The Usual Suspects: Courage and Curiosity vs. Professional Smugness

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4 The Usual Suspects: courage and curiosity vs. professional smugness

If the notion of personal growth is personified by Isak Borg in *Wild Strawberries*, then there are few better examples of professional growth than *The Usual Suspects* (1995). Professional growth means maintaining an open, yet critical mindset while practicing your profession. Although *The Usual Suspects* is a heist movie widely known for its surprising plot twists, it is also a verbal and visual battle of wits between two ambitious professionals.

The movie starts cautiously; the opening credits appear against a backdrop of dark water reflecting slivers of light. The image fades to black and then a title appears: ‘San Pedro, California — last night’. It’s the middle of the night and Dean Keaton lies fatally injured on the deck of a freighter moored in a harbor. He lights a match and sets fire to trail of gasoline running over the deck.
The flame spreads rapidly. It passes a dead man's body and moves on, but is suddenly extinguished by a stream of urine from a shadowy figure standing on a higher deck. The man climbs down and approaches the injured Keaton. When he lights a cigarette, Keaton looks up at him and recognizes him.

**How are you doing, Keaton?**

Keaton looks up again with some difficulty and whispers:

**I can't feel my legs.........Keyser.**

**Ready?**

**What time is it?**

**Twelve-thirty.**

The man takes a gun from his pocket, aims, and kills (?) Keaton with two shots. He walks away, drops his cigarette on the trail of gas, reigniting it, and leaves the ship. A series of explosions ensues and the ship burns down.

Dissolve to the next scene: an interrogation room later that night. In exchange for immunity, Roger 'Verbal' Kint makes a statement.

**It all started six weeks ago.**

He recounts how a hold-up of a truckload of weapons parts went wrong because the driver heard a voice he recognized. Just a voice.

**Sometimes that's all you need.**

Verbal is precisely that kind of voice as he recounts how the suspects were rounded up, lined up and interrogated, and how they sat in the waiting room after their interrogation. There were no cops present in the waiting room, so everything Kint says about what the five men talked about there is hearsay. Kint claims one of them was planning the next heist…

The next morning the police discover the full impact of the fire on the ship: 27 dead and only two survivors. Crippled conman Verbal Kint came away unscathed while Arkos Kovaz, a Hungarian criminal who speaks no English, sustained some burn injuries. On board, officers find 91 million dollars in cash, raising suspicion that the fire was a drug deal gone awry.

**US Customs' Special Agent Dave Kujan goes to San Pedro to investigate this angle.**
But he has another reason to go, too. He has a personal vendetta against Dean Keaton, a former police officer gone bad. Kujan is convinced Keaton is behind the crime.

Meanwhile, Kint has been granted immunity and is about to be released on bail. He refuses to be interrogated again, but agrees to a meeting in the local police chief’s messy office. Kint is already seated when Kujan walks in. This marks the start of the psychological game pitting Kint and Kujan in a battle of words and images. Before long, Kujan resorts to threats:

I’ll get right to the point. I’m smarter than you. I’ll find out what I want to know and I’ll get it from you whether you like it or not.

Kint listens intently, but responds evasively:

I’m not a rat.

He says it was hard to convince Keaton to take part in the raid, but that he succeeded, as did the raid. He contends they were celebrating their success, hailing Verbal as ‘the man with the plan.’ But Kujan keeps pushing his own theory: Keaton is the brains behind the job.

Let me tell you something. I know Dean Keaton. I’ve been investigating him for years. The one I know is a cold blooded bastard…I think he was behind that whole circus at the marina….My bet is he is using you, because you’re stupid and you think he’s your friend…

Kint looks away and tries a different tack:

There was a lawyer, Kobayashi.

Is he the one who killed Keaton?

No. But I’m sure Keaton is dead.
Kujan is convinced of his own version of events and self-confidently challenges Kint to tell him his story:

**Convince me. Tell me every last detail.**

And that is exactly what Kint does, although not quite the way Kujan expects. Kint first elaborates on his tales of action and mystery, about Redfoot who had another job for them which they carried out, about Kobayashi who makes them an offer they can’t refuse from his client, one Keyser Söze, a dangerous Turkish criminal who always remains in the background.

**Anybody could have worked for Söze. You never knew. That was his power. The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.**

The story about Keyser is shown in soft focus, preventing us from getting a clear view of his face. We’re left to wonder whether this is just a tall tale, a red herring. In any case, it was Keyser who, through Kobayashi, forced them to hold up the ship in order to prevent a 91- million-dollar cocaine deal. Despite heavy security, they managed to hijack the vessel. However, they found not a trace of cocaine. The only thing they did find was an Argentinean prisoner named Arturo who kept screaming that Keyser Söze was on board. Arturo knew what Keyser looked like. He was shot in his cell (by whom?). It seemed the sole survivor was Keaton, but he was then shot by an unknown party from the upper deck. Was it Keyser Söze? Kint tells Kujan he saw the whole thing from where he was hiding, but the customs agent is suspicious. Reasoning that Keaton was Kint’s friend, he asks:

**Then why didn’t you help him?**

**I was afraid, okay?….It was Keyser Söze, Agent Kujan. I mean the devil himself. How do you shoot the devil in the back? What if you miss?**

And he holds up his crippled left hand. Kint starts to break down and Kujan is convinced he knows what went down:

**There was no drugs on the boat…It was a suicide mission to whack out the one man that could finger Keyser Söze….. Keaton was Keyser Söze.**

Kint objects some more, but Kujan persists, calling him a cripple, stupid and weak: the only reasons he was allowed to live. Kint starts crying:

**It was all Keaton. We followed him from the beginning…**

Kint complains about Keaton while Kujan smiles triumphantly. He has managed to root out the truth. Keaton is dead and Keyser Söze was a spook story. Meanwhile, Kint’s
bail has been posted and he is free to go. He leaves the office a broken, crippled man.

Kujan sits on the police chief’s desk, smiling smugly, until his gaze falls upon a few unusual names on the police bulletin boards on the wall. Names he recognizes from Kint’s stories… Could it be that…? In his haste to get up and go after Kint, he drops his coffee mug. On the bottom of the mug we see another familiar name:

By now, Kint has reached the street, where he’s suddenly no longer limping and far from broken. He is picked up in a car by his accomplice who played the role of Kobayashi in his tales. Kujan also rushes outside and looks around bewildered. But Roger ‘Verbal’ Kint is nowhere in sight. Inside the police station, a sketch of Keyser Söze based on Arkoz Kovaz’s description rolls out of the fax machine. The sketch looks suspiciously like Kint.

What we have just seen unfold between the two men in the police chief’s office is partly an acting duel, but mainly an interpretative face-off based on selective perception and assignation of meaning. Kujan entered the meeting fully convinced he knew the truth and looking to confirm what he already suspected (Keaton was the bad guy!). His mission was successful thanks to Kint’s courage and curiosity. Kujan thought he was in a boxing match and had Kint cornered and hanging in the ropes. Kint, however, was not boxing. For him it was a judo match in which he upset his opponent’s balance by moving with him and luring him in. He appeared physically weak, but psychologically he was by far the stronger of the two. An adept improviser, Kint cleverly made use of Special Agent Kujan’s inflated ego and self-congratulatory tendencies.

The Usual Suspects, 1995, 102 minutes, USA
Screenplay: Christopher McQuarrie

Directed by: Bryan Singer

Actors: Kevin Spacey (Verbal), Chazz Palminteri (Dave Kujan), Gabriel Byrne (Keaton), Stephen Baldwin (McManus), Benicio del Toro (Fenster), Pete Postlethwaite (Kobayashi)

Virtues and values at stake

In this movie, the Bad Guy demonstrates strong moral qualities, but he is insincere and only out for his own gain. The Good Guy is a law enforcement officer whose intention it is to serve the common good, but his ego proves to be his fatal flaw. In Kujan, we see great drive; in Kint, we see skill, courage and curiosity when he improvises his tales (Virtues). Kujan personifies smugness and disrespect in his interrogation while Kint’s stories abound with insincerity and unreliability (Vices).

Relevant Connections in Genre

Heist movies – thrillers about carefully planned robberies – first became a full-fledged genre in the heyday of the film noir style, particularly in John Huston’s The Asphalt Jungle (1950). Quentin Tarrantino’s Reservoir Dogs (1992) is multiperspectivist variation on the same type of narrative. The Usual Suspects deviates from this tradition in the sense that the mastermind behind the heist is absent. The brains behind the scheme sits in the police station and tells stories that buy him freedom with no consideration for the cost, the number of lives lost, conveniently including his ‘accomplices’ – except one.

Relevant Connections in Terms of Content

The movie’s title refers to the scene in Casablanca (1942) when Captain Louis
Renaud says: ‘Major Strasser has been shot. Round up the usual suspects.’ This line has become an expression in its own right.

Keyser Söze is based on the life of John List, an accountant from Westfield, New Jersey. This pious, hard-working man owned a colossal home, but had run up even more colossal debts. He gradually lost all perspective and no longer saw any way out of his financial troubles but to kill his family. This led him, on November 9, 1971, to shoot his wife, mother and three children. Wanting to spare them the disgrace of bankruptcy, he thought they'd be better off with God. Bobby Roth turned this into a made-for-TV movie called *Judgment Day: The John List Story* (1993), which in turn inspired Christopher McQuarrie to write the screenplay of *The Usual Suspects*. McQuarrie transformed the accountant-gone-berserk into the mythical avenger from Turkey.

The ‘Devil’s greatest trick’ was inspired by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). The exact translation of the sentence in question from *Le Spleen de Paris* (1862) is: ‘The devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.’

**Connected Themes**

What do you do with information that is unexpected and unwelcome? Isak Borg allows this information in, dreams about it, talks about it with his nearest and dearest, and learns from it. Dave Kujan remains suspicious and tries to disprove what he hears. As soon as he sees his own preconceived notions confirmed, he stops learning, at least until he reaches insight by association. By that time, however, it’s too late. What do you believe, and what are the facts? A classic movie on this theme is *Rashomon* (1950). More on that later.