If “Brain Drain” presents a silly dream version of *Charmed*, “Labyrinth” plunges Clark into a nightmare vision of what his world could look like if he were insane, and does so with little or no warning. The show spends a minute of screen time on Clark in the real world, as opposed to *Charmed*’s fourteen. In that minute, Clark fixes a piece of farm equipment in the barn, his dog barks, and then he is blown over by some unknown thing. He wakes up in a hospital setting with patients looming over him. With this opening, the spectator gets just as little context for what is going on as Clark does. Furthermore, this episode deviates from the more typical structure of a *Smallville* episode. *Charmed* often uses variants on the evil twin plot device, placing characters under spells or sending them into various alternate universes and times. *Smallville* uses this kind of manipulation less often; its episodic plotlines tend to revolve around minor characters acquiring special powers and wreaking havoc, or they involve incorporating aspects of the Superman mythology into the *Smallville* universe. Thus “Labyrinth” places the spectator in the dark as to what to expect in more ways than one, adding levels of uncertainty to this episode that *Charmed* lacks.

The spectator may be uncertain as to what is going on, but not as to its menacing quality. Clark wakes up flat on his back with unfamiliar faces looming over him in a blue tinted world with an unsettling metallic soundtrack. Unlike “Brain Drain,” “Labyrinth” offers no clear reason as to why whatever was in the barn might have transported Clark here. One character does tell Clark the truth about
situation, but his words are undermined by his status as a fellow patient. Nor does the episode flash back and forth between insane and real realities, instead remaining with Clark as he works his way deeper and deeper into this new, labyrinthine universe. As in *Charmed*, Clark meets various characters from his own universe, but they are nightmare constructions. Clark escapes from the asylum to find that his mother has married his nemesis’s father. He goes to confront his nemesis, Lex Luthor, a character he met in the series premiere when he saved Lex from a car crash. In this universe, though, Lex reveals that insane-Clark caused the crash by rushing out in front of Lex’s car, and that Lex lost his legs as a result. Clark’s two female friends at first seem to offer him hope. His friend Chloe appears to believe that he is at the center of some sort of evil conspiracy, but she turns out to be suffering from paranoid delusions herself, and then is shot by the security team that has been chasing Clark. Clark’s love interest Lana appears to be devoted to Clark in this universe, but it is a devotion that Clark cannot share; instead of reframing the show’s actual history as Lex does, Lana cites instances from her and Clark’s romantic history that never occurred on *Smallville*.

The more Clark questions his beliefs about himself, the more he begins to look insane as well. After Chloe dies in his arms, the camera cuts to a close up of Clark’s haggard face, with purple shadows under his eyes. The camera tracks backwards to reveal Clark back in the hospital, sitting in a straight jacket, insisting that Chloe did not just die. In *Charmed*, Piper remains a heroic character. In *Smallville*, Clark becomes a villain, a kid who invented super powers to achieve some
control over his world and ended up wreaking havoc, causing the paralysis of an innocent man and the death of a friend. For Clark, insanity is a nightmare.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s episode, while different stylistically, offers a similarly nightmarish challenge to Buffy’s place as a hero, going so far as to question aspects of the entire series. “Normal Again,” episode seventeen of season six, aired on the WB in March of 2002, only a few months after “Brain Drain” aired on *Charmed*. Buffy, on the prowl for the nerds who are the villains of season six, comes across their hideout and they set a demon on her. She fights back, but the demon grabs her from behind and jabs her in the arm with a long white spike in his hand. In a match cut, the camera jumps from Buffy screaming at being stabbed by the demon to Buffy in white being stabbed with a syringe by two doctors in a hospital room. The camera then cuts to the hallway, revealing what appears to be a psychiatric ward, filled with shuffling and twitching patients. The screen goes to black, and the credits roll. After the credits sequence, Buffy finds herself back in her own world, alone. Unlike in either *Charmed* or *Smallville*, in “Normal Again” Buffy herself jumps between the two worlds, flashing suddenly back into the hospital world in the middle of conversations or scenes with others, and then returning to Sunnydale. This choice suggests structurally what the episode suggests narratively, that while Buffy typically lives full time in her fantasy world, she is starting to become lucid for brief flashes of time. Unlike the other two episodes, “Normal Again” presents Buffy’s amnesia as a typical occurrence for her insane self. Sarah Michelle Gellar’s acting style as insane-Buffy is quite different from her portrayal of Slayer-Buffy. The character we meet in the institution does not come across as a sane person suddenly transported to an
alternate universe, but as a confused patient, an affect Gellar slowly works into to her depiction of Slayer-Buffy as the episode progresses. Talking to Willow within the Sunnydale universe, Buffy reveals that even as the Slayer she has spent time in a sanitarium, dating back to when she began seeing vampires. Buffy voices the episode’s enigma: “What if I never left?”

