

## From Auster to Wang: Postmodern Indeterminacy, 'auggie wren's christmas story', and *SMOKE*

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Raleigh was the person who introduced tobacco in England, and since he was a favorite of the Queen's —Queen Bess, he used to call her—smoking caught on as a fashion at court. ... Once, he made a bet with her that he could measure the weight of smoke. ... I admit it's strange. Almost like weighing someone's soul. But Sir Walter was a clever guy. First, he took an unsmoked cigar and put it on a balance and weighed it. Then he lit up and smoked the cigar, carefully tapping the ashes into the balance pan. When he was finished, he put the butt into the pan along with the ashes and weighed what was there. Then he subtracted that number from the original weight of the unsmoked cigar. The difference was the weight of the smoke.

Paul Benjamin in Auster's *SMOKE*<sup>1</sup>

For if you have worked in any serious way, you have your style—like the smoke from a fired cannon, like the ring in the water after the fish is pulled out or jumps back in.

Eudora Welty<sup>2</sup>

In 1990 Paul Auster was asked to write a Christmas story for the *New York Times* and, despite being Jewish, never having written a short story, and assuming such an attempt would result in a piece of 'make-believe', he agreed to the project.<sup>3</sup> The resultant six-page unconventional 'auggie wren's christmas story' is about constructing and telling stories and the difficulty of finding a unique artistic perspective and stance, as well as about stealing and giving, lying and telling the truth, and the triumph of hope over adversity. It avoids Christian ideology, religious piety, and the popular

sentiment of traditional Christmas stories, but nevertheless proves affirmative in a strangely postmodern way.

Although postmodern fiction supposedly 'has not shown itself very adaptable to film',<sup>4</sup> film director Wayne Wang found himself drawn into this 'no-nonsense', self-contradictory, paradoxical story, ultimately adapting it in the two-hour *SMOKE*. Exploring the relationship between make-believe (fantasy, fiction, and story) and reality, and transforming the postmodernity of fiction into that of film, Wayne Wang's involvement in the saga of *SMOKE* is an interesting one. Never having heard of Paul Auster, he stumbled across 'Auggie wren's christmas story' as he was reading *The New York Times* on Christmas Day, 1990. In his own words:

As I started to read the story, I was quickly drawn into a complex world of reality and fiction, truth and lies, giving and taking. I was alternately moved to tears and laughing uncontrollably. Many of my own interesting Christmas-day experiences flashed through my mind. By the end, I felt that I had been given a wonderful Christmas gift by someone I was very close to.<sup>5</sup>

Wang's choice of language to describe the complexity of this film is close to Auster's in his interview with Annette Insdorf, an indication that the two of them see the narrative in similar terms. As Auster remarks, 'everything gets turned upside down in "Auggie Wren". What's stealing? What's giving? What's lying? What's telling the truth? All these questions are reshuffled in rather odd and unorthodox ways'.<sup>6</sup> But the parallel goes one step further: when Wang finished the film, he wrote that it was a Christmas gift 'to the moviegoing audience from Paul Auster and Wayne Wang'.<sup>7</sup> This 'Christmas gift', like the many other gifts in the film, preserves certain qualities of the original story, but places them in a more elaborate and complex narrative, adding its own stamp of postmodern [in]authenticity, self-consciously reminding those who are both readers and viewers of the similarities and differences between print-oriented and visual- and audio-oriented signifying systems.

'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story' and *SMOKE* thus beg to be compared, especially as Paul Auster himself wrote the film script. In this study I wish to consider elements of Christmas myth and mystery and important 'kernels' of narrative that have been maintained, deleted, or enhanced from story to film.<sup>8</sup> I also want to explore 'functional equivalents',<sup>9</sup> especially the blurring of generic conventions, that serve as correlations and disparities between the two forms. In the process I hope to explore various ways in which the film presents postmodernism, including such artistic techniques as the interplay of colour and black-and-white footage, music, camera movement, but also postmodern cultural features of race and class.

