Magic, *The Magician*, *The Prestige*, *The Illusionist*

Watching two films about magicians—*The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*—I was reminded of an old (1959) film by Ingmar Bergman—*The Magician*—which was loosely based on G.K. Chesterton's 1913 play, *Magic*. It is almost axiomatic that remakes will be inferior to the originals, but Bergman adds and subtracts so substantially from Chesterton's play that his film is more a restatement of a theme than a mere translation into a new medium. Chesterton's clever piece sparkles; the Conjurer, as he is called, "an intellectual-looking man, young but rather worn," fences verbally with the other characters in the playwright's voice:

> CONJURER. I think journalism and conjuring will always be incompatible. . . . The two trades rest on opposite principles. The whole point of being a conjurer is that you won't explain a thing that has happened.
> DUKE. Well, and the journalist?
> CONJURER. Well, the whole point of being a journalist is that you do explain a thing that hasn't happened.

The power of *Magic* comes from the effect and, paradoxically, the lack of effect the Conjurer exerts on the other characters. The Duke is completely untouched. His vacuous broadmindedness is so total that he honours everything and nothing, offering financial support to opposite sides of every issue: the Militant Vegetarians and Anti-vegetarians, for instance. He also donates £50 towards the new public house sponsored by Rev. Mr. Smith, the local vicar, and another £50 to the League for opposing the new public house. "SMITH. [*Staring at his cheque*.] Liberal-minded! . . . Absent-minded, I should call it." It is inevitable, then, that the Conjurer eventually tears up the Duke's cheque for "Conjurer's widows or something of that kind." Significant is the Conjurer's interaction with Smith, a high-church Christian socialist who, under the prodding of the Conjurer, comes at least to face the implications of his position in society and religion:

CONJURER. [*Violently*.] I want you to be martyred. I want you to bear witness to your own creed. I say these things are supernatural. I say this was done by a spirit. . . . what the devil are you for, if you don't believe in a miracle? What does your coat mean, if it doesn't mean that there is such a thing as the supernatural? What does your cursed collar, mean if it doesn't mean that there is such a thing as a spirit? [*Exasperated*.] Why the devil do you dress up like that if you don't believe in it? [*With violence*.] Or perhaps you don't believe in devils?
SMITH. I believe . . . [*After a pause*.] I wish I could believe.

The Duke's wards, Patricia Carleon and her brother, Morris, represent extremes. They're Irish, the young woman credulous to the point of superstition and her brother fanatically sceptical. Chesterton is clever in rewarding Patricia's belief in fairies:

> PATRICIA. Our fairy tale has come to an end in the only way a fairy tale can come to an end. The only way a fairy tale can leave off being a fairy tale.
> CONJURER. I don't understand you.

PATRICIA. It has come true.

i.e., she marries him. But Morris, pitiful in his scientific scepticism, goes into delirium when he is faced with a final trick he cannot explain: the red light visible across the park on the doctor's house turns blue and then, on the Conjurer's bidding, back to red again.

Somewhat heavy-handedly, the light has been introduced from the start as symbolic of the all sufficiency of mere reason.

MORRIS. That red lamp is the light of science that will put out all the lanterns of your turnip ghosts. . . . Your priests can no more stop that light from shining or change its colour and its radiance than Joshua could stop the sun and moon.

Chesterton's conjuring trick is to make the change in colour actually the result of magic. The truth is too much for Morris to bear.

PATRICIA. And what are we to do with Morris? I—I believe you now, my dear. But he—he will never believe.

CONJURER. There is no bigot like the atheist. I must think.

In order to save young Morris from madness, the Conjurer tells him—offstage—a false but plausible natural explanation. In terms of the action, however, Chesterton has created a conundrum for himself: what natural explanation can he possibly provide that will convincingly account for something that was actually magic? Chesterton rises to the occasion. The conjurer refuses to reveal the natural explanation, for two reasons; it is false, and, more importantly, anyone would seize upon it to avoid confronting a preternatural reality.

CONJURER. You would believe it as he believed it. You cannot think [*pointing to the lamp*] how that trick could be done naturally. I alone found out how it could be done—after I had done it by magic. But if I tell you a natural way of doing it . . .

SMITH. Well?

CONJURER. Half an hour after I have left this house you will be all saying how it was done.

The character of the Conjurer conjures up the young Chesterton, who in the *Autobiography* describes the dangers of diabolism, which he, like his dramatic counterpart, narrowly escaped: "I am not proud of knowing the Devil. I made his acquaintance by my own fault; and followed it up along lines which, had they been followed further, might have led me to devil-worship or the devil knows what."
And in the play:

CONJURER. They turned the tables upon me. . . . When they tried to be my masters . . . I found they were not fairies. I found the spirits with whom I at least had come in contact were evil . . . awfully, unnaturally evil.

Other Chestertonian ideas come to the surface in the play. He amuses himself—and his original audience if not the readers of the *Review*—by making Morris an American businessman whose viewpoint, exclusively scientific, is easy prey to Chesterton's economic and social theories.