“Normal Again” builds a very minimalist hospital world, consisting of several white, empty hospital rooms. Twice director Rick Rosenthal shows other patients, but he typically depicts Buffy alone or with her parents or doctor. Though Buffy’s parents appear in the hospital world, alive and together as they are not in the Sunnydale universe, the episode does not create alternate versions of various places or people. Instead, its minimalist setting stands in contrast to the rich, familiar details of Sunnydale. “Normal Again” goes much further than “Labyrinth” in challenging Buffy’s place in her own universe. As I discussed in my first chapter, Buffy episodes often serve as extended magical metaphors for personal issues that Buffy is facing. Buffy’s sixth season in particular deals with Buffy chafing at her long ingrained role as savior, having been unwillingly brought back from Heaven to resume her earthly duties as Slayer. In “Normal Again,” doctors inform insane-Buffy that she invented this world in which she stars as a hero. Meanwhile, internal to the Sunnydale universe, Spike tells Buffy that she needs to stop playing hero and martyr. This episode cleverly challenges Buffy’s role as a hero by offering a metatelevisual critique of Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a show, pointing out how much more unreal is the idea of a girl Slayer saving the universe from vampires and various forces of evil than is the idea of a mentally unstable teenager. Although Joss Whedon conceived of
Buffy-as-Slayer as an empowered female character, a strong and independent alternative to the more typical vulnerable teenage girls in horror films, this episode calls that premise into question. Can a teenage girl really do what Buffy does? The episode is very sophisticated in its use of the operational aesthetic, challenging Buffy’s belief in herself and her Slayer-verse by using the character of the doctor to point out some of the inconsistencies and weaknesses of the entire series, from the show’s sudden invention of a sister for Buffy in season five to the fact that Buffy had begun to move in a darker direction in recent seasons, shifting from having Buffy save the world with her friends’ help to having her battling high school nerds while her friends fall apart around her. All the observations that the doctor makes about the show are true, acknowledging issues in the series as a whole that cannot be dispelled even if Buffy does drink a magical antidote for her hospital hallucinations.

Buffy does eventually choose to believe in her own Sunnydale universe and drink the antidote, once again sacrificing her desires for the sake of her friends (in order to be cured as a patient she sets a demon on them, but then cannot stand to let them die) and making the decision to remain in the Slayer role she has been struggling with all season. “Normal Again” in particular makes clear how madness can become the ultimate challenge to the marvelous, the one accusation it can never fully respond to. Even in “Brain Drain,” during which the spectator always knows that Piper is not insane, Piper herself becomes convinced of her own insanity. Nor is

27 The British series Life on Mars, 2006-2007, begins with main character Detective Sam Tyler getting hit by a car and waking up in the 1970s. He spends the rest of the series hesitating over whether or not his presence in the past is the result of actual time travel or if he is hallucinating from within an accident-induced coma. As with Buffy, this enables Life to explore complex questions of gender roles, particularly of masculinity, as Sam struggles with his conflicting desires for the old-school masculinity of the ‘70s cops (which his own mind may be creating) and for the more sensitive practices of the ‘00s.
she able to unconvince herself, even with the real appearance of her two sisters in her mind. It takes her husband Leo’s magical healing touch to a cut on her forehead, offering visual and concrete proof of magic’s existence, to change her mind.

