

Puzzle Films

For Edward Branigan

Puzzle Films

*Complex Storytelling in
Contemporary Cinema*

Edited by Warren Buckland

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Introduction: Puzzle Plots

Warren Buckland

People from all cultures understand their experiences and identities by engaging the stories of others, and by constructing their own stories. But in today's culture dominated by new media, experiences are becoming increasingly ambiguous and fragmented; correspondingly, the stories that attempt to represent those experiences have become opaque and complex. These complex stories overturn folk-psychological ways of understanding and instead represent radically new experiences and identities, which are usually coded as disturbing and traumatic.

This volume examines the influence of this new storytelling epoch on contemporary cinema. It identifies and analyzes "Contemporary Puzzle Films" – a popular cycle of films from the 1990s that rejects classical storytelling techniques and replaces them with complex storytelling. I spend the first part of this introduction examining the concept of the "complex plot" as found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, before pointing out how puzzle films go beyond Aristotle's sense of complexity. Other studies have begun to identify and analyze these films, positioning them on a continuum that ranges from "similar to" to "distant from" classical storytelling (see Eig [2003], the papers in Staiger [ed., 2006],¹ Bordwell [2002, 2006, pp. 72–103], Branigan [2006], and Denby [2007]). In a similar vein, Jan Simons has also used complexity theory and game theory to analyze the films of Lars von Trier (Simons 2007).

David Bordwell's "Film Futures" (2002) is representative of these studies. Bordwell subsumes complex storytelling under Aristotle's conception of plot. This may, at first, seem uncontroversial, because Aristotle does identify both simple and complex plot structures (*Poetics*, ch. 10).² However, I argue in this volume that the complexity of puzzle films far exceeds Aristotle's meaning of complex plot. Yet Bordwell does not feel the need to go beyond Aristotle's conception of complexity.

All poetic arts, according to Aristotle, emerge out of general principles of mimesis, or imitation. “Plot” refers to the “arrangement” of events that are imitated. For a plot to be successful, the events it selects, combines, and arranges must appear probable and even necessary rather than contingent and haphazard (which is the case with episodic plots – the worst of all plot structures, according to Aristotle). Probability and necessity form the basis of mimesis and classicism.

Simple plots are mimetic (and therefore classical) because they involve the arrangement of events into a single, continuous action organized and unified into a beginning (initiation of the action), middle (involving a complication of the action), and end (marked by the resolution of the complicating action). Audiences find such a plot easy to comprehend.

Aristotle characterizes complex plots as simple plots with the additional qualities of “reversal” and “recognition” (*Poetics*, ch. 11). A reversal (more specifically, a reversal of good fortunes) is an action or event that runs counter to a character’s (usually the hero’s) situation and the spectator’s expectations. A tragic error suddenly befalls the hero, which has huge unforeseen consequences for him or her. Recognition names the moment when the hero discovers that he or she is subjected to a reversal. Aristotle argues that a plot becomes stronger if recognition and reversal take place at the same time. The moment Oedipus discovers that he has killed his father and married his mother is the ultimate moment of realization and reversal of fortunes to befall any character in the history of drama.

Reversal and recognition introduce a new line of causality into the plot: in addition to the actions and events motivated and caused by characters, there’s the plot’s additional line of causality that exists over and above the characters. Reversal and recognition are not obviously carried out by characters; they are imposed on the characters and radically alter their destiny. The addition of a second line of causality that introduces reversal and recognition is what, for Aristotle, makes the complex plot complex.

Yet, for Aristotle, complex plots are *still* classical, mimetic, and unified, because reversal and recognition are eventually made to appear probable and necessary. This may seem paradoxical, because of the huge disruption that recognition and reversal cause. To understand Aristotle’s reasoning, we need to investigate what he means by “complex.”

The term Aristotle uses for complex is *peplegmenos*, which literally means “interwoven.” In a successful complex plot, the second line of causality (which introduces recognition and reversal) is interwoven into the first, the characters’ plotline. By using the term “interwoven” Aristotle understands that, while the second plot initially disrupts the first by

radically altering the hero's destiny, the second plot is eventually integrated into the first, resulting in a unified, classical plot once more, in which reversal and recognition appear to be probable and even necessary actions. Oedipus's recognition and reversal eventually appear inevitable, a necessary part of his plotline (the oracle even predicted Oedipus's misfortunes at the beginning of the drama). Once we grasp his misfortune as a plot necessity, we feel pity and fear toward the unfortunate character. These emotions elicit a cathartic reaction in the audience.

