

## **Film Magic: Neil Burger's Film *The Illusionist* and Steven Millhauser's Short Story "Eisenheim the Illusionist"**

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### ***Abstract***

In his interviews, Neil Burger, the director of the film *The Illusionist* (2006), offers some fascinating insights into the making of the film, the connections between magic and film, and the challenges of film adaptation. Since Burger has had a lifetime interest in illusionism, he knew immediately after reading Steven Millhauser's "Eisenheim the Illusionist" that he wanted to film the short story. At the same time, he was well aware of the challenges of turning an essentially one-character story, reminiscent of Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," into a feature film with enough action to keep its audience in their seats for two hours. Accordingly, he developed a love triangle of Eisenheim (Edward Norton), Duchess Sophie (Jessica Biel), and Crown Prince Leopold (Philip Sewell) in the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. More important, he transformed Millhauser's Chief Inspector Uhl (Paul Giamatti) into a major figure who eventually assumes control of the story's ending—the plot of Eisenheim and Sophie to disappear after faking her murder by the Crown Prince, who has a Bluebeard reputation and now is plotting to depose his aged father, the Emperor. Central, however, are the illusions Norton (another illusionism aficionado) actually performs in the film, not coincidentally set over a century ago when cinema was just beginning, amid other forms of entertainment such as magic shows. Burger uses several strategies of early filmmaking not so much to antique his production as to remind us that film itself is a form of illusionism in which viewers both know and forget that the images on the screen are exactly that, and not what we conventionally think of as reality.

### **Keywords**

film, *The Illusionist*, Neil Burger, Steven Millhauser, "Eisenheim the Illusionist," cinema, illusionism, adaptation, autochrome, self-referentiality

When it was released in 2006, Neil Burger's film *The Illusionist* received much less attention than might have been expected. His first film, *Interview with an Assassin* (2002), whose central figure is the legendary second Kennedy assassin on the famous grassy knoll, had attracted enough attention for Burger's name to appear on *Variety's* January 2006 list of ten new directors to watch. The timing of *The Illusionist* probably worked against its reception, since Burger's film joined two others that year with an interest in magic: *The Prestige* and Woody Allen's *Scoop*. Burger's film did receive its share of kudos, however. Stephen Holden in *The New York Times* said of it: "Entertaining! Rouses your belief in the miraculous! Teases you until the very end!" (par. 17), and "The surreal spiritualistic feats produce a wow effect on the screen because they have an aesthetic elegance that transcends trickery; they look like works of art" (par. 4). Bob Mondello of NPR wrote:

Director Neil Burger delights in getting period details right. [ . . . ] [T]he illusions are smart, as is the script. The photography is gorgeous, as is [Jessica] Biel. And the line between truth and illusion is blurred so persuasively that for a moment or two, you may even believe that a romantic costume drama could stand up to all those special-effects blockbusters in the dog days of summer.

(par. 5)

Although the comments of Holden and Mondello clearly indicate the film's reception was not completely negative, they also point toward challenges *The Illusionist* faced. One challenge has been the long tradition of ambivalence toward films with a focus on illusionism, or magic, since some believe such films represent a low level of entertainment and are not to be taken seriously. The other challenge has been the tendency to dismiss films set in the past,

especially when the setting is Europe, as it is in *The Illusionist*. Critical conversations about such films are often peppered with phrases like "costume drama" or disparaging references to "Masterpiece Theater." However, paying closer attention to the film's aspirations, particularly as they are enunciated by Burger himself, rewards viewers with a deeper sense of how *The Illusionist* is implicated in the writer/director's fascination with the provocative interrelations of magic and film, especially in the context of filmmaking's birth over a century ago. Indeed, it is no coincidence that *The Illusionist* is set around the time when film was beginning to be taken seriously. Burger's comments about the making of *The Illusionist* foreground his awareness of the close relationship between these two challenges. However, before we can explore them more fully, yet another challenge needs to be addressed.

This is the immense challenge Burger encountered in navigating the troubled waters of film adaptation. The starting point for *The Illusionist* was Steven Millhauser's short story "Eisenheim the Illusionist." As a script writer, Burger had the advantage of working with the story of a relatively unknown writer so that he did not have to look forward to disappointing viewers by "changing the story." In many ways, Millhauser the writer and his fiction in general are highly unlikely choices to be filmed. In the last three or four decades, Millhauser has continued to publish novels and short fiction, while teaching writing at Skidmore College. He is content not to leave Saratoga Springs more than he has to, and like Thomas Pynchon and others, Millhauser has resisted self-promotion in the form of public readings, book-signings, and interviews. His fiction has appeared in the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*, garnering enthusiastic reviews, but his name is relatively unknown to the larger reading public. When interviewers have asked him to analyze his own work or the writing of others, he often declines, saying that he would prefer to leave that to others who are trained in literary criticism. In 1996 when Millhauser received the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Martin Dressler*, the story goes that the chair of his department interrupted the writer's class to inform him that a reporter was on the phone asking to interview him concerning the Pulitzer, and Millhauser responded that there must have been a mistake or perhaps somebody was playing a joke on him.