“Labyrinth” also depends on a deus ex machina to convince Clark of his sanity once he begins to doubt it himself. Just as he is succumbing to the ‘treatment’ that is supposed to ‘cure’ insane-Clark but will actually destroy real-Clark, Lana’s reflection watching him through a window conveniently disappears and he hears the barking of his dog, prompting him to realize that he is still in the barn where he collapsed at the start of the episode. Only in “Normal Again” does Buffy actually make a conscious choice to believe in her Slayer self without any outward proof of its validity. Though this episode most likely did not cause any viewers to change their minds about Buffy’s sanity, Buffy’s choice is presented in a heartbreaking scene in which she says good-bye to her mother, who is dead in her Sunnydale universe. The episode does not end by celebrating Buffy’s choice, but by undermining any narrative closure that the choice might provide: the final scene takes place not in Sunnydale but in the hospital, with the doctor examining Buffy and explaining that her decision to return to Sunnydale has rendered her completely catatonic with no further hope of recovery.

“Normal Again” has explicitly reminded viewers, and Buffy, of the troubled direction the series has taken and that the characters and situations, as the doctor puts it, “aren’t as comforting as they once were.” Buffy’s choice to believe in herself and return to her friends solves none of her problems. None of these characters can fully recover from intimations of insanity and the questions about their lives that these episodes raise. These three episodes show the multiple ways that insanity can be used to
challenge and explore the marvelous, for comedy or for nightmarish tragedy and self-aware reflection, and how dangerous insanity can be in a mundane-marvelous show.

In each of these episodes, questioning the characters’ sanity also brings up questions about gender roles: whether Piper can be happy as a career woman, whether Clark is the masculine superhero he believes himself to be, whether Buffy can be an empowered female Slayer or whether she must accept that her desire to be a hero is unrealistic and self-destructive. Before I end this chapter and this thesis, I would like to look at one more example of a television series that spends its entire eight-season run using a blend of fantasy and subjectivity to investigate issues of gender and race, particularly to comment on and situate itself within the history of gendered and racial representations on television sit-coms. For a moment, let us leave the grim world of straight-jacketed mental patients behind for a very different kind of hospital.

In 2001, the same year that The Others and A Beautiful Mind hit theaters and “Brain Drain” aired on Charmed’s fourth season, the television show Scrubs premiered on NBC. Scrubs, a half-an-hour ‘dramedy’ (a single-camera comedy-drama with no laugh track) takes place at the fictional hospital Sacred Heart, following main character J.D. as he completes his medical internship and his residency to become a full-fledged doctor. J.D. provides voice over narration for Scrubs, and at any given moment his imagination may take over the screen, showing a race between him and a fellow intern as a marathon, an argument between two doctors as a Jedi fight from Star Wars, or a resident who is a “first class teacher’s pet” in a dog collar, humping the leg of the chief of medicine. J.D.’s momentary flights of

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28 Scrubs ran for seven seasons on NBC before moving to ABC to air an eighth season in 2009. ABC renewed the show for a ninth season, but this most recent season of Scrubs, while it retains the same name, is effectively a sequel, starring an almost entirely new cast of characters in a different location.
fancy tend to visually depict metaphorical situations: he watches fellow intern Elliot ‘dig her own grave’ in a conversation with Nurse Carla or he ‘gets hit with a ton of bricks’ after hearing surprising news. The show also plays with blurring the boundaries of J.D.’s subjectivity. Occasionally, other characters seem to notice elements that are ostensibly part of his fantasies, and cartoon-like sound effects accompany all characters, not just J.D. Yet Scrubs never crosses the line into out-and-out fantasy; most of its more overt fantastic elements remain loosely tied to J.D.’s subjective experience of Sacred Heart.