The use of the term "complex" in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* extends far beyond Aristotle's term *peplegmenos*. The "puzzle plot" is, I would argue, the third type of plot that comes after the complex plot. A puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*.

In regard to puzzle films, Bordwell follows Aristotle in interweaving the complex, multiple plotlines back into a single, unified classical plot. He only considers one additional quality of the puzzle film – forking path plots – which he finds he can easily subsume under Aristotle's classicism:

[T]hese forking path films [call] forth folk-psychological inferences and [are] designed for quick comprehension. (2002, p. 91)

[In forking path films] narrative patterning obligingly highlights a single crucial incident and traces out its *inevitable* implications. (92; emphasis added)

[Forking paths illustrate] alternative but *integral* courses of events – something fairly easy to imagine in our own lives and to follow on the screen. (92; emphasis added)

[Forking path films] call upon skills we already possess, notably our ability to *bind sequences together* in the most *plausible* way in terms of time, space, and causality. (96; emphases added)

Thomas Elsaesser (in this volume) notes that the result of Bordwell's argument "is that the para-normal features are given normal explanations, and the narratives are restored to their 'proper' functioning."

Edward Branigan points out in his discussion of Bordwell's paper: "it may be possible to imagine more radical kinds of forking-path films" (2002, pp. 106–7). Branigan distinguishes the more conservative forking-path films that Bordwell discusses from the more radical films by calling the latter multiple draft films.³

In reading Bordwell's account of forking-path plots, I am reminded of attempts by generative stylistics in the 1960s to "describe" (that is, reduce) complex literature to simple sentences and transformational rules. Following Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, Richard Ohmann (1969) defines transformational rules as manipulations of a sentence that produce a new (usually more complex) sentence by reordering, combining, adding, and deleting grammatical components:

Since the complexity of a sentence is the product of the generalized transformations it has gone through, a breakdown of the sentence into its component simple sentences and the generalized transformations applied (in the order of application) will be an account of its complexity. (1969, p. 139)

More simply put, a complex sentence is made up of one or more simple sentences plus transformational rules. A complex sentence can therefore, in this model, be accounted for and understood in terms of its simple sentences in addition to the transformational rules that combined these simple sentences together to generate the complex sentence.

Ohmann analyses 10 lines from William Faulkner's "The Bear" (here I reproduce the first three lines only):

... the desk and the shelf above it on which rested the ledgers in which McCaslin recorded the slow outward trickle of food and supplies and equipment which returned each fall as cotton made and ginned and sold ... (in Ohmann, p. 141)

Ohmann argues that Faulkner's prose in this passage consists predominately of simple sentences plus three transformational rules: the relative clause transformation; the conjunction transformation; and the comparative transformation (141–2). Ohmann reduces the Faulkner passage back to its simple sentences by removing the transformational rules, which yields:

... the desk. The shelf was above it. The ledgers rested on the shelf. The ledgers were old. McCaslin recorded the trickle of food in the ledgers. McCaslin recorded the trickle of supplies in the ledgers. McCaslin recorded the trickle of equipment in the ledgers. The trickle was slow. The trickle was outward. The trickle returned each fall as cotton. The cotton was made. The cotton was ginned. The cotton was sold. (Ohmann, p. 142)

I cannot help thinking that there's something missing from Ohmann's rewriting of Faulkner – and I'm not only referring to the transformational rules.

But Ohmann suggests that Faulkner is really very similar to Hemingway; he just uses a few more transformational rules than Hemingway does.

