

# "The House of Games"

A theological **review** of David Manet's 1987 Orion Pictures Corp. study of manipulative deception (i.e., conning [short for "confidence-building with malign intent"]).

**REDEEMING SOCIAL VALUE:** Education against being taken by conners (conpersons, formerly "conmen"). Always, no matter how sophisticated about conning you get, there's always out there some conner more clever than thou, as the devil is (though God is more clever than the devil).

Bigtime, smalltime. Loree & I, in an Istanbul underground bazaar in 1958, didn't get taken: we were successful bargainers smalltime. But early in the present year, same city but in the glitzy government-sponsored "Bazaar 54" bigtime operation, we got taken for a few hundred dollars. How? Our government guide Ali set us up before entering: "You can trust the salesmen in Bazaar 54 [branches of which are in all Turkey's major cities]. They won't cheat you. But beware of bazaars elsewhere in the city: you may get taken." Ali exuded "Trust me," which we did & shouldn't have! (We weren't taken bigtime, but we were taken by bigtime --in this case, national--deception.) *Caveat emptor!* (Lat., "Let the buyer beware!")

**STORY-LINE:** Dr. Margaret Ford, a highly successful addiction-specialist psychiatrist, gets taken for \$80,000 through a devilishly complex, clever scheme involving a half-dozen denizens of a gambling establishment named "The House of Games." She'd interviewed Mike (tall-dark-handsome), one of the gang, telling him that she wanted to study the deception process. He seduces her, body & soul. To gain her confidence, he cons an army sergeant (but doesn't take his money: the ploy was for educational, not monetary, purposes)--then explains the process in detail to her. When the trap is sprung & she finds the gang divvying up her \$80,000, she makes a date with Mike, coldly murders him, then goes to a restaurant where (& here the film ends with evidence of her slide into corruption) she diverts a woman's attention so as to steal a gold cigarette-lighter from her purse.

**RATINGS:** Wildly divergent: \* "worst movie ever," "bad movie," "dope" / \*\* / \*\*\* / \*\*\*\* "a great psychoanalytic movie!" "a psychologic thriller where nothing is at it appears to be." Truly human ambiguity: a lonely, bored, "strong and vulnerable" pyschiatrist finds a criminal physically & mentally attractive & herself becomes one.

1 **A FARCE ON FREUD:** Going to her older mentor-shrink, Dr. Ford gets asked & advised. The question: "Have you had any pleasure lately?" When you're becalmed, Freud's "pleasure principle" is proffered as wind for your sails. No, says Dr. Ford, no pleasure lately; so she goes to the House of Games, acquires Mike (overworld to underworld, to defeat boredom by breaking routine & finding excitement), &--after extensive dithering--hops into bed with him. The advice: "Forgive yourself," the atheist surrogate for repentance (which requires a Second Party, or at least a second party). Self-forgiveness (do-it-yourself, circular-intrapsychic sin-to-salvation) is only pseudo-relational, authentic only in the limited sense in which talking to yourself is "conversation." Theologically, the self-forgiveness project's aim is to cut God out of the sin-to-salvation circle (or, in the Adam-&-Eve story, substituting conversation with the snake for communion with God). Historically, it's the West's Enlightenment project, the primary target of binLaden's hate (in the sense that America is the Enlightenment's supreme exfoliation). In sexual metaphor, it's (nonrelational) masturbation as substitute for (relational) intercourse. Three teleological failures as limitations of three goods (introspection, reason, & sexual pleasure).

2 "Malevolence" is a Latinate word meaning the opposite of **good will**. Biblically, "ill-will" is the source of angelic (Lucifer) & human **evil**. The specific kind of evil pervading this film, infesting the viewer with suspicion & anxiety, is in the NT called δόλος *dolos* (11x in NT; cognates 3x, 1 each; all 4 in LXX) "deception"--but so extensive was this type of evil that the NT uses an additional 13 Gk. roots for words bespeaking it). Jesus found Nathaniel "incapable of deceit" (Jn.1.47), but Paul found Elymas to be an utterer of "fraud" (Ac.13.10). Jesus himself was never guilty of "guile" (1P.2.22 qt. Is.53.9): in our film, Mike was never not guilty of

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it: he's "dolos" with hair & skin, though too human (& sympathetically portrayed) to be a mere stick-figure for this vice. (The film is highly moral but not moralistic--or Roger Ebert wouldn't have rated it "the year's best film.")....In case you want to check out the NT's other instances of this noun: Mt.26.4; M.7.22, 14.1; Rm.1.29, 3.13; 2Cor.4.2, 11.13, 12.16; 1Th.2.3; 1P.2.1,2, 3.10. (The Romans used the same noun, but with the -us ending.)

Homer's **Trojan horse** is a world-class "dolos" story, for the Trojans were softened up for the take (of their city) by the besiegers' craftily convincing them that the huge wooden horse was a good-will gift: the essence of dolos is ill-will pretending to be good-will (as Ali pretended to be defending us from the ng [non-governmental] sharks). ("Satan is a cunning rogue."--Luther [W.A.46.583]. The devil takes the innocent in their ignorance & the worldly-wise [eg, Dr.Ford] in their overconfidence [so "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"].)

3 Dr.Ford's a **control-freak** who switches from controlling for good (she says, in her profession) to controlling for evil. A client says "Why am I here?" & she says "To take control of your life." & he says "No, to kill myself." He (in the con plot) pretends to resist her insistence that he give her the gun, then gives it to her (&, at film-end, she uses it to murder Mike). To her mentor: "Why do we take their money when we can't help [she means "control"] them?" Mentor: "What do you enjoy?" Margaret: "I enjoy writing my book," for which she does research by taking up with Mike, who in a philosophical mood says "There are many sides to each of us. All those parts have to speak."

Margaret's tried to control by letting her good "sides" speak. After the murder, she rationalizes that now she's letting her evil "sides" speak: "When you've done something unforgivable, you must forgive yourself. And that's what I've done." Then she steals, & (though the script doesn't speak it) forgives herself for that. And, as far as the movie knows, she gets away with both murder & theft. But the she who gets away (if she does escape the law) isn't the same she who by her writings & counseling had been doing some good in the world: that good she can't get away from having been transformed into the evil she (whether or not the law ever catches up with her). This is a movie about (demonic) conversion. In the 9.17.01 BOSTON GLOBE, Ellen Goodman warns of this conversion vis-a-vis the horror of six days earlier: "What we tell our children about humanity may decide whether we can defeat our enemies without becoming like them."

4 Mike's one moment of good advice (which he's somewhat inclined to give her, out of a small flicker of pity or love or both) comes mid-film when he says to Margaret, "Don't **trust** nobody....I'm a con man, a criminal." "We can't hide anything" from our faces: he's a master face-reader & has read on her face some affection for him.

5 The film's dominant color is **red**, the sin-&-Satan color, which makes the story's pieces fit together. Also, blood color. Red clothing, objects (including the car of the set-up gunman [whose gun she takes]). And of course red as both temptation & danger. But without red, there'd be no story! Dr.Ford the control-freak was tight inwardly (cold, hard, low-affect) & outwardly (tight hairdo & clothing); the story gets interesting when she comes loose, takes risks (including erotic affection), sheds the old overcontrols (does life pick up interest when one loses control?). She's an extremist: from too Apollonian to too Dionysian. "People can change," we say, but usually when we say it we mean in the opposite direction from her change.

6 Aloneness is dangerous: the conmen had community, Margaret was alone (except for her worse-than-nothing mentor). We may be single ("unattached"), but God didn't make anybody to be solitary.

7 "The House of Games" is a negative parable of **grace**: we are saved by trust (faith) if we trust the trustworthy, ultimately our gracious God in Jesus Christ.