Very frequently, J.D. will explicitly state exactly what he is about to imagine before imagining it. Before he visualizes Dr. Stedman as a teacher’s pet he introduces the concept through his voice over. Thus the visualization adds no new information to the episode; it simply allows the actor playing Dr. Stedman to give an entertaining physical performance. The slapstick-filled Scrubs derives a significant amount of humor from performative excess, harkening back to the traditions of vaudeville and its “player-centered mode of production … [which] appealed to a fascination with showmanship for its own sake; [vaudeville] acts fed a desire to be impressed by the skill of the performer rather than absorbed within the development of the narrative” (Jenkins 68-69). Vaudeville and its performers had strong ties with early television. Sit-coms like The Honeymooners and I Love Lucy were hybrids between narrative realism and a vaudevillian aesthetic (Spigel 136-181). The vaudevillian aesthetic often served to counteract the inherently conservative nature of narrative realism in the sitcom. Television scholar Jane Feuer comments that, from the perspective of I Love Lucy’s narrative the show is not socially transgressive because “at the end of each
week’s episode [the show sends Lucy] back to the situation of domestic imprisonment with which [she begins]” (68). Yet Feuer notes that “the outrageousness of” Lucille Ball’s performance “may transcend [the character Lucy’s] return to being Mrs. Ricardo each week” (68). Although “Lucy’s plots for ambition and fame narratively failed … performatively they succeeded” (Mellencamp 49; emphasis in original).

*Scrubs* uses its vaudeo-fantasies with a similar intent, enabling the show to play with socially transgressive themes and to situate itself within the traditions of television comedy.

*Scrubs’s* self-aware excesses enable the show’s narrative to address exaggeratedly melodramatic or sentimental themes. Just as *Buffy* can explore conventional high school stories in ironic or innovative ways, *Scrubs* can explore conventional sit-com stories while also commenting on traditional depictions of masculinity and minorities within previous sit-coms. A significant number of J.D.’s fantasies consist of pop cultural references. Many of these are references to earlier sit-coms, especially those that dealt with traditional masculinity and earlier representations of race. Within the narrative, J.D., an atypical male protagonist repeatedly mocked for his feminine side and “guy love” for friend Turk, longs to have a traditional father-son relationship with his abrasive and appropriately named supervisor Dr. Cox. In his fantasies, J.D.’s longings are framed as longings for the masculinity and father-son relationships of the suburban realist sit-coms of the past.

In the episode “My Two Dads” (a reference to a 1980s ‘odd family’ sitcom), when an exasperated Dr. Cox asks J.D., “just what in the hell do you want from me?” J.D. flashes to a sequence of him and Dr. Cox playing catch that is shot in an old-

\[\text{Rock 152}\]
fashioned home video style. In a later episode, J.D., knowing a family is expecting a miracle from him, imagines himself as the Fonz from *Happy Days*, strutting in and fixing everything. The fantasy emphasizes J.D.’s longing for a simpler time and the “magical power” of the Fonz’s exaggerated masculinity. Although this moment pokes fun at the outdated world of *Happy Days*, when J.D. enters the room for real, his patient does get magically better. Not only does *Scrubs* situate itself within a tradition of gendered representations in television sit-coms, but also J.D., who is white, and his friend Turk, who is black, frequently invoke black sit-coms of the past, such as *What’s Happening!!*, calling attention to past sit-com representations of African Americans.

In the world of *Scrubs*, many stereotypical characterizations of gender and race are present. From a narrative standpoint, characters like J.D.’s best friend, the break-dancing, smooth-talking African American Turk, or Nurse Carla, Latina dispenser of wisdom, are ethnic stereotypes. His love interest Elliot is a fragile, repressed, upper-middle-class white girl. From a performative standpoint, the actors’ comically excessive performances comment on the stereotypes they present by exaggerating or undermining them. *Scrubs* frequently brings up or explores issues of race and gender, dealing in atypical and stereotypical depictions of both, using vaudevillian performative excess and fantasy to comment on television and society’s images of gender and race.