Bordwell attempts something similar to Ohmann in relation to forking-path/multiple draft/puzzle films. He reduces these films down to a classical framework to preserve their stability and coherence – but at the expense of their intricacy and perplexity. See, for example, his reading of *Memento* (2006, pp. 78–80). When Bordwell wants to fit the film into the classical paradigm, he downplays its narration and the spectator's experience. For example, *Memento* may actually consist of “the classical four-part pattern” (2006, p. 80), but the film's presentation obscures the logic of that pattern. And when a film does not conform to classical norms (such as redundancy), Bordwell regards the director to be amiss: “If complex storytelling demands high redundancy, Lynch [in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*] has been derelict in his duty” (2006, p. 89).

The premise of this volume is that the majority of forking-path/multiple draft/puzzle films are distinct in that they break the boundaries of the classical, unified mimetic plot. The puzzle film is made up of non-classical characters who perform non-classical actions and events. Puzzle film constitutes a post-classical mode of filmic representation and experience not delimited by mimesis.

For example, there is no way that the end of *Lost Highway* (1997) (a film I analyze scene by scene in this volume), in which Fred Madison is positioned outside his house *and* inside it at the same time, can be subsumed under classical conceptions of mimesis, probability, or necessity. This action (and many others in the film) is startling precisely because it is improbable. *Run Lola Run*'s (1998) three alternative plotlines break down any sense of mimesis or necessity; the film can be subsumed under the concept of probability only when we accept that it realizes or materializes three alternative probabilities, rather than (as is customary in the traditional mimetic plot) only one probability. Michael Wedel analyzes *Run Lola Run* and discusses Bordwell's forking-paths argument in this volume. In *The Sixth Sense* (1999), Dr Malcolm Crowe's realization at the end of the film that he has in fact been dead from scene 2 onward seems at first to conform to a standard moment of recognition in Aristotle's sense. However, this recognition does not lead the audience to feel catharsis, but to a sense that the film's director, Shyamalan, has pulled a “fast one” on the audience. Daniel Barratt asks in his analysis of the film in this volume: How does the director keep the audience “blind” to the film's narrative twist? It is the film's twist that drove audiences back to the cinemas to see the

film again, rather than walk away from their first viewing feeling cathartic. And, although it is in part possible to motivate the backward movement of *Memento* (2000) (a film Stefano Ghislotti analyzes in this volume) by arguing that it imitates Leonard's lack of a short-term memory – for he cannot remember what happened two minutes previously, so the spectator does not (initially) see what happened two minutes previously – this mimetic reading soon breaks down, because the spectator gradually builds up a memory of what happens in the plot's *future* events, whereas Leonard never builds up a memory (of either past or future events). Hence there is no reconciliation or interweaving between the character's plot and the secondary plot. Furthermore, Leonard never experiences a reversal or revelation – or, if he does, he soon forgets about it, and writing it down leads more often than not to confusion rather than clarification (as his murder of Teddy demonstrates, since we are dubious that he is “the one”).

How do puzzle plots go beyond Aristotle's definition of the complex plot? The chapters in this volume demonstrate that puzzle films embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality. These films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences. They are populated with characters who are schizophrenic, lose their memory, are unreliable narrators, or are dead (but without us – or them – realizing). In the end, the complexity of puzzle films operates on two levels: narrative and narration. It emphasizes the complex *telling* (plot, narration) of a simple or complex *story* (narrative).

The term “puzzle film” names a mode of filmmaking that cuts across traditional filmmaking practices, all of which are becoming increasingly difficult to define: so-called American “independent” cinema, the European and international art film, and certain modes of avant-garde filmmaking. Rather than try to redefine these practices, this volume unites them on the basis of their shared storytelling complexity. This “unity” is of course outweighed by the diversity of each film. This volume investigates the three key sites of film production where complex storytelling is prevalent: North America, Europe, and Asia.

Outline of Chapters

Several contributors to *Puzzle Films* use David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) to guide them through their chosen puzzle films. I will briefly outline his theory before summarizing the chapters.

