

Wagers and Dares

Films discussed: *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997), *Love Me If You Dare* (2003)

The device at the heart of *Oscar and Lucinda* is to take two misfits, who could be happy with no one but each other, bring them almost together against all probability, but then still keep them apart. Both characters, Lucinda Leplastrier and Oscar Hopkins, grew up in 19th century rural isolation, the former in Australia the later in Devon; each is brought up by only one parent. Oscar (played by Ralph Fiennes) is taught strict Plymouth Brethren ideas by his father. A religious crisis arises when servants secretly give him a taste of Christmas pudding and his father, catching him, makes him spit it out. The father, rejecting the pagan paraphernalia of Anglican worship and church holidays, is nevertheless superstitious enough to think that some taint attaches to pudding. This raises doubts in Oscar's mind, as he can't see the sin in pudding, and he begins to make wagers on religious matters asking God to reveal in that way the truth. The options he presents to God are very limited, presumably they are the denominations that were in his immediate area. The lot falls to Anglicanism, and Oscar departs to join them.

He goes to a university to prepare for a career in the Anglican church, and takes up gambling, with a success not explained in the film, to pay his bills. From there he embarks for Australia as a missionary. Although Australia is English, and therefore Anglican, it is thought to be sufficiently pagan to require the efforts of a missionary society, and it is the English colonists who receive the attention of the missionaries, not the aborigines.

Lucinda (Cate Blanchett) has inherited a large sum, the proceeds of the sale of the family land. She buys a glass works in Sidney. This brings her into contact with an Anglican clergyman who is a glass collector and with whom she strikes up a friendship while seeking his advice. Her accountant introduces her to gambling. While returning from a business trip to London Lucinda encounters Oscar on the boat. They discover a mutual interest in gambling, and Oscar maintains that it is not a sin.

Oscar explains the concept of Pascal's wager, and says that God requires man to gamble his soul. If there is anything sinful about gambling it is using something so divine for ordinary pleasure.

Just what Oscar's religious ideas are by and large is kept obscure in the film. From his remarks about Pascal we gather that he considers salvation to be a chancy thing. One is forced to choose without knowledge. But what has a clerical life to contribute to this? As the envoy of a missionary society, what does he expect his endeavor to accomplish for anyone? That the Oscar

character shows no interest or insight into these questions ought to be a major point. All these denominations that Oscar originally decided between give detailed accounts of what they believe and the reasons why they believe their view to be correct. Originally, Oscar is a child without access to such theological works or the education and maturity of judgment to use them—thus his childish casting of lots to make his choice. But then Oscar gets a theological education at a university, and this makes no difference to his mentality. During his whole life he makes blind bets.



This should have been a theme in the film. Oscar does not represent some charming simplicity but a rejection of the very substance of what he claimed he chose to believe when he made his religious wager. That is, he adopted, even if by chance, a religion of substance and reasons, which he dismisses in practice. But this is not an interest of the filmmakers or the typical audience. They do not want to get into

the substance of Christianity and denominational views. They leave alone this huge contradiction at the heart of Oscar's religious position.

Oscar applies for a remote assignment but Lucinda's clerical friend is sent instead. Soon, though, Oscar is discovered playing cards with Lucinda, and is dismissed from the missionary society.

He is taken in by Lucinda, with whom he is now in love. He proposes the idea of building a prefabricated glass church and taking it to the remote outpost where the clerical friend labors without benefit of a building. Here Oscar makes a Kierkegaardian wager (though, since Kierkegaard was not known in English speaking countries at this time, one supposes Oscar came up with it himself). The idea is that one sacrifices all to gain all, roughly on the inspiration of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Instead of making a play for Lucinda's affection, Oscar proposes to take the prefabricated church north to the remote outpost. Since he has a phobia of water, he will take it by the untried overland route and not by sea and river.

In doing what everyone says is an impossible feat he hopes to win Lucinda's confidence. At the same time he makes a side bet with her: his entire inheritance if he fails, vs. hers if he succeeds.

The film is filled with religious imagery, but the basic one is that of baptism, which is also associated with drowning. If this is taken with the movie's theme of gambling, then baptism is a

picture of death and rebirth, and gambling is a putting oneself at risk, a sort of embrace of death, for the sake of the release of winning, a sort of rebirth.

These are, however, individual fancies. Abraham was a world historical individual, who stood at the beginning of a great work God ordained and a great nation. He was called by God and put to a test in the context of that cosmic purpose. For Oscar to suppose that he can step into such a role vis-a-vis God, merely because he wants to marry some woman, is foolish. Neither does Oscar's elevation of gambling to some great divine principle carry any conviction, Pascal and some evangelist preachers notwithstanding.

Sometimes, the more we examine themes and symbolic elements the more and deeper are the connections we uncover. This is not the case with *Oscar and Lucinda* where what is on the surface is all there is. It is a brilliant surface, however, and the characters are striking. They are portrayed, moreover, by two of the world's great film actors. Perhaps the engaging characters, the ripping yarn, the scenery, and the talents of the filmmakers are all we need for a great entertainment, but there is nothing further to the movie than that.

Love Me If You Dare (Jeus d'enfants) comes billed as the number one smash hit from France. Only on the continent of Europe could this celebration of pointless nastiness be a commercial success. Two young people, first as children, and then up to about age thirty, engage in a game of dares where each in turn dares the other to do something, usually outrageous. Julien, first as a selfish and reckless boy and later as a youth with a perpetual nasty smirk never hesitates from the first dare that Sophie makes him. He begins by releasing the parking brake on a school bus, and continues heedless of the consequences for others. There is a canister that they exchange, and whoever holds it can propose the next dare with a "Game or no game?" that is never refused.

As they grow up, when one or the other wants to end the game in favor of a real relationship the other holds back. Then the dares take on the purpose to impose emotional suffering, and the next dare is fashioned as revenge, as though acceptance of the dare had not been wholly voluntary.

As adults they add physical danger (standing blindfolded on a track in front of an oncoming train) and extreme consequences, daring one to go away and not speak to the other for ten years. In the mean time they both contract marriages, yet these seem only for temporary selfish pleasure. There are two endings, one a dare to mutual suicide in which they are at the bottom of a hole for a building foundation while it fills with concrete, encasing them forever, and another in which as very old people in some sort of nursing home they continue to exchange dares while professing love for each other and making life miserable for everyone else. The double end and a few other features such as the over night aging from childhood to teenagers seem to be simply cutesy touches of the sort that adorn post-modern cinema.

All this seems to charm the French. The violations of the conventions of decency by the young (and puerile elders) is thought charming just because it is a violation of convention, something the French take to be valuable in itself. The film is well crafted, with good composition of images and well paced editing. More than that, the director is determined to show that he can use every trick in the book—When did you last see a camera roll shot?—and uses them successfully in a single movie. It seems, though, that as the French perfect their mastery of the techniques of filmmaking they can find less of human value left to say. *Love Me If You Dare*, which as a compendium of technique deserving to be shown in film schools is reduced in its content to a twisting together of romanticism with sadism to achieve its effect by creepiness and shock. It is careful not to reach a resolution in any direction.

That is how post-modernism works. Everybody knows the standard resolutions and endings based on what are now termed modern values and conventions, and we have an inner drive to resolve the story (whether due to cultural expectations, human nature, or some combination). The film fights us in these expectations at the same time that it feeds us the cues to seek resolution. This sets up a sort of complex aesthetic condition in the viewer. The film is probably deliberately playing on this: Do you the viewer want to enter into the emotional content of the movie and then endure the frustration of lack of resolution? Game or no game? It only works if the viewer plays along.

How long will this trickery continue to draw audiences? Post-modernism is really a way of repackaging the Romantic movement to give it another run, but we will run through it much faster this time, because the whole course is well known to us. Besides, this time we no longer believe in Romanticism's occult sources of value. We know that it is contrived. Will the achievement of Post-modernism be that of inoculating the coming generation against the "noble" feelings of Romanticism, and creating a generation of brutes and clods? Post-modernism is completely parasitic on that which it claims to be "post" of, and just as soon as it actually succeeds in being post it will crumble to nothing. What will be left then? Perhaps the ugly and unimaginative brutality that characterizes cultures such as Islam that modernism bypassed.

There are marked contrasts between these two films. Oscar and Lucinda are extraordinarily appealing, Julien and Sophie are repellent. Oscar is generous, Julien is selfish. Oscar is concerned about the good opinion of others, and especially his father. Julien, self-absorbed and sporting his mocking smile is unconcerned about his mother dying of cancer and makes life a misery for his father. The success of Oscar and Lucinda owes much to the transparency with which the actors convey the character's emotions. Julies and Sophie smirk and hide their feelings behind false fronts.

There are also points in common. Oscar and Lucinda come to depend on their gambling and they need that thrill. Their involvement of each other in it, making it vital part of their relationship, leads to Oscar's tragic end. Julien and Sophie also come to depend on the thrills of

the dares, are ready to kill each other for it, and in the first of the endings actually do so. Also there is something in common between a bet and a dare.

In a bet a person takes a risk with a chance of success or failure, there is a period of suspense, while the outcome is undecided, and then there is the resolution, of win or loss. With addictive gambling there seems to be something about this period of suspense that becomes the goal in itself. It differs from risk taking in business, where one ventures on the basis that the odds are in ones favor and that chance of gain compared to what is put at risk is sufficiently great to compensate for the risk and for the time and effort expended as well. Finally, in a business venture one tries to control circumstances as far as possible to minimize the risk and accelerate the return. That is, one tries to reduce the risk two ways, by cutting down the odds of failure and reducing the duration of the risk. But in gambling there is often a “house” which is interested only because it can guarantee that the odds are in its favor and against the gambler.

Visitors to Las Vegas have often noted the withdrawn and self-absorbed demeanor of the people playing the slot machines. Gambling can be highly unsocial and self-initiated. What it requires is a system, alien to the gambler, that enforces the rules. With the invention of the mechanical gambling devices, such as slot machines, that do everything from accepting the stakes to issuing the payout, the essentially non-social nature of gambling was laid bare.

A dare can take the form of a gamble, but is in its essence a social interaction where one individual proves some personal quality of courage, will or nerve to one or more other persons. There typically is no reward on offer, just the passage through an ordeal or period of risk, and the risk can be much more general than the typically monetary ones of gambling.

What is highly striking in comparing these two films is the stark contrast in the social effect of the risk taking. Oscar and Lucinda both gamble without it undoing the engaging and attractive nature of their personalities. This points to the cheating nature of the *Oscar and Lucinda* film, where Lucinda’s success as a business woman is not damaged and where Oscar runs up a remarkable winning streak that allows him to cover his educational and travel expenses and be generous besides. This is not what gambling really does to people, and so we have something of a fairy tale. The most remarkable thing is that Oscar and Lucinda can bet against each other without it damaging their relationship. Perhaps that is because neither is willing to let harm come to the other as a result: something that is not pledged but is tacit.

For the dares in *Love Me If You Dare* there is always an element of viciousness or a demeaning of the other person, and this grows so that toward the end the dares impose years of unhappiness or the actual embrace of death. And this is because of the characters of the two young people involved. In the death scene at the end Julien tells Sophie:

- There were a few things I was game for you never asked.
- Like?
- Eating ants... insulting the unemployed... loving you like crazy.

But as self-centered spoiled children they were not capable of such love, and the game stops them from ever growing into it. Each marries someone, but only out of a selfishness and spite, without a genuine commitment.

This brings us to another thing that bets and dares have in common. They are a replacement for the demands and challenges of real life. A real life with its moral framework and imperatives requires one to undertake hard things and undergo risks. These things are tests, but also opportunities for growth. As an added result they take a measure of the individual who emerges then from them with a character of known worth (or not). It is the characteristic of decadent social contexts that this necessary life environment is missing so that real risk and achievement cannot emerge. Whether this is an 18th century nobility or 20th century super-rich with a status secure apart from their character, the working poor in a rigid society for whom no real chance of achievement exists, or morally groundless middle-class gambler in Las Vegas, constructive challenge, test and achievement have been replaced by the gambling which substitutes for it. But as risk taking done only for its own sake, it simply repeats until failure takes down the gambler as the odds insure will eventually happen.

We can wonder if more and more of life is not taking on this character. Education, for example, where everyone is to have self-esteem protected regardless of actual achievement, sets aside real measures of achievement and worth, removing, during the developmental years, a large part of life from the possibility of fully emotionally invested endeavor. Something else is going to take its place. As long as slot machines give a sense of adventure to nobodies, gambling will be one of these substitutes. Higher education has in another way also become gambling. The reason for borrowing heavily and paying an enormous sum to get a degree from a prestige university is not the value of what could be learned in the formal education offered there. It is getting established with the right prestige and connections to improve the chance of career success, a chance to get lucky at the point of graduation.

Gambling, then, is the true counterpart of post-modernism. Outside a genuine framework of value, which does not exist as a possibility for post-modernism, human purposes are contrived and self-imposed ordeals, and the only commitment is addiction.