Blending subjectivity and fantasy enables film, theater, and television to explore altered mental states. It can enable directors to distance the spectator from a character. In the case of puzzle films, it can bring the spectator so deeply into a
subjective experience of the character’s world that the spectator does not even realize the images are not necessarily real, that the apparently objective world is subjective. In mundane-marvelous stories, characters face serious consequences for their awareness of a world beyond that which their mundane counterparts can see and understand. The suggestion of insanity threatens witches, superheroes, and vampire slayers. Their precarious existence on the borderline between reality and fantasy can easily transform into a nightmare for them, either because their fantastic status is not believed by others or because their fantastic status has been a dream all this time. Mixing fantasy and subjectivity need not be nightmarish, however, as in the case of Scrubs, a playful visualization of the subjective world of J.D.’s mind that enables the show to address issues social issues as well as psychological ones, engaging in a dialogue with sit-coms of the past on representations of gender and race.

In our world, the world of the spectator, fantasy and subjectivity are deeply intertwined. We experience the one through the other. We reach fantastic worlds through hallucinations or by appropriating the products of an artist’s imagination. We also view madness in the same way that we view the marvelous, as something that is Other, that transgresses the limits of our mundane world. Though we often use fantasy to represent or deal with questions of the Other, fantasy is not actually that much of a stranger to us. Artists frequently combine fantasy and subjectivity with great success. Fantasy can add complexity to our understanding of a character’s mental state. On a mundane-marvelous television show, asking questions about insanity can open up existential concerns about the show itself and highlight such issues as the portrayal of race or gender. The examples I explored in this chapter
represent some of the opportunities to be had when artists recognize and explore the power of juxtaposing or blending subjectivity and objectivity, fantasy and reality. A kiss may not actually be able to transport us momentarily to a murder scene (or make the sun go down) but mixing madness and the marvelous can show us what might happen if it could.
Conclusion:
When Anti-Theatricality Meets the Anti-Expected

The mundane and the marvelous walk into a bar in *The Skriker*, Wesleyan’s 2009 Fall Theater Department Production. (Courtesy of John Carr)

Let us for a moment contemplate this hypothetical situation posed by Noël Carroll:

Consider the realist, mimetic representation of a tree; it might be a stage flat, a snapshot, a painting, a statue, or, for our purposes, a strip of film, a shot. Why would we say that a realist shot of a tree is an “illusion” – indeed, does it even make sense to call such image an “illusion?” Perhaps we shall be told that the shot of the tree is an illusion because it is nothing more than a substitute or proxy for the tree, at best it is an ersatz tree. But this implies that what we really always want is the tree itself. Yet there would be no point to having an
institution of pictorial representation if what we really always wanted is the referent of a representation rather than the representation. There are many purposes – including cognitive, emotive, and aesthetic ones – that lead us to want representations of things rather than the things themselves (Mystifying 93-94).