Long before he began writing about forking-path films, Bordwell developed a cognitive theory of comprehension using the concepts of schemata, cues, and inferences. This theory is not limited to classical films; as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, it is sufficiently flexible to cover puzzle films.⁴ When watching a film, which cognitivists posit as being inherently incomplete, spectators use schemata to organize it into a coherent mental representation. Schemata are activated by cues in the data. Gaps in the film are the most evident cues, for they are simply the missing data that spectators need to fill in. Films cue spectators to generate inferences to fill in the gaps.⁵ When comprehending a narrative film, one schema in particular guides our inferences – the Aristotelian-based canonical story format:

Nearly all story-comprehension researchers agree that the most common template structure can be articulated as a “canonical” story format, something like this: introduction of setting and characters – explanation of a state of affairs – complicating action – ensuing events – outcome – ending. (Bordwell 1985, p. 35)

As a film progresses, spectators experience the events and actions as they are arranged by the plot (or what Bordwell calls the *syuzhet*, following the Russian Formalists). Plot or *syuzhet* belongs to the level of narration to the extent that these terms refer to *how* events are presented on screen. Spectators rearrange events, disambiguate their relations and order, and in doing so, gradually construct a story (or *fabula*). This is the level of the narrative, of *what* happens.

Because the film’s story is a mental representation the spectator constructs during his or her experience of the film’s plot, the story is in a constant state of change, owing to the spectator’s ongoing generation of new inferences, strengthening of existing hypotheses, and abandonment of existing inferences. A film may deliberately lead spectators to generate incorrect inferences or the film may deliberately challenge the canonical story format: “If the film does not correspond to the canonic story, the spectator must adjust his or her expectations and posit, however tentatively, new explanations for what is presented” (Bordwell 1985, p. 36). This process of readjustment is precisely what the spectator must go through in relation to puzzle films.

Bordwell is an “atheistic” narratologist because he does not recognize the role of an external “master of ceremonies” controlling the story events. In other words, he does not posit the existence of external narrative agents (external to the story): “To give every film a narrator or implied author is to indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction. . . . [This strategy takes] the

process of narration to be grounded in the classic communication diagram: a message is passed from sender to receiver” (Bordwell 1985, p. 62). In place of this communication model, Bordwell argues that narration “presupposes a perceiver, but not any sender, of a message” (Bordwell 1985, p. 62).

Edward Branigan’s cognitive model of narration (1992) presupposes both a sender and receiver of a film – in fact several senders and receivers, including narrators, characters, and focalizers. Spectators comprehend characters as agents who exist on the level of narrative; the character is therefore an agent who directly experiences narrative events and who acts and is acted upon in the narrative world. A character whose experiences of the narrative world are then conveyed to spectators become focalizers.

Branigan further distinguishes two types of focalization, each representing a different level of a character’s experiences: external focalization, which represents a character’s visual and aural awareness of narrative events (the spectator sees what the character sees, but not from the character’s position in the narrative; the spectator shares the character’s attention, rather than their experience); and internal focalization, which represents a character’s private and subjective experiences.

In opposition to characters and focalizers, narrators do not exist in the narrative; they exist outside it on the level of narration. This means they have the ability to influence the shape and direction of the narrative.

From these distinctions, we can label and identify any shot in a narrative film in terms of the agents who control it and the level(s) on which it operates.

Thomas Elsaesser’s “The Mind-Game Film” offers a seminal and wide-ranging historical and theoretical overview of a category of films that overlap considerably with the puzzle film – the mind-game film. Indeed, we could argue that the puzzle film is the mind-game film seen from one theoretical perspective – narratology. Elsaesser does not limit himself to one perspective, but instead examines the mind-game film from several perspectives – not only narratology, but also psychology and psychopathology, history and politics – in order to identify its multiple and diverse distinctive characteristics. He notes that mind-game films “address not just the usual (genre) issues of adolescent identity-crises, sexuality, gender, the oedipal family, and the dysfunctional community, but also epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds) that are in the mainstream of the kinds of philosophical inquiry focused on human consciousness, the mind and the brain, multiple realities or possible worlds.” Similarly, he argues that

mind-game films “imply and implicate spectators in a manner not covered by the classical theories of identification.”

The remaining chapters focus on a mind-game/puzzle film (or small group of films) from a narratological perspective. In my own contribution, “Making Sense of *Lost Highway*,” I use Bordwell’s and then Branigan’s cognitive theories of narration to analyze scene by scene David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, focusing on the film’s complex, intriguing, and engaging storytelling strategies.

In “‘Twist Blindness’: The Role of Primacy, Priming, Schemas, and Reconstructive Memory in a First-Time Viewing of *The Sixth Sense*,” Daniel Barrett introduces/develops a series of new cognitive concepts into film studies – including attention, primacy, priming, reconstructive memory, and change blindness – to explain why first-time viewers of M. Night Shyamalam’s *The Sixth Sense* remain “blind” to the film’s narrative twist.

Stefano Ghislotti’s “Narrative Comprehension Made Difficult: Film Form and Mnemonic Devices in *Memento*” examines the unique organizing principles behind the progressive, regressive, recounted, and fragmented storylines of a film many regard to be the archetypal puzzle film – *Memento* (Christopher Nolan). Ghislotti focuses specifically on the experiential difference between the original theatrical and DVD release, in which time and causality are reversed, and the alternative chronological edition provided on the special edition DVD.

Chris Dzialo studies the screenplay as a legitimate and undervalued form of cinema in itself. He examines two of Charlie Kaufman’s screenplays – “Adaptation” (2002) and “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” (2004) – and highlights their ambiguous and indeterminate articulation of time. He identifies a tension between, on the one hand, a desire to overcome time as a variable and, on the other, the demand for narrative clarity and the irreversible nature of projection time. He calls this mode of storytelling “frustrated time” narration.

Michael Wedel analyzes the narration of *Run Lola Run* and argues that it “reconfigures temporal linearity and circularity, action and causality, movement and stasis around the central problems of embodied subjectivity, spatio-temporal intervals, and hetero-topic experience.” Wedel presents a substantial expansion of Bordwell’s reading of *Run Lola Run* in his “Film Futures” paper, by focusing on cinematic rhythm created by sound and music – which, Wedel argues, establish another, more intricate and paradoxical temporal logic in the film.

Allan Cameron and Sean Cubitt begin by discussing the first in Andrew Lau's *Infernal Affairs* (2002–3) trilogy of films within the context of Scott Bukatman's concept of the terminal screen, before moving on to analyze how the film's morality is conveyed through its dense narrative, setting morality and narrative in opposition. They point out that the two main characters (Yan and Ming) deny each other their own truth. The authors end by discussing how the film's narrative and morality address the spectator.

Gary Bettinson charts Wong Kar-wai's manipulation of both genre and narrational conventions in *2046* (2004) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Whereas *In the Mood for Love* meshes melodrama and detective genres, creating a narration consisting of gaps, unreliable cues, and retardations, *2046* combines melodrama and science fiction, while its narration disorients and misdirects the spectator.

Yunda Eddie Feng begins by considering Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) and *Purple Butterfly* (2003) to be reworkings of Hitchcock's thrillers, a reworking that involves combining the thriller format with complex storytelling. Feng identifies nonlinearity and "aggressive" visual style as Lou's key complex storytelling techniques. *Suzhou River* blurs the boundary between the vision of an unseen character-narrator and that of the director. In specific terms, the film occasionally and deliberately confuses the unseen diegetic narrator's focalized shots (which he makes with his video camera) and the director's nonfocalized objective shots. Feng argues that we can only distinguish these two types of shots retrospectively, after we have seen the whole film once. *Purple Butterfly* does not conflate external and internal narration, but its dearth of exposition encourages viewers to practice active engagement in order to comprehend the narrative and to fill gaps in information.

In "The Pragmatic Poetics of Hong Sangsoo's *The Day a Pig Fell into a Well*," Marshall Deutelbaum examines Hong Sangsoo's first film, a multi-plot, multi-character film made in 1996. Deutelbaum notes that Hong's film is the result of the combination of four scripts by four writers, with each script describing a character's experience over a day. Hong revised these scripts in order to create a single story that connects the characters to one another – but without reducing the four plots to a single, coherent, mimetic plot. Rejecting critics who say the film effaces temporal linearity, Deutelbaum examines the film's complex and indirect way of signifying temporality, which he contrasts to the conventional (and mimetic) multi-plot/multi-character Hollywood film *Crash* (2004).

