

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Con Artist?

Teaser: A century after Victor Lustig ‘sold’ the Eiffel Tower, we contemplate the art of the con.

Many years ago, one of us interviewed a renowned consumer researcher – we’re talking superstar scholar here – who told us about ‘a friend’ who’d got away with a fast one. After suffering the slings and arrows and boiling oils of a leading journal’s review process, they’d finally, mercifully, glory hallelujah, got the thumbs up. But the mutilated manuscript that survived its death march bore no relation to the pristine piece they’d initially submitted. Tempted to withdraw the embarrassing mish-mash, a veritable Frankenstein monster from the crypt of scholarship, the researcher realized that once the paper was passed on to the journal’s production people, no one was likely to check whether it was the version that had been accepted. So their ‘friend’ sent their favourite iteration to Production and it got published in due course.¹

Disgraceful as their behaviour was, some might even deem it duplicitous, who among us doesn’t secretly envy the scamp? Anyone who’s had their work butchered during the review process – and who among us hasn’t? – must surely wish they’d done likewise. Yes, the reprobate’s behaviour was, if not exactly criminal, certainly less than ethical. Yet it is admirable all the same.² Would that we had the nerve to do something similar. Though you’d never get away with it nowadays. More’s the pity.

Be that as it may, the simple fact of the matter is that we have a soft spot for the tricksters, scallywags and con artists among us. As Morris Holbrook recently made clear – in this very journal – the marketing profession has more mountebanks than most. Despite researchers redoubtable attempts to raise its reputation, ‘marketing’ remains a term of disapprobation. *Plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose.*

Poe Knows

If further proof is needed, gentle reader, consider the comments of social psychologist Maria Konnikova.³ What, she wonders in *The Confidence Game*, ‘are politicians, lawyers, businessmen, admen, and marketers but thinly-veiled con-artists?’ They are people, Pulitzer Prize-winner Coulson Whitehead contends in *The Nickle Boys*, ‘who deliver emptiness with a smile’.⁴ Stephen King likewise claims that a facility for ‘sincere lies’ is the essence of scammers’ USP (unique swindling proposition).⁵ And while that may or may not be so, Edgar Allan Poe goes further in his classic parodic essay, ‘Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences’. Characteristically hyperbolic, the horror-meister howls that perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, and grinning are grifters’ foremost attributes, grin-to-win above all. ‘A diddle’, he concludes, ‘would be *no* diddle without a grin’.⁶

George R.R. Martin goes even further. In a hefty, 900-page hymn of praise to ‘scoundrels, con men, scalawags, seducers, flim-flam men, imposters, frauds, and fakes’ – not to mention ‘liars, cads, and tricksters’ – he loudly announces that ‘everybody loves a rogue’.⁷ In myth, legend and the media, at any rate. Whether it be Rhett Butler, Bret Maverick, Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday, Dirty Harry, Han Solo, Indiana Jones or Al Swearengen of *Deadwood* fame,

they are ‘the children of Loki, the brothers of Coyote’, direct descendants of Herman Melville’s ‘Confidence Man’ and Thomas Mann’s ‘Felix Krull’. In certain respects, what’s more, they’re similar to the current crop of digital diddlers, as well as their analogue ancestors.⁸ ‘All marketers are liars, after all’. Or so Seth Godin contends.⁹

As marketers ourselves, who may or may not be lying through our teeth, let us just say that this essay reframes society’s antipathy to such people by approaching finaglers’ fiddles from an alternative perspective. Namely, the glorious yet ignoble tradition of con-artistry. That is, those who seek to deceive, yet do so in a perversely pleasurable, irresistibly appalling, adorably abominable way. And while we don’t endorse their reprehensible activities – quite the opposite – we seek to show that the sometimes censorious attitude adopted the scholarly community doesn’t provide a full picture. Popular culture, on the other hand, provides a powerful lens that magnifies the matter and, by doing so, enhances academics’ appreciation of a fast-growing phenomenon that rakes in around \$500bn per annum.

It’s an industry, according to *The Economist*, that extends from vast scam compounds in Myanmar (where cyber slaves spend their days duping gullible consumers in western nations) and disturbing latter-day developments in generative AI (which siphon the income streams of creative artists without a penny in recompense) to the amoral activities of ‘puffed up politicians’ (who embellish their CVs, concoct their professional credentials or siphon-surf like nobody’s business).¹⁰

Eve’s Apple

When the cultural history of hustlers, humbugs, cozeners and cheats is contemplated, several fascinating facts are evident. The first of these is that they aren’t ordinary criminals, nor do they consider themselves to be so. ‘Although’, as Maurer’s seminal empirical study of the profession points out, ‘the confidence man is sometimes classed with professional thieves, pickpockets, and gamblers, he is really not a thief at all because he does no actual stealing. The trusting victim literally thrusts a fat bank roll into his hand. It is a point of pride with him that he does not have to steal’. As a result, ‘relatively few good con men are ever brought to trial; of those who are tried, few are convicted; of those who are convicted, even fewer ever serve out their full sentences. Many successful operators have never spent a day in prison’.¹¹ And the same seems to be true of social media miscreants who attract followers by the truckload despite ample evidence of Facebook-based fraudsters, Pinterest-situated picaroons, Instagram-reliant ‘scamfluencers’ and so on.

Second, and closely related to the first, is that bamboozlers’ have numerous, ready-to-hand, get-out-of-jail-free excuses for their unscrupulous behaviours.¹² As only ‘slightly bent when it came to being crooked’, they attribute their activities to prevailing circumstances; most definitely not personal choice.¹³ They have ‘no other option’ when, say, the platform’s algorithm is all-powerful and rules with a rod of iron, when Prohibition prevents the sale of the popular beverages they just happen to purvey, when the on-going gold rush, the latest land grab, the eye-catching, bells-and-whistles social medium platform offers unmissable opportunities, unparalleled profits and everybody else is doing it too. If you snooze you lose, especially in the hyper-speed, ultra-competitive, growing-like-kudzu-on-hormones world of cyberspace, where hustling and hyperbole are (Bit)coins of the realm.¹⁴

The third salient aspect of con-artistry's cultural history is that its practitioners are blessed, for the most part, with considerable personal charm. Those conned, as a rule, rarely have a bad word to say about their experience, bar being gulled. Though this is tempered, as often as not, by the strange but true fact that many victims of con-artists find it difficult to accept that they have been duped by the charmer they encountered. 'Owing to feelings of shame or denial' they not only fail to file police reports but continue to believe in the con artist's good intentions, despite rock-solid evidence to the contrary.¹⁵ Cognitive dissonance, it seems, is alive, well, and rampant here, there, and everywhere, cyberspace included.

Yet grifters, remarkable as it appears, get high grades from their marks. And nowhere is this better illustrated than by the unsuspecting victims of Victor Lustig (1890-1947), 'the man who conned the world'.¹⁶ Best known for selling the Eiffel Tower, not once but twice, to Parisian patsies who were prepared to believe that it was being sold as scrap metal, he trafficked London's Tower Bridge in a similar fashion. Better yet, Victor bilked scores of investors with a mechanical contraption called the Rumanian Box, which cranked out 'real' dollar bills; he fleeced innumerable first-class, high-rolling seafarers when luxurious Transatlantic liners ruled the waves; then conned none other than Al Capone – yes, *the* Al Capone – and not only lived to tell the tale but the Great Depression's greatest gangster gave him \$5,000, gratis, on account of his 'honesty'. An honesty, what is more, that was attested to by almost everyone Lustig encountered, including the law enforcement officers and FBI agents on the glorious grifter's trail. 'Tricky Vic', numerous victims vouchsafed, 'was a genuinely charming fellow'.¹⁷

Set against this, however, is the masculinist bias of Poe's 'exact science'. Near enough every individual identified in Maurer's rogues' gallery of grifters is a man, and more than a few are monsters. Sommer's selective history of *Great Cons and Con Artists* is similarly predicated – apart from assorted token representatives including Cassie Chadwick, Edith Irving, and 'Princess Anastasia' – on the Great Man model.¹⁸ And it is noteworthy that the academic literature alludes to managerial 'Machiavellianism' rather than, say, executives' *Eveosity*.¹⁹ Eve, according to the good book, was the con-artiste who persuaded Adam to eat the apple that condemned humankind to its fallen state. Or so masculinist misrepresentations of holy writ suggest.²⁰ Granted, fourth-wave feminists are recuperating women's many and varied contributions to charlatanism, but the very fact that their achievements have been overlooked until recently is testament to their veracity. What self-respecting con-artiste, after all, would want to be outed as one? Many of the best in the business – Rose Marks, Roxie Ann Rice, Bonny Lee Bakley – were blessed with *Eveosity* in abundance.²¹

