

## COMMENTS ON THE FILM

### “SMOKE”

The film we are about to comment on is without a doubt not common. We might define it in a classical concept as a comedy since its characters are at the end a bit better than they started off. But it is very difficult to define its plot, if there is any.

Intertwined and frayed, similar but at the same time different stories follow one another without end. There is the story of the characters that live the present and those that have lived in the past, there is also the mysterious stories the characters retell, like the one of the writer who smoked his own book, that of the son who finds his father frozen in the mountain or that of Sir Raleigh weighing smoke and of course, the moving final story: the Christmas story.

When asked about the meaning of the name "Smoke", Paul Auster, the writer of the script and of the novel *"Auggie Wren's Christmas Story"* that gave rise to the film, answered that the word "smoke" .... *is many things at the same time. It makes reference to store, of course, but also to the forms in which smoke can darken things to the point of making them illegible. Smoke is something that is never static, it constantly changes shape. In the same way the characters change as their paths meet. Smoke signals ..... Smoke curtains..... Smoke billowing. Just a little or a lot, each character undergoes constant change under the influence of the characters around him.*<sup>1</sup>

Well, this description perfectly adjusts to the mood that the film causes in me when I feel like dwelling into its deepest meaning. On the one hand, a dark intuition that the film has a message that has to be unveiled; a hidden message, given out through smoke signals that have to be interpreted. However, at the same time, these smoke signals cannot be kept static since they change shape and darken things till it is impossible to see them. What was a smoke signal becomes suddenly a smoke curtain, set just there to confuse and darken things.

This is how the money stolen from the jewelry changes shape as well as meaning according to how it changes hands. The topic of stealing is recurrent in all the stories but not in the same manner or bearing the same meaning. Little by little, everything is confused and we cannot distinguish what it is to steal, what it is to give, what it is to lie, what is the truth, what is right and what is wrong. At this stage, I picture the author pulling my leg, smiling malevolently and mysteriously. The same smile Auggie addresses to Paul at the end of the story.

I remember that that smile is repeated in Paul at the end of Sir Raleigh's story, in Ruby when he tells Auggie he might be Felicity's father, and then again I

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<sup>1</sup> Having no access to the original English words, this is a translation from the Spanish version.

ponder on a hidden message. The unyielding smoke curtain becomes once again a signal.

If we want to grasp these signals, which are just smoke, we should not hurry; we have to be cunning and patient, like Sir Raleigh, let's light our cigars, inhale the smoke in each scene and let's see what is left on the scales. Precisely, Sir Raleigh's story is the first.

On the background, a black and white scene of Manhattan, a train reaches Brooklyn. Paul gets in to buy cigarettes, he is engrossed, out of touch.... Auggie urges him to tell a story of women and tobacco. Paul tells the ingenious story of Sir Raleigh. We are left dumbfounded, is it true or just a joke? Can smoke be weighed? Weighing smoke is like weighing the soul, if we do weigh the body when alive and also when dead, would there be any difference? That's how Paul's ironic smile seems to tell us " ... a lie. Just a symbol; the difference, do you get it?"

The difference is in the body and the corpse, not between living and not living life. In other words, the difference between a cigar that has already been smoked and one that has not. Living life is that difference, a huge difference that crops from the small things that give life a meaning. If we interpret it well, smoking or rather smoke will further on be a symbol of life, of living life finding meaning in the small differences. A symbol that is pulling the leg to an anti tobacco society which considers smoking little less than suicide.

Now, having cleared out some things, the name of the film, precisely "**Smoke**" turns up. In other words, the small things that make the difference between living life or not does not seem a bad idea as a plot.

The puzzled customers ask themselves about Paul. Auggie says that he is a writer, " *an underwriter*" they mock. True, Auggie tells that Paul, melancholic after his wife's and son's death, has lost the inspiration, he has lost the meaning of life. Ellen, who was pregnant, dies in an accident at the bank robbery. Auggie struggles against the fateful destiny: "*at times I think that if she hadn't given me the exact change that day ... it would've taken a few more minutes to get out of here, she wouldn't have stepped into that bullet. She'd be still alive. The baby would've been born and Paul .....*" (taken from the script).