In thinking about *SMOKE* as an adaptation of a short story, we should note that, with the exception of the opening scene and the final narrative segment entitled 'Auggie', it pretends to no particular faithfulness to the written text. Rather, the film 'intersects' with the short story to provide a 'commentary' on, and to change our perception of, the original narrative. The film, then, may be considered a 'borrowing' or 'analogy' with the story in order to make a very different work of art, though with similar meaning.<sup>10</sup>

'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story' primarily centers on the ritual of Christmas as embodied in the surprising relationship of Auggie Wren and Granny Ethel and their memorable Christmas dinner. Underlying this occasion are themes of stealing and giving, lying and telling the truth, and fantasy and reality, though in many respects these can be subsumed under the postmodern use of indeterminacy. Although postmodernism can be defined in many different ways, ranging from the globalization of popular culture to a radical critique and subversion of social customs, I believe, along with Todd Gitlin and Ihab Hassan, that among other things it challenges and decenters traditional notions of aesthetics and cultural values, blurring distinctions and boundaries between high and low art, between romance and realism, and between privileged hierarchies and marginalized social customs.<sup>11</sup> In a related way, postmodernism interrogates master narratives, under-

mining their cultural authority and highlighting indeterminacy in their artistic and cultural representations. As Joseph Natoli remarks:

The absence of a foundation of absolute and universal truth troubles the 'self' grounded in reality as well as the word and world connection, that is, our capacity to validate a precise correspondence between what we say is going on in reality and what may actually be going on in reality. And it is the indeterminacy of our saying in reference to reality that converts fundamental truths – and all modified variations thereof – into challengeable narratives of truth. Selves are brought up within a clash of such narratives.

So in the end, it is not some postmodern perversity that simply chooses to ignore fundamental truths of all stripes, from scientific to moral, but a recognition of the unreliability of our representing capacities, a pointing out of the distance between words and world. This breach is, for postmodernity, foundational.<sup>12</sup>

Inherited from such poststructuralists as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, indeterminacy and undecidability are features fundamentally concerned with the disjuncture between language and reality, suggesting that signification moves uncertainly among several alternatives at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

As an annual religious, cultural, and commercial celebration, the event of Christmas is especially important in the United States. Beginning just after Thanksgiving at the end of November, preparations for Christmas last the better part of a month, and the holidays extend from Christmas Eve through New Year and, for some, until twelfth night or Epiphany. Family and social celebrations involve cooking and eating, shopping and gift giving, with many attempting to preserve family, ethnic, and regional traditions while making each successive season, celebration, and gift unique. Underlying these activities is a question of the appropriate balance between religious observance and general cultural celebration: some would like to see Christmas only as a religious event, some mainly as a religious event, some mainly as a cultural event, and some only as a cultural event. Christmas, then, is for many always already a postmodern indeterminate

phenomenon with the signification moving uncertainly between the religious and secular, collective and personal, ritualistic and particular.

Auster's story picks up this postmodern indeterminacy in Auggie's odd celebration with the blind Granny Ethel: Auggie goes to see her to return the billfold dropped by her grandson Robert Goodwin (who, as a thief, has fled the scene of a robbery), lies to her about being her grandson, finds himself strangely charmed by this eighty- or ninety-year-old woman, and enjoys wine that she has on hand with a feast of soup, chicken, potato salad, and chocolate cake that he purchases from a store. On a less positive note, Auggie takes a camera that presumably has been stolen by Ethel's grandson Robert. This Christmas celebration is, then, one of mixed motives and actions: it is about Auggie's giving Granny a moment of intense happiness balanced by his lying to her and stealing the camera, raising serious issues about ethics in a postmodern age. The episode mingles the false and the true, and this story itself, claimed by Auggie to be authentic, may well be false. As the character Paul remarks:

I paused for a moment, studying Auggie as a wicked grin spread across his face. I couldn't be sure, but the look in his eyes at that moment was so mysterious, so fraught with the glow of some inner delight, that it suddenly occurred to me that he had made the whole thing up. I was about to ask him if he'd been putting me on, but then I realized he would never tell. I had been tricked into believing him, and that was the only thing that mattered. As long as there's one person to believe it, there's no story that can't be true. (p.156)

By analogy, of course, this narration and its mixed motives, as well as the question of truth and belief, beg the ultimate question of the authenticity of the Christmas event and story since the origin and conventions are uncertain at best. Doubt and skepticism, however, are shown finally not to matter for the very indeterminacy and undecidability of Christmas and of narration, if you will, are their salient features. It is the celebrant's and reader's ability to enjoy Christmas and its

religious and secular stories, whether or not they are true, that gives them a curious attraction and mysterious ambiguity.