Above and beyond Bonny Lee and the like, this revival of interest in 'rogue women' is indicative of another aspect of con-artistry. Its periodicity. Diddling is not only not new, as Eve's achievements attest, it comes and goes in waves, which tend to peak at times of societal, political, technological, cultural, and economic change, uncertainty, crisis. The turbulent, oft-times tragic, 'taming' of the American west, for instance, was accompanied by any number of 'hornswogglers, four-flushers, and snake-oil salesmen'.²² And that doesn't include those who made a fortune from the gold rushes without panning for a single nugget, much less staking a speculative claim. The cataclysmic aftermath the First World War, furthermore, 'was a golden age for the confidence man'.²³ Ivar Kreuger, Charles Ponzi, Thérèse Humbert, the Cottingley Fairies hoax (perpetrated by two young girls) and the rise of spiritualism, where countless mostly female mediums raised the dead for an appropriately stiff fee, is testament to its loan shark-infested waters. Although the existence of cultural 'periodicities' is impossible to prove – as retro-marketing researchers remind us on an

annoyingly regular basis – parallels with present political (MAGA), technological (AI), immunological (Covid), environmental (global warming), societal (genders' agendas), financial (cryptocurrencies), and cultural (social media) circumstances are plain for all to see. Concerns about the last of these are rising fast.

Abagnales Assemble

So remarkable, indeed, are the inter-war/present day resemblances, Konnikova contends that ‘a new golden age of the graft’ is upon us.²⁴ It is an online age, however, an era of cyber-cons, digi-diddling, net-fraud, a place where i-patsies abound, e-suckers are two a penny and silicon-artists express themselves at lightning-cabled speed. ‘No amount of technological sophistication’, Konnikova continues, ‘make cons any less likely. The same schemes that were playing out in the big stores of the Wild West are being run via your in-box, the same demands over the wire are hitting your cell phone’. Citing frightening statistics of ever-increasing online fraud – primarily for weight-loss products, prize promotions, buyers’ club offers and unauthorized internet billing – she concludes with a comment by Frank Abagnale, whose exploits were immortalized in Steven Spielberg’s *Catch Me if You Can*: ‘Technology breeds crime. It always has and always will’.²⁵ And it has got significantly worse since then. Nowadays, online scamming not only ‘compares in size and scope to the illegal drug industry’, but it is just as deadly.²⁶

Social media, in short, represent a new twist in the trickster tale. Silicon Valley is well named. Instagram is its Menlo Park, its Los Alamos, its Las Vegas and, for some of its less principled influencers perhaps, a one-way ticket to Alcatraz. WeChat and whatnot are not short of Silicon Valley Grrrls, strong women the world over, more than a few of whom have been accused of unethical online activities. Such sites are the fountainhead of flim-flam women, she-scammers, hucks-hers, as it were, the cyber-counterparts of *Confident Women*, a cultural history of ‘swindlers, grifters, and shapeshifters of the feminine persuasion’.²⁷

Be that as it may, the principal problem for researchers faced with digital diddlers and their ‘slippery situational ethics’ is that they are difficult to study.²⁸ True, there is no lack of books and articles and podcasts and newspaper reports about confidence men and women. But how can researchers rely on what loveable rogues say, even if they’re willing to talk? As equivocation is their native language, so to speak, why should we expect scammers to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to business school scholars? Especially in the case of Insta’s A-list swindlers – the Anastasias, Abagnales and Amy Bocks of the online world – since they are surrounded by brand managers, PR people, and social media curators who ensure that, akin to the imperishable Tallulah Bankhead, their clients remain as pure as the driven slush. Such people may try to sell us a time-share apartment in the Seychelles or promise to spill the beans if we agree to an appropriately adapted game of Find-the-Lady – where’s the full professorship? – but honest answers to our carefully-crafted questions is contrary, surely, to their code of conduct and the profession’s time-tested traditions...