A tempting idea, snatching a life from destiny, just for a few seconds. Taking an opportunity away from death. As a symbol, the account is interrupted when a boy steals some magazines in a scene identical to that of the Christmas story. A curious detail: the actor with the role of the boy who steals is nobody less than Paul's real son, Paul Auster the real writer. As will be seen later, the relationship father-son is also a central theme.

The next scene takes the same theme and shape covered in Auggie's fantasy. In same manner Ellen meets the bullet, Paul meets the truck. But a hand saves him in the nick of time. What happened is interpreted as the fulfillment of

an all-powerful fantasy; a death has been snatched from destiny. The robbery generates persecutory fantasies: the universe has been upset and Paul has to do something for Rashid so that everything returns to its natural path.

The interpretation in this case is simple; a temporary inversion has been created. What actually saves Paul's life, in the sense of coming out of his melancholic seclusion, is the possibility of becoming interested and doing something for the others. We may say the real robbery will consist of just the opposite, that is to say, wasting a life on oneself.

Like Granny Ethel in the Christmas story, Paul invites a stranger home. Like Auggie with Ethel, Rashid, really Thomas, accepts to play the game but he changes his real name.

The following scene links both meanings that we have discovered. Vinnie reprimands Auggie for not taking things seriously. Auggie says that while Vinnie has already had two strokes, he is still waiting for his first. Vinnie answers that what he has to do is to quit smoking. Auggie tells him to make the most of it as long as he can. Pretty soon smoking will be banned, then sex will follow suit and lastly smiling a stranger will be forbidden. What is apparently harmful and dangerous (smoking and mingling with strangers) is just what is vital, risky, Eros who puts forward a complication.

Paul still needs of others. He has "run out of existences" and needs to stock tobacco to "smoke", according to our interpretation of the symbols it would be an existential dilemma. Like the lock in Paul's and Ethel's house, Auggie opens the locked shop. On this occasion, it is Paul who learns a lesson of life when Auggie calls his attention to the small differences between the pictures, which apparently are all just the same.

Auggie says that the pictures are his life's masterpieces and that it just takes him five daily minutes. Once again, there is a trap here, the secret is not in the time it takes him but in the perseverance that it needs. Little, but constant, little but always. To get out of his melancholic lethargy, symbolized in the overwhelming quantity of equal 4000 pictures, Paul will have to go slowly, day after day, tomorrow....tomorrow... a little bit more each time. He will not find the meaning of life in magical solutions which undo the past, the meaning will crop up by observing the small differences which, like the smoke of a cigar being smoked, give a quality to the present moment, making of every minute an unrepeatable opportunity.

Little by little, picture after picture, without haste but without pause, in a similar process to a psychoanalytic treatment, session after session, Paul will be able to get to the traumatic moment and face the mourning he has to elaborate. Like a symbol, he gets Ellen's picture and he weeps. Auggie does not anguish, he just is there, not upsetting his pain with a premature soothing. The same corner now is seen in color and Auggie takes his daily picture, as a symbol that

life goes on, and in the next scene Paul takes up writing again, as a symbol that something in him has changed.

Nevertheless, he is still engrossed in himself, Rashid upsets his concentration, just like Eros, complicating it all. Paul is no longer so interested but he keeps his word and welcomes him, not paying any attention to him and Rashid becomes lethargic. Like Roger Goodwin in Granny Ethel's home, he hides his boot in Paul's home.

Paul tells him it is time he left, *"I spend two and a half years not being able to write a word and then, when I get started, when it seems I am coming back to life, you turn up and break everything in my place.... The flat is small and I can't work having you around"* (taken from the script) Paul, still busy with his melancholy seems to have no room for anybody else in his life but him. Rashid leaves and Paul is left uneasy, intrigued, he looks out the window, as if he had lost an opportunity.

However, when Paul returns from work, Rashid once again interrupts under the form of Aunt Em, who tells us Rashid's story. His mother has died and he does not know his father, he fled home when he gets to know his father had been found although for him his father was dead. Paul feels bad, he has let him go perceiving he was in trouble.

Putting two and two together, we understand that when Rashid, not giving it a thought, took the money the Creeper had stolen, he was under the effects of the news that his father had been found. We might deduce that Rashid, who does not know his father, lacks a model to identify with, thus he has no future. The robbery is his wish to take an ideal, represented by just the opposite, the material things, money. Paul turns up as a substitute model. Rashid feels interested, reads his books (this is even more evident in the script) but when Paul sends him out, he searches for his real father.