The film preserves many of the critical details and themes of the short story, though they are positioned primarily as part of the opening sequence set in the cigar store and as a short twenty-minute finale. Otherwise, the film presents a greatly expanded narrative concerning the relationship of Auggie, Paul, and three new principle characters named Rashid, Cyrus, and Ruby as well as a number of new minor characters. The terminal section, called 'Auggie', first presents a close-up in full color of Auggie telling his Christmas story to Paul at a restaurant. Then, while the credits are rolling, it visually presents in black-and-white Granny Ethel's wonderful joy and Auggie's happiness in creating this special feast for her, in what is perhaps the last Christmas of her life. By a significant pause, sideways glance, and flicker of Ethel's eyelids, the film suggests that Ethel understands this might be a game of make-believe, but it is such a wonderful game that inevitably it is as good as, and maybe even better than, the real thing. This conclusion to the film does not pass a negative judgment on the actions of the characters for engaging in such postures. The viewer accepts Auggie's lying and stealing as at least partly justified by the rest of his actions, even perhaps as the ambiguous claims of Christmas are justified by the happiness the holiday brings to people.

It is particularly in this terminal episode that Wang most fully exploits his postmodern techniques to create and check an optimistic tone, to install and subvert traditional Christmas feeling – to explore indeterminacy. When Auggie tells Paul Benjamin this Christmas story, the camera slowly, but relentlessly, moves in on his face, finally centering on his mouth, which fills the screen. The camera also tracks Paul the observer, moving just as surely toward his face, culminating in his eyes as he watches Auggie. Like Auggie's mouth, Paul's eyes fill the entire screen on one occasion. Telling and seeing, constructing a story and looking at the truth and falsity of it – these are underlying motivations for the camera

movement. But Wang does not stop there. At the very end in which the Caucasian Auggie's relationship with the black Granny Ethel is shown, the camera work again focuses on faces (though not exclusively), but in black-and-white rather than colour. The effect of the change in coloration blurs and fragments the focus on lying and truth and raises a question about the relationship of black-and-white footage and colour in films and television, black and white in ethics, and the race relations of blacks and whites in America. The film shot in colour concerns the lives of Paul, Auggie, Rashid, and Ruby in the borough of Brooklyn, whereas the black-and-white portion, while also beginning with Auggie's tobacco shop, quickly shifts to the Boerum Hills public housing projects. The opening shots in both the coloured and black-and-white portions depict a generally pleasant, racially tolerant middle-class setting in this 'great People's Republic of Brooklyn',<sup>14</sup> while the final segment shot in black-and-white shows the more oppressive housing of the New York City underclass, represented in this film by Rashid, Aunt Em, and Granny Ethel – all black.

This use of black-and-white also typifies the realistic photographs of Auggie (though the short story says they are in colour) taken of the same undistinguished crossroads in Brooklyn over fourteen years. The use of black-and-white thus raises the issue of an American underclass, nodding in the direction of documentaries and such early films as *Grapes of Wrath*, and the incorporation of colour and black-and-white in relation to idealism (and fantasy) and a hard-edged reality gestures in the direction of *The Wizard of Oz*. (This latter intertextual reference is quite explicit, given Rashid's aunt's being called 'Aunt Em'.) Fantasy and reality, however, are problematized by Wang, for this film does not surrender to easy polarities and binary oppositions. Because the film begs questions about the relationship of fantasy and reality, the use of black-and-white in relation to colour self-consciously ironizes happiness, though it also offers hope for positive racial relations, thus continuing to ask, but not resolve, important and basic questions about life and art in America.

This moral and social indeterminacy intermingled with holiday happiness is borne out in the main part of the film in the relationship of Auggie, Paul, and Rashid. Each one of these men has lost someone of significant value – Auggie’s fiancée Ruby left him when he failed to write to her while he was in Vietnam and he had no relationship with his alleged daughter Felicity; Paul’s father died at an early age (in the film script only) and his wife and unborn child were killed in a bizarre shoot-out; Rashid’s mother died in an auto accident and his father abandoned him as a young child – but each finally offers the others forgiveness, emotional support, and assistance. Though nearly all the families are dysfunctional, the film is never one of despair. Despite the problematic past of each character and the possibility for tragedy, *SMOKE* offers the viewer a provisional gift of hope and affirmation, which after all are quintessential to the Christmas message of seasonal, familial, and spiritual renewal.