And even if they did succumb to the ‘sincere lies’ of management researchers, plus our promises of anonymity, respect, and punctilious reportage – such as the present essay, naturally – a crucial question remains: What exactly constitutes a con-person? How conniving must they be to qualify, especially when they don’t consider themselves charlatans in the first instance? As Ray Carney, ‘an upstanding salesman of reasonably priced furniture’ recalls in *Harlem Shuffle*:

[A]n outside observer might get the idea that Carney trafficked quite frequently in stolen goods, but that's not how he saw it. There was a natural flow of goods in and out and through people's lives, from here to there, a churn of property, and Ray Carney facilitated that churn...It was true that his cousin did bring a necklace from time to time. Or a watch or two, top-notch. Or a few rings in a silver box engraved with initials. And it was true that Carney had an associate on Canal Street who helped these items on the next leg of their journey...As a middleman. Legit.²⁹

Ray Carney, in short, is an above-the-board, straight-shooting (literally) business person. Tony Soprano was equally on-the-level re. Barone Sanitation, Satriale's Pork Store, and the Bada Bing! 'social club'. The same goes for Walter White's Gray Matter Technologies, until he sold up in season three of *Breaking Bad*. And as for *Better Call Saul*, only one word can capture Jimmy's superlative chiselling abilities: *sublime*.

Huck Sucks

Whatever else is said about con-artistry, one thing is clear. The profession is endlessly fascinating for many people. Wikipedia, for instance, lists one hundred heist movies alone – themselves a subsidiary of the 'crime caper' genre – more than a few of which are stone-cold classics: *Heat*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *The Sting*, *The Usual Suspects*, *The Italian Job*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, et al. Goodreads itemizes 148 works of fiction and non-fiction about fraudsters, finaglers and so forth, works whose protagonists/antagonists are some of the best-loved characters in literature: Moll Flanders, Becky Sharp, Jay Gatsby, Tom Ripley, Lorelei Lee, Huckleberry Finn and so forth. Merriam-Webster, meanwhile, offers 111 synonyms for 'swindle', everything from adventurer and bamboozler to thimble-rigger and wheeler-dealer. Such expressions not only speak volumes about the hold hustlers have on us – our language, our culture, our values – but are remarkable in their own right. As is the everlasting admiration of H.L. Mencken, no less, who extols con-artists' argot in a second supplement to his landmark text, *The American Language*.

More remarkable still is that consumers repeatedly fall for loveable rogues, charming scoundrels, and the like, even though everyone knows they're untrustworthy. In a recent paean to the achievements of *Confident Women*, Tori Telfer neither skimps on the superlatives, nor fails to emphasize the allure of their villainy. It makes Maurer's famous hymn of praise look positively churlish:

The con-woman's likeability is the single most important tool she has, sharp as a chef's knife and fake as a theatre mask...The fact that we like con artists so much is probably the greatest con of all time...There's no point in denying it: [such] women are extremely charming. Most of them would be fantastic company on a bar crawl. Many had great taste in fashion. The designer handbags! The fur coats! But perhaps there's a darker reason we cheer on the con artists: secretly we want to *be* her.³⁰

As hypotheses go, women's alleged inner con-artistry is all very well. But how do such people, and bamboozlers more generally, get away with their 'knavish tricks'? Well, it's not their denial of knavishness in the first place, nor the ready-to-hand rationale for their 'slightly crooked' behaviour, nor the charismatic charm that convinces their marks they haven't been conned. Nor for that matter is it the innocence, credulity or downright stupidity of the gulls,

suckers and saps they prey upon, people like us. The key to success is connivers' ability to convince *themselves* of their veracity. As George MacDonald Fraser observes in *The Flashman Papers*, his bestselling series of 'autobiographical' novels about a superlative swindler: 'I have observed, in the course of a dishonest life, that when a rogue is outlining a treacherous plan, he works harder to convince himself than to move his hearers'.³¹ Radan concurs, contending that flimflammers' fibs *must* be believed by the fraudsters responsible, otherwise they'll fail to convince anyone else.³²

Most academicians demur, however. When the scholarly literature on the topic is considered, an ethos of censoriousness tends to prevail. And rightly so! Such people are criminals!! Flogging is too good for them!!! In this regard, consider Shelby Hunt and Lawrence Chonko's much-cited study of marketers' Machiavellianism, one of the three 'dark' traits, alongside 'narcissism' and 'psychopathy' that plague the profession. Unsurprisingly, they found that marketing is considered manipulative, unethical, unfair, abusive and filled with 'hucksters, cheats, and frauds'.³³ But no more so than society as a whole, which implies that the US is irredeemably amoral. They also report that Machiavellianism was more prevalent among young, unmarried people, as well as women and, if prior studies are taken into account, business school faculty. Presumably, their own study was scrupulously conducted.

Carney's Credo

As is the present one. Honest! There are a couple of issues, though, insofar as we can't take fraudsters' true confessions at face value. What we know about con-artists, what's more, mostly comes from those who get caught. The greatest grifters keep the secrets of their success to themselves. What we also know however is that many mountebanks possessed surprisingly strict codes of practice, not unlike the Pirate Code, buccaneers' seventeenth-century 'articles of agreement', and, rather more chivalrously, the Knights Templar Code of Conduct. The Muhammed Ali of imposture, Victor Lustig, likewise adhered to his 'Ten Commandments of the Con'. These included: Never boast; Never look bored; Never be untidy; Never get drunk; Never discuss health; Never pry into personal circumstances; and Be a patient listener, since 'it is this, not fast talking that gets a conman his coups'.

Coulson Whitehead's Ray Carney, the presiding spirit of the present piece, may not have issued any formal rules of engagement. However, his fictional con artist's 'autobiography' gives some idea of the moral milieu in which the loveable rogue operates. Ostensibly a fashionable furniture store owner, Carney 'knew crime's hours...when the straight world slept and the bent got to work. An arena for thieving and scores, break-ins and hijacks, when the con man polishes the bait and the embezzler cooks the books'.³⁴ And it is this knowledge that not only helps Ray escape the clutches of his pursuers, legal and illegal alike, but gives Whitehead's readers a sense of the precepts' that characterize Carney's circumstances and his philosophy of customer care:

Precept One: Sneaky gets you paid around here.

Precept Two: Entrepreneur?...That's just a hustler who pays taxes.

Precept Three: [Deliver] smiles as counterfeit as the twenties in [your] hip pockets.

Precept Four: I may be broke sometimes, but I ain't crooked...[Although] perhaps he was.

Precept Five: His job was the nudge people into doing what they didn't know they wanted to do.

Precept Six: You [always] want something more when you ain't going to get it. (So true.)

Precept Seven: He had a policy where he granted delinquent accounts a one-week grace period before his muscle came over to break a leg or appendage of the client's choice. No one had ever heard of such a marketing gimmick before, this à la carte maiming. (Who knew?)

Precept Eight: An envelope is an envelope. Disrespect the order and the whole system breaks down. (Cryptic, think about it...)

Precept Nine: Should ask the Indians about looting. This whole country's founded on taking other people's shit. (Too close to home, perhaps?)

Precept Ten: *You'll take the matching ottoman and fucking like it.* (Who would gainsay a salesperson packing heat?)

Lovely Jubby

Or, for that matter, packing sweet. Take Del-Boy. In the annals of British situation comedies, a genre that includes classics like *Monty Python*, *Mr. Bean*, *Blackadder*, *Absolutely Fabulous* and *The Vicar of Dibley*, one sit-com stands head and shoulders above the rest. *Only Fools and Horses*, which ran for six series between 1981 and 1991 – followed by sixteen Christmastime specials – is the country's most beloved comedy by some distance. Starring David Jason, the sitcom focuses on the unfailingly comedic escapades of Derek 'Del-Boy' Trotter, a less than virtuous market trader – a dodgy-dealer in lovely jubby – whose money-making scams don't just go awry but fail, for the most part, to make a return on Del-Boy's investment. Breaking even is a pipe dream, earning a healthy profit practically impossible. Derek's delightfully doomed adventures include selling suncream in the middle of winter, VCRs that only work in mainland Europe, camcorders with Russian-standard sized tapes, briefcases with the lock-code locked inside, and 700 bottles of communion wine that turned out, on inspection, to be Romanian Riesling. The less said about his box of pre-owned men's wigs, hot air guns repurposed as hairdryers, and bottles of 'spring water' sourced from the kitchen tap, the better for everyone.

