Puzzle Films
For Edward Branigan
Puzzle Films

Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema

Edited by Warren Buckland
Contents

List of Contributors vii

Introduction: Puzzle Plots 1
Warren Buckland

1 The Mind-Game Film 13
Thomas Elsaesser

2 Making Sense of Lost Highway 42
Warren Buckland

3 “Twist Blindness”: The Role of Primacy, Priming, Schemas, and Reconstructive Memory in a First-Time Viewing of The Sixth Sense 62
Daniel Barratt

4 Narrative Comprehension Made Difficult: Film Form and Mnemonic Devices in Memento 87
Stefano Ghislotti

5 “Frustrated Time” Narration: The Screenplays of Charlie Kaufman 107
Chris Dzialo

6 Backbeat and Overlap: Time, Place, and Character Subjectivity in Run Lola Run 129
Michael Wedel
7 Infernal Affairs and the Ethics of Complex Narrative  
   Allan Cameron and Sean Cubitt  
   151

8 Happy Together? Generic Hybridity in 2046 and  
   In the Mood for Love  
   Gary Bettinson  
   167

9 Revitalizing the Thriller Genre: Lou Ye’s Suzhou River  
   and Purple Butterfly  
   Yunda Eddie Feng  
   187

10 The Pragmatic Poetics of Hong Sangsoo’s The Day a  
   Pig Fell into a Well  
   Marshall Deutelbaum  
   203

11 Looking for Access in Narrative Complexity. The New  
   and the Old in Oldboy  
   Eleftheria Thanouli  
   217

Index  
   233
List of Contributors

Daniel Barratt is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Center for Visual Cognition, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and is currently working on a project on visual attention, emotion, and media. He has a PhD in cognitive film theory from the University of Kent, UK (awarded 2005); his thesis addresses the paradox of fiction by describing a multi-level model of the film viewer’s emotion system. He has guest edited (with Jonathan Frome) the recent issue of the journal Film Studies: An International Review based on papers from the 2004 CCSMI conference (published Summer 2006).

Gary Bettinson is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Lancaster, UK. He has published articles in Asian Cinema and Film Studies: An International Review.

Warren Buckland is Reader in Film Studies at Oxford Brookes University, UK. He is the author of Directed by Steven Spielberg (2006); Studying Contemporary American Film (2002, with Thomas Elsaesser); The Cognitive Semiotics of Film (2000); Film Studies (1998; 3rd edition, 2008); and The Film Spectator (ed., 1995). He also edits the journal the New Review of Film and Television Studies.

Allan Cameron is a researcher and lecturer at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, and an honorary fellow in screen studies at the University of Melbourne. He is the author of Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). His articles on complex narrative and Hong Kong cinema have also appeared, respectively, in The Velvet Light Trap and Jump Cut.
Sean Cubitt is Professor and Director of the Program in Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Honorary Professor of Duncan of Jordanstone College of the University of Dundee, UK. He is the author of Timeshift: On Video Culture (1991); Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture (1993); Digital Aesthetics (1998); Simulation and Social Theory (2001); The Cinema Effect (2004); and EcoMedia (2005). He is co-editor of Aliens R Us: Postcolonial Science Fiction with Ziauddin Sardar (2002); The Third Text Reader with Rasheed Araeen and Ziauddin Sardar (2002), and How to Study the Event Film: The Lord of the Rings with Thierry Jutel, Barry King, and Harriet Margolis (2007). He is editor in Chief of the Leonardo Book Series for MIT Press and Leonardo/ISAST.

Marshall Deutelbaum is Professor Emeritus of English at Purdue University, Indiana, USA. His areas of interest are film narrative and visual logic. He is at work (with Leland Poague) on a revised edition of A Hitchcock Reader; his essay “The Deceptive Design of Hong Sangsoo’s Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors” appeared in the New Review of Film and Television Studies.

Chris Dzialo is a PhD student in the Department of Film & Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.

Thomas Elsaesser is Emeritus Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. His essays on European cinema, film history and media archaeology, American cinema and contemporary media theory have been translated in more than 15 languages and published in over 200 collections. He has been visiting professor and research fellow at UC Berkeley, IFK Vienna, Sackler Institute Tel Aviv, NYU, and Yale. In 2006 he was Ingmar Bergman professor at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, and was Leverhulme Professor at Churchill College, Cambridge, UK, in 2007. Most recent books as (co-) editor include: Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? (1998); The BFI Companion to German Cinema (1999); The Last Great American Picture Show (2004); and Harun Farocki – Working on the Sightlines (2004). His books as author include Fassbinder’s Germany: History, Identity, Subject (1996); Weimar Cinema and After (2000); Metropolis (2000); Studying Contemporary American Film (2002, with Warren Buckland); Filmgeschichte und Frühes Kino (2002); Terror, Mythes et Representation (2005); European Cinema: Face to Face with
List of Contributors


Yunda Eddie Feng graduated with an MA in Film Studies from Chapman University. He currently lives in Austin, Texas.

Stefano Ghislotti teaches the history of cinema at the University of Bergamo, Italy. In 1996 he co-authored with Stefano Rosso the collective book Vietnam e ritorno (Vietnam and Back). In 2000 with Benvenuto Cuminetti he co-authored Il cinema nella scrittura (Cinema in Writing). In 2003 he published Riflessi interiori. Il film nella mente dello spettatore (Inner Reflections. The Film in the Mind of the Viewer). He is currently writing a book about mnemonic structures in films.

Eleftheria Thanouli teaches film studies at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Michael Wedel is an assistant professor at the Media Studies Department of the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He is the author of Der deutsche Musikfilm: Archäologie eines Genres (2007), and is co-editor of The BFI Companion to German Cinema (1999), Kino der Kaiserzeit: Zwischen Tradition und Moderne (2002), and Die Spur durch den Spiegel: Der Film in der Kultur der Moderne (2004). His essays on early cinema, German film history, and contemporary Hollywood have appeared in a number of edited collections and in journals such as Film History and New German Critique.
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], 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). 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
Introduction: Puzzle Plots

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:


[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