From the theater and sculpture of Ancient Greece to the paintings of the Renaissance to Hollywood cinema, Western history is filled with representational art forms. Clearly, Carroll is right in asserting that we have found reasons across history to desire representations of things, including in the form of theater or film. Yet, according to Matthew Potolsky, “the theatre and other performance genres have been subjected to more abuse and official censorship than any other art form” (72). There is something about the kind of representation that performance genres offer that some people find puzzling or dangerous. Perhaps theater and film evoke a sense of the uncanny; both mediums take physical bodies and physical spaces and transform them into something else, something fictional. They make the familiar strange. Potolsky cites theater theoretician Josette Féral’s suggestion that “theatre opens up a ‘cleft in quotidian space’, dividing the ‘outside’, and setting certain places and actions apart from the flow of things” (74), an assertion that works for both the space of a theater and the space of a movie theater, not to mention the sacred spaces of religious rituals. In a sense, all performances are inherently mundane-marvelous, emerging out of reality and crossing over into fiction, both within the performance and through the transformation of space to stage.
Throughout Western history, critics have been inclined to exhibit some level of mistrust towards performance, in which real people and real places engage in fictional enterprises. Performers “have been regarded as potential seducers … whether revered or reviled … actors and actresses seem a breed apart, somehow transfigured by their connection to stage or screen” (Potolsky 72). Carroll notes that “contemporary film theorists have been prone to call mimetic pictorial representations ‘illusions.’ This is a term which disdains such representations … for ‘illusion’ is a label that signals deceptions, as practiced by magicians and, before them, demons” (Mystifying 93). Among those critical of theater and film, there seems to be a desire to justify why spectators enjoy watching fictions and why they can become so invested in these unreal events, and a tendency to mistrust or dismiss the potential pleasures of such spectatorship. Some argue that spectators are convinced that the fictional events in a performance are real. After all, “why would audiences scream and cry, why would they sweat and cheer, unless they believed that the events before them were really occurring?” (N. Carroll, Mystifying 102). What other reason could there be for spectators to become invested in something that is not real? Or perhaps the danger in performance lies not its capacity to deceive spectators as to its reality, but in the fact that its unreality “distances us from [caring about] others and renders the morally repugnant irresistibly attractive,” as Saint Augustine feared (Potolsky 73). Children are meant to enjoy fantasy, but adults are expected to outgrow and renounce such pleasures. Similarly, some critics feel that there must be something deceptive or immoral about performance to lure adults into a theater.
Although theater and film have been legitimized to some extent in contemporary Western culture, these anti-theatrical fears (as they are often called, though they apply to other performance genres) persist today. A significant trend in film studies remains “the identification of the operation of ideology in film,” based on the belief that “mimetic representations … [put] spectators in a sort of trance which paralyzes their critical faculties in respect to social falsehoods” (N. Carroll, *Mystifying* 103-104). The German philosopher Hans Blumberg writes that “at no time in the history of Western aesthetic theory … has there been any serious departure from the tendency to legitimize the work of art in terms of its relation to reality” (qtd. in Potolsky 93). I think that the general disavowal of fantasy and the obsession with realism has a lot to do with our overall critical unease with regards to the mixture of reality and fiction in performance.

What is so valuable about mundane-marvelous texts is that they tackle these concerns directly by exploring the ramifications of juxtaposing the real and the unreal within their stories. Fantasy has a lot to teach us about our obsession with realism. Mundane-marvelous stories are by no means escapist. They bring fantasy *into* the mundane world, and often this juxtaposition reveals more about the mundane than it does about the fantasy. By transforming the ordinary world, fantasy makes it possible for us to look at the familiar with new eyes. The marvelous enables us to see anew what in our lives has been relegated to “the sphere of automatized perception” and thus to question our assumptions (Shklovsky 6). All of the texts that I have explored in this thesis represent the social conventions of mundane life and / or particular aesthetic conventions as restrictive in some way. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* uses
fantasy to reexamine high school, *Our Town* questions small town life, and *Enchanted* and *Scrubs* challenge the conventions of cinematic romance and suburban realist sit-coms respectively. Just as we learn more about a character when that character is pushed into extreme circumstances (and fantasy is a goldmine for extreme circumstances), we learn more about the mundane when its limits are transgressed.

Fantasy can be the factor that pushes characters and situations to extremes, and it can also provide a vocabulary for experiencing extreme situations. We frequently resort to metaphor and figurative speech to explain our experience of the world. A realistic description often falls far short of how we feel. Fascists are not just villains, they are monstrous, like a herd of stampeding rhinoceroses. As Ionesco says:

> I have always considered the imaginative truth to be more profound, more loaded with significance, than everyday reality. Realism, socialist or not, never looks beyond reality. It narrows it down, diminishes it, falsifies it, and leaves out of account the obsessive truths that are most fundamental to us: love, death and wonder. It presents man in a perspective that is narrow and alien; truth lies in our dreams, in our imagination (*Notes* 16).

The mundane and the marvelous are not mutually exclusive categories. Our experience of reality has a strong relation to fantasy, something which performance enables us to explore, although this worries the anti-theatricalists.

I hope that I have shown in this thesis that the mundane and the marvelous are far from mutually exclusive, that fantasy dwells in many places where we might not
expect to find it, and that we need to reevaluate or at the very least clarify the ways in which we think about ‘realism.’ Clearly there is a reason that critics are interested in understanding theater’s relationship with reality and have been since antiquity, but I think that the current way in which “an uncanny number of critics prescribe for theater, and evaluate it according to, various conceptions of realism” (P. Murphy 1) narrows our understanding of the performative arts. For one thing, as Patrick D. Murphy says in his book on *Staging the Impossible*, “the fantastic serves as a significant mode of representation in the modern drama of Western Europe and North America” (2). As I have argued here, the fantastic plays an equally important role in film and television.

First and foremost, I hope I have shown that fantasy is not antithetical to theater and to film. The fact that both are visual mediums, that theater unfolds in front of a live audience and cinematic images have an indexical relationship to reality, does not inherently make their representations of fantasy less fantastic. The relationships theater and film have with reality can actually make them appear more fantastical, as when real objects are placed on the unreal space of the stage or when fantastical elements are authenticated by appearing within a single cinematic image. Staging the supernatural can afford a wide range of storytelling options, heightening and transforming landscapes in *North by Northwest* and literalizing metaphors in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Many scholars seem to value complexity as a defining feature of high art, and plays like *Our Town* and *Death of a Salesman* prove to be far more complex when we accept possible interpretations of these plays that extend beyond evaluating how realist they are or fail to be.
Fantasy can be an important part of a play like *Death of a Salesman*, helping to convey Willy Loman’s personal experience of the world, and it can be an important part of a play like *Rhinoceros*, helping to call attention to socio-political issues by placing them within a fantastically alienating context. Fantasy can function well as part of a metatheatrical political commentary and as part of a film that foregrounds its ambiguity and ontological reality; it is effective both at challenging social conventions and at conveying subjective experience. Fantasy can bring the spectator into a character’s mind, as films like *A Beautiful Mind* or *Shutter Island* do, and it can distance the spectator from a character, as in *Raging Bull* and *Vertigo*. The marvelous lurks unseen in many an artworks supposedly holding the mirror up to nature.

As it stands now, realism is an ambiguous and multivocal category, used differently by different scholars and critics depending on where their interests lie. I think that further understanding fantasy will contribute significantly to our understanding of realism. My goal in this thesis is to point out the efficacy of an artistic mode too long overlooked and suggest directions for further interpretive research and artistic experimentation. Though fantasy often gets dismissed as a low art, as too emotional, too accessible, too escapist, it can be extremely intellectual, complex, ambiguous, and thought provoking. Fantasy troubles our categorizations of what is low and what is high art. Though we often dismiss the fantastic as low, it is present in works of high art. I would also argue that there is considerable merit in the works of fantastic ‘low art’ that I have discussed in this thesis.
Conventionally, fictional narratives tend to begin at a moment in a character’s life when change is imminent: when Ranevskaya’s family is on the verge of losing their estate and their cherry orchard, when Willy Loman is on the verge of committing suicide, when Roger Thornhill gets mistaken for a secret agent. Even characters that occupy the most ordinary of universes, with no hint of the marvelous, are thrust into circumstances that are extra-ordinary within the context of their own lives, a departure from the everyday. Mundane-marvelous texts simply take this departure further. Characters in mundane-marvelous stories do not just face a change in their personal lives; their entire worlds are disrupted. Mundane-marvelous stories explore tensions that are present within the mediums of theater, film, and television by investigating the intersections between fantasy, reality, and realism. Fantasy is a fascinating mode with a lot to offer from both a scholarly and an artistic perspective, and we do not have to look very hard to find examples of it. As Emily comes to realize in the last act of *Our Town*: “all that was going on and we never noticed” (Wilder 124). If Wilder wants to teach us anything with the most frequently performed play in the United States, it is to push ourselves to notice what is happening all around us, to live in the moment and open our minds to new possibilities. Realism needs to make room. The marvelous is here to stay.
Works Cited


Theatrical Productions, Films, and Television Shows Cited
This is an abbreviated list, including only the texts that I discuss at some length.


   Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. DVD.


