



## A Film Buff's Paradox: The Evolution of Illusion vs. Reality

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### Abstract

In this cinematic realm, the concept of illusion vs. reality is a theme that has attracted artistic exploration, and has proven to be an enduring and significant storytelling framework in the realm of contemporary cinema. This theme of illusion vs. reality is witnessed in films from as far back as George Méliès 1902 *A Trip to the Moon*, to the 1964 version of *Mary Poppins*, to contemporary offerings such as *The Matrix* in 1999.

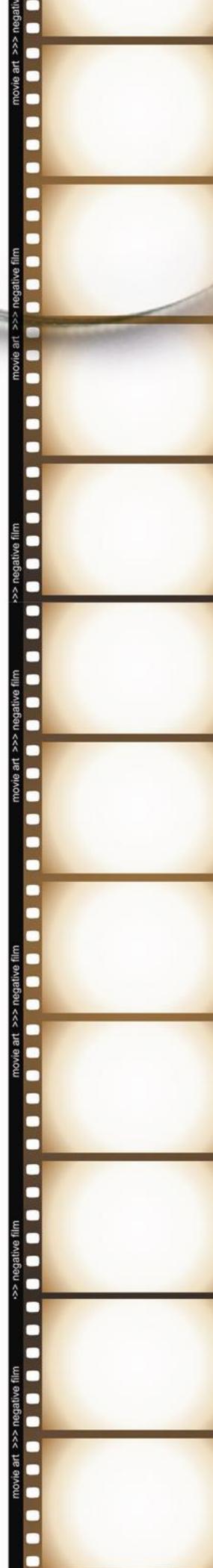
**Keywords:** Reality, illusion, cinematic, representation



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## A Film Buff's Paradox: The Evolution of Illusion vs. Reality

Armand Amini

The medium of film has proven to be one of the most versatile, accessible, and universally appreciated form of storytelling. Since the initial, primitive ventures into filmmaking at the birth of the twentieth century, the craft of cinema has grown to be one that allows artists a truly vibrant outlet for creative vision. And of course, movies have shown their power to entertain and unite the masses while also providing endless material for the scrutiny of critics and enthusiasts. In this cinematic realm, the concept of illusion vs. reality is a theme that has attracted artistic exploration, and has proven to be an enduring and significant storytelling framework in the realm of contemporary cinema. This theme of illusion vs. reality is witnessed in films from as far back as George Méliès 1902 *A Trip to the Moon*, to the 1964 version of *Mary Poppins*, to contemporary offerings such as *The Matrix* in 1999.

But to what factors can we attribute the endurance of this significant theme in modern cinema? What drives us as an audience, to accept being manipulated in the interest of entertainment? After speaking with many film experts regarding this theme, such as directors, Emmy-nominated writers, actors, and Chairs of Film Departments in major universities, truths begin to emerge regarding our human fascination with creating and consuming works that explore the contrast between what is and what appears to be. Despite the limitless choices these film experts all returned to three films, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), and *Inception* (2010). These offerings are united in exploring this theme in explicit and recognizable ways, while each nevertheless maintains its artistic individuality.

Although *A Beautiful Mind* is one of the most controversial films of the modern era due to its somewhat insulting depiction of highly acclaimed Princeton Professor John Nash, it has garnered various awards including the Oscar for Best Picture and Best Director in 2002. The film chronicles the life of John Nash, an unsocial genius who attends Princeton, and has his life take a turn for the worst. The twist and the controversy comes, as he is diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and makes clear to the viewer that many people in his life, including his roommate were hallucinations; figments of his imagination. Filmmakers' views vary when it comes to *A Beautiful Mind*, but the movie insiders that do enjoy it are infatuated with it, and believe the presentation of the movie is impeccable. These movie insiders include Professor J. Mira Kopell, Producer and Professor at the Department of Film and Media Studies at UC Berkeley, Jeffery K. Ruoff, the Department Chair of Film and Media Studies at Dartmouth University, and Professor Trey Ellis, Emmy-nominated Writer and Professor at Columbia University of the Arts.

