Effects of the dominant in Secret Window

DR GARY BETTINSON

Lecturer in Film Studies, University of Lancaster (U.K)

ICR, County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster. LA1 4YD. U.K.

Email: g.bettinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Fax: +44 (0) 1524 594273

Effects of the dominant in *Secret Window*

This essay seeks to identify and examine 'problematic' aesthetic strategies in David Koepp's Secret Window *(2004). Arguing that the film fits into a specific 'puzzle film' category favouring self-deceiving protagonists and surprise twists, the essay seeks to account for the negative critical reaction accrued by the film's denouement. Most centrally, I invoke the Russian Formalist's concept of the 'dominant' in order to suggest how* Secret Window *subordinates textual elements to the film's narrative revelation. It is this prioritising of the main plot twist that accounts for many of the film's dramaturgically contentious tactics. The essay demonstrates the means by which* Secret Window *cuts against the grain of Hollywood storytelling norms; it suggests that the film manipulates character engagement in a way that exceeds the puzzle film's traditional reshuffling of sympathies; and it indicates how the film deploys generic convention and allusion to engender a highly self-conscious and repressive narration. These arguments aim to show that the film displays bold and sophisticated aesthetic strategies. More broadly, the essay argues that by analysing problematic examples of a film genre, we can usefully disclose the aesthetic principles that underpin the genre's more successful films.*

Recent Hollywood cinema has elaborated an extant fascination with self-deceptive protagonists and shock twists.[1] In particular, a few films anchor revelation in a fundamental aspect of the protagonist's identity. Until the revelation's disclosure, this hidden but essential aspect is repressed by the character and concealed from the spectator. The protagonist may be dead (as in *The Sixth Sense*, 1999 and *The Others*, 2001) or assailed by another, altogether more malevolent personality (e.g. *Fight Club*, 1999). In all such films, the epistemic hierarchy aligns protagonist and viewer: the viewer's coming into knowledge is concurrent with the protagonist's moment of *anagnorisis*. In a recent study of modern Hollywood cinema, David Bordwell includes these movies within a discussion of contemporary 'puzzle films': that is, films which organise narrative suspense around a central enigma, repress crucial story information, provoke inaccurate hypotheses, and equivocate about the objectivity of narrative action. Bordwell's examples encompass such twist films as *The Game* (1997), *Memento* (2001), and *The Usual Suspects* (1995), as well as *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, and *The Others* (Bordwell, 2006, pp.80-2). The puzzle film is a wider

category than will be evident from the films I am concerned with here. Not every puzzle film, for example, will root its chief enigma in a revelation of character identity.

Despite the popularity of these puzzle films, the narrative paradigm they employ does not ensure critical success. Two recent Hollywood films – *Secret Window* (2004) and *Hide and Seek* (2005) – apply the paradigm in apparently problematic ways. Consider this representative sample of critical opinion on *Secret Window*'s late-arriving twist. For one critic, the film 'starts out promisingly but goes spectacularly off the rails' (Leyland, 2004, p.78); another opines that 'there is something awry in the movie's construction' (Wilmington, 2004); and still another accuses director-writer David Koepp of 'serving up a colossal…stinker' in the final act (Lim, 2004).[2] If *Secret Window* capitalises on a successful narrative trend, what constructional manoeuvres are responsible for the apparent failure of its narrative revelation?

In what follows, I seek to disclose and account for *Secret Window*'s 'problematic' aesthetic strategies. I set these strategies against the film's most proximate contexts, i.e. the particular brand of puzzle film described above, and the ('post'-) classical Hollywood cinema more generally. In this way, I aim to show that *Secret Window* actively explores mainstream cinema's parameters of character revelation. Most problematically, I argue, the film sacrifices certain dramaturgical (or 'extrinsic'[3]) norms to narrative surprise. By elevating its twist above other constructional principles, the film effects some radical revisions to classical conceptions of character. Devolving from this, I go on to establish how the maintenance of character in *Secret Window* complicates viewer sympathy and calls attention to narrational processes. By centring my analysis on *Secret Window*, I seek not only to lay bare the formal patterning of an individual film, but to sharpen the focus on key structural norms underpinning both the puzzle film and Hollywood narratives in general. Isolating *Secret Window*'s deviations from convention thus sets in relief the very norms that the film violates.[4]

Adapted from a novella by Stephen King, *Secret Window* invokes other King adaptations – *The Shining* (1980) and *Misery* (1990) – in its focus on a writer protagonist.[5] Six months after discovering his wife Amy (Maria Bello) in an affair with Ted (Timothy Hutton), Mort Rainey (Johnny Depp) languishes alone in a lakefront cabin. There, Mort is confronted by Shooter (John Turturro), a Mississippian dairy farmer who accuses Mort of plagiarising a story he claims to have written.

Shooter lays down an ultimatum: within three days, Mort must provide proof that his story is an original work, or else Shooter will exact revenge. Mort is also instructed to rework the story's climax, so that the fictive protagonist kills his wife.

After his pet dog is ominously skewered by a work tool, Mort enlists the help of Karsch (Charles S. Dutton), a private detective. More disquieting incidents occur, including the burning down of Amy's house. To discredit Shooter's plagiarist allegations, Mort arranges courier delivery of the magazine in which his story was originally published. He takes more immediate action by planning to rendezvous with Karsch and Tom Greenleaf, a local resident who has glimpsed Shooter in the woods. Discovering Karsch and Greenleaf murdered, and his own axe and screwdriver embedded in the victims' heads, Mort disposes of their bodies for fear of being framed. As his sanity ebbs away, Mort is struck by a shattering realisation: Shooter is a figment of his own schizoid mind, an epiphany corroborated by flashbacks revealing Mort engaged in the earlier crimes. When Amy and Ted arrive at the lake cabin, Mort kills them and buries them in his 'secret garden' – an eventuality that dovetails with the revised story ending proposed by Shooter.

Classicism and innovation

Invoking the Russian Formalist concept of the 'dominant' best allows us to comprehend *Secret Window*'s eccentric narrational manoeuvres. The dominant, as Roman Jakobson defined it in 1935, is 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components' (Jakobson, 1971, p.82). As Kristin Thompson later characterised it, 'the dominant is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others' (Thompson, 1988, p.89). In *Secret Window*, the dominant is the narrative epiphany that Shooter and Mort are the same person. This narrative fact displays primacy over other aspects of narrative construction, and determines 'the role and structure of the other components' (Jakobson, 1971, p.83). *Secret Window* will chance some radical departures from canonic filmmaking norms in order to prioritise and conceal its main plot twist (i.e. its dominant).[6] The revelation, moreover, exerts transformative influence upon ensuing story material, particularly with respect to the film's internal framework of character engagement and sympathy.

I will discuss this latter phenomenon in the next section. For now, let us lay out some of the film's putatively 'disturbing' revisions to classical narrative. Many of these revisions, we will find, are traceable to the film's dominant, that is, the narrative twist around which the film is structured. (Likewise, critical dissatisfaction with *Secret Window* is largely relatable to effects wrought by its key revelation.) We will find, moreover, that the film's contravention of extrinsic norms does not indicate structural ineptness, as some critics have implied, so much as a propensity for bold and experimental storytelling. Upon closer inspection, then, we can elucidate and smooth down some of the film's more problematic elements.

Most Hollywood films, as Kristin Thompson points out, favour 'clear, gradual character change' (Thompson, 1999, p.43). A character's psychological growth will typically be mapped across several phases of story action, the better to show how narrative events steadily shape an agent's attitudes and beliefs. In *As Good As It Gets* (1997), a 'neoclassical' film which traces a broad arc of character change, the transformation of Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) from misanthrope to philanthropist is matched to the film's entire running length. Along the way, Melvin encounters various characters and situations that teach him the value of self-improvement. To be sure, many Hollywood films require their protagonist to undergo a less extreme change of personality than that traced in *As Good As It Gets*. Often, character change amounts to ironing out flaws rather than to a steep volte-face in character behaviour. In any case, the principle that governs character development in these subtler instances is still that of *modulated* psychological change. The character's emergent traits crystallise as the narrative events unfold.

Daringly, *Secret Window* employs gambits of character change that contravene Hollywood convention. First, the film flouts the kind of graduated character development outlined above. Because character change is here the crux of narrative surprise, the narration cannot overtly signal Mort's *gradual* change into Shooter. To do so would be to expose and extinguish the main revelation (i.e. that which I have identified as the dominant). As a result of the film's suppressive tactics, Mort's metamorphosis strikes the viewer as sudden and unmotivated, rather than as a gradual transformation shaped by earlier story events. To speak of character *development* in this context risks underplaying the disjunctive nature of character change in the film.

Second, whereas conventional films engender a gradual change in the hero's *personality*, *Secret Window* posits a sudden change in its protagonist's *identity*. From

the revelation onward, Mort *is* Shooter in all but physical appearance.[7] With little apparent regard for character consistency, the film supplants Mort's established traits with the malignant attitudes and desires of Shooter. A more traditional approach to character change is exemplified in *As Good As It Gets*. As the story progresses, some of Melvin's character traits gradually evolve while others remain constant. In this way, personality change occurs against a baseline of basically stable traits by which we individuate the character. Melvin can thus trace a quite broad arc of change which poses no serious threat to character consistency. Psychological growth in *As Good As It Gets* – by conventional standards, an 'extreme' example of character change in Hollywood dramaturgy – is therefore quite distinct from the kind of bold character transformation found in *Secret Window*.[8]

Once its narrative revelation is out of the bag, *Secret Window* forces the spectator to revise prior moral judgements about Mort. Again, character consistency is put at risk. 'Forgivable' character flaws established at the outset, such as slothfulness, paranoia, and plagiarist tendencies, hardly prepare us for the murderous intent with which Mort is now endowed. Tracing a protagonist's moral degeneration is not without precedent, of course. Though it is still the Hollywood norm to present 'nice people…becoming nicer' (Bordwell, 2006, p.83), some films plot the moral degeneration of their initially nice heroes. But here, too, screenwriting laws of plausibility and causality mandate that change be wrought in stages. The corruption of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) is played out across almost the entire length of *The Godfather* (1972), while Anakin Skywalker's withdrawal to the 'dark side' occurs extremely gradually, spanning three *Star Wars* films (1999, 2002, 2005).

In *Secret Window*, however, we are asked to come to terms with what we perceive to be a radical break in Mort's moral valence. The protagonist's new capacity for murder takes us by surprise. At the level of story, in fact, Mort's moral upheaval is not as abrupt as it first appears. Action prior to the revelation can be taken as representing Mort's *gradual* transmogrification into Shooter: this foregoing action presents Mort becoming acquainted with, conversant with, and finally acquiescent to the amoral spectre haunting his unconscious. That Mort's moral transfiguration does not *occur* to us as gradual, but on the contrary as unprepared and surprising, is again attributable to a restricted narration with suppressed gaps – a narration that aims to preserve the integrity of the plot's major twist (i.e. the dominant). If the twist is to be potent in surprise, the narration must repress information pertaining to Mort's crisis of

morality. In privileging the forcefulness of the twist, then, the filmmakers boldly reject tactics of foreshadowing that would cue the viewer gradually to Mort's shifting moral state.

None of this is to assert that abrupt character change, identity switches, and moral u-turns are without precedent in Hollywood narrative, only that such tactics are exceptional (especially the co-ordinating of all three tactics at once).[9] We can sketch in the horror genre as a pertinent context for these collective devices. Some horror films will transform morally good characters into malevolent ones (as in *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *The Shining*), though again psychological change tends to be engendered quite gradually, and is often signalled during an early phase in the narrative. *Psycho* (1960) anticipates more closely the narrative strategies evinced in *Secret Window*, especially as it dovetails character change and a *deus ex machina*. *Psycho*, however, places less emphasis on the protagonist's moment of *anagnorisis* than does *Secret Window* or the other films that I am considering here.[10] If *Secret Window* finds forebears in the horror genre, its strategies exceed or transgress the conventions of its other pertinent and proximate contexts (namely, the contemporary Hollywood film in general, and the Hollywood puzzle film in particular).

Particularly courageous is *Secret Window*'s mapping of character goals. Early phases of action clearly establish Mort's primary goal: he must disprove Shooter's allegation of plagiarism, and so resolve their hostile impasse. A second goal requires Mort to salvage his marriage to Amy. In plot terms, both goals are drastically curtailed by the main revelation (wherein Mort's psychological traits, including his goals, are vanquished by Shooter's supersession). Abandoning these goals risks vexing the spectator who engages emotionally in Mort's goal-oriented activity. Moreover, the twist exposes the triviality of Mort's principal goal, which is neither resolved nor further elaborated by the narrative.[11] Whether Mort plagiarised from Shooter becomes a question both tail-chasing and academic in light of the revelation that they both are the same person. The film's chief character goal, then, comes to be viewed by the spectator as fundamentally inconsequential. *Secret Window* thus chances a risky manoeuvre: by undermining the significance of the plagiarism story, the twist removes the very underpinnings of the film's main conflict.

Once more, however, the narrative revelation spurs us to review character goals. Retroactively, we ascribe additional, unconscious goals to Mort which tacitly run parallel to his more transparent desires. These repressed goals are less sharply defined

than his explicit desires, but we can infer that both sets of desires are mutually oppositional: at an unconscious level, Mort pursues incongruous desires to both emancipate and restrain his perverse alter-ego. Often an unconscious goal will keep in check one or both of the transparent goals. Midway through the film, for example, Mort and a private detective, Karsch, arrange to meet an elderly local named Tom Greenleaf. Greenleaf, Mort claims, has witnessed Shooter and Mort conversing in the woods. In setting up the rendezvous with Karsch and Greenleaf, Mort acts on a conscious desire to determine more about the figure terrorizing him. Yet, *at an unconscious level*, Mort knows that Greenleaf could not possibly have seen Shooter (since Shooter does not exist); the old man will surely testify that Mort was alone in the woods. Shooter kills the two men before Greenleaf can provide testimony that would push Mort closer to self-discovery. Mort's latent desire to keep Shooter enigmatic thus intervenes in his conscious course of action.

Retrospectively, then, the spectator comprehends the undulations of plot – its advancing and retarding of character objectives – not as resulting from the conflicting goals of two discrete antagonists, but from an interplay of the repressed and conscious desires possessed by a single agent. Taken together, Mort's and Shooter's cluster of goals aptly delineates a single internally-conflicted psychology.

Recognising the duality of Mort's actions allows us to re-evaluate initially unsatisfying plot manoeuvres. For instance, we can now qualify our belief that *Secret Window* abandons Mort's goals. Rather, only some of his goals are discarded – namely, those consciously pursued, narratively transparent objectives. So the revelation may forsake certain explicit goals, but it signals the achievement of a key 'unconscious' goal, i.e. to permit Shooter full anarchic reign. From this angle, apparent dramaturgical ineptness begins to look like fairly adventurous storytelling, motivating action by the protagonist's latent rather than explicit desires.

Secret Window transgresses Hollywood narrative in still other ways. Like *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, and *The Others*, the film achieves narrative surprise by exploiting basic and habitual assumptions. We ordinarily assume (unless, that is, genre conventions or narrative cueing indicate otherwise) that a coherent and animated body designates a living human agent – an assumption that leads us awry in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*. *Secret Window* violates another of the viewer's 'low-level' assumptions: character individuation. It does this by forcing the viewer to *misapply* character individuation; that is, to individuate agents inappropriately. In

view of their shared identity, Mort and Shooter ought not to be individuated discretely, yet the film daringly encourages just this process of discrimination by employing two physically dissimilar performers in the roles.[12] Differing external cues thus mark Shooter and Mort as discrete agents, and deflect hypotheses that might anticipate the main revelation. Once more, then, the dominant is the *raison d'être* of aesthetic risk.

Our assumption that the narration presents Shooter from a vantage point of objectivity is also undercut. Not only is our individuation of character wrongheaded, but, we realise, every view of Shooter is focalised subjectively through Mort's skewed perspective. Here, *Secret Window* manipulates its own motivic system as a means by which to mislead the viewer and conceal narrative surprise. Some films codify focalisation or character point of view by opposing colour and black & white sequences.[13] Similarly in *Secret Window*, dream sequences and subjective flashbacks are recurrently characterised by reverberative sound effects, desaturated images, overexposed lighting, and handheld camerawork. Occasionally, however, the film will depart from this codification of subjective action. A few flashbacks are rendered in the film's orthodox (if occasionally flamboyant) aural and visual style. Stylistic cues for subjective action are not, therefore, unequivocally and consistently demarcated in the film. Consequently, *Secret Window* can justify rendering certain subjective events – most significantly, Mort's hallucination of Shooter – in the film's overarching, 'objective' audiovisual style. Rather than transparently differentiating subjective and objective points of view, the narration obfuscates these perceptual boundaries, throwing into doubt the objective nature of action preceding the revelation.

Also undermined is our tacit assumption that the protagonist perceives events accurately. As in *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, and *The Others*, *Secret Window*'s protagonist is an unreliable focaliser of story action. More generally, these films teem with motifs of misperception. Characters may perceive events through mediated surfaces, such as eyeglasses, telescopes, or rear-view mirrors.[14] Minor characters may be literally sightless, as is the elderly clairvoyant in *The Others*. (In *Secret Window*, Mort's chief companion is a blind dog.) Sleep becomes a prominent metaphor for flawed perception, and in *Secret Window* hints at the protagonist's conversance with his unconscious. All the films link visual impairment with the protagonists' inaccuracies of knowledge. And these themes and motifs acquire deeper resonance by

mirroring the viewer's off-center hypotheses. Narrative revelation will expose these perceptual errors, and elucidate aural and visual motifs of (mis)perception.[15]

For all its narrative experimentation, *Secret Window* remains rooted in classical storytelling principles. David Bordwell has shown how puzzle films, and so-called postclassical films in general, rely on classical principles of narrative form and style (Bordwell, 2006). Innovation flourishes within the parameters of classical narration. Likewise, in *Secret Window* aesthetic risk stands out against a ground of classical convention. Even the revelation sequence conforms to classical norms of staging, continuity editing, sound design, and so on. Against these 'stable' elements, the film's experimental play with character and story organisation acquires special salience. (At the level of story construction, too, familiar structural mechanisms underlay narrative experimentation; some typical or classical norms such as formal symmetry – here implemented by a prologue and epilogue – are faithfully hewn to.)

Secret Window's revelation exposes other classical gambits. Consider the instigation of Mort's primary goal, which is retroactively accorded a subtle but significant change in emphasis. 'Hollywood protagonists,' observes one scholar, 'tend to be active, to seek out goals and pursue them rather than having goals simply thrust upon them' (Thompson, 1999, p.14). Initially, by contrast, we believe Mort's principal goal to have been thrust upon him: Shooter unexpectedly arrives at Mort's door and issues an ultimatum. This apparent deviation from the classical norm is important, because it situates Mort as the victim of events – a circumstance that crucially helps stack sympathy in his favour. When the revelation arrives, the genesis of Mort's goal assumes a new composition: obliquely, we realise, Mort himself engendered the goal, and thus an initial platform for sympathy is retrospectively planed down. Ironically, despite its subversive functions and effects, the main revelation here works to sharpen a classical tactic; that is, the twist reveals Mort's goal to be more classical than we had originally construed.

Bold, radical strategies mask a 'classical', ideologically conservative affirmation of the family. Both *Secret Window* and *Hide and Seek* relate the protagonist's mental dissolution to familial dysfunction. An unfaithful wife precipitates the dysfunction in both films. Character motivation here finds an ideal generic context: observing the 'connection of the Family to Horror', Robin Wood has argued that 'the psychotic/schizophrenic, the Antichrist and the child-monster are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty…or innocent'

(Wood, 2003, pp.75-6). Motivating the protagonist's psychosis by marital breakdown also invites the viewer to infer, by reverse logic, that emotional wellbeing is derivable from familial stability. In important respects, then, ideological conservatism and generic convention underlie the film's daring narrational manoeuvres.[16]

Still, we have seen that *Secret Window* is hardly a paradigm case of classical storytelling. Character traits, typically corrigible in the classical film, are here usurped in abrupt and immoderate ways; the protagonist's moral valence is likewise overturned with apparent little foreshadowing; character goals are ostensibly abandoned, and issues seemingly at stake in the narrative are dissolved; character individuation is travestied; and the viewer's tacit assumptions of narrational objectivity and reliability are crudely undercut. Much of what the viewer experiences as narrative 'disturbance' we have accredited to the film's dominant, i.e. its main twist and the tactics employed to preserve it. Similarly recalcitrant of classical convention, and equally traceable (but not reducible) to the main revelation, is the film's anarchic play with character engagement.

Reshuffling allegiance

Narrative revelation in the 'puzzle film' tends to challenge our engagement with character in a number of ways. Most basically, the twist typically effects a general redistribution of sympathies. Secondary and minor characters may turn out to have been harshly judged by the spectator, and now stake a claim for our compassion (e.g. Marla in *Fight Club*, the servants in *The Others*, and the grief-stricken neighbors in *Hide and Seek*). The revelation may function to flatten out undesirable traits in the protagonist, and deepen our allegiance with her (e.g. Grace may elicit greater sympathy once *The Others*' twist is revealed, for the revelation supplies knowledge by which we can better understand her fraught behaviour).[17] Typically, while our sympathy with supporting characters may alter quite drastically, our allegiance with the main protagonist is apt to remain relatively stable.

A more radical reshuffling of viewer sympathy is achieved in *Secret Window*. The revelation forces us to both drastically revise our moral judgement of the protagonist and to recast or nuance our evaluation of secondary agents. Neither *The Sixth Sense* nor *The Others* challenges us in this way. Grasping the main twist in *The Sixth Sense* does not entail that we re-evaluate Malcolm in moral terms, only that we revise our judgement of him as a reliable focaliser of events. Though his range of knowledge may be exposed as deficient, Malcolm continues to embody the moral values upon

which our allegiance rests. Even *Fight Club*'s revelation poses no serious challenge to our sympathetic engagement with The Narrator. *Secret Window*, however, shakes up allegiance more comprehensively, generating ambivalence around its main protagonist, and putting the viewer's moral assumptions into disarray.

One way in which the film complicates allegiance is by tampering with the physical specificity of its protagonists. *Secret Window*'s revelation marks the end of Shooter as a bodily autonomous agent. Thereafter, 'Shooter' is perceptible only as a set of mental dispositions 'channelled' through the physical dimensions of Mort. By collapsing hero and antagonist into a single body, *Secret Window* complicates the spectator's distribution of sympathy. Conflating the two characters means that the viewer's sympathy (with Mort) and antipathy (toward Shooter) is no longer discriminable by separate bodies. The corporeal body we have individuated as Mort thus plays host to a dynamic conflict of spectatorial emotions. In *Fight Club*, by contrast, the narration retains visual purchase on Tyler even after his autonomy as a human agent is undermined. Maintaining Tyler's bodily integrity not only permits David Fincher to keep his star performer (Brad Pitt) on screen (compare the irreverence with which John Turturro is vanquished in *Secret Window*); it also allows him to preserve the clarity of distinction between Tyler and The Narrator, transparently marking out their position of conflict, and enabling a basically conventional battle of wits to usher in the denouement. Conversely, *Secret Window* folds together its protagonists' discrete moral states, thus dissipating conflict and dislocating allegiance.

The bodily unification of Shooter and Mort heads off any anticipation of a climactic Manichaean struggle between the two characters. But the denouement also closes down the prospect of an *internal* moral conflict, a gambit that would ameliorate those negative traits of Mort's that the narration now lays bare. Hollywood cinema offers generic precedents for the interior Manichaean struggle, particularly in the horror genre: think, for example, of the demonically possessed priest in *The Exorcist III* (1990). By closing off generic options of this kind, however, *Secret Window* implies that Mort's submission to Shooter is absolute and irreducible. ('Mort's dead', the schizoid protagonist drawls in Southern dialect near the climax.) If the Manichaean tropes we expect to find are retarded, does the final act dispose of moral conflict altogether? (It does, after all, dispose of Shooter's bodily continuity and the personality attributes we identify with Mort.) In fact, the locus of moral conflict is

resituated at the climax by pitting Shooter against Amy and Ted. Now the film reworks its pattern of allegiance so that the ensuing moral conflict achieves an ambivalent, unsettling effect upon the spectator's sympathies.

Note that I have not called this final confrontation a *Manichaean* conflict. Even after the twist reconfigures the moral status of each character, the viewer cannot unequivocally assume that anyone among the party embodies purely good or evil values. (It is, however, still a *moral* conflict, because Shooter's harmful intent is at odds with Amy and Ted's everyday values.) Part of our reluctance to ascribe absolute moral states to the characters arises from our prior judgements of them. The 'primacy effect' (i.e. the first impressions that inform our evaluation of a character) thus reveals its particular potency in these moments. If the narration now asks us to re-evaluate Amy and Ted as basically good people, this judgement must be counterbalanced against our established archive of assumptions about the two characters. Since this archive includes a good many negative judgements, our response to Amy and Ted will most probably be ambivalent at the film's climax. (Our reluctance to infer indomitable moral states may also reflect a recent wariness toward the film's narration – if the narration has misled us about an agent's moral status before, it may do so again.)

Still more ambivalent is the spectator's engagement with Mort. At stake here is the fund of goodwill that the film has generated toward the protagonist. Are we inclined by the revelation – that is, by its moral revision to character – to 'disengage' our sympathy with Mort (assuming that such short-circuiting of emotional response is possible)? Certainly the surprise twist reveals our allegiance to have rested on some shaky assumptions. But the revelation does not so much arrest allegiance as attenuate it, and several factors ensure that our alliance with Mort prevails at the climax.

For instance, the identity switch is unveiled late in the film, by which stage the viewer's allegiance with Mort is firmly established; it is no easy task, therefore, for the late-arriving twist to sever this allegiance altogether. We can also understand the film's climax as satisfying the demands of a tacitly augured revenge plot. Early phases of action establish Mort as blighted, ineffectual, and tormented by his wife's adultery. Now culminating events empower him to mete out 'retribution.' From this perspective, Mort's revenge-taking becomes a *desirable* trope (though the extremity of his payback will most likely disconcert the viewer). Another probable factor shaping our allegiance at the climax is Depp's star presence. Here, star 'charisma' has

a determinate mitigating effect upon undesirable character activity.[18] (Depp, in the view of one critic, 'takes the audience with him whether he's reaching for an evil-looking poker or a cup of coffee' (Christopher, 2004).)

Our enduring sympathy with Mort tinctures the film's denouement. The kernel of our allegiance with the character helps leaven the horror of the film's ending, and so maintains the macabrely comic tone that characterises the film as a whole. There is no denying, however, that our allegiance with Mort is radically altered by the film's revelation: sympathy may comprise part of our amended judgement, but so too does suspicion, distrust, and antipathy. Through all this, the dominant is the central hub that transforms our allegiance. Action occurring early in the film sets out character flaws that will later be exposed on a far greater scale. These flaws are transmogrified by the main revelation, which modifies our evaluation not only of Mort, but virtually of the entire narrative populace. (Even minor characters, such as the town's ineffectual sheriff and the smitten female postal worker, are tainted with a suspicion that we must subsequently disqualify.) But the dominant in *Secret Window* motivates still another substantive effect, one that pertains less immediately to story comprehension and character engagement.

Narrational salience

Revelation in the puzzle film not only reorders the viewer's sympathy; it also makes plot architecture highly salient. As we endeavour to adjust to its shifting pattern of allegiance, the film invites us to appreciate the dextrous use of cues and structures by which it has concealed the chief revelation. The film's formal design, then, is spotlit by the revelation sequence. Murray Smith has applied the phrase 'architectural pleasure' specifically to parallelism and the American independent cinema, but we can requisition it to broadly characterise the revelation's foregrounding of form.[19] Here, delight is taken in repressive formal procedures. Puzzle films thus evince a kind of epistemic as well as architectural pleasure. A major part of their interest derives from an elaborate play with the viewer's knowledge.

Now the narration reveals itself to be more repressive than we had thought. Errors of comprehension become palpably evident to the viewer. Flashbacks revive lines of dialogue that, in retrospect, seem to flirt precariously with disclosure of the main twist. Even character names come to be seen as bits of foreshadowing. (In *Secret Window*, Mort lives up to his name by at one stage splintering into several bodies.) As

the revelation unfurls, the film makes its principles of construction maximally transparent.[20]

Revelation sequences also lay bare anticipated genre tropes. Generic expectations are never as acute as when they are retarded. Sometimes, the puzzle film overlaps two or more genres, the better to furnish unexpected events that can nonetheless be motivated generically. This strategy is evident in *Secret Window*, which, though overtly a horror-thriller hybrid, blends together strong elements of comedy and romance. It also animates a tacit detective schema. This schema is embodied not only by the film's repressive narration, but by Mort's effort to solve a disturbing enigma.

Applying detective schemata to *Secret Window* finally obliges us to identify the detective (Mort) as the criminal (Shooter), and vice versa.[21] Or we might say that the film intensifies a detective norm – namely, the close identification of detective and criminal – so that the degree of interchangeability between the two figures becomes 'maximal.' From either angle, the film's generic strategies look fairly subversive of detective convention. However, we form a different impression by mapping horror schemata onto the film. Whether the cause is possession (*The Shining*) or schizophrenia (*Sisters*, 1973), the pinpointing of evil within the protagonist is a common trope of the horror film. Explaining the revelation in terms of detective norms thus risks distorting the film's adherence to genre conventions. What may strike us as 'antigeneric' and surprising with respect to the detective film is quite conventional when set against horror schemata. By subduing detective schemata, *Secret Window* lets horror norms come forth with surprising effect.

Generic allusion also foregrounds a highly self-conscious narration. *Secret Window* reminds us that the functions of allusionism can be effectively wide-ranging. At times the film employs allusion 'postclassically', for purposes of homage.[22] But references of this sort tend always to be mediated by a more 'immediate' narrative purpose. In *Secret Window*'s revelation sequence, the inexplicable fissures that snake across the cabin walls not only evoke similar imagery in *Repulsion* (1965) and *The Exorcist* (1973), but also function subjectively (giving us Mort's aberrant POV) and metaphorically (signifying the severity of his mental schism). Allusion will also function as narrative decoy. The grisly killing of Mort's pet animal in *Secret Window* revives a favourite motif of the horror and thriller genres – recall, for example, the ominous animal totems displayed in *Straw Dogs* (1973) and invoked in *Cape Fear* (1962, 1991). Traditionally, this motif asserts the potency of some external agent

threatening the family (e.g. the Cornish farmhands; the aggrieved ex-con). Exploiting this motivic connotation allows *Secret Window* to further misdirect the viewer, whose suspicions should properly fall upon a figure located within the family itself.

Lastly, allusion will reflect thematic concerns. In a riff on *The Shining*'s 'Redrum' wordplay, Mort's spiralling delusions transmute a baleful proper name ('Shooter') into a murderous directive ('Shoot Her'). This allusive emphasis on renewed perception is apt for a film that thematises perceptual and cognitive misapprehension. It also hints at *Secret Window*'s broader strategies of narrative comprehension, which bind the viewer's perceptual and inferential activity on a rack of repressiveness, misdirection, and unreliability.[23]

Two more self-conscious tactics should be highlighted. First, several of our puzzle films call attention to narrative processes by making storytelling a thematic reference point. Characters might reflect on the art of effective storytelling, as in *The Sixth Sense* ('You've got to add some twists', one character instructs Malcolm). In *The Others*, the traditional discourse of oral narrative propels the film's plot ('Now children: are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin'). *Secret Window* magnifies this tactic further, tailoring fiction-making and plagiarism into ostensible story materials. In addition, reflexive dialogue focuses our attention onto particular aspects of the text, as when Mort proclaims in the film's coda: '[the ending] is the most important part of the story… this one is perfect.'

Secondly, *Secret Window* flags narrative procedures by baring the device of voiceover. Mort's periodic narration functions in traditional ways, supplying subjective data and soliciting the viewer's allegiance. Yet, as the main twist will reveal, interior monologue here exceeds its typical functions. Hindsight lets us perceive psychological cues hitchhiking on the voiceover device: Mort's 'disembodied' voice, we realise, has all along been evidence of a fractured psychology. By suppressing this psychological cue, *Secret Window* discourages us from probing the voiceover for deeper narrative significance.

Mort's voiceover will reach a pitch of overtness just prior to the revelation. Here, diegetic boundaries overlap as Mort begins interacting with his nondiegetic narration. *Prima facie* this gesture constitutes a stylistic flourish, but *Secret Window*'s twist will uncover a narrative connotation as well. Engaging Mort in cross-diegetic dialogue serves retrospectively to signal his fast-unravelling psychosis. As so often in *Secret*

Window, a bold or transgressive tactic turns out to be motivated by character traits and story action.

Any critic reproaching *Secret Window* for dramaturgical incompetence needs to acknowledge the ambitiousness of the film's narrative strategies. Moreover, part of the film's interest lies in the imputed 'failure' of its revelation. From this, we can discern the rough limits of character revelation as they are tacitly defined in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Tellingly, these parameters seem to stem from principles of classical filmmaking: the film's most problematic elements are those that appear to violate classical norms. Typically, however, the film's innovations are discreetly anchored in classical principles. Often, what looks like incompetent storytelling is simply action that has been motivated obliquely. For example, story action will fulfil Mort's repressed goals, abandoning his explicitly-stated objectives; detective schemata will be judiciously superseded by horror elements, which the narration seeds throughout the foregoing action; and self-conscious voiceovers are retroactively justified by Mort's schizoid psychology. The critic indicting *Secret Window* for inefficient storytelling fails to recognise either the film's aesthetic risk-taking or its adherence to classical narrative principles. True to puzzle film tradition, *Secret Window* invites and rewards repeat viewings.

I have tried to show that *Secret Window*'s main twist importantly shapes many of the film's 'difficult' functions and effects. Furthermore, what I have defined as the film's dominant assumes fairly complex activity on the part of the viewer. *Secret Window*'s revelation, we have seen, forces the viewer to reweigh her sympathy with the dramatis personae. It wrenches the viewer's attention between story comprehension and formal appreciation. It undercuts basic and 'automatic' assumptions, i.e. that distinct bodies signify distinct individuals. And it upsets learnt expectations pertaining to character goals, character change (including moral flux), reliable protagonists, and genre tropes. Acknowledging the twist's cognitive demands allows us to refute claims that contemporary Hollywood films bear witness to 'the demise of audience consciousness' (Dixon, 2001, p.363). Indeed, puzzle films in particular are largely predicated on a challenge to narrative comprehension.

If we want to better grasp the tacit rules governing 'successful' puzzle films (like *The Sixth Sense*), we do well to dwell upon problematic examples of the genre. Such an undertaking contains a historical component, moreover: it can gesture toward what

is encouraged aesthetically at a given moment in history. *Secret Window* betokens the parameters of character revelation within a particular film type at a particular moment. Its handling of norms not only lends the film an intrinsic formal interest, therefore. It also elucidates the aesthetic principles upon which its more celebrated kin rely.

Notes

[1] Though recently flourishing, this preoccupation is not new to Hollywood. Popular cinema has a long history of films organised around a surprise twist. In terms of characterisation, the contemporary films I'm referring to here extend and rework the psychological confusion associated with the New Hollywood antihero (just as that archetype reworked the psychological transparency of the classical hero). Like the 1970s antihero, the current protagonist is vulnerable to deception, but now the deceit is self-perpetuated rather than attributable to a corrupt social epoch.

[2] Critics find *Hide and Seek*'s main twist equally problematic: '…this is a precisely engineered piece…only letting itself down in its final act' (Davies, 2005); 'it's not technically true to say that the movie cheats, but let's say it abandons the truth and depth of its earlier scenes' (Ebert, 2005); 'the ending…is so abysmally lame and implausible' (Arendt, 2005); 'when [the film] springs its Big Twist 80 minutes in, prior to the feeble climax, it's clear there really is nothing under the emperor's clothes' (Elley, 2005).

[3] Extrinsic norms are those repeated standards or 'rules' by which typical or classical narrative films operate. Intrinsic norms, by contrast, are rules that are set up by the individual work, and which may (as in the case of the films we'll be considering) explicitly violate extrinsic norms.

[4] Considerations of space oblige me to restrict my analysis to *Secret Window*, but many of the arguments I advance here are equally applicable to *Hide and Seek*. I will try to flag any substantial dissimilarities between the two films at relevant junctures. A sketch of *Hide and Seek*'s narrative will be useful at this point. A New York

psychologist, David Callaway (Robert DeNiro), is distraught by the apparent suicide of his wife (Amy Irving). David relocates to the countryside with his young daughter, Emily (Dakota Fanning), who soon reports of encounters with an imaginary friend named Charlie. Shortly thereafter, the country house is assailed by 'disturbances': graffiti is mysteriously scrawled on the bathroom walls; a pet cat is discovered drowned in the bathtub. David attributes the incidents to Emily, who in turn diverts the blame to Charlie. Things turn more sinister when a family friend (Elisabeth Shue) is thrown from Emily's bedroom window. Eventually an epiphany strikes David, as he discovers that he has been repressing an alter ego: Charlie. Overwhelmed by his diabolic persona, David/Charlie tries to murder Emily but is shot dead by Katherine (Famke Jannsen), a colleague from New York. In the film's coda, Emily sketches a picture of herself, but the crayon drawing implies that David's schizophrenia has hereditary consequence: the self-portrait shows a two-headed child.

[5] King's story – included in the anthology *Four Past Midnight* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990) – is entitled 'Secret Window, Secret Garden.'

[6] In identifying the twist as the dominant, I run up against a dissenting voice within the diegesis itself. *Secret Window*'s blocked novelist proclaims: 'The only thing that matters is the *ending*. It's the most important part of the story.' Mort's assertion may be true of his own 'story' (which, admittedly, closely parallels that of *Secret Window*), but it does not hold true of *Secret Window* itself. The film's coda cannot exist independently of the twist; in other words, the revelation facilitates the ending. By contrast, the revelation is not dependent upon the coda for its meaning, and a vast range of alternative denouements could conceivably be yielded by the revelation.

[7] King's novella can underscore this identity switch by titular sleight of hand: the narration refers to Mort only as 'Shooter' once the main twist has been revealed.

[8] Of course, there is another type of protagonist who *actively* assumes a distinct identity, but *Secret Window* departs from this tradition of character as well. A handful of examples will suffice. In *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999), Tom (Matt Damon) steals the identity of Dickie to compensate for the amorphousness of his own identity. In *The Passenger* (1975), David Locke (Jack Nicholson) inherits the shady existence of a gun smuggler, so as to escape the trappings of his past. And in *Superman: The Movie* (1978), the Man of Steel (Christopher Reeve) manufactures the persona of Clark Kent to patrol Metropolis undetected. Unlike each of these figures, Mort's

adoption of a dual identity is not *consciously* motivated. In addition, Mort is totally consumed by his alter ego in a way that these other protagonists are not. Though he may want to, for example, Ripley is unable to fully relinquish his original identity, however tenuous it may be.

[9] A relatively early precursor of our puzzle film trend is Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), a film which tailors its plot surprise to the thematic motifs (e.g. incest, flawed acts of detection) of such neo-noirs as *Chinatown* (1974).

[10] Much the same can be said of *Haute Tension* (aka *High Tension*/*Switchblade Romance*, 2003) which, though not a Hollywood film, is contemporaneous with the trend I have been describing. Like our Hollywood examples, *Haute Tension* contrives a narrative revelation hinged on a suppressed identity. However, the viewer's coming into knowledge is not paralleled by the female protagonist's moment of 'awakening' – indeed, it is not clear that the character ever becomes properly cognizant of her split personality.

[11] A determinate outcome for the foremost goal is not furnished, for ambiguities still remain. Because Mort and Shooter are the same person, Mort effectively plagiarised his own work. From another standpoint, no actual story authored by Shooter can exist, since Shooter is not literally a person; thus Mort could not have plagiarised it. Or perhaps Mort did plagiarise the story from another, actual author, and his feelings of ethical guilt simply manifest into the virtual figure of Shooter. Far from being resolved, then, Mort's primary goal is simply retarded by the narrative revelation. In any event, the twist reveals that the plagiarism story – the armature on which Mort's principal goal hangs – is a sheer plot device, akin to a Hitchcockian macguffin.

[12] *Hide and Seek* circumvents this play with recognition by not specifying Charlie's physical attributes. In this way, David can more easily assume Charlie's identity in the mind of the viewer.

[13] For a discussion of this tactic, see Buckland, 2001, p.33.

[14] Film titles may also reflect this thematic preoccupation. *The Sixth Sense*, *Hide and Seek*, and *Secret Window* are titles which evoke unnatural, covert, or mediated perception. *The Others* is a more deceptive title, which compounds the film's red herring. It is a revelation of the self, rather than of or about others, that in this film truly resolves the narrative enigma.

[15] Examples of *aural* motifs of perception include iterated phrases or lines of dialogue (typically revolving around modes of 'seeing') and certain music cues (as in *The Others*' appropriation of 'I Only Have Eyes For You').

[16] Thanks to authorial license exercised in the adaptation stage, the causal nature of Amy's infidelity becomes salient in *Secret Window*. King's novella begins *in medias res*, depicting the first tense encounter between Shooter and Mort. Koepp's film also begins *in medias res*, but prefaces King's opening with another moment of abrupt conflict: Mort confronts Amy and her lover in a motel room. By inaugurating his film with a situation of marital collapse, and by trailing the event with a '6 months later' caption, Koepp augments our sense that Amy's infidelity has determinate causal influence upon the narrative events that follow. The film thus implies her culpability in Mort's mental deterioration, though it will later mitigate her actions by itemising Mort's negative traits (e.g. alcohol abuse) and Amy's own private trauma (she has miscarried their child). That Amy's love affair triggers Mort's mental schism is implied throughout the film. Several of Mort's subjective flashbacks, for instance, hark back to the opening motel confrontation. (*Hide and Seek*'s protagonist is similarly beset by memories or fantasies of his wife's infidelity. Here, fragmentary subjective flashbacks accumulate for communicative purpose, gradually orienting the spectator to previously withheld events and supplying motivation for David's acts of violence.)

[17] The term 'allegiance' is borrowed from Murray Smith, 1995. Smith employs the term to denote the viewer's moral evaluation of a character, which serves as the mainspring of emotional response.

[18] For the capacity of star charisma to influence allegiance, see Smith, 1995, pp.193-4.

[19] This is not to deny, of course, that a puzzle film can also be an American independent film. For more on 'architectural pleasure', see Smith, 2001, p.156.

[20] Still, the narration is not 'parametric', or style-centred in *Secret Window*. As I have indicated, the revelation sequence places considerable demands on the viewer, not least in respect of story comprehension and character allegiance. Rather, the film's baring of narrational style operates concurrently and interconnectedly with its surprise developments at the level of story. (For parametric narration, see Bordwell, 1985, Chapter 12.)

[21] Tzvetan Todorov points out that in detective fiction, the criminal is often a policeman. Films like Otto Preminger's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950) situate themselves within this literary tradition. But typically, such narratives cue us to the detective's criminality early on, rather than revealing it as a narrative twist late in the film. See Todorov, 1977, p.50.

[22] Noël Carroll provides some important insights into the prevalence of cinematic allusion in Carroll, 1982.

[23] King's novella also acknowledges literary and filmic antecedents. Synthesising the names of Patricia Highsmith's protagonists in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, King confers the moniker Tom Greenleaf upon a minor character. The reference to Highsmith's novel is apt, given King's themes of interchangeable and confused identities. Hitchcock's *Psycho* is also referenced in King's novella. Another minor character, Richard Perkins Jr (named for Anthony Perkins) holds class at Bates College. Once more, the allusion is apposite: Mort will be subjugated to a shadow identity just as Norman Bates will be overwhelmed and displaced by 'Mother.'

References

Arendt, P. (2005) Hide and Seek (review), www.bbc.co.uk (24 February). Retrieved
May 10, 2006.

Bordwell, D. (1985) *Narration in the fiction film*, Routledge.

Bordwell, D. (2006) *The way Hollywood tells it: Story and style in modern movies*,
University of California Press.

Buckland, W. (2001) Narration and focalisation in *Wings of Desire*, *Cineaction* 56;
pp.26-33.

Carroll, N. (1982) The future of allusion: Hollywood in the seventies (and beyond),
October 2; pp.51-81.

Christopher, J. (2004) Secret Window (review), *The London Times*, April 29,
www.timesonline.co.uk Retrieved May 10, 2006.

Davies, S. (2005) Hide and Seek (review), *Sight and Sound* 15:3; p.54.

Dixon, W.W. (2002) Twenty-five reasons why it's all over, in Lewis, J. (ed.) *The end
of cinema as we know it: American film in the nineties*, New York University
Press, pp.326-366.

Ebert, R. (2005) Hide and Seek (review), http://rogerebert.suntimes.com (January 28).
Retrieved May 10, 2006.

Elley, D. (2005) Hide and Seek (review), *Variety* (January 31 – February 6), p.48.

Jakobson, R. (1971) The dominant, in Matejka, L. and Pomorska, K. (eds.) *Readings
in Russian poetics: Formalist and structuralist views*. Cambridge: MIT Press,
pp.82-7.

Leyland, M. (2004) Secret Window (review), *Sight and Sound* 14:12 (December);
pp.78-9.

Lim, D. (2004) Secret Window (review), www.villagevoice.com Retrieved May 10,
2006.

Smith, M. (2001) Parallel lines, in Hillier, J. (ed.) *American independent cinema: A
Sight and Sound reader*, London: BFI, pp.155-161.

Smith, M. (1995) *Engaging characters: fiction, emotion, and the cinema*. Clarendon
Press: Oxford.

Thompson, K. (1999) *Storytelling in the new Hollywood: understanding classical*

narrative technique. Harvard University Press.

Todorov, T. (1977) The typology of detective fiction, in *The poetics of prose*, R. Howard (trans.), Basil Blackwell: Oxford, pp.42-52.

Wilmington, M. (2004) Secret Window (review) http.//metromix.chicagotribune.com Retrieved May 10, 2006.

Wood, R. (2003) *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan…and beyond*. Columbia University Press: New York.