> MORRIS. [*With abrupt and dangerous calm.*] I am not a schoolboy, Professor. I am a quiet business man. But I tell you in the country I come from, the hand of a quiet business man goes to his hip pocket at an insult like that.
> CONJURER. [*Fiercely.*] Let it go to his pocket! I thought the hand of a quiet business man more often went to someone else's pocket.

Magic, actual magic, is dangerous, and its threat to Morris and the others, including the Conjurer himself, is real. The play describes a reverse movement in the Conjurer, from devilish magic through fairy imagery to the wonderful reality of married love; and another bit of autobiography is introduced in the healing power of Patricia's love for the Conjurer, as an expression of Chesterton's love for his wife, Frances.

The slightest acquaintance with the films of Ingmar Bergman will warn the readers that *The Magician* will be far removed from *Magic*. Bergman uses a broader canvas than Chesterton, although he retains, in a weakened form, the basic scheme of the play. A sceptic, made to confront terror in encountering what he cannot explain, is restored to sanity only by having the preternatural events explained away. The difference is that the "magic" in the film really is a trick, an illusion which allows the audience as well as the doctor to breathe easily once more. Nevertheless, Bergman shows that an experience of terror was itself enough to call into question the certainty of the atheist, even though the rational account of the occurrence allowed an out, as the Conjurer foresaw in refusing to provide the natural explanation of his powers.

As in the play, so in the film, characters discover unexpected aspects of themselves with the arrival of the magician and his troupe, which consists of a young male apprentice, a witch-like crone, a bon-vivant manager, and a young, callow factotum. The original title of the film was *The Face*, for in the magician Bergman evokes the figure of Jesus: his name is Albert *Emmanuel* Vogler, and the dark hair and beard, the penetrating glance, his imperturbable, mysterious silence call to mind the traditional icon of Christ. His actions, too, at first, draw attention to parallels in Scripture. In the opening sequence, for example, he is a good Samaritan to a dying actor whom later he seems to have raised from the dead.

This is the troupe which, like the Conjurer in *Magic*, is forced to perform at a country estate to settle a bet between Counsel Egerman and Doctor Vergerus about the possibility of magic. As the film progresses, the magician's intimidating externals are stripped away, for nothing, in reality as in the show, is what it seems. The dark beard and wig come off, and he can speak and does so. The young man turns out to be the magician's wife, the love potions are innocuous concoctions or, when supplies run short, a dose of rat poison. The show itself is a debacle, with the doctor unmasking every trick, as Morris did to the Conjurer. Finally, hypnosis does achieve some remarkable and—for the chief of police—embarrassing moments, but they are not inexplicable. The red lamp of science in the play becomes the Doctor's wish to expose every ruse, to uncover every

secret. He wants, he says, literally to dissect the body of the magician, a wish which is granted when Vogler is attacked and thought to have been murdered by one of the servants who had been hypnotized. It is in the attic laboratory that Vergerus meets terror. The corpse is actually that of the actor, substituted for the magician who, roaming the attic as an *ersatz* resurrected Jesus, severely frightens the doctor. Once the ruse is discovered the doctor, like Morris, refuses to admit the full effect of his experience.

The Patricia of *Magic* is transformed by Berman into the Counsel's wife. She is drawn to the magician at first, who arouses in her a mystical yearning which she extends to the physical; since the death of her child the year before, she has lived apart from her husband, whose timidity galls her. The magician ignores her, expressing to his wife contempt for the wealth and power he sees around him. He has nothing to offer. Significantly, Bergman provides no counterpart to Chesterton's sympathetic Anglican minister, so that the unmasking of the magician and his pitiful, reduced troupe is complete. As he and his wife prepare to leave, and leave behind the manager and the crone, he is reduced to grovelling before the doctor for a pittance to allow them at least to reach the capital. The comedy ends with a *deus ex machina* in the form of a summons to perform before the King, and the wagon lumbers off to the lively strains of a military band.

Familiarity with Bergman's interest in theology allows the viewer to interpret the magician's movement from mystery to exposure and then royal favour as a parable of the waning power of religion in society to its final degraded position as an accoutrement for state functions. It is noteworthy that the troupe has lost the two members that can really do something: the worldly wise manager in the financial sphere and the (literally) spellbinding crone in the realm of mystery. There is no clergyman to address, and no real conjurer to confound, the sceptical Doctor Vergerus. Unlike Patricia, whose marriage to the conjurer is the fairy tale come true, the wife of the Counsel now shrinks in horror from the magician who, in ordinary dress, tries to use her earlier fascination with him to obtains money. But one thing remains. However secure the doctor may now feel, he has known terror, and some night may "wake and feel the fell of dark, not day."