Professors Kopell, Ruoff, and Ellis all arrive at the same conclusion when it comes to *A Beautiful Mind*; it is a prime example of clever and powerful unreliable narration that leaves the audience stunned - much as John Nash must have felt when diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Kopell states that "audiences enjoy being tricked," but sometimes the illusion fails and "can feel forced or cheap" (Kopell). This failure to convince is something that *A Beautiful Mind* successfully avoids. Also, Kopell states that the new information provided by the illusion allows for the audience to "understand the character on of deeper level" [sic] (Kopell). This reinforces the concept that illusion, however illusive it might be, shines a revealing light on a character's complexity, because sometimes we can tell more from lies than the truth.

Professor Ellis discusses much of the same as Professor Ruoff in regards to the audiences' perspective, but speaks more about *A Beautiful Mind's* unreliable point of view. Ellis states, "I love a clever plot like *A Beautiful Mind* where we realize that we were watching from unreliable Point of View" [sic] (Ellis). Ellis states that he too enjoys narration from an unreliable point of view, but goes on to say "It is important to question reality, to not necessarily believe what you see" [sic] (Ellis). Ellis believes it is important for an audience to always question, and keep the audience not just focused, but on their toes, actively trying to predict what will happen next. Overall, Ellis believes that the audience always longs to be involved in the movie. This means they do not want to just be a spectator wasting their time watching a motion picture that has no meaning and does not even provide an escape from their life, an important characteristic of a good film.

Professor Kopell's point of view aligns with that of Professor Ruoff. However, Ruoff places more emphasis on tricks using new technological advancements in film. These new advancements in technology are used by filmmakers, and are important in a filmmaker's arsenal. Ruoff suggests that when photography was invented, "people felt that photographs were not representations like paintings, but were pieces of reality, made without the intervention of human hands" (Ruoff). This suggests that during the initiation of photography and film, the theme of illusion vs. reality in film was rarely explored. Now, with the introduction of new technology, not only does the plot of a movie like *A Beautiful Mind* deal with illusion vs. reality, the filmmaker also uses it as a visual device. Ruoff goes into more detail as he states that "now with the advent of digital, CGI, Photoshop, etc., people are generally less inclined to believe in the reality of imagery" (Ruoff). Specifically, in *A Beautiful Mind*, not only do Nash's hallucinations themselves represent the illusion vs. reality concept,

the presentation of these hallucinations using conventional filming or with CGI, expose the theme as well.

This is a perennial filmmaker's dilemma. The artist must decide to whether to use new technologies to enhance the film or should they stick to what is real and simply use the film recorded with no edits. Filmmakers nowadays usually take the easy route and use CGI and other film modifying programs to improve the film. This usually comes back to bite them, because people feel insulted as Professor Kopell explained, due to the trick feeling somewhat cheap and forced. For the most part in *A Beautiful Mind's* case, the filmmaker, Ron Howard, decides to make the film as pure as possible, a great choice as this is one of the aspects in *A Beautiful Mind* that fans adore. No CGI, no Photoshop, just pure film. This is one of the few movies to avoid it and ended up being a box office hit because of it.

Next, *The Usual Suspects*, renowned for Kevin Spacey's portrayal of Keyser Soze, is the gold standard for unreliable narration, but unlike *A Beautiful Mind*, the audience is being tricked **by** the character not **with**. Created by Brian Singer in 1995, *The Usual Suspects* won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor and Best Screenplay written directly for the screen, and is viewed as the ultimate Crime Mystery. Singer presents the story of a lone survivor of a criminal gang, who relays the tale of its demise. Special Agent Kujan, realizes that Kint used objects around his office to come up with names and events for his elaborate story. Right as the sketch of Keyser Soze is faxed over to the offices, Kujan realizes Kint was Keyser Soze, and is unable to find him because "like that, he's gone." Also, the difference between this movie and *A Beautiful Mind* is that this movie is not highly controversial, but highly revered by all, due to its non-offensive storyline and chilling ending. These movie experts include the likes of Ruoff, Henry Bean writer, director, and Adjunct Professor of Film Studies at New York's

University Tisch School of the Arts, and Tom Reck, actor and retired Film and Media Studies Professor.