Eleftheria Thanouli uses Bordwell's cognitive theory to analyze Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003). She asks "what makes a film travel or 'translate' to

other cultures?"; "how can a filmmaker be original in the era of the 'already filmed?"; and, above all, "how can one resolve the tension between Hollywood and national cinemas in this increasing phase of globalization?" Like many contributors to this volume, she feels the need to go over the film again after first viewing, to double-check the connections among the characters in what is a "twisted narrative" transmitted through a "twisted narration." Yet, she asserts that, paradoxically, the film still remains accessible and intelligible on first viewing. Her close analysis of the film attempts to uncover the way this paradoxical viewing experience is created.

This volume could have been three times as long. Below is a list of additional puzzle films from the 1990s onward, each of which occupies a unique position on the continuum ranging from "similar to" to "distant from" classical storytelling (perhaps with *Sliding Doors* at one end and *Inland Empire* at the other, respectively). The analysis of each film will add further insight into the phenomenon of the contemporary puzzle film:

21 Grams (2003), *Abre los Ojos* (*Open your Eyes*) (1997), *Amores Perros* (2000), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Bin-Jip* (*Three Iron*) (2004), *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*) (1981/released in 1987), *Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Chungking Express* (1994), *Dark City* (1998), *Donny Darko* (2001), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Game* (1997), *Go* (1999), *Inland Empire* (2006), *The Hours* (2002), *The Limey* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), *Oh!, Soojung!* (*Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*) (2000), *Premonition* (2007), *Primer* (2004), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Sliding Doors* (1998), *Stay* (2005), *Tierra* (1996), *Time Code* (2000), *Total Recall* (1990), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and *Yi ge zi tou de dan sheng* (*Too Many Ways to be No. 1*) (1997).

Notes

- 1 Staiger's volume was published as this book was in pre-production. The partial overlap of themes, topics, and terminology demonstrates a shared interest in identifying the primary characteristics of complex storytelling in contemporary cinema.
- 2 The following discussion of Aristotle is indebted to Jaskolowska (2004).
- 3 Bordwell does use the term "multiple draft narrative" at the end of his essay, but he defines it differently to Branigan. For Bordwell, "multiple drafts" is an alternative term for "forking-paths," whereas for Branigan "forking-paths" is a conservative subset of "multiple drafts."

- 4 Eleftheria Thanouli also argues this point in her delineation of post-classical narration (2006).
- 5 Gaps and inferences come in many shapes and sizes. There are: temporary and permanent; flaunted and suppressed; diffused and focused gaps. These prompt to spectator to generate curiosity and suspense inferences; inferences with different levels of probability; inferences that are either exclusive or non-exclusive; and inferences which operate on both the micro and macro levels of the film. See Meir Sternberg (1978) and Bordwell (1985).

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The Mind-Game Film

Thomas Elsaesser

Playing Games

In December 2006, Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All* was released. The film is a comedy about the head of an IT company hiring a failed actor to play the "boss of it all," in order to cover up a sell-out. Von Trier announced that there were a number of ("five to seven") out-of-place objects scattered throughout, called Lookeys: "For the casual observer, [they are] just a glitch or a mistake. For the initiated, [they are] a riddle to be solved. All Lookeys can be decoded by a system that is unique. [...] It's a basic mind game, played with movies" (in Brown 2006). Von Trier went on to offer a prize to the first spectator to spot all the Lookeys and uncover the rules by which they were generated.

"Mind-game, played with movies" fits quite well a group of films I found myself increasingly intrigued by, not only because of their often weird details and the fact that they are brain-teasers as well as fun to watch, but also because they seemed to cross the usual boundaries of mainstream Hollywood, independent, auteur film and international art cinema. I also realized I was not alone: while the films I have in mind generally attract minority audiences, their appeal manifests itself as a "cult" following. Spectators can get passionately involved in the worlds that the films create – they study the characters' inner lives and back-stories and become experts in the minutiae of a scene, or adept at explaining the improbability of an event. Besides reaching movie-house audiences, several of the films have spawned their own online fan communities or forums on the imdb website. Film critics, as well as scholars from different disciplines and even social commentators and trend-watchers also get hooked, judging by the interesting things they have to say. This widespread, but diverse appeal, as well as other differences, makes me hesitate to call the films in question a

genre or a sub-genre. I prefer to think of them as a phenomenon, or maybe – in deference to François Truffaut – a “certain tendency” in contemporary cinema. But if it is a tendency, it does not point in one direction only; and if it is a phenomenon, what is it symptomatic of?