In the next scenes Cyrus appears. He observes how Rashid observes him. He tries to see the secret, what is really happening; but his difficulty to connect with his painful past hinders him from thinking of the obvious facts. Surprisingly, his fantasies are geared to the idea of robbery. Rashid explains that on his way, he saw a rundown garage which he felt like sketching. Rashid sees a mutilated father, decrepit and his hatred gives way. The fact of sketching it shows the need of building an ideal.

Cyrus wants to see the drawing, to know the truth, know the secret. Rashid says he should pay first. *"once you look at it, you'll want to buy it, guaranteed, .... it is going to tear you up inside and make you all miserable"*. In other words, if you know who I am but have nothing to be responsible for you will feel miserable, knowing has its price. Cyrus does not pay and Rashid seeks another way. *"if I am bothering you why don't you hire me"*, but Cyrus claims to be very poor, like Paul, with little libido so as to be interested in strangers.

As a wedge to this situation, Ruby appears, also mutilated like Cyrus. Auggie asks how she lost her eye, Ruby says she does not feel like talking about it. Auggie tells her she looks dressed up as Captain Hook, making a hint to Cyrus, who really has the hook. Ruby like Cyrus is the harmed progenitor, impotent, who gets the son's hatred. Ruby, like Aunt Em, is looking for her daughter, fears losing her grandchild and is ready to fake and deceive. She tells Auggie, "our daughter". Auggie is like Cyrus; the unknown father. Here we get to know that in the past Auggie had stolen for Ruby. Ruby admits her helplessness *"I thought I could on my own, but I couldn't"*

Felicity is another version of Rashid. Both are the same age, do not know their father and both are in trouble, in need for somebody to take care of them. But Auggie is like Cyrus and Paul, having invested all his attention in his own shop, Auggie cannot help Ruby. Auggie is distraught and argues with the customer *"the shop is closed"* and there is no room for caring for others.

In the next scene, as if to make up for this outcome, Cyrus decides to hire Rashid. The job consists of cleaning a room where objects have been cramming for 20 years. Cleaning the past of painful memories. Rashid wants to know to what extent Cyrus is ready to take up his responsibility. Working independently or will there be fringe benefits? Resentful Rashid makes it difficult for him, but ends up yielding enthusiastically. Rashid fakes his identity once more, and taking up Paul as a model he pretends to be Paul or his son. Rashid and Cyrus work together on the cleansing of the past. The TV he finds symbolizes the images, the ideals, the identification model, which in this case is pretty damaged. Rashid is fast, Cyrus needs to face himself little by little and suggests taking a break. Rashid asks him about his arm knowing what the answer will be. Cyrus tells his story, about his suffering and the lesson he was given. Rashid unperturbed asks him if he did learn it. Cyrus, disheartened says he doesn't know though he tries. This is maybe the most authentic moment of the film.

Nevertheless, there is a twist in the events. Doreen arrives with Cyrus Jr., Rashid sees that his father has not fared so bad, he has a beautiful woman and tenderly plays with his son. Up to a point, he has been able to make over his life. Rashid is moved; is it admiration? Jealousy? Resentment? The point is he does not feel at ease there. He leaves behind the drawing, takes the TV and returns to Paul's.

Paul, like Cyrus, has lost his wife and his son, but cannot redo his life. Rashid would like to make up for it, and he takes him Cyrus' television, his father, his inheritance so that Paul may do what Cyrus has already done. But the images are snowy and blurred, so it is not easy.

Now it is Paul the one who faces Rashid with the truth. Rashid talks about his problems, but keeps many details to himself; he says nothing about the money or about the theft. The tale about Rashid meeting the Creeper seems to give a symbolic hint to the meeting Rashid has just had with Cyrus, his father;

somebody dangerous one does not want to come across. "I came across him and I am in trouble, he recognized me, sure he knows who I am". He fled from Cyrus just like the Creeper *"Some seconds later and I'd be dead"*. It is noteworthy, once again the idea of being close to death and being saved by a second like Paul or dying like Ellen.