Ruoff strongly believes that, in helping us to enjoy movies that deal with illusion versus reality, *The Usual Suspects* accomplishes the task more successfully than any other cinematic offering. Ruoff states that, "I think our minds enjoy teasing out reality versus falsity/illusion as occurs in *The Usual Suspects*," showing that this huge tease which is essentially the whole movie, is what leaves us satisfied (Ruoff). Also, *The Usual Suspects* not only leaves us satisfied, the issue of Keyser Soze's deception keeps us thinking about the film days after viewing. Also, in *The Usual Suspects*, unlike in many movies, the audience is shown exactly what happened, and yet they are still left wondering how this could have happened. Director Henry Bean goes into more depth about the emotions of the audience immediately after the surprise ending of the movie.

Bean's point of view when it comes to *The Usual Suspects* is that the trick was there for everyone to see, but nobody realizes it until the end. Bean elaborates on this when stating, "we know that people often don't tell the truth, yet we (or at least I) fell for it anyway, because Spacey did such a great, emotional job of selling the story," essentially meaning the audience "bought in" (Bean). Spacey's role was truly mesmerizing, fooling not only Agent Kujan, but also the audience in the process, and was a huge reason why the film was so striking and memorable. Bean goes on to say that "We bought in, and when the rug was pulled out, we saw our own complicity" (Bean). This explains to us further that right after the ending, the audience realizes that they not only knew the lies were there for us to see, but knew of his crime and the audience feels as if we were the ones not to report it. It would only be possible for the audience to believe it was their fault for not reporting this crime, if the filmmakers created a plot that

makes one emotionally attached to the characters. Also, the plot would have to make you feel as if you were outdone, in this case by Keyser Soze, which is a concept Mr. Tom Reck speaks of in more depth.

Reck's feeling is that Keyser Soze not only tricks you, but defeats you - largely due to the deftness of Kevin Spacey's portrayal of Soze, but also due to the skill of the film's screenwriter, Christopher McQuarrie. Reck states, "I did feel a bit like I'd been taken to the cleaners," in regards to *The Usual Suspects* (Reck). This means that Reck felt as if the filmmakers' made him feel bested by Soze, but also figuratively robbed him and the audience in general by coaxing the audience from a mindset of skepticism to one of trust. Besides consuming the audience's attention, a filmmakers' goal is to make a film enjoyable for the audience, which *The Usual Suspects* certainly manages to do. Reck concurs stating that "*The Usual Suspects* is fun," and when one looks back on it, the one word that represents the movie, before deceit, lies, and tricks, is "fun" (Reck). *The Usual Suspects* did as good a job as any of grasping the attention of the audience with mystery and thrills, while still having a "fun" feel.

The most recent of the three is Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, intensely visual and highly acclaimed *Inception*. Nolan's film explores the realm of dreams, and emphasizes the complexity and subjectivity that comes along with them. Nolan challenges audiences to discern what is real from what is not. This crown jewel of special effects, released in 2010, won four Oscars for Best Achievement in Cinematography, Sound Mixing, Sound Editing, and Visual Effects respectively. As previously stated by Ruoff, filmmakers are faced with the choice to use pure film or CGI, and even though the popular and usually cheaper choice is CGI, *Inception* is one of the few movies that use it so well. *A Beautiful Mind* is so breathtaking because of its usage of pure film, but *Inception* showed film critics that these new technologies

can be used to create new realistic worlds, instead of fake insulting mirages. Although both films visually different, they both share a similarity besides the obvious comparison of similar theme, which is controversy. Both films are extremely controversial, which film experts such as Professor Ellis, Tom Reck, and Professor Mick Casale of NYU can attest to.