But that was then, this is now. Or is it? A latter-day equivalent of Britain's trickster-trader is *The Traitors*, a 'reality' game-show where twenty-two players are classed as either 'traitors' or 'faithfuls', and the objective of which is to cheat and lie one's way to a winner-takes-all haul of £120,000. It is, an aghast critic contends, 'the celebration of deceit as a life skill'.³⁵ Aghast or otherwise, the Dutch-devised format has been sold to thirty territories including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, New Zealand, South Africa, South Korea, the United Kingdom and, since 2023, the United States, where Alan Cumming is the rogues' ringmaster and scooped a Primetime Emmy for his

performance. Adorned with appropriately Gothic trappings – crenelated castles, werewolves, and whatnot – it is a mediated microcosm of today’s con-or-be-conned culture and, according to *The Economist*, is game theory made flesh.³⁶ Be afraid, be very...Abagnale.

Or Elizabeth Holmes, if you must. The disgraced founder of Theranos, a celebrated Silicon Valley start-up, her infamous blood test contraption was, if nothing else, a consummate work of con artistry.³⁷ It not only fooled the biggest brains and canny venture capitalists in tech-bro country but ranks right up there beside Victor Lustig’s money-making Hungarian Box in the profession’s Hall of Fame. Or should that be shame? Charismatic to a fault, Holmes is limned by two recent commentators as ‘a rising Silicon Valley star following in the footsteps of the (all-male) billionaire startup founders before her. She graced the covers of numerous business and popular magazines, was recognized by the White House as a leading entrepreneur, and selected as one of *Glamour*’s Women of the Year and *Time*’s 100 Most Influential People’.³⁸ Then it all came tumbling down when the contraption didn’t work, despite repeated attempts, and it became apparent that the brains behind the scam ‘had bilked millions of dollars from investors in part by capitalizing on her position as a woman in technology’. Technology’s loss is Federal Prison Camp Bryan’s gain. Until 2034, if Holmes serves her full sentence.

Incarceration aside, much the same can be said about Belle Gibson. A small-fry Australian influencer focusing the skateboarder community, Belle rose to prominence by falsely claiming that she was suffering from terminal brain cancer.³⁹ Follower numbers rocketed, fame and fortune followed and, pausing only to record her never-say-die courageousness in the face of calamity, the tragic heroine lived the high life, disbursed sagacious advice to those suffering similar travails, and enjoyed the time she had left swaddled in what little comfort the lap of luxury bestowed. Gibson’s ever-optimistic posts, in fairness, gave succour to those undergoing similar ordeals. Especially after she claimed to have been cured thanks to a combination of alternative medicine and a dietary regime that was available to all via her cookbook and app, *The Whole Pantry*. Or did so until her integrity was questioned by inquisitive journalists and the scheme unravelled.⁴⁰ Belle’s downfall was accompanied by a conviction on five counts, plus \$400,000 fine, from Australia’s Federal Court, and, it has to be said, continuing fascination with the whole nine yards of *The Whole Pantry* racket, which she pulled off so adroitly. And just like Holmes before her, Gibson has attracted the attention of television streaming services in the form of *The Dropout* and *Apple Cider Vinegar* respectively.

Tricky Takeaways

Reprehensible they may be but Gibson and Holmes certainly deserve to be included in Gardner Dozois’ pantheon of *Dangerous Women*.⁴¹ These include both Boudicca and Joan of Arc, the Gladiatrix of Ancient Rome, the Warrior Women of the Scythians, formidable female pirates like Anne Bonny and Mary Read, prodigious, pistol-packing highwaywomen such as Mary Frith and Pearl Hart, outstanding outlaws of ‘feminine persuasion’, most notably Ma Barker and Bonnie Parker. And, in the fictional-but-unforgettable category, Sherlock Holmes’ nemesis, Irene Adler, Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Dejah Thoris, Dashiell Hammett’s fabulous *femmes-fatale*, to say nothing of kick-ass heroines akin to Xena Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and, of late, Rebecca Yarros’s Violet Sorrellgail, dragon-rider supreme. They are what feminist mythographer Marina Warner calls ‘she-monsters’, adding that, ‘the bad girl is the heroine of our times and transgression a staple entertainment’.⁴²

The same is true today, a time when western society is ‘moving gradually’ from a ‘light mode’ to a ‘dark mode’, characterized by ‘supervillain vibes’.⁴³ Such as those allegedly possessed by the 47th President of the United States, whose ‘performative deceptions’ have conned the great American public.⁴⁴ Though the public doesn’t see it that way. Nor do his critics appreciate the remarkable personal charm of the politician, much less Trump’s ‘truthful hyperbole and honest bullshit’.⁴⁵ Which is on a par, some say, to that con artist nonpareil, P.T. Barnum. As a second-rate scholarly swindler of our acquaintance observed more than twenty years ago:

More than anything else, The Donald is heir to P.T. Barnum. Everything he does is bigger, higher, longer, greater, further, classier or richer than has ever gone before. He has his name on more buildings than Burger King. His ego is so huge that it takes crampons, oxygen, and sherpas to scale their lower foothills. He knows more celebrities and their secrets than J. Edgar Hoover in his pinafored prime. The rise in global warming, they say, is caused by the deforestation caused by The Donald’s daily press coverage. His hair alone is a work of art, an installation piece loosely based on Monet’s *Haystacks* or, possibly, Magritte’s little-known surrealist masterpiece, *This is Not a Combover*.⁴⁶

Academics, however, have nothing to be smug about. The universities that house them stand accused of many and various sharp practices, fraud included.⁴⁷ And the journals that contain their learned articles aren’t exactly repositories of rectitude.⁴⁸ Granted, sagacious marketing and consumer researchers seem to believe they’re above such base behaviours and shudder at the thought of those who fall short of their exacting yet necessary standards. But academia isn’t exactly an egalitarian world where sweetness and light prevail, where all are treated equally, equitably, ethically. Especially so in top-ranked journals whose reviewers, purportedly, are impartial paragons of virtue and favouritism is far beyond the pale. Higher education is a puritanical profession, so they say, where promotions are made on merit and merit alone, where the *crème de la crème* always rise to the top, and hornswoggling simply doesn’t happen.

If that *were* the case, why the wholesale redactions of previously published articles, why the scandals surrounding so many learned journals, our own among them, why the ‘citation circles’ of unscrupulous scholars who scratch each others backs for mutual professional benefit?⁴⁹ Why, come to think of it, have we not woken up to the fact that such con artistry is and always has been prevalent throughout our profession? We are all, are we not, con artists of a sort, disciplinary if ill-disciplined diddlers. Every time we dress for success, fake it till we make it, put our best foot forward or, as they say, are economical with the truth about our illustrious academic achievements, we are dabbling in Edgar Allan Poe’s grin-to-win territory.

The thing is, gentle readers, editorial boards can huff and puff all they like; pillars of the academic community can castigate the miscreants who bring learned journals into disrepute; the marketing profession can insist that it’s doing its best to eradicate the industry’s hard-selling, dodgy-dealing, bunko-artist heritage. But, they’re whistling in the wind, one and all. Censorious scholars, to be frank, are fulminating Elmer Fudds about a Bugs Bunny business.

Th-th-that’s all folks!

Abagnales Assembled

Except that it isn't. Before calling time on our con artist catwalk show, we too feel obliged to 'fess up. The thing you need to know is that we're undertaking an empirical study of on-line Insta influencers, mostly female, predominantly small-fry, with less than 10,000 followers. As you might expect, none of them consider themselves to be chisellers, charlatans, con artists or their importuning ilk. Yet their behaviours are consistently fraudulent: doctoring photographs, stealing ideas, feeding false information to followers about products and services. But as everybody else does likewise, they don't deem such activities dubious, much less dishonest, let alone disreputable. They are the unwritten rules of the game, water off a dodgy, diddling, digital duck's back. So engrained are they, we're tempted to conclude that, just as influencers are conventionally divided into *nano*, *micro*, *macro* and *celebrities*, so too con artists can be classified in a similar fashion.⁵⁰ Are you, gentle reader, a nano, a micro, a macro or a celebrity swindler like Victor Lustig? Are you now or have you ever been a con artist? Be honest.

As for ourselves, we may or may not have been telling fibs about our fibbing all along. That's for you to decide.⁵⁰ But before you make up your mind, reflect on that legendary line in the Coen Brothers' brilliant early movie, *Miller's Crossing*: 'Look in your heart...Look in your heart...Look in your heart'. Or your CV, at least...

Notes and References

1. If you believe a single word of this, you'll believe anything. It's not so much an urban legend as a research rumour, which we've just invented. Pass it on.
2. We're reminded of the social media meme that circulated a while back: *I know this paper is ready to be published because I hate it now and never want to see it again*.
3. Konnikova, *The confidence game*, 27.
4. Whitehead, *The nickel boys*, 25.
5. King, *Different seasons*, 85.
6. Poe, 'Diddling considered', 1.
7. Martin, 'Introduction', 1.
8. Dasani, *Pseudology*; Young, *Bunk*; Dodsworth and Fagan, *Free your mind*.
9. Godin, *All marketers are liars*.
10. And let us not forget the equally vast industry in counterfeit, copycat and dupe goods, which also rakes in around \$500bn per annum. See *Economist*, 'Scam Inc.'; *Economist*, 'Industrial-scale swindle'.
11. Maurer, *The big con*, 1.

12. Konnikova, *The confidence game*.
13. Whitehead, *Harlem shuffle*, 33.
14. Strategic Insights, ‘Anatomy of a scam’.
15. Konnikova, *The confidence game*, chapter 7.
16. Sandford, *Victor Lustig*.
17. Sandford, *Victor Lustig*, 33.
18. Sommer, *Great cons and con artists*.
19. Musarra, et al., ‘Machiavellianism’.
20. Edwards, ‘Temptress Eve’.
21. Clarke, *The lies I tell*; Telfer, *Confident women*.
22. Mayo, *Hornswogglers, fourflushers and snake-oil salesmen*.
23. Sandford, *Victor Lustig*, 1.
24. Konnikova, *The confidence game*, 9. Dodsworth and Fagan (2023, 14) likewise report that the ‘average American’ is exposed to between four and ten thousand advertising messages daily, approximately twenty times as many as the ’70s.
25. Konnikova, *The confidence game*, 10.
26. Economist, ‘Scam Inc.’, 7.
27. Telfer, *Confident women*, iii.
28. Keefe, *Rogues*, xviii. As Fletcher (1966, 31-37) explains in his seminal text, ‘situational ethics’ is a flexible moral code, which depends on the context, circumstances, choices, etc. that prevail at the time of the decision. And while this code of conduct is a radical departure from the conventional wisdom of Western Christian morality, it is not short of adherents including existentialists, Nietzscheans, situationists and so on.
29. Whitehead, *Harlem shuffle*, 27-28.
30. Telfer, *Confident women*, xi-xii.
31. Fraser, *The Flashman papers*, 156.
32. Radan, *The truth about lies*, 198.
33. Hunt and Chonko, ‘Marketing and Machiavellianism’, 31.

34. Whitehead, *Harlem shuffle*, 138.

35. Ellen, ‘We all have a wicked side’, 40.

36. Economist, ‘All fun and games’, 73.

37. Straker, et al., ‘Designing a dangerous unicorn’.

38. Banet-Weiser and Higgins, ‘Liars, scammers and cheats’.

39. Rumbelow, ‘She said she’.

40. Donelly and Toscano, *The woman who*.

41. Dozois, ‘Introduction’.

42. Warner, *Managing monsters*, 11.

43. Kelly, ‘We have now entered’, 22.

44. Dasani, *Pseudology*, 110.

45. Ruprecht, ‘Truthful hyperbole’.

46. Brown, *Free gift inside!!*, 76. The Trump-Barnum parallels have been noted by many. But, just to be clear – and notwithstanding Hugh Jackman’s saccharine screenplay – PTB wrote the book about con artistry. Literally. Published in 1866, *The Humbugs of the World* was a bestseller in its day. And still worth reading.

47. Lyons and Yorke, ‘Universities named over fraud’.

48. Tourish, *Management studies in crisis*.

49. Konnikova, *The confidence game*.

50. The typology’s four-fold terminology seems a wee bit weak and wishy-washy when applied to con artistry. We suggest the following framework instead: *White Lies*; *Big Fibs*; *Stretchers*; and *Don-Cons* respectively ‘Stretchers’, FYI, was the word Barnum used for his many and varied schemes and tricks.

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