The meeting father-son, thwarted and frustrated as in the case of Rashid and Cyrus is recurrent in other characters: Felicity, Auggie and Ruby... Ruby makes Auggie face his past. Ruby lied to Felicity that she would meet her father so as to see her once more. She tells Auggie: *"you just have to pretend" "got to do nothing, just go in and fake"*, it's just the same Auggie will do with Grandma Ethel. Ruby also tells him tales, *"she's just like you"*.

Felicity has agreed to see her father, but in like manner Rashid uses a fake name, her face is not seen, just her back. She feels disappointed to see Auggie is no big deal, as she most probably has expected. The idea of robbery and that the father has to pay looms again *"Chico told me to check him out, see if there is some dough enough for us"*. Felicity has had an abortion, she couldn't stand it. It is so traumatic for Ruby and Auggie they leave. Felicity feels abandoned and feeling anguished becomes aggressive. Once she is alone she feels terrible, an opportunity has dwindled away. This is the most traumatic scene in the film. But in a symbolic sense, what is so traumatic? That which cannot be faced? Let's see the next scene.

Pual talks to Rashid *" Listen carefully. Twenty five years ago there was a young man who went skiing... alone ... in the Alps. There was an avalanche, snow swallowed him up and his body was never recovered"* Rashid thinking he might have found his father, is anguished and says *"The end"*. Paul corrects him *"no, it is not the end, it is the beginning. His son was just a little boy at that time, but years passed and he grew up to be a skier too...."* The son has achieved the identification with the father. When alone in the mountain *"... he looks down and seen a body right there, at his feet, frozen in the ice. He bends down to take closer look.... suddenly he feels that he's looking in the mirror, that he is looking at himself. There he is, dead and the body is intact, frozen in a block of ice, as somebody who's been preserved through suspended animation. He gets on all fours, looks right into the dead man's face and realizes he is looking at his father. The strange thing is that the father is younger than the son now. The boy has become a man and it turns out he's older than his own father"*.

I think this scene summarizes the meaning of the film; discovering after childhood that the father does not match the ideal image we had as children. This ideal image is also the son's omnipotence, which is why it is like looking into a mirror. To mourn for the omnipotent image of the father means accepting oneself with one's own limits.... it means accepting and forgiving parents. He, who is able to go through this mourning, grows, matures, and becomes a man

and a father to himself. This is ... in the apparent paradox that the son is older than the father.

In other words, the adult son compares himself with the idealized childish image he had of his own father who looks older than him. The one who cannot give up and does that mourning as if he were dead, isolated from the others, frozen in a block of ice. That is how the film shows us the path from childhood to mature life through the period of adolescence, when disappointment and hatred towards the father hinder the identification and growth process. This theme is posed at the same time in two different moments; the one of adolescence through Rashid and Felicity, and the one of second adolescence when the parents such as Cyrus, Ruby, Auggie and Paul have to become parents of adolescent children and they have to mourn their own limitations in the achievement of their ideals.

Let's go back to the film. Behind the story, Rashid's birthday pops up as a symbol of growth. Symbolically speaking, after Paul's lesson, Rashid decides to grow up and become an adult. In the bookstore Rashid pushes Paul in jest to face his own mourning by inviting April to the celebration. This is why Rashid becomes the father and Paul the son. Paul understands the metaphor and yields. The three of them seem to make up a lost family, that of Paul and that of Rashid.

In the pub, Auggie gets comfort from his traumatic meeting Ruby, Felicity and his past through Violet. What he has not been able to do for Felicity he does for Rashid by giving him a job. He pays, he takes up the responsibility. Paul is the one who is still indebted, still impotent, he can give advice but not take up any responsibility. He has not paid his fare yet..... he has not mourned.

In the next scene Jimmy, the retard, teaches Rashid how to get rid of litter and dust on the sidewalk, a symbol of the horrible and painful, by just sweeping it away. It is the maniac negation, the paranoiac irresponsibility that foreshadows the mishap with the Cuban cigars. Rashid is going back in his growth.

In the next scene Paul tells Rashid the story of Batkin, the writer who smoked his own book. *"I mean... you think you're gonna die, what's more important, a good book or a good smoke"* Smoking, as we have said, is here the symbol of life, the meaning of life, the difference, that which gives meaning. Batkin lives an immediate future, he is able of resigning to his great dream of being a writer and finds in smoking the pleasure of being alive. This foreshadows the next lesson in Rashid's growing process: the payment he will make for the Cuban cigars giving up his bright future but finding relief in the reparation. Rashid doubts, just like in the Christmas Story, what is true, what is fiction? The hidden money turns up.

Paul makes Rashid confess his guilt, the robbery. The money, which for Rashid means his future, symbolizes clinging to the ideal image of his father rejecting the real father who has turned up, maimed but real. As we have seen,

he had told his Aunt Em: " *to me the son of a bitch is dead* ", in other words, I have no father, no father who can provide me with **a future**, I have got the money which implies choosing whichever future I like. Rashid refuses to give the money back to the Creeper, as we have seen the Creeper symbolizes the image of the feared father, thus hated. Rashid refuses to do his mourning, to give up, to become responsible, to forgive and accept his own limitations and those of his father. He lives thus in a dangerous world of lying and persecution.

The cigar accident and the reparation scene are shown. Reticent Rashid guided by Paul pays his due so as to get his job back. This symbolizes recovering friends who accompany, reconcile and mend the persecutory object of the inner world. Credibility implies taking up the responsibility. Each one turns his chair, symbolizing straightening up those things which were crooked.

Auggie, baffled, protests "*probably stolen, anyway*", Rashid answers back " *what d'you care where it comes from, it's yours*". It is just the same Paul will tell Auggie when he answers him in connection to the stolen camera "*Any deed for art, eh , Paul?*" In this case, as in the one of the camera, Auggie will put something stolen to good use.

Only Paul is missing to pay his due. We see the scene of the battering. The lock that does not lock, where life, Eros and its complications, the inevitable seep in. The same fifteen locks Granny Ethel will have to unlock so as not to spend Christmas on her own. In the next scene, the paradox is cleared out; the paradox of not knowing a God damn thing; that is paradise. Being open to life, day in, day out, with the changes life has in store for us.

Jimmy wants to know if Paul is really hurt or if he is just pretending. Has he paid his debt? Has he mourned? They ask about Rashid, who feeling guilty, leaves to take refuge at Cyrus' after having phoned the police to save Paul.

Paul cannot watch TV. The blurred images seem to symbolize his difficulty in finding ideals. He has been left alone and does not know how to go on.

Auggie gives Ruby the money. Following Rashid's example, he also feels the need of reparation, of doing something for Fellicity. He wants to know if it is her daughter, but to know the answer, like in Rashid's and Cyrus' case he has to take up the responsibility and pay. Ruby, with the same mysterious, ironic smile, which Auggie will use at the end of his own story, lets him decide. Auggie does not know if she is lying or not. But, anyway it doesn't matter.

Let's see it from a different angle. Life gives him the opportunity of having a daughter.... he might not have wanted one, but the one he would have liked to have he does not have it, so Felicity might be his daughter if he is ready to accept her. **This** is what Auggie has to decide, not if Ruby is lying or telling the truth.

Now it is Cyrus' turn. Rashid phones Paul but he is not in. It is interesting that when the film focuses on Cyrus, Paul is completely absent, as if the substitute



father had been done away with so that the real father might take the position he is supposed to.

Auggie is there, sticking pictures to his project. It is a symbol of being in the present moment, as will be seen immediately. Rashid phones and makes an appointment. That day, Rashid paints the "memories" room white. It is a symbol, the title of the scene will clear its bills. If we take up the previous symbols; the true father will have to take his place, now, without delays and accepting things for their true value, mourning all the ideal things he could not and will not be able to be.

Unexpectedly, Cyrus and Doreen arrive inviting Rashid to join them in a picnic. It is unexpected, life showing its ways of complicating and enriching things. But it also shows how they try to make him part of the family, and it is Rashid who avoids them out of jealousy and resentment.

Paul and Auggie arrive. The events take a fast pace. Paul says his injuries are the price a writer has to pay so as to go through real experiences. *"Research... I work the scene into the story... that makes the medical bill 100% deductible"* He means he is not angry, he has learned the lesson. Auggie says he should tell that to the IRS. As if to avoid Paul slipping away from taking the responsibility " it is no good getting the spanking and somebody else paying for the medical bill".

The issue of names crops up, Paul Benjamin. Rashid says: *"well, you and junior have the same name too"*. He is saying Cyrus Junior has the same name as his father, I do not have a father so I can choose whoever I want as a father.

Auggie and Paul press him to make a clean breast. Rashid protests that he will mourn whenever he feels is the right moment. Auggie, the one who takes pictures, says: *" there's no time like the present"*.

There is a fight, everybody is hurt. The atmosphere at the picnic is of integrating and elaboration silence. The film might end here, but we still have to know about Auggie.

The train symbolizes the passing of time. This time the image is in color as if to mean that it is no longer the frozen void time of melancholy, the enclosure the characters were submersed in at the beginning of the film. Life goes on, Summer went by and we are now at Christmas time. At the store they talk of the need of inventing an enemy to keep the Pentagon busy. In other words, the persecutor is a fantasy.

Paul is dating, most probably April. He has mourned, but he still needs his friend Auggie since he finds no inspiration for the Christmas story he has been asked to write.

Let me quote from "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" by Paul Auster: *"The very words "Christmas story" had a disagreeable connotation to me, conjuring up*

*horrible effusions of mellow and hypocrite oversentimentality. Not even the best Christmas stories were but dreams of wishes, fairy stories for adults, and for nothing in the world would I write something like that. Nevertheless, how could anybody not write a Christmas story that was not sentimental? It was a contradiction in terms, something impossible, a paradox"*<sup>2</sup>

Through the idea of Christmas, we are going back on the elaboration done. Christmas is the birth of Jesus, the son of God Father, All mighty. A time of idealizations, in which mourning for the ideal image of fathers in childhood bleed through the wounds that do not heal, Christmas is a particular moment in life. As in dreams, one would like to stop for a minute in dealing with harsh reality and closing one's eyes, blind like Ethel, we wish a world according to our hopes. We wish for a better life, a better family, in harmony and with good feelings.

It is also a time for considering what we are and what we would have liked to be, hurrying so as to straighten our accounts we want to clear our debts by a good deed in the illusion that we are better and deserve better. This generally makes one feel bad and that is why it is generally said that Christmas are happy only when one is a child or when a child, who will make us catch some enthusiasm, is around.

Let's return to the film. Paul asks Auggie if he knows any Christmas story. Auggie does not give it a thought, he knows many. In other words, he knows of childish illusion so he can make up a Christmas story whenever he feels like it. Just to make his wishes come true; the secret is to make sure every word said is true.

As Paul will later say *"to make up a good story you have to know how to push all the right buttons"* and Auggie is a Maestro at it. But, through Auggie, the author wants to seep in a teaching so as not to bluntly write *" a horrible effusion of hypocrite oversentimentality"*.

Auggie reads in the paper about the Creeper's and Roger Goodwin's death. On the one hand, this seems to symbolize that there is no longer any danger, there is no persecutor. But as regards the story, it is telling us that Auggie is making the Christmas story up on the spur of the moment.

As if foreshadowing the lesson of the story, Auggie explains how he got by the camera and that which is his project in life, that is, the secret of looking for the meaning of life is the small differences.

The action continues on Bicentennial Year, when Auggie started working at the tobacco store. This symbolizes growth, leaving childhood aside so as to start working as an adult.

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<sup>2</sup> Having no access to the original English words, this is a translation from the Spanish version.

The story starts off with the stealing of magazines at the beginning of the film, an identical scene to show what the origin of fiction is based on. The main character is substituted by evil Roger Goodwin, whose death Auggie has just read about in the paper. Goodwin means to win good, that good should prevail and triumph. Good wins over evil, it is to see the good side of things, admitting that even evil has a good aspect.

Roger Goodwin shows this in the wallet pictures, he once was a child, loved by his mother and Granny Ethel, a child who is happy with his trophy won at school. Auggie decides not to report him and keeps the wallet, as if to remember that every thing has a good side.

It is Christmas time and Auggie feels lonely and melancholic, pitying himself, sees the wallet and feels like doing his good deed, mend his internal world, full of objects that have abandoned him. Auggie offers us the possibility of being lured by the idea that he has done a good deed, that he and Ethel did not spend Christmas alone, he made her happy, but that is fiction. The Auggie that he is not is the one who spent Christmas with the Granny he does not have. Telling her how well he is doing and that he got a job in a tobacco shop, listening to words of approval he feels he does not deserve. Ethel, on the other hand, pretended to be the caring Granny of the good hearted grandson she does not have. Does reality sound too traumatic? Will we choose for this very reason to live in the fiction of what we are not?

It is just the foolishness that comes from that gratification from fiction, which leaving Auggie empty handed, that drives him into the wish of taking that which is not his, into stealing the camera. Nevertheless, this seems to be the price of having done a good deed. Blind Ethel does not dare look at her own reality. Not knowing how to go on with this crazy fiction, she falls into lethargy of negation: "too much Chianti".

We see Auggie is left feeling uneasy, remorse hinders him from using the camera. Not remorse for stealing, but for cheating and lying. He feels empty and he needs to mend. But Ethel is no longer there. Putting the camera to good use, a fact closely linked to the Christmas story, is the outcome of his depressive integration. Auggie has learned the lesson: if we want to live a better life, we should not be seduced by Christmas stories and sirens songs, and feign our unfulfilled wishes, but make them true, day by day, very little each time, without haste but without pause.

The final dialogue is full of subtleties. Paul has bought the story. *"It was a good deed, Auggie. It was a nice thing you did for her"*. Auggie seems amused *"I lied to her and stole from her. How do you call that a good deed" "you made her happy. Camera was stolen anyway - not as if the person you took it from really owned it"*. Auggie smiles ironically *"Any deed for Art, eh, Paul?" "I wouldn't say that. But at least you put the camera to good use". "and now you got your Christmas story, don't you?"* In these last words a metalogue takes place. Auggie is saying "you also let yourself in just to have a good story".

Auggie smiles malevolently and Paul understands he has been cheated. Anyway, he congratulates Auggie for his talent. Auggie says, "*Shit, you can't share your secrets with your friends, then what kind of friend are you?*" Paul answers, "*Exactly, life wouldn't be worth living, would it?*" Auggie is a good friend because he lets Paul see the deception, as if he were telling him "Cut the crap and the illusion of good deeds, stop thinking you should be better than you really are and that in that way you would get what you wish for. Life has got to be lived day by day, not balancing your deeds, knowing the good side of things, the small differences".

In brief, the film focuses on the topic of mourning for the ideal image of parents in infancy but it does so in a strange and deceitful manner mixing two absolutely different levels. This mixture leaves us puzzled and confused, seduced by our own ideals not knowing what to think, what to believe in. If it is true or false, what is a lie and what is true, what is right and what is wrong.

One level is that of illusion, negation, lie and deceit. It does not matter if Christmas is a lie as long as it makes you happy "any deed for art" "whatever for a good cause". This is the level of the smoke curtain which darkens things.

The other level is that of mourning, reparation, admitting the harm which has been caused, the limit. The authenticity. The true meaning of life from living the present, the small things, the one of the differences, searching the good and the bad side, but as from authenticity. This is the level of the smoke signal which takes us to discovering the truth.

Anyhow the author does not stick to a puritan moral in condemning lie, fiction or deceit, not even theft. Just the other way round, he seems to highlight the positive aspect of lying.

Lying, cheating and stealing draws our attention to that which we are missing, and as from fiction to that which we would like to be, we could be on our way to the materialization of our ideals. That is what Auggie has done with the stolen camera.

In this sense, it is as if Auggie would be telling Paul, "before having my camera, I also believed in Christmas stories. What does it matter how I got it, if I learned the lesson and now I can put it to a good use that fulfills my life. The good deed was not to make Ethel happy, Ethel fell asleep and was left as empty as me. If anything good came out of all this foolhardy, it is that I learned to live my life, without Christmas stories".

To round it up, let us see this same topic in words by Luis Chiozza: "*We can live in truth, in reality, in authenticity and in our present or we can live in a lie, in fantasy, in fallacy and also in the story of a yesterday that no longer is. We can live in that which we are or we can live imagining that which we are not; when we reach in thought that which has been and no longer is, that which makes up our wish of being what we now are not. But we still have a third option of living, that which belongs to transference, to theatre and play. In this*

*third option, in a continuous "trip" between the perception of what we are and the image of what we wish to be, the new experience of a "as if we were" is established. Thus, in a kind of illusion (...) we catch that middle field between the life we call "real" and the story (...) that middle field of the "as if" is set in each particular static situation at a varying distance between each extreme. In such a way that at a certain moment the transference is a fact that does not distinguish "real" life and at another moment is a saying that is told like a "pure story".*"

Thank you.

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