As a director and a screenwriter, Burger faced the typical challenge for the makers of film adaptations. He had to restrain his admiration for the "adapted text" (to use Linda Hutcheon's term, or "source text" to use Robert Stam's) in order to avoid privileging the Millhauser story over the film and thereby repeating the disasters of any number of films bent on being "faithful" to a literary text.<sup>1</sup> Because Millhauser is not a well-known author, Burger was to some degree free of the excessive respect that can lead to the "writer's block" of the adapter, as it did Charlie Kaufman, the screenwriter of the film *Adaptation* (2002). To borrow Hutcheon's terms for the stages of adaptation, Kaufman had to move beyond "interpretation," which produced a crippling awe of the author Susan Orlean, to the stage of "invention" before it became possible to develop the brilliant screenplay that became the story in his film, a film about filmmaking.

More than once in his interviews, Burger comments on how *The Illusionist* represents the realization of his desire to film "Eisenheim the Illusionist" as soon as he had read it in Millhauser's collection *The Barnum Museum* soon after it appeared in 1990.<sup>2</sup> Asked what it was about it that he liked as a model, Burger said:

It's a beautiful gem of a story, lyrical and transcendent. The images and tone of it are quite cinematic, but the story itself is more of a fragment and somehow not a film. I loved the story, but it wasn't immediately clear how to solve the narrative puzzle and transform it into a full-blown movie.

(qtd. in Levy, par. 5)

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<sup>1</sup> I take my cue from Linda Hutcheon, who writes how "the morally loaded discourse of fidelity is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text" (7). See also Robert Stam's comments on "The Aporias of 'Fidelity'" (14-16). Additionally Simone Murray offers an extremely helpful examination of the "adaptation industry" and the traditional critical paradigm of "fidelity" issues in film adaptation.

<sup>2</sup> As a mark of *The Illusionist's* popularity, the 2007 reprinting of *The Barnum Museum* has the silhouette of a performer, perhaps Eisenheim stepping on stage to perform.

Both *buts* indicate his keen awareness that he needed to restrict his love for the story by reminding himself he was making a film.

Another aspect of the Millhauser story that attracted Burger was the way in which magic, or illusionism, is connected with writing—both writing fiction and writing films. This connection between writing and magic is succinctly expressed in a sentence from "Eisenheim the Illusionist" which Burger has enjoyed quoting: "Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams" (217). This sentence points to what may be the most telling reason for Burger's long-held aspiration to adapt the Millhauser story: he found in it (1) a narrative that spoke to his own fascination with the world of magic and illusion-making, and (2) a narrative whose method occasionally seemed to him "cinematic." The cinematic aspects of Millhauser's story may have actually encouraged Burger to approach *The Illusionist* as not only a film about making magic but also a film about making films. In this way, he could combine his investment in filmmaking with his interest in magic as two related forms of illusionism. Indeed, although he researched the subject thoroughly after deciding to write the screenplay, he told an interviewer: "Actually, when you have been involved with magic for nearly a lifetime as I have, you tend to know a lot of the secrets and methods already" (qtd. in Levy, par. 30).<sup>3</sup>

Given his background in magic and his high regard for Millhauser's story, it is important to note once again that despite the story's appeal Burger was well aware of the challenges he faced in attempting to adapt "Eisenheim the Illusionist" for the screen. He clearly saw that this twenty-page story, told in an episodic fashion as though it were a biography of Eisenheim, would be insufficient to sustain a two-hour film. As in several of his other stories, Millhauser focuses on a self-preoccupied individual who in Eisenheim's case has immersed himself so completely in the

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<sup>3</sup> Burger is not alone in having a long-term interest in magic. Edward Norton volunteered as usher for Ricky Jay's off-Broadway show "Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants." As a consultant on the project, Jay helped Norton learn many of the illusions he performed in the film.

creation of increasingly challenging illusions that he lacks any personal life. He has no family, friends, or love interest, nor does he care for money, fame, or any other worldly concerns. Indeed, he has the devotion to his illusion-making that we have come to understand as the saint's devotion to his faith or the artist's dedication to creating. Eisenheim lives to produce illusions, as Van Gogh lived to paint, and if he could not continue to invest himself in illusion-making there would be no reason for him to be alive. After becoming something of a superstar illusionist, Eisenheim faces imminent arrest by the agents of the Crown Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in one last performance of his mastery makes himself disappear.<sup>4</sup> In any case Millhauser's transformation of a stage magician into Eisenheim, the artist of illusions, works well as a short story, but it is almost totally lacking in the fundamental element of narrative film: action.