Indeed, it is a film filled with gifts: Auster’s and Wang’s gift to the viewer, Auggie’s presentation of a memorable day and feast to Granny Ethel as well as his gift of a story to Paul, Paul’s offer to Rashid of a place to stay out of gratitude for his saving him from being run down in traffic, Rashid’s present of stolen money to Auggie as recompense for having ruined his investment in Cuban cigars, Auggie’s offer of the same money to Ruby to assist Felicity, Rashid’s gift of his pencil sketch to his newly discovered father, and Rashid’s present of a television to Paul. These gifts – the very spirit of Christmas – confirm a sense of tenderness, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, which preclude sustained tragedy. In two instances – Auggie’s and Ruby’s encounter with their derelict daughter and Rashid’s fight with his newly discovered father – when the action could take a decidedly negative and even tragic turn, it does not. These potentially difficult situations between parents and children end on a moderately hopeful note, though not a wildly optimistic one, just as the concluding story of Auggie and Ethel sounds hopeful, though built on a lie. Thus, the story and film have an uncertain mixture of the romantic and realistic, of post-modern mystery and manners.



A related postmodern indeterminacy in the story, film script, and film is the self-reflexive consideration of the role of art, which is also significantly related to the ritual of Christmas, the basis of Auggie's going to see Ethel. The narrator in all three is a writer, who is accorded a certain self-consciousness about the literary process: in almost the exact words of Paul Auster's autobiographical statement about his reaction to an invitation to write a story about Christmas, the narrator in the short story tells about his misgivings:

A man from the *New York Times* called me and asked if I would be willing to write a short story that would appear in the paper on Christmas morning. My first impulse was to say no, but the man was very charming and persistent, and by the end of the conversation I told him I would give it a try. The moment I hung up the phone, however, I fell into a deep panic. What did I know about Christmas? I asked myself. What did I know about writing short stories on commission?

I spent the next several days in despair, warring with the ghosts of Dickens, O. Henry and other masters of the Yuletide spirit. The very phrase 'Christmas story' had unpleasant associations for me, evoking dreadful outpourings of hypocritical mush and treacle. Even at their best, Christmas stories were no more than wish-fulfillment dreams, fairy tales for adults, and I'd be damned if I'd ever allowed myself to writing something like that. And yet, how could anyone propose to write an unsentimental Christmas story? (p.153)

This self-reflexive comment about Christmas narratives clearly begs the question of the uncertain status of this piece of writing. To satisfy the ritualistic quality of the occasion and the traditional requirements of Christmas narrative, the narrator must conform to certain cultural expectations, social codes, and narrational conventions but also recognize the need to express his own voice and define his own art. This dilemma, of course, goes to the heart of the artistic process: how a writer can make a story recognizable within a given set of conventions and yet stand out in some particular fashion.

In the story, pictorial art, especially photography, is similar to that of writing, for Auggie Wren, too, 'considered himself an artist' (p.151) in taking more than four thousand pictures

of the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Clinton Street in Brooklyn over a period of fourteen years, and it is the narrator's picture on a book jacket of his novel that forms the initial bond between the two men. Thus, the issue of photographic and narrative representation becomes central to both story and film. Attuned to considering each object of art – whether fiction or photograph – as an individual work, the narrator is initially dismayed to discover the 'numbing onslaught of repetition' and 'unrelenting delirium of redundant images' (p.152) in Auggie's photos, but finally learns to slow down, look at, and explore the subtle differences marked by 'natural time' and 'human time' in each picture. Arguably, fiction is similar in that the reader must read slowly and carefully to gain an adequate appreciation, and the viewer of *SMOKE* is forced to observe carefully and analytically as the film moves slowly and deliberately from one character portrait to another. Clearly, photography, fiction, and film have many elements of conventional experience in them – of the ritualistic if you will – but in each case it is the details of place and event related to time and the individual's perspective that allow the artist to break out of the ordinary and make an artistic difference. Like life itself, repetition and ritual in Christmas, writing, film, and photography may dull perception, but it is the role of the artist to alter that in some special fashion, to allow a closer look at, and a unique perspective on, life. As the narrator in the short story says of Auggie and his thousands of pictures:

He was right, of course. If you don't take the time to look, you'll never manage to see anything. I picked up another album and forced myself to go more deliberately. I paid closer attention to details, took note of shifts in the weather, watched for the changing angles of light as the seasons advanced. Eventually, I was able to detect subtle differences in the traffic flow, to anticipate the rhythm of the different days (the commotion of workday mornings, the relative stillness of weekends, the contrast between Saturdays and Sundays). And then, little by little, I began to recognize the faces of the people in the background, the passers-by on their way to work, the same people in the same spot every morning, living an instant of their lives in the field of Auggie's camera. (152)

*SMOKE* picks up from the short story on both Paul's writing and Auggie's photographs, but adds yet another dimension: Rashid's drawing. Rashid may be untutored in his art and is not at all self-reflexive but uses his abilities to sketch his father's place of business and then slips the picture under his door one day as a parting gift. A piece of art, then, may have some special aesthetic merit, but it may also simply be an unexpected gift from the heart, another way of breaking out of commonplace and prosaic reality. Art enters the film script and movie in several ways.

One critic who has much to say about the various ways in which festivals and fiction mimic and undermine daily patterns of authority and who stresses the need for constant reformation is Mikhail Bakhtin, whose term 'the carnivalesque' encompasses these aspects:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all 'languages' and dialects; there developed the literature of the *fabliaux* and *Schwänke* of street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the 'languages' of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all 'languages' were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face.<sup>15</sup>

Bakhtin's comments may appear only neatly coincidental with Auster's writing and the critique of master narratives, except that Auster himself in the film self-consciously invokes Bakhtin's name when talking about literary and philosophical pieces that have been wasted. The writer Paul mentions that the only copy of a manuscript by Bakhtin literally went up in smoke during the occupation of Leningrad in 1942 when Bakhtin used the pages of his book for cigarette wrappers. The reference to Bakhtin is not necessary for the film and, indeed, nearly slides by, subsumed as it is in an account of the inestimable value of smoke. By

invoking Bakhtin's name, however, Auster indicates a self-conscious awareness of his antecedents in exploring the value of festivals, writing, art, and smoking. (Indeed, with references to Sir Walter Raleigh, Raleigh cigarettes, Queen Elizabeth I or Bess, and Bakhtin, there is a sort of playful intertext of tobacco and the meta-narrative of smoking.)

This self-reflexivity concerning ritual and art gives this particular narrative an interesting postmodern character, for postmodernity concerns a self-aware, paradoxical continuation and disruption of custom and artistic process. In that spirit, Linda Hutcheon argues that 'postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past'.<sup>16</sup> We might call this indeterminate paradox in 'Auggie wren's Christmas story' and *SMOKE* an 'ironized, paradoxical epiphany', a term that neatly fits both the Christmas and narrative events. (It is interesting and relevant that the mentally challenged Jimmy confuses paradox with paradise, linking the two in the viewer's mind.) In the religious sense, of course, Epiphany refers to the season just after Christmas celebrating the special insight and recognition given the three wise men as they looked at the infant Jesus, born in the most common of circumstances. In James Joyce's sense, an epiphany is a special unbidden moment of illumination in a narrative about one's personal, social, and cultural situation. Both the religious and literary usage stress a new stage of awareness, though Auster suggests that familiar patterns and constraints co-exist with this new insight.

This notion of sight and insight is especially embodied in the eye imagery of the story and film. In both, Granny Ethel is blind, and Auggie has a special 'look in his eyes' when telling his story (p.156). Indeed, Auggie's name is similar to the German *augen*, to see, and his camera gives him a special extra 'eye' to see with. In the film, the camera moves directly to Paul's eyes, which fill the screen, as he hears Auggie

telling the story. Then, too, in both story and film, the narrator/Paul is told to slow down and look carefully at Auggie's pictures, and when he does he learns to appreciate the familiar, even seeing his dead wife in a fresh way. In the film, Ruby has a patch to cover a missing, artificial eye (the 'blue marble') and Auggie maintains in the script that she has 'an eye that couldn't see, an eye that couldn't shed any tears'.<sup>17</sup> And, Auster in playing upon Paul's name (Paul Auster, Paul Benjamin, Paul Benjamin Cole), reminds the reader of the blinded St Paul who is credited with 'seeing' in a new way, universalizing the Christian message. Story and film, then, ask the readers to be freed by new sight, insight, illumination, and epiphany, but they also suggest we are simultaneously blind and constrained. In a postmodern sense, both constraint and freedom, blindness and insight, are simultaneous, on-going, and enfolded within each other. Christmas is constrained by ritual and art by convention, but unless the artist is also able to suggest the particular and personal in the midst of the constraint, art cannot exist. This is the postmodern paradoxical indeterminacy of 'both/and' instead of 'either/or', which so fully characterizes both the story and the film.

The film's image of smoke and smoking, though mainly absent from the story, is central to an appreciation of this ironized, paradoxical epiphany for smoke is simultaneously nothing and something. It is almost nothing for, being neither solid nor liquid, smoke is virtually impossible to measure, and yet it can be seen, felt, and experienced. Indeed, as a signifier, smoke floats easily among several signifieds. As Auster himself remarks, smoke is 'many things all at once. It refers to the cigar store, of course, but also to the way smoke can obscure things and make them illegible. Smoke is something that is never fixed, that is constantly changing shape. In the same way that the characters in the film keep changing as their lives intersect. Smoke signals ... smoke screens ... smoke drifting through the air'.<sup>18</sup> Because of its Native-American origins and Raleigh's introducing and popularizing it in England, tobacco is also strongly identified as an American icon.

Such references to tobacco, smoke, and smoking nonetheless raise important ethical considerations. With the story set and published in 1990 and the film released in 1995, Auster raises the issue of social taboos: what was once a fashionable pastime is now considered hazardous for health and, therefore, 'under erasure'. Auggie complains that 'they will legislate us out of business', and Vinnie responds, 'They catch you smoking tobacco, they'll stand you up against the wall and shoot you'.<sup>19</sup> The film self-consciously addresses the dangers of smoking but also suggests that smoking brings a group of men together in the cigar store, creating and sustaining community. It is, after all, Paul's need for his Dutch Schimmelpennicks that brings him into Auggie's circle in the first place, and it is while smoking and drinking coffee in a restaurant that Auggie tells Paul his memorable Christmas story. Then, too, the film script lists such Hollywood 'personalities' as Groucho Marx, George Burns, Clint Eastwood, and Frankenstein's monster who are identified with smoking and whose pictures appear in the cigar store, therefore reinforcing the intertextual and interfilmic qualities. Paul Auster also admits that it was while he was smoking his 'beloved Schimmelpennicks' that he conceived the idea of 'auggie wren's christmas story'.<sup>20</sup> All the main characters, except the youth Rashid, smoke on a regular basis, and in a moment of companionship in front of a televised baseball game Rashid tries smoking a cigar with Paul. Smoke itself, then, is both nothing and something, dangerous to the body and beneficial to the community and soul. How does one weigh smoke and calculate these aspects? Certainly not by an unthinking acceptance either of a politically correct view of smoking or of a totally subversive view.

This critiquing of predominant social and cultural positions is apparent in structural and textual features of the film *SMOKE* and its printed texts. Perhaps the first thing the reader notices in Auster's and Wang's printed edition of *SMOKE*, which includes 'auggie wren's christmas story', is that, with the exception of the cover page, all the titles are presented in lower case in the table of contents and the

headings of particular sections. This lack of upper case has roughly the same effect upon readers as an e.e. cummings' poem, which represents an attempt to undermine dominant social and logical structures through a more 'democratic' typeface. In postmodernism, this resistance to conformity is identified with Lyotardian interrogation of master narratives and conventional hierarchies.<sup>21</sup> Christianity is, of course, one of the most important master narratives in the West, so placing its most important 'feast' in lower case removes some of the dominance of Christianity as the sole voice of the people and defamiliarizes the Christmas season, making it more available to people of many faiths and religions and to those who have none.

The film adapts this defamiliarizing technique from its very opening by first listing the actors but withholding the actual title until the fifth shot of the film, which concludes Paul's comments on the weight of smoke. Similarly, at the end, a black-and-white sequence depicting the relationship of Auggie and Granny Ethel is shown in its entirety while the film credits are slowly running. For all practical purposes the narrative is concluded when the viewer actually sees Auggie's interaction with Ethel, but this very moving episode keeps the viewer glued to the screen while also aware that, like smoke itself, the impact of this sequence is very difficult to weigh.

The structure of the short story itself reinforces this defamiliarization and democratization in its use of framing. The first-person narrator of this story, the 'I', is a writer who has been told this story by Auggie Wren, a remote, shadowy figure. As the narrator remarks in the opening lines of the story:

I heard this story from Auggie Wren. Since Auggie doesn't come off too well in it, at least not as well as he'd like to, he's asked me not to use his real name. Other than that, the whole business about the lost wallet and the blind woman and the Christmas dinner is just as he told it to me. (p.151)

Traditionally, the use of a narrative agent in an exterior frame throws suspicion on the interior narration. This nesting makes

it impossible to ascertain whether statements are true or false because there are simply too many perplexities and inconsistencies in the narrative to peel away the layers easily and confidently. Auster exactly creates and sustains that tone of perplexity: it is impossible to verify Wren's story because even his name is inauthentic: all we have is Paul's report from a non-identifiable and unverifiable source and his query about the authenticity of the story.

In the film this frame technique is not articulated in the same way. Indeed, the frame is not evoked at all at the beginning, but the final part of the coloured portion of the film concludes in the same manner as the story, with Paul's uncertainty about the truth of Auggie's account. The film script and the film itself, however, further complicate the question of authenticity in this fragmentary framing. For although the person centrally involved in the episode of 'the lost wallet and the blind woman and the Christmas dinner' (p. 151) continues to be called Auggie Wren (though that name, of course, is a pseudonym), the author/narrator in the film is specifically referred to as Paul, though now Paul Benjamin. The internal and external narrators, then, become increasingly mysterious floating signifiers, whose names, and therefore identity, continue to shift. If the character involved in the incident cannot be rightly named and the narrator's name continues to change, then the very stability of the narrative is in question and leaves the reader/viewer unable at some level to resolve the question of identity or of the distinction between truth and falsehood or of reality and imagination.

The issue of an unstable narrative and identity is reinforced through the interpenetration of genres and blurring of generic boundaries. This occurs first with the publication of the short story in the *New York Times*, a most unusual venue. Fiction generally appears in magazines, journals, and books, and factual accounts and 'news' appear in newspapers. A short story appearing in a newspaper thus problematizes reader expectations, appropriate venues, and the relationship of news, truth, and fiction. This question is specifically raised by the narrator's failure to identify himself in the story.



Perhaps, like a newspaper byline, the 'article' assumes that the author is the main observer and/or participant. Here, however, that is merely an article of faith, which the 'fiction' does not either support or refute.

Auster and Wang continue to blur generic boundaries in the film by using devices usually reserved for print and by reversing expectations about the use of colour in relation to black-and-white. The most noticeable blurring of boundaries between fiction and film occurs in the 'chapter' divisions of the film, which are, with one exception, identified with principle characters. The exception is the first instance in which a frame giving the season and year appears – 'Summer 1990'. Otherwise, these frames with a black background and blue print (the colour of smoke) are listed as: 1. Paul, 2. Rashid, 3. Ruby, 4. Cyrus, and 5. Auggie. These have the effect of alerting the viewer that the film will be divided into a series of character portraits or vignettes. To some extent this assumption is false because characters other than those designated by the subtitles enter these 'chapters' or 'sketches', suggesting that each is not exclusively a personal portrait but rather approximating divisions in drama. For example, Auggie's and Ruby's relationship begins in the unit entitled 'Rashid', suggesting at least a certain amount of non-linearity and dissipated focus (like smoke itself). To some extent this assumption is true, however, for the main emphasis of each 'chapter' concerns the named central character, though there is a strong narrative thread linking the chapters.

Narrative instability and interpenetration of genres in *SMOKE* are bolstered by music and other sounds. Though this is a film about Christmas, it has no Christmas music. Instead, it uses an interesting combination of street noise, electronic music, and ethnic music. When the film opens, the first sound is that of a muffled drumming, which turns into the sound of the New York commuter train. Music giving way to the noises of the city frequently suggests the various real and metaphorical rhythms of the city – the sounds of traffic (also mentioned in the short story), the music in bars and cafes, and the silences in conversation. Traffic is a

frequent part of the film's sound, heard in the street, Auggie's cigar store, and Paul's apartment. These are the background and interfering noises of modern urban culture, but they are also the rich stuff out of which multiple meanings can be constructed. This noise, which includes radio music, televised sports events, transmission static, and even information about the Gulf War is frequently replaced by – or interspersed with – soft, melodic, minimalist, Japanese or new-age electronic percussive music that resembles a piano or xylophone. For instance, Paul Benjamin's walking before nearly being hit by a truck is punctuated by quiet, melodic, repetitive electronic xylophone music. Indeed, Paul in his contemplative moods is often identified with this soft, jazzy new age sound, just as Rashid is by African-American soul music. On the other hand, the film includes little background noise or music of any kind when two people are deeply engaged in conversation.

Street noise, new age music, and strategic silences pervade much of *SMOKE*, but African-American soul and blues music increases in the second half and completely take over the final black-and-white portion concerning Auggie and Ethel, especially emphasizing positive race relations. This African-American soul music is complemented by other ethnic music, suggesting the multi-ethnicity of New York City and, therefore, the USA: when Paul and Rashid talk in the Greek cafe immediately following his near accident, a Greek or Middle-Eastern melody is played and when Paul and Rashid meet Auggie in a bar, Hispanic music plays, though when Auggie tells his story to Paul in a kosher restaurant, no music is played. All together the music and background sound suggest some uncertainty as they move almost randomly from silences to harmonic new age sounds to various ethnic music. While pleasant, it suggests a kind of fluidity to this environment, and the prevalence of ethnic cafes and food, including Chinese, adds to that fluidity and multi-ethnicity.

In conclusion, then, although 'auggie wren's christmas story' is Paul Auster's own postmodern, multicultural Christ-

mas present to the *New York Times*' readership, his and Wayne Wang's present to a film audience is equally poignant. Both 'texts' use postmodern indeterminacy in representing human relationships, morality, and art even as they depict with considerable warmth the generosity and benevolence of the main characters. The kernels of retained narrative and the incremental narrative in the film intensify the moral ambiguity, multiculturalism, and self-conscious reflection on festivals and art. The predominant use of colour and the incremental black-and-white of Auggie's collection of pictures and the film's conclusion questions conventional assumptions of film production, as well as assumptions about the expectations and reality of multiculturalism. Auster and Wang use many different means to explore these issues – to surprise and delight readers and viewers into rethinking human relationships, the subject of ethics, the possible intervention of the divine into the human domain, and the representation of such subjects in drawing, print, and film. Not only does this treatment create an interesting story and film, it also indicates ways in which postmodern literature can be transformed readily into film, and even enhanced by postmodern film practices.

- 1 Paul Auster, *Smoke and Blue in the Face: Two Films* (New York: Hyperion, 1995) [hereafter cited as *Smoke*], p.25. *Smoke* is a collection of related pieces that includes the short story 'auggie wren's christmas story', page references to which will be inserted in the text.
- 2 'Words into Fiction', *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Random House, 1979), p.143.
- 3 Insdorf, Annette, 'The Making of Smoke: Interview with Paul Auster', *Smoke*, pp.3-16.
- 4 McFarlane, Brian, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.6.
- 5 Wayne Wang, 'Preface' to *Smoke*, p.vii.
- 6 'The Making of Smoke', *Smoke*, p.3.
- 7 'Preface' to *Smoke*, p.viii.

- 8 Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), p.53.
- 9 Bordwell, David, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.13.
- 10 For the different terms used here, see J. Dudley Andrew, 'The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory', in *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction*, ed. Sydney M. Conger and Janice R. Welsch (Macomb, Ill.: West Illinois University Press, 1980), p.10, and Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), pp.224; 226.
- 11 Todd Gitlin, 'Hip Deep in Post-modernism', *The New York Times Book Review* 6 November 1988, p.35; Ihab Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Spring 1986), pp.503-20.
- 12 Natoli, Joseph, *A Primer to Postmodernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), pp.70-1.
- 13 See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
- 14 'The Making of Smoke', *Smoke*, p.16.
- 15 M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse on the Novel' in his *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.273.
- 16 Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p.23.
- 17 *Smoke*, p.38.
- 18 'The Making of Smoke', *Smoke*, p.13.
- 19 *Smoke*, p.38.
- 20 'The Making of Smoke', *Smoke*, p.3.
- 21 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).