First of all, a broad description of the mind-game film. It comprises movies that are “playing games,” and this at two levels: there are films in which a character is being played games with, without knowing it or without knowing who it is that is playing these (often very cruel and even deadly) games with him (or her): in Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) the serial killer “Buffalo Bill” is playing games with the police (and the women he captures) and Hannibal Lecter is playing games with Clarice Starling (and eventually, she with him). In David Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995), John Doe, another serial killer, is playing games with the rookie policeman played by Brad Pitt. In Fincher’s *The Game* (1997), Michael Douglas is the one who is being played games with (possibly by his own brother). In Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998), the eponymous hero leads an entire life that for everyone else is a game, a stage-managed television show, from which only Truman is excluded. Then, there are films where it is the audience that is played games with, because certain crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented: Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), John Woo’s *Paycheck* (2003), John Maybury’s *The Jacket* (2005), David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) fall in this category. The information may be withheld from both characters and audience, as in M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001), where the central protagonists are already “dead, except [they] don’t know it yet,” to quote one of the opening lines of Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999). Sometimes, the “masters” of the game reveal themselves (*The Truman Show*, *Se7en*), but mostly they do not, and at other times, a puppet master is caught up in his own game, as in Spike Jonze/Charlie Kaufman’s *Being John Malkovich* (1999), the hypochondriac writer in the same team’s *Adaptation* (2002), or the two magicians in Nolan’s *The Prestige* (2006).

Other films of the mind-game tendency put the emphasis on “mind”: they feature central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological; yet instead of being examples of case studies, their ways of seeing, interaction with other characters, and their “being in the world” are presented as normal. The films thus once more “play games” with the audience’s (and the characters’) perception of reality: they oblige one to

choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible “realities” or “multiverses”: Ron Howard’s *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), David Cronenberg’s *Spider* (2002), Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* (2001), or the Wachowski Brothers’ *The Matrix* (1999). The nature of consciousness and memory, the reality of other minds, and the existence of possible/parallel worlds are equally at issue in films like Richard Linklater’s *Waking Life* (2001), Shane Carruth’s *Primer* (2004), Michael Gondry/Charlie Kaufman’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* (2001, a remake of Amenábar’s *Abre los Ojos*, 1997), and Peter Howitt’s *Sliding Doors* (1998).

The last two titles indicate that the tendency is not confined to Hollywood or North American directors. To varying degrees and in sometimes surprisingly different ways, “mind-game” films are also being made in Germany, Denmark, Britain, Spain, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan: Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1998), Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* (1996), Julio Medem’s *Tierra (Earth)* (1996), Pedro Almodovar’s *Habla con ella (Talk to Her)* (2002), Kim Kii Duk’s *Bin-Jip (Three Iron)* (2004), Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004). Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy* (2003), Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Inconnu* (2000), and *Caché* (2005), with their sadomasochistic undertow of revenge and guilt, also qualify, along with many others, some of which are discussed and analyzed in this volume.

While several mind-game films have affinities with genres such as the horror film (*The Silence of the Lambs*), science fiction (*The Matrix*, *eXistenZ* [1999]), the teen film (*Donnie Darko*), time travel films (*The Village* [2004]), and film noir (*Lost Highway*, *Memento*), they address not just the usual (genre) issues of adolescent identity-crises, sexuality, gender, the oedipal family, and the dysfunctional community, but also epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds) that are in the mainstream of the kinds of philosophical inquiry focused on human consciousness, the mind and the brain, multiple realities or possible worlds.

Yet one overriding common feature of mind-game films is a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators (besides carefully hidden or altogether withheld information, there are the frequent plot twists and trick endings). Another feature is that spectators on the whole do not mind being “played with”: on the contrary, they rise to the challenge. The fact that audiences are set conundrums, or are sprung “traps for mind and eye,” that they are – as with von Trier’s *Lookeys* – confronted with odd objects or puzzling