Ellis is not fond of *Inception*, and feels that the film is a jumble of seemingly random events that forces the audiences to attempt to catch up throughout the movie and eventually leads to the film losing them. This is one of the main reasons behind the controversy of *Inception*, that it is too hard to follow, but also that there is an over usage of special effects. These two reasons add up to Ellis simply stating that, "*Inception* finally overstayed its welcome" (Ellis). In most cases audience members are not able to keep up with this fast-paced motion picture, so they get lost behind and eventually start to feel spite for the movie because they do not understand it. Unlike these ordinary audience members, Ellis does understand the movie, but almost does not want to, and by the end of the movie he does not hate it due to a lack of understanding but he, "didn't care if it were real or not" (Ellis).

Casale believes that an audience must be organically tricked and understand the complexities of the trickery in hindsight in order for the audience to feel as if the characters have tricked them, not the writer. This is the aspect that film critics such as Professor Ellis dislike; the haphazard storyline in which the filmmaker is tricking them. Not only that, but they feel the writer is doing a poor job of tricking them, which leads audience members to lack attention throughout the rest of the movie. Casale states that, "the trick is do it seamlessly in a fashion that seems effortless totally organic" [sic] (Casale). The critics of *Inception* believe the film is not organic, that it does seem forced and insulting at times. Also, Casale states that, "every script should be surprising," because "it's basic dramatic structure," and since critics

disregard the film towards the beginning, they do not have the opportunity to experience the true disbelief that lovers of *Inception* do (Casale).

Reck believes that those unimpressed by *Inception* are so because it seems personally irrelevant and ultimately implausible. Reck states that, "American film in recent years is that they are all illusion - no real humans" [sic] (Reck). This is restating this theory of the film being so unreal, the world created being so unbelievable, that the audience does not pay attention, because they do not get any benefit from it. Despite Reck's belief in the downhill slope of contemporary cinema, *Inception* lands on his good side. Why? Because if a viewer watches intently, he or she will become infatuated with the world of dreams that *Inception* provides, and will see life in a new light, with an added perspective. All in all, viewers that enjoy *Inception* crave to be in this world of creation and imagination, while haters of *Inception* feel the film is ridiculous and somewhat insulting, but despite the controversy it is a film that defines this generation.

An audience uses film as an escape. Still, there is a paradoxical quality to an audience's desire to escape from reality when dealing with films containing the theme illusion vs. reality. So, it stands to reason that the more an audience indulges in films appealing to their sense of illusion vs. reality, the more accustomed their minds become to anticipating the ending or surprises in the movies. This is an easy assumption to make, but in reality when predicting these surprise endings, plot twists, or sudden revelations, we use pattern recognition based on past life experiences that are stored in the frontal lobe of our brains. This can be seen in many of the eminent films previously specified. For example, the plot twist in *A Beautiful Mind* is that John Nash is actually a paranoid schizophrenic. This revelation would have been easier to

predict if, for instance, an avid viewer had been exposed to this condition either in themselves or someone close to them, in the past.

This viewer would have been more inclined to pick up on the telltale signs seen in the movie that deal with this psychological disorder. Another example can be found in the conclusion of *Fight Club*. It is made clear to the audience that the narrator's friend, Tyler Durden, is actually one of the narrator's own personalities. It follows that if members of the audience had read about, talked to, or otherwise been exposed to Multiple Identity Disorder, they would have detected various indicators of this dispersed throughout the film. This ultimately suggests that the more surprising a movie one watches, the less real life experiences one can have that affect one's instincts, which does not include watching film. Therefore, the surprises in movies become harder to predict by those supposedly familiar with this type of film, as compared to someone who does not watch movies as much, creating a paradox similar to films that deal with illusion vs. reality.

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