The challenge posed by Eisenheim's self-immersion is increased by other factors. First, he is a Jew in the declining Austro-Hungarian Empire. This empire would soon self-destruct in the Great War precipitated by the assassination of its Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand and leave as its central surviving nationality the Austrians. The Austrians would ally themselves with the Third Reich and its Final Solution to the challenge of making "marginal" people fit into its Master Plan. As the film's reviewer Jonathan Rosenbaum notes, Burger chose not to identify his Eisenheim as a Jew, leaving the very few viewers familiar with Millhauser's story to speculate about the director's motivation. Perhaps Burger wanted to avoid the appearance of exploiting the issue of anti-Semitism—although there are hints of anti-Semitism in his Prince Leopold—and of course he was shaping the film as a romantic comedy. Probably the greatest difficulty, however, was the isolation of Millhauser's Eisenheim as an artist. While fiction can easily focus on the life of a single individual—one thinks perhaps of Kafka's "The Hunger Artist"—film demands action to keep its audience in

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<sup>4</sup> This attraction to individuals with deep investment in what they do is a characteristic Millhauser shares with Burger, who felt that Norton was like Eisenheim "an intense guy and kind of a mystery in himself" (qtd. in Tallerico, par. 19).

its seats.

Accordingly, Burger as script writer developed two new characters to create a love triangle and made other major changes that he was aware from the beginning would run the risk of offending the author of a story for which he had such great admiration.<sup>5</sup> As he told an interviewer, "I had to invent a dramatic context to surround what was most beautiful in the short story. I had to create this narrative through time" (Doughton, par. 16). The two characters Burger develops for his love triangle are at best only mentioned in the Millhauser story. The first is the romantic lead, Sophie, the aristocratic girlfriend of the boy Eduard Abramowitz, who would become Eisenheim, and the second is Crown Prince Leopold, who becomes Eisenheim's rival for Sophie.

Based on a brief reference to a "Sophie" in the Millhauser story, Burger transforms a fictional character with the equivalent of a walk-on role into the Duchess von Teschen, presumably a leading figure in the Hungary of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For the role of Sophie, he chose Jessica Biel whose experience was fairly limited to the role of the young girl Mary Camden in the television series "Seventh Heaven."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps in part because they were expecting to be hostile to Burger's choice of Biel for the female lead, most reviewers praised the actress for her self-transformation from the Mary Camden role to a mainstream film role as a duchess, an Eliza Doolittle becoming My Fair Lady.

It is worth noting in passing that Millhauser's Sophie *was* a possible love-match for Eisenheim, but the relationship never blossomed. As a man of 40 or 41—the narrative sustains uncertainty about Eisenheim as a person—he began to

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Dowell notes that Burger "was still worried about offending the Pulitzer Prize recipient with a heavily altered version, so much so that he avoided contacting Millhauser until a week before shooting began in Prague" (par. 9). Of Millhauser's attitude toward the film adaptation, Burger told Dowell: "He [Millhauser] hates that people have expected him to be disdainful" (qtd. in Dowell, par. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Biel attracted the attention of the film's viewers in her breakthrough role as Sophie. In 2005 *Esquire* voted her the "sexiest woman alive," and she was described as Derek Jeter's "new babe."

acknowledge the need to marry and have children. The story describes the illusionist's failure in wooing a

Sophie Ritter, the twenty-six-year-old daughter of a local landowner who disapproved of Eisenheim's profession and was a staunch supporter of Lueger's anti-Semitic Christian Social party;<sup>7</sup> the girl appears to have been in love with Eisenheim, but at the last moment something went wrong, and a month later married a grain merchant from Graz."

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This notion of "something [that] went wrong," which Millhauser's narrator pretends not to understand, was undoubtedly the confirmation by Sophie's father that Eisenheim was a Jew.

In line with his need for "story," Burger decided to bring together the young Sophie and Eisenheim as childhood sweethearts, she as a duchess-in-waiting and he as the son of a woodworker. Providing the two characters, but especially Eisenheim, a dramatically rendered childhood helps to justify their involvement in the later love triangle with the Crown Prince. More important, it helps to humanize a character whose aura of mystery Millhauser chose to preserve by emphasizing that he has always been "Eisenheim," even though he was born Eduard Abramowitz. Additionally, the film narrative can establish preparation for the ending, or at least *one* ending, in the effective scene in which the forest haven of Eduard and Sophie is violated by her father's police and she pleads with the boy, "Make us disappear." Eisenheim's inability at that point to fulfill her desire makes it necessary for the boy to disappear before the ducal police find and "disappear" him. It also nicely justifies his setting out on the long journey in pursuit of the art of making illusions so he may return as an adult, as Eisenheim the Illusionist, portrayed by Edward Norton.

More important than Burger's choice of Jessica Biel to play Sophie was his casting of Rufus Sewell as Crown Prince Leopold, an impulsive decision he made on first meeting the British actor.

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<sup>7</sup> Lueger and the Christian Social Party actually existed.

Because Burger saw *The Illusionist* as essentially "a battle of wits between the three male characters," he knew that the "actor playing the Crown Prince had to be a formidable foe for Norton's Eisenheim," whose illusion-making the rationalist Leopold would dismiss as mere magic tricks and superstition ("*The Illusionist*: Production Notes," par. 43). To Burger, "It was vitally important that he be played as fiercely intelligent and truly powerful, even as he is flawed or ruthless. Rufus has an amazing intensity, a fierce cerebral quality, and he certainly doesn't suffer fools—just like his character" ("*The Illusionist*: Production Notes," par. 43). Sewell concurred with Burger's analysis of the Crown Prince: "Eisenheim represents to Leopold everything he thinks the world must leave behind in order to move forward. The world is changing, and if the royal family doesn't move with it, they are in danger of becoming the dinosaurs of their age, and will soon be extinct" ("*The Illusionist*: Production Notes," par. 114). In these ways, the Crown Prince, as Burger and Sewell interpret him, speaks for modernity and against the superstition and magic associated with a past that must be shed.

And probably more than his focus on recreating actual illusions on stage and the creation of the characters Sophie and Leopold for their obvious romantic functions, it was Burger's decision to enlarge the minor role of Chief Inspector Uhl in the Millhauser story and to ask Paul Giamatti to play the part that generated much of the film's success as a vehicle for illusion-making. Burger was impressed that Giamatti would be willing to take the role after just having experienced a major success with his break-through role in *Sideways* (2004). Just as Burger chose Jessica Biel because he wanted an actress his audience would not easily recognize in the role of a Hungarian duchess, he chose Giamatti for the powerful role of Uhl because he wanted an actor who would not be as well known as someone such as Anthony Hopkins. As Burger said of Giamatti, he was someone "we haven't really seen [him] in this role before but I knew he could do it. [ . . . ] He's incredible. Everything is in his eyes that lets you see his love of life but also [his] humiliation, conflict, and corruption" (qtd. in Tallerico, par. 19). In the context of narrative film, the closest cinematic equivalent to prose fiction, it is probably no coincidence that in describing Giamatti, Burger stresses the actor's eyes as an entry to a character's interiority in a

visual medium that lacks the agency of the print text's narrator to represent the character's inner life.<sup>8</sup>

Burger's invention of his Uhl was one solution to the problem of adapting fiction to film—how to manage the function that a narrator has in the print text and to establish something akin to "narrative point of view" in a visual text. The problem was especially challenging, as Burger tells Levy, because he wanted to preserve Millhauser's Eisenheim, "a man who is an enigma, a mystery." In order to make the enigmatic Illusionist a believable character—one who after all has earned the love of a duchess—the film had to find a way of allowing the audience to know him "without giving away his secrets" (qtd. in Levy, par. 13). As the story's viewpoint character, Uhl can be authorized as "the eyes, ears and heart of the story" (Levy, par. 13). Eventually the audience catches on to the film's "trick," namely, that everything they are seeing has been observed by Uhl or reported to him by his underlings. Because Uhl, like the Crown Prince he serves, is a rationalist who believes that all the illusions are mere magic tricks which can be explained away, the Chief Inspector becomes increasingly frustrated by his failure to explain the mysteries outside, as well as inside, the theater of illusions. As the consummate detective, Uhl operates on the principle that mysteries are solved by deduction from the evidence collected by the detective. And when observation and reporting are insufficient, the

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that in one of the very few negative reviews of *The Illusionist* Jeffrey Anderson writes of Uhl: "He has a good soul—even if not much is left of it after years of decadence and corruption. In the movie, there are not a lot of expository scenes about Uhl's character, and yet, we understand all of his inner conflict and turmoil just by looking in Paul's eyes." Anderson has little patience with the performances of the illusions, seeing the film's "magic" elsewhere: "No, the real magic in *The Illusionist* occurs whenever Norton and Paul Giamatti appear onscreen. [ . . . ] [T]hese two remarkable players have transformed their gawky, nerdy personas into respectable, upright men, ready to engage one another in a battle of trust and wits" (par. 5). He goes on to say: "None of these obvious flourishes can match the magical power of just a few heartbeats in time as illusionist and inspector regard each other with curiosity, cunning and ultimately, respect" (par. 14).

Chief Inspector is forced to improvise. Thus, as Burger notes, Uhl's story "becomes conjecture, what he imagines might have happened, and not necessarily true at all. [. . .] He's creating the legend even as he tries to figure it all out. It's a subtle but fairly rigorous organizing principle for the storytelling" (qtd. in Levy, par. 14). In this way, Burger reconstructs Millhauser's Uhl as not only the narrator and *raisonneur* but, like Burger as well as Millhauser, a *writer*, bent on producing an imaginative construction of what has been going on in the film, especially how it ends.

In these ways, Burger succeeded in confronting the challenges of adapting a literary work to the screen. Despite the attractiveness of the romantic triangle of Eisenheim-Sophie-Leopold and the measurable increase in the Uhl role as Eisenheim's admiring opponent in a cat-and-mouse of surveillance and potential arrest, Burger's film still faced the larger challenges of the conventional dismissal of "costume dramas" and more important, the traditional bias against movies about magic. He may have shortened the title of Millhauser's story to avoid the off-putting name "Eisenheim," but he preserved the rest of the title to identify the film's focus as the performing of illusions in a theatrical setting.

As he has indicated again and again in his interviews, Burger has enjoyed a long-term fascination with the world of magic and illusions. He speaks of a foundational experience sometime before he got involved in the making of *The Illusionist*. He was watching the illusionist Ricky Jay perform a "simple sleight of hand trick with a playing card two feet from my eyes." Burger remembers: "As I stared at the card in his hand, it changed into a different card. [. . .] [I]t sent a chill through me that was completely unnerving, in a way mind-blowing. It's the reaction I described when I would tell people how I wanted *The Illusionist* to feel" (qtd. in Levy, par. 27). Clearly, he was moved by that "chill," the "eerie" sense of an encounter with the realm of mystery or the unexplainable in our everyday world where we operate on the principle that everything can be understood through the power of reason. As a result, much of the film production focused on the performances of Eisenheim's illusions, most of them based on actual illusions. The orange tree illusion, for example, was the invention of French

illusionist Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin,<sup>9</sup> who has been called the Father of Modern Stage Magic. The challenge to Burger as a screenwriter was the obvious one: how to create a feature-length film about a stage performer who lived for his art of illusion-making and had few connections with other people, except as faces in the audiences for his performances.

In researching the background for *The Illusionist*, Burger must have concluded that Millhauser had been there before him in his choice of the story's setting. "In 1900 Vienna, magicians were the height of entertainment," Burger tells an interviewer. "The magicians had the tools to do these incredible things, and the audience still had the faith to believe that they were seeing supernatural effects. It was a special time, right on the edge of a vanishing world and the birth of modernity" (Doughton, par. 10). Burger goes on to say that "the birth of cinema went hand in hand with magic and the birth of magicians," then becomes so intent on asserting that connection between film and magic that he misidentifies the Lumiere Brothers as magicians who became filmmakers, even though he was correct in remembering that the Lumieres "invented some of the early color photographic processes," film techniques Burger would attempt to imitate (qtd. in Tallerico, par. 2). (It was not the Lumieres who started out in magic and moved over into filmmaking, but George Méliès, one of the great pioneers of cinema, who was a stage magician at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin before he began making the earliest films with special effects, such as the early 1900s film *A Trip to the Moon*, which earned him the sobriquet of "cinemagician.") Burger's assertions, however, are still valid: "The trick with magic and doing magic in a film is that film *is* magic. It's already a deceit, an artifice, a trick and the audience already knows how the trick is done" (qtd. in Tallerico, par. 2). Like other films in which the performance of illusions is central, *The Illusionist* is ultimately self-reflexive, a film about making film, since film is always already the Grand Illusion.

Burger has continued to feel the need to clarify that he was

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<sup>9</sup> From the trove of knowledge Burger gained by doing extensive research in stage magic, he shares the fact that probably the most famous illusionist, Houdini, appropriated Houdin's name for his stage persona.

intent on replicating the technology of early film *not* to "antique" his 1900 Vienna setting but to create the atmosphere he associates with old horror and mystery films. In his words, "If you think of old horror movies like the early Frankenstein movies or *Nosferatu*, there is something creepy not just about the subject matter but about the very grain and flicker of those films. I wanted that to add to the tone of the movies" (qtd. in Wilson). Filming most of *The Illusionist* in Prague (because its cobbled streets and gaslights make it resemble what Vienna used to look like), Burger absorbed its Old World atmosphere into his filming method:

I wanted the film to have an almost "hand-cranked" feel to it, not that we were actually going to use a hand-cranked camera, although for a time I did consider it. I wanted that look, not to make it seem old, but rather to take it out of time, beyond the world of rationality and into the realm of mystery and dream. Everything you see is real, recognizable, but somehow heightened. I wanted to have a kind of sinister beauty—lovely on the surface, but with a disturbing, unnerving undertone.

(qtd. in Levy, par. 17)

And it was here that the work of the Lumiere Brothers was especially relevant. Burger wanted to replicate their "autochrome" coloring, a distinctive characteristic of *The Illusionist* to which reviewers and audiences have responded enthusiastically. Burger describes the autochrome method thus:

Autochromes have a very different kind of color and contrast palette. Some people think they're hand-tinted but they're not. They are indeed photographic color, but what I like is that they have the emotional impact of black and white. I showed these references to [director of photography] Dick Pope and then together we translated it into the particular look for this story.

("The Illusionist: Production Notes," par. 51)

In addition, Burger used other early film techniques such as vignetting (reducing the brightness of the background to highlight

the central image), irising (reducing an image to a pinpoint and replacing it with a new one by reversing the process), and flickering (simulating the effect of slower film projection). Once again, he was intent on replicating early filming techniques associated with cinematic mystery. In one significant sense, Burger is not merely doubling his impact on *The Illusionist* by both writing and directing the film; he is also involved in a double adaptation, not only the obvious adaptation of the Millhauser story, but also the adapting of early films whose techniques have powerful associations with the magic or illusion-making he sees as central to his film.

Here again, Chief Inspector Uhl is central to what Burger strove to accomplish in *The Illusionist*. As we have seen, Uhl represents the very ambivalence Burger could anticipate in his audience: a good measure of fascination, perhaps even awe, in response to the Illusionist's performance, but in the end a lingering cynicism about these "magic tricks" and a desire to witness the restoration of rationality by learning "how the tricks are done." In addition to that role as mediator between the film and its audience, Uhl positions himself at the center of the conflict between Eisenheim and Crown Prince Leopold, as well as the worlds of illusion/mystery and logic/explanation that the two figures respectively represent, generating the dynamic force of the film. In addition, Uhl is commissioned to serve as a variety of writer, a storyteller within the story, explaining what happened, and most important how the story ends. Eisenheim has a special importance because of his presence in both the romantic triangle with Sophie and Crown Prince Leopold and a political/ideological conflict with Leopold and Uhl, but Uhl may, in the end, represent even greater complexity because he has the role of mediator between Burger as writer/director and the audience. This is because Uhl is both the filmmaker's creation and the representative of the film audience.

It is the very indeterminacy of Eisenheim's illusion-making—either as magic, which can be explained, or as mystery, which cannot—that makes Uhl crucial to the film. When asked if he did research about the magic in 1900 Vienna, Burger replied:

I did research on everything, but particularly on magic and on magicians of the time. All of the illusions are based on real illusions. [. . .] The movie walks a fine line. On one

hand, you can read it as that it's all a trick. On the other, it's supernatural. All the way down the movie, I want either logic to work.

(qtd. in Tallerico, par. 13)

That tension between reading Eisenheim as either a clever trickster or a man with genuine supernatural powers is maintained throughout the film, including its dramatic ending, unlike Millhauser's story in which Eisenheim's otherworldly powers are confirmed in its last pages.

As *The Illusionist* moves toward its exciting climax, Uhl is, of course, much more than the camera eye in this film. In line with other self-referential gestures, Uhl becomes Burger's ironic double as screenwriter and director. As the Chief Inspector becomes aware that Leopold, the rising star in whom he has invested his own ambitions, is a potential source of disorder in the Empire by planning to usurp the power of his aging father,<sup>10</sup> Uhl confronts

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<sup>10</sup> Here the film depends on its audience's lack of familiarity with the latter days of the Habsburg dynasty. Historically, this Crown Prince Leopold could not have been the son of Emperor Franz Joseph, whose only son, the Crown Prince Rudolf, would have been dead by the film's time setting of 1900. Rudolf and his lover Mary Vetsera died mysteriously in an apparent murder and suicide at Mayerling, the royal hunting lodge. Both Rudolf's wife and his father knew about the affair, and although Mary *was* a baroness, apparently the Emperor was putting pressure on his son to end the romance. Rudolf had not yet produced a male heir to the imperial throne. The Crown Prince, after Rudolf's death in 1889, would have been Rudolf's cousin, Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in Sarajevo would precipitate the 1914-1918 War. In the audience for which Eisenheim performs an adaptation of the Excalibur story is the other cousin who became Crown Prince after Sarajevo. This historical background produces some eerie touches in Burger's choice of the home of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand's castle as the living quarters of the film's Crown Prince. Additionally, Burger has his Prince Leopold commit suicide as did Rudolf, albeit for very different reasons. Burger has clearly read the Millhauser story carefully enough to note that some in the audience at the Eisenheimhaus believe that the "Greta" whose spirit the illusionist lures back from the dead is actually Mary Vetsera, who died with Prince Rudolf at Mayerling.

Leopold in the very room where the Prince struck the defiant Sophie, whom he later followed to the stable to murder. This dramatic confrontation of Uhl and Leopold replicates similar scenes, going back to the beginning of film. When the Prince aims a pistol at Uhl, the audience is likely to assume the Inspector is about to follow Sophie to his death. Given that the film, or specifically the performance of Paul Giamatti, has made Uhl an extremely sympathetic character, the tension is heightened for an audience that assumes Leopold's murder of Sophie would hardly deter him from killing Uhl to protect himself. Soon, however, the sounds of the approaching Imperial Guard, with their echoes of the cavalry coming to the rescue in countless Westerns, indicate that Uhl is writing the script for *The Illusionist* and in a sense making history happen by exposing the Prince's machinations and leaving the villain little choice but to turn the pistol on himself.

Burger's decision to allow Uhl to dominate the narrative is nowhere more evident than in the rapid—some have thought "rushed"—ending of the film. The disappearance of Eisenheim, after Uhl's futile attempt to arrest him, is cast by the Chief Inspector in the form of a story his imagination constructs to explain that disappearance. The Illusionist and his Sophie, Uhl speculates, faked her murder by the Crown Prince, not only to remove him as a menace to their future happiness but also to eliminate him as a threat to the throne. To the middle-aged and apparently single Uhl, what could be a more attractive scenario than this one in which Sophie awaits an anticipated reunion with her tardy lover in some rural Eden where no one will question the love of a duchess and a commoner? And to accentuate this ending as Inspector Uhl's "Hollywood ending," the setting unexpectedly shifts from autochrome to Technicolor, another self-referential gesture in which sophisticated viewers are cued that the film, too, must offer the "magic trick" of saving the lovers "in the final reel." This ending works out a logic of romance grounded in illusion-making, foreshadowed when Sophie tells the boy Abramowitz (who will become Eisenheim), "Make us disappear! Make us disappear!" after she hears her family's police approaching the couple's hiding place. In an earlier and quieter moment, Sophie had told Eduard, "One day we'll run away together. We'll disappear." There is also the mysterious remark of the adult Sophie, who

speaks of "going ahead" and waiting for Eisenheim to join her, leading one commentator to remark that he figured out the ending halfway through the film, even though it is uncertain whether Sophie is "going ahead" to an actual rural retreat or into the spirit world.

In one sense, the narrative is working on at least two levels for its audience. In addition to those spectators who want to have illusions explained, as Uhl does in the story he is telling in/as the film, there are also those more sophisticated viewers who realize that Uhl is constructing the narrative to support his notion that ultimately all mysteries can be explained (away), making it possible to return to a world of clear-cut divisions between what we conventionally understand as illusion and reality. Illusionism is a game that only *seems* mysterious until the spectator understands how it is played. In this way, *The Illusionist* can have its cake and eat it too by allowing the possibility of its audience's figuring out how it works, only for that illusory explanation to be unsettled by the ending—not so much the ending of Eduard and Sophie staging the illusion of her death but the ending in which it becomes clear that this is Uhl's story, that this is a film about the Explainers who are unwilling, or unable, to tolerate the indeterminacy of mystery or illusion as being itself an aesthetic experience, whether it is Eisenheim's illusions, or the illusions of both fiction and film.

Burger clearly recognizes the power of putting a narrator or storyteller into the story so that he can have it both ways. The filmmaker can take credit for his surrogate's interpretation of the action and yet keep his distance, always allowing himself to answer critics who might accuse him of over-plotting by saying that this "Hollywood ending," like the structuring of the film narrative itself, is actually Uhl's, not his. Burger himself has made it clear that he parts company with Chief Inspector Uhl with his impulse to find explanations of how illusions are produce. As Burger tells his interviewer Emmanuel Levy, "I like that moment when you come face to face with something incomprehensible and unexplainable" something that changes one's perceptions about everything. To that end, the magic in *The Illusionist* is not about "How does he do it?" but rather about the uncanny sense that nothing is what it seems (in Levy, par. 3).

The strategy works because Burger has already established that

the Chief Inspector is a man who is both fascinated by the making of illusions and desperately in need of the explanations of just how they are made. Jonathan Rosenbaum reports that at the preview screening of the film in Chicago Burger told the audience that he saw the ending Uhl imposes on the plot as an invitation to the spectator to interact with his film: the viewer can either interpret the alleged conspiracy of Sophie and Eisenheim to remove Leopold from a position of power as the film's revelation of what "really" happened or enjoy the ending as a construction of Uhl's desire for an explanation of the preceding events. In this way, Uhl becomes the agent for a restoration of the conventional polarity of illusion and reality, a spokesman for the need to remove the painful tension produced by a situation in which we can no longer determine what is real, even if in the process Uhl as *raisonneur* ends up dispelling indeterminacy and mystery by fixing his imaginative construction of what "really" happened. It is those recollections that Burger feels make the scene work, as Uhl dominates the screen in an ecstasy of finally knowing, or explaining, the plot(s), as the story moves toward its own climax. This is Uhl, the amateur magician, who is frustrated when he rummages through Eisenheim's workshop and cannot find the explanations for *all* the master's illusions.

It is also to the more sophisticated members of the audience that Uhl functions as the agent of the illusionism at the center of filmmaking itself. As we see in the episode of his screening film footage shot by the police in an effort to study how Eisenheim might be creating the illusions of spirits of the dead on stage, Uhl may be on the brink of using film as a tool of his trade. The technology of the film camera would undoubtedly appeal to him because he might see the camera eye as a superior instrument of surveillance, recording as technological memory what is "really there," rather than what the human eye can be tricked into seeing as reality. Once again, *The Illusionist* subtly makes gestures toward itself as illusionism, more obvious in film's earliest stages of development when that medium had barely lost its association with parlor games, especially "flip books" of almost identical illustrations whose pages, when flipped through quickly enough, could give the illusion of animation. As the scientists were quick to explain, these illusions of motion result from the idiosyncrasy of

human perception whereby an image persists as the eye takes in the next image, eventually erasing the gaps between the two.

Screening *The Illusionist* a second or third time, viewers begin to see the variety of means by which this film not only entertains but provokes the more sophisticated viewer to enjoy the play of its self-referentiality and the connections between illusionism and filmmaking. When, for example, Eisenheim joins his manager at breakfast the morning after his smash debut and asks why his manager is so pleased with the morning newspaper he is reading, the manager reads aloud the following excerpt from a rave review of the performance: "some of the effects transcend mere illusion and approach the realm of art." This brief encomium seems almost a knowing wink to a prospective reviewer of *The Illusionist*, as though the film were anticipating what *its* reviewers might say about its own excellence as "art." Life does copy art in some of the comments of reviewers: Stephen Holden, as quoted at the beginning of this essay, writes that the film's "surreal spiritualistic feats produce a wow effect on the screen because they have an aesthetic elegance that transcends trickery; they look like works of art" (par. 4). For the more knowing viewer, *The Illusionist* becomes a film about film as the making of illusions. In the end, the form of this film becomes its content.

*The Illusionist* succeeds as a film adaptation in large part because of Burger's keen insight into the connections between narrative in film and fiction, on the one hand, and "magic," or illusionism, on the other. One factor that attracted him to Steven Millhauser's "Eisenheim the Illusionist" was his perception that Millhauser was a kind of Secret Sharer in seeing the connection between illusionism and storytelling. In closing, we could do no better than to repeat Burger's comments to his interviewers: "The trick with magic and doing magic in a film is that film *is* magic. It's already a deceit, an artifice, a trick and the audience already knows how the trick is done" (qtd. in Tallerico, par. 2); and "There's a quote in the story that says, 'Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams.' That goes for the art of cinema in general and *The Illusionist* in particular. My goal was to have the film completely inhabit that realm of dream and mystery" (qtd. in "'The Illusionist' First Look," par. 11). Clearly *The Illusionist* achieves that goal.

Earl G. Ingersoll. "Film Magic: Neil Burger's Film *The Illusionist* and Steven Millhauser's Short Story "Eisenheim the Illusionist." *LATCH* 4 (2011): 89-109.

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