A viewer who turns from these older *Theaterstücke* to *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist* moves simultaneously up and down the artistic scale. Technically, current cinematography is extremely sophisticated. The Vienna, the London of a century ago are recreated with sets, costumes, and makeup that are almost distracting in their perfection. And in the performances of these magicians, the traditional "How do they do it?" is now addressed not to the prestidigitator but to the computer hack. Of the two, *The Prestige* is the superior. Its theme, the rivalry of a nobly born dilettante and a lowly born professional, invites a comparison to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, although this is more a case of two Mr Hydes who resort to public ridicule, mutilation and murder in their desire to outdo one another. The parallel with Chesterton and Bergman, remote but not altogether unfounded, lies in the presence or absence of something preternatural; it's real in *The Prestige* but not in *The Illusionist*. I must qualify my statement by noting that in the former it is science that provides the "magic" in a fanciful electric apparatus that an historical figure, the physicist Nicola Tesla, had supposedly invented. It begins by cloning—if I may extend the range of the term—hats, but it can also instantaneously fabricate a perfect reproduction of the magician. It is the nobleman, Angier, who travels to the wilds of America to purchase the machine which allows him to match and outdo

the *pièce de résistance* of his rival, "The Transported Man," in which the magician disappears and instantly reappears across the stage or, in the improved version, in the top balcony of the theatre. The evil occasioned by the use of real magic is exhibited in the magician's having to kill his clone—or, perhaps *vice versa*—each night. He does so by drowning him in a tank of water used in an earlier act, the very trick which years before had resulted in the accidental death, or perhaps murder, of his wife by his rival. The final scene of the movie shows one such tank, still with its drowned version of Angier. The irony of the film lies in the fact that the rival magician had performed the trick in the obvious way, by using a double. It is this twin who murders Angier at the end of the film. The multiple parallels between the two men, therefore, extend even to their violent deaths. The commoner is hanged, having been framed for the murder of one of the clones, and then the other magician is shot to death by the surviving twin, which one we are not sure. Hence, the theme of the movie—all for art—is realized in its terrible dénouement.

The Illusionist, once again technically superb, illustrates the great distance between a sophisticated vehicle and a trivial plot. It's a love story, told in the modern style with the narrative chopped into chronological bits that are then jumbled to form a pleasing puzzle for the viewer. The engrossing film *Memento* of a few years ago is an extreme instance of this approach to filmmaking. One suspects, however, that an inability for sustained attention accounts for the difference between these current pieces and those of Chesterton and Bergman. The action of *Magic*, nearly the same as the running time of the play, follows the clock in its progress from one scene to the next. Similarly, *The Magician* is straightforwardly chronological over a couple of days. But typically, *The Illusionist* breaks the narrative into short scenes with minimal—and often banal—dialogue. Admittedly, there is a satisfaction in putting the pieces together, something like the feeling of success that accompanies the completion of a jigsaw puzzle, but puzzles have limited appeal for adults.

The Illusionist contains many more deceptions—offstage and on—than *The Prestige*, but they are, again, so dependent on the computer that the viewer is left as incredulous of them as tricks as Morris was of the Conjurer's magic. The complicated plot does not produce the frisson engendered by the inexplicable in Chesterton's play and even in *The Prestige* or by terror in *The Magician*. The story, a remote descendant of *Romeo and Juliet*, but with a happy ending, is more fantastic than any strange goings-on in the theatre. Is it plausible, is it possible that the heroine, Countess Sophie, expected to marry the heir to the throne, could fake her death, and then escape to a never-never land of rustic bliss with her childhood sweetheart, the magician?

The Magician and *The Illusionist* discard any notion of magic as real; *Magic* and *The Prestige* do not. In grouping them, it is well to remember that the explanation of a mystery can be too slick for its own good. I have often thought that Hitchcock's *Vertigo* would be a much better film without its simplistic ending. Chesterton, of course, puts the matter perfectly in his comments about Dickens's final chapters:

> The secrecy is sensational: the secret is tame. The surface of the thing seems more awful that the core. It seems almost as if these grisly figures, Mrs. Chadband and Mrs. Clennan, Miss Havisham and Miss Flite, Nemo and Sally Brass, were keeping something back from the author as well as from the reader. When the

> book closes we do not know their real secret. They soothe the optimistic Dickens with something less terrible than the truth.

And in *Magic*, Chesterton acts upon his own insight; he does not explain too much:

> MORRIS. Now, see here, wizard, we've got you. And we know you're a fraud.
> SMITH. [*Quietly*.] Pardon me, I do not fancy that we know that. For myself I must confess to something of the Doctor's agnosticism.
> MORRIS. [*Excited, and turning almost with a snarl*.] I didn't know you parsons stuck up for any fables but your own.
> SMITH. I stick up for the thing every man has a right to. Perhaps the only thing that every man has a right to.
> MORRIS. And what is that?
> SMITH. The benefit of the doubt.

Scripture tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Perhaps doubt (Chesterton) or terror (Bergman) can be the beginning of faith. *The Illusionist* needs a touch of *Magic*.