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## The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

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## STUDY 2

### *Taming Dissonance: Cognitive Operations and Interpretive Strategies*<sup>1</sup>

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There is no problem being momentarily confused if you feel you're in good hands.

Quentin Tarantino on *The Charlie Rose Show* (1994)

*A smooth aerial shot over the skyline of Toronto is interrupted by the beeping sound of a voicemail. A worried mother leaves a message for her son. At the end of the call we see a young pregnant woman sitting on a bed, turning around and then looking straight into the camera. We cannot identify her – it is too dark in the room. The image fades to black and reveals the opening line of the film: 'Chaos is order yet undeciphered.' Switching scene, we now see two men enter a sinister erotic seance where a female stripper, wearing nothing but a high-heeled shoe, is about to step on a tarantula spider. ... The story begins, introducing Adam Bell (Jake Gyllenhaal), an introverted, if not depressed, college history teacher, who is living with his girlfriend Mary (Mélanie Laurent). Following his colleague's recommendation, Adam rents a movie, in which, to his astonishment, he spots a supporting actor who seems to be an exact lookalike of himself. After some research, he learns that the actor is one Anthony Claire (also Jake Gyllenhaal), who also happens to live in Toronto with his pregnant wife, Helen (Sarah Gadon). Adam starts to stalk him, and finally confronts Anthony – physically indeed his perfect doppelgänger, right down to a scar on his chest. In character, however, Anthony is quite the opposite of Adam: successful, extroverted and assertive. Seeking an explanation for this bewildering situation, Adam visits his worried mother (Isabella Rossellini), but is assured that he does not have a twin brother. In a cutaway scene a gigantic spider towers over the city. Meanwhile, having done his own stalking investigation, Anthony has set his eye on Mary. Accusing his double of cheating on him with Helen, Anthony forces a deal on Adam: he will take Adam's identity (and Mary) for a single night, and then will disappear from his life forever. Adam complies, but, while Anthony is with Mary in a hotel, he decides to visit Helen. While making love with Anthony, Mary suddenly freezes, seeing a mark of a wedding ring on Anthony's finger; as Adam, her boyfriend, doesn't wear a ring, she demands to know who this man really is. Driving home, Mary and Anthony get in a fierce quarrel and have an accident that leaves them both dead. The camera zooms on the wrecked car's broken window, patterned like a spider's web. The next morning Adam, taking Anthony's now-vacant identity, pockets a key – clearly that to the hidden seance – and, before saying goodbye, he checks in on Helen. Instead of 'his' pregnant wife, he finds a giant tarantula filling the entire room, to which he responds looking more desperate than shocked.*

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter has previously been published as part of the book *Impossible Puzzle Films*, co-authored with Dr. Miklós Kiss for Edinburgh University Press (Kiss and Willemsen 2017), pp. 104-39.

Based on José Saramago's 2002 novel *O Homem Duplicado* (*The Double*), Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* composes a puzzling mystery from its suggested and cleverly nurtured dissonance. Circling around its central character, or characters, being simultaneously similar and different, the film seems to exchange Saramago's story about a bizarre biological anomaly of a 'real double' for a confusing narrative riddle. *Enemy* opens and maintains a thoughtful balance among several analytical and interpretive possibilities regarding the relationship between (or within) Adam and Anthony. As director Villeneuve himself has admitted (Lewis 2014), the film seems to juggle at least three possible readings,<sup>2</sup> but that does not mean that one could not come up with other credible analyses or evenly plausible symbolic interpretations. The point for us is not to determine a single appropriate interpretation, or to establish any hierarchy among the different hermeneutic options; rather, we are interested in the processes and strategies of meaning-making itself. How do viewers usually cope with and tend to make meaning out of such ambiguous narrative dissonances? Where do the balanced possibilities in *Enemy* come from? And wherein lies the engaging potential of the strategically sustained interpretive puzzlement? While so far, this study has described and explained the confusing effect of complex films, now it is time to focus on what viewers do to make sense of dissonant stories.

Elsewhere (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 65-72), we argued that complex film narratives evoke *dissonant cognitions* by confronting viewers with conflicting cognitive cues (incongruities, impossibilities) in narrative sense making. We argued that this may nonetheless result in an engaging viewing experience, as such dissonances will often send viewers on a quest to resolve the conflict - comparable to Leon Festinger's (1957) original theorisation of how cognitive dissonances exert in individuals a pressure to reduce the psychological tension elicited by the conflict.<sup>3</sup> This chapter seeks to address how viewers

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the least likely among these options adheres to Saramago's original supernatural idea, and sees *Enemy*'s story as a kind of (magical) realist tale of a real character duplication; however, this strange but realistic scenario is problematic due to a photo that Adam and Anthony both own, which appears as an impossible lapse between them. Another option is that Adam is Anthony, or that Anthony is Adam, in which case the film's primary question is who is whose hallucination? In this option the film ambiguates between two possible subjective realist scenarios. It could be that there is no history teacher, and Adam exists only in the imagination of Anthony, who simply cannot commit to his married adult life and impending fatherhood. The girl's panic concerning the wedding ring and his true identity might be seen as a projection of Anthony's own doubt. Or what if the entire film is a frustrated vision of Adam, the wannabe actor à la Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn of *Mulholland Drive*, who became no more than a miserable history teacher? From this prospect the advice of his mother sounds like a key to the story: 'I think you should quit that fantasy of being a third-rate movie actor!' Perhaps once Adam had a pregnant wife whom he cheated on and then lost in a car accident (hence his scar), and now his traumatic guilt fuels the dissonant dream-scenario of his successful self, having a career and an expectant wife.

<sup>3</sup> To prevent a theoretical issue that was helpfully pointed out by Prof. András Bálint Kovács, I have chosen to avoid the term 'cognitive dissonance' when talking about conflicts in narrative sense making. This is to prevent confusion with this term's established social-psychological meaning, which refers to the effect of inconsistencies in an individual's behaviours or beliefs in real world situations (see for example, Cooper 2007; Stone 1999) and has also been used to describe, for example, attitudes towards fictional characters or situations (e.g. Caracciolo 2013; van der Pol 2013). Although our use of the term 'dissonant cognitions' in narrative comprehension shares some similarities with the cognitive core of Leon Festinger's original theory (1957: 31, 13) and its suggestion of how dissonances between cognitions elicit a pressure to resolve or deal with the conflict, there are also significant differences (e.g., between fictional and real world situations, or between values and logical beliefs). A more elaborate discussion of these differences and overlaps was included in the original study (Kiss & Willemsen 2017: 67-70) in a section is not part of this dissertation. I have therefore followed Prof. Kovács' constructive advice to avoid here the conflation of these terms.

approach and cope with conflicting cognitions in narrative fiction. We will argue that in narrative comprehension, dissonance-reduction strategies almost invariably involve amendments in *interpretation*. This chapter will outline the different cognitive operations and interpretive strategies that viewers can employ when facing the challenge of dissonant and complex story situations. After a brief general discussion about interpretation in relation to narrative coherence, this chapter will discern and explore three general interpretive pathways by which viewers generally deal with dissonance in narratives. These are (2.2) dissonance reduction through naturalising interpretations; (2.3) engaging in a frame-switch as a more general change in viewing stance (such as a shift from narrative to poetic modes of meaning-making); and (2.4) frame-switching as a cognitive hesitation between different interpretive options, which allow for certain kinds of hermeneutic play (2.4.1), and which may give rise to viewing effects and ‘theoretical genres’ like Tzvetan Todorov’s notion of the fantastic (2.4.2).

Of course, the problem with theorising interpretation is that any interpretive action is fundamentally subjected to myriad differences in terms of individual, cultural and contextual conditions. Determining definitive interpretations is a futile (and consequently not very desirable) endeavour, especially not in relation to borderline cases of complex narratives, since different viewers might opt for different ways of meaning-making. It is, however, possible to examine and specify the possible strategies that viewers commonly have at their disposal to make sense of complex stories – the ‘interpretive toolkit’ from which viewers can choose, so to speak. Following Liesbeth Korthals Altes, we could speak, in a ‘meta-hermeneutic’ manner, of certain ‘interpretive pathways’ that viewers use to negotiate the meaning of texts (Korthals Altes 2014). These are general strategies of interpretation that are deemed appropriate and acceptable in response to certain narrative patterns. Such pathways of interpretation are habitualised and distributed (socio-)culturally, for instance through film criticism, artistic socialisation and institutional contexts (such as journals or film festivals). Or, in David Bordwell’s words, in making sense of texts and films, ‘the inductive process is guided by particular, socially implanted hypotheses about how texts mean’ (Bordwell 1989: 133).

Complex films often invite, rely on or play with such interpretive routines. Discerning the most commonly utilised and accepted strategies for making meaning of complex stories will therefore be the focus of this chapter. We will primarily draw on concepts from literary theory and literary narratology. This is mainly because these fields have already extensively conceptualised the role of interpretation in relation to narrative. Some of the theories and taxonomies discussed may thus be familiar material for narratologists; they will nevertheless be discussed here in some detail, as they may be less evident to scholars from other fields. Furthermore, this chapter will extend and elaborate these existing theories to relate them to narrative complexity in film specifically. Applying this chapter’s findings, the next chapter will turn back to the niche of impossible puzzle films, illustrating how the narration of this particular set of films strategically cues viewers to use certain strategies over others.

## **2.1 Dissonant cognitions versus narrative coherence**

Up to this point, our theorising of dissonant cognitions and complexity in fiction has contained a potential discrepancy. This tension lies in the apparent incongruity between the

presumed engaging quality (or even attractiveness) of certain cognitive effects of dissonance in story comprehension, while assuming that viewers have an inherent drive to reduce such dissonance. The potential paradox – or ‘dissonance’ in the effect of dissonance, if you like – would be in claiming that viewers would enjoy or appreciate a mental state that they simultaneously strive to eliminate or reduce. After all, if we truly ‘enjoyed’ dissonance in narratives for its own sake, there would be no urge to reduce it – on the contrary, we would probably seek to create and maintain it. Conversely, if we readily reduced all dissonance in favour of soothing consonance, the cognitive effect of dissonance would be nothing more than an undesired obstacle in our path to narrative enjoyment.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, these two mental drives would be incompatible. So how could we say that the two notions co-exist within our hypothesis? To examine this, the current chapter will look into the coping strategies by which viewers deal with the effect of dissonant cognitions in fiction. After all, one may wonder, do the same real-life rules of dissonance reduction also apply when we are watching a narrative film? Do viewers generally avoid dissonance and readily seek to get rid of all incongruities encountered in a story? And if this is the case, then how do they do so?

Looking into narrative and cognitive theories, and considering our own experiences with fiction, it seems justifiable to assume that viewers indeed strive for *consonance* in their understanding of stories. It is a widely shared assumption in literary and hermeneutic theory that readers and viewers – by disposition – always expect and, as a result, try to render works of art to be narratively meaningful and congruent as a whole. As Noël Carroll puts it in the conclusion of his functional approach to film, ‘it is not strange to treat objects of human design teleologically’ (Carroll 1998: 400).<sup>5</sup> Viewers actively strive towards making a text or film intelligible, even if the narrative at hand seems to resist their efforts at ascribing meaningful coherence. David Bordwell has called this basic viewer presumption the ‘hypothesis of *minimal coherence*’ (Bordwell 1989: 134). By the principle of minimal coherence, viewers and critics assume that all elements of a text are significantly related. What is more, even contradictory parts are conceived as cohering units, since ‘in practice most contradictory text readings do not posit a thoroughgoing fragmentation’, and therefore usually do not constitute a ‘radically disunifying device’ (ibid.: 134).

Both this passive disposition and active bias can be seen as stemming from our cognitive make-up as well as being culturally governed. It is cognitive in the sense that cognition can be characterised as a problem-solving activity that is geared towards establishing relatively unambiguous meaning from an information-rich environment. Within this, narrative fulfils a key role as an instrument of the human mind to organise information on actors, events, space and time, to assert coherence and continuity, to track changes, to establish causality, to recognise goals and obstacles, to memorise and navigate one’s own

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<sup>4</sup> This contradiction shows some similarities to the ‘paradox of negative emotions’ in art, which we will also touch upon in the Outlook chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, artworks are after all ‘created by “narratively wired” humans to other “narratively wired” humans. If narrative artworks are products of a (“narratively wired”) human mind, then it is logical that they resonate naturally with a (“narratively wired”) human perceiver. Because of this loop between creativity and comprehension, “narrative functions” are just as much of the internal features of an artwork, as of the embodied mind’s [sic] that creates, appropriates, then recognises, and ultimately labels the experience as “narrative” (Kiss 2015: 54).

experiences or to understand the actions and mental processes of others – and so on. In short, making elements cohere and establishing meaningfulness can be claimed to be the core task of narrative as a cognitive instrument (and, consequently, one of its key functions as a social tool).

On the other hand, the tendency to assume that the elements of a text are significantly related is also a central cultural convention of art. As a socially established convention, it is distributed and reinforced through various channels including narrative habitualisation, acculturation, literary and cinematic socialisation, and art criticism. This convention surrounds not only the reception but also the production of (narrative) artworks, exerting the predominant expectation that the work forms a more or less unified, composed whole that should communicate to its beholders a point. On the reception end, this cognitively inherent and culturally strengthened narrative propensity causes viewers to take a co-operative stance in making sense of a complex story. This stance can be characterised as an aesthetic ‘charity’ (Walton 1990: 182-3). In the words of Liesbeth Korthals Altes:

Such a general intention attribution includes what has been nicely called ‘the principle of charity’. Readers will do their best to make sense of narratives with strange gaps in information transmissions (whole murders eluded), implausible narrators (horses, unborn babies, needles), ontological inconsistencies (houses that can expand or shrink, in narratives that strongly cue a realist reading), apparently pointless stories (about individuals without qualities, engaged in nonactivities), and ethos incongruities (sincere ironies, ironic sincerities). (Korthals Altes 2014: 108)

Moreover, the expectation of a meaningful point is a fundamental aspect of our culture’s view of art, and its origins are difficult to pinpoint. It may for instance be seen partially inherited from romantic notions of art and criticism, but it can in different forms also be traced back to a variety of earlier prominent theories of art and narrative (cf. Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its notion of the unified plot).

Narratives that evoke and maintain dissonant cognitions can be particularly threatening to this viewer anticipation of congruence and cohesion, and can thereby seriously challenge the limits of viewers’ charitable viewing disposition. When a viewer encounters elements in a story that are incongruent, or which do not resonate with his or her cognitive frames of narrative comprehension, and hence provide a sensation of dissonance – be it through some inconsistency in the story, or logical impossibilities in the diegetic world – one may expect that the viewer’s initial response will be to readily seek ways to reason out the discordance. As in real life, dissonant elements in a story often trigger the viewer’s active engagement to reduce the conflict. However, as we argued elsewhere (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 68), to reduce dissonance in a pre-structured and non-interactive medium like cinema, viewers only have choices in terms of interpretations formed and attitudes taken with regard to the experience at hand (rather than, for instance, having the option of taking real actions or making changes in the film itself). This means that viewers will strive for a consonant interpretation by changing their attitude to particular elements of the film text, or to the film as a whole. A viewer can, for example, try to attribute an appropriate meaningfulness to the

anomaly, infer that the story will cohere thematically, or conclude that the story's experienced incoherence might perhaps be the work's intended function.

So how do viewers achieve this sense of narrative coherence? In the following sections (2.2 to 2.4) aim to discern three general interpretive moves (and, within those, several different modes and types) by which viewers can reduce dissonance in narrative fiction. These options comprise the most common and widely used pathways to make meaning out of complex narrative experiences, thus hypothesising the 'interpretive toolkit' that viewers have at their disposal. Naturally, different viewers will choose or prefer different strategies; moreover, whereas some films explicitly and unambiguously cue their viewers to use specific interpretations (providing intra- or paratextual motivations that support a certain meaning), other works will leave more freedom to the viewer to make meaning and to try out different strategies. As we will see in the last sections of this chapter, impossible puzzle films for instance tend more towards the latter option, often cultivating ambiguities in their potential readings and interpretations. We will argue that applying or testing different interpretive strategies may become a gratifying viewing activity itself, forming one of the possible reasons behind the engaging quality of dissonant viewing experiences.

## **2.2 Reducing dissonance: interpretation and naturalisation**

First of all, there are various strategies by which a viewer may understand the dissonance evoked by a film to have a *function*. Such functions can restore a dissonance as consonant within the work as a whole. This may seem like old news to narratologists. Already in 1975, Jonathan Culler wrote on readers' efforts of *naturalisation*. Naturalising a text means that readers and viewers form new paths along which they can make textual incongruities 'intelligible by relating [them] to various models for coherence' (Culler 1975: 152). The term covers the interpretive strategies through which viewers or readers reconcile local textual inconsistencies by fitting them into overarching sense-making patterns. These patterns are often derived from cultural frameworks and familiar discursive contexts. Applying a new interpretive stance or inventing another discursive context to an encountered inconsistency can render the experience meaningful again. For example, one can choose to interpret a textual incongruity as a sign of irony or parody, or as an expression of a thematic concern, or one may attribute it to the conventions of the work's genre. In any case, by exploring and changing the interpretive frame surrounding the inconsistency, we effectively change our attitude towards the experienced dissonance (for example, 'this must be ironic', 'this is meta-fictional', 'the author is playfully making us reflect on the medium of film' and so on). Viewers exercise such naturalising negotiations up to a point when there is no longer a dissonance (or at least less of a disturbing dissonance) between the film's represented inconsistency and our interpretation attributed to it – or, as we will see in some cases, up to the point where viewers run out of such naturalising possibilities.

Other theories on complex and counterintuitive narratives offer similar insights. In his work on impossible storyworlds, Jan Alber (2009, 2013a, 2013b) builds on Culler's (1975) and Tamar Yacobi's (1981) theoretical heritage when scrutinising reader responses to *unnatural narratives* – that is, stories that feature physically, logically or humanly impossible scenarios or events. Alber outlines a cognitive model that describes nine strategies by which readers and viewers can make sense of impossible events in fiction (Alber 2013a: 76–9).

These strategies are also relevant for narrative complexity in cinema, since most complex films (from moderately challenging to impossible puzzle films) form distinctly ‘unnatural’ narratives of which viewers need to make sense in some way. We will outline here these nine strategies discerned by Alber, and extend them by adding in what ways film viewers may use these in response to variously complex and dissonant film narratives.

(1) *The creation of unnatural frames*: to mentally adapt to a fictional impossibility, viewers can blend or enrich existing frames to create new, ‘unnatural’ frames. In this process, viewers recombine, alter, update or extend available previous knowledge in such a way that a world model is constructed that allows them to make some sense of the encountered impossibility. For instance, the cognitive concept of a cat and the concept of a narrating person can be combined to understand the unnatural scenario of a narrating cat (as it appears in Miranda July’s 2011 *The Future*). This cognitive principle is known as conceptual blending, and has received notable attention in the context of literary studies (for example, Turner 1996; Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Additionally, the notion of frame enrichment has been used by narratologists to refer to the idea that accepting fictional departures from real-world parameters can in itself create new fictional frames that allow the unnatural to persist, for instance in a conventionalised form (Alber et al. 2010: 118; we will discuss this below). By these principles, viewers can form new ‘unnatural’ frames or stretch pre-existing frames to make sense of a complex narrative structure.

Complex story structures and impossible storyworlds often cue their viewers to update, revise or reform their knowledge on the narrative they are watching (or on modes of meaning making more generally). To make sense of a convoluted timeloop-film like *Triangle* (Christopher Smith, 2009) for instance, viewers have to blend the idea of a linear narrative path with that of a circle; they need to constantly adapt and update their mental model of the story structure to include multiplying versions of the protagonist; they must keep track of these different protagonists, and they are required to map and integrate their different paths within the story - and so on. As Jason Mittell has noted, puzzle films often ‘require the audience to learn the particular rules of a film to comprehend its narrative ... inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies’ (Mittell 2015: 51). The process of puzzling one’s way through a complex story by unravelling its internal laws can be understood as a constant blending and updating of frames. Successfully adapting one’s knowledge and hypotheses to a challenging narrative logic may resolve (or at least tone down) the dissonance between cognition and may make the story (more) coherent and meaningful; this may ultimately afford viewers a distinct sense of narrative gratification.

(2) *Generification*: readers and viewers may also ‘account for certain impossible scenarios or events by identifying them as belonging to particular literary genres and generic conventions’ (Alber 2013a: 77). Indeed, many fictional impossibilities, like speaking animals in fairy tales or time machines in science fiction, do not pose problems because viewers are able to assign their ‘unnaturalness’ to a generic context (and perhaps do not even perceive them as ‘impossible’ in the first place).

Therefore, it makes sense to distinguish between two types of unnaturalness: on the one hand, there are the ‘physical, logical or human impossibilities that have already been conventionalized and are now familiar forms of narrative representation’ (Alber 2013a: 70)



like time travel in science fiction; on the other hand, there are the impossibilities that have not yet been conventionalised, ‘and, therefore, still strike us as odd, strange, disconcerting, or defamiliarizing’ (ibid.: 70).

Impossible puzzle films by definition include one or several elements that belong to the latter category, as they are dependent on such strange, striking and challenging impossibilities for their effects. Viewers will, after all, be much quicker in grasping and making sense of narrative patterns with which they are familiar, as they already possess cognitive frames (in the form of a known genre or other internalised generic conventions) to make sense of them. Moreover, formal strategies that were once found complex and strange may over time and through recurrent use also become conventional generic cognitive frames, which reduces their capacity to create challenging or complexifying effects (see, for instance, the popularisation of the unreliable twist film around the turn of the millennium). However, logically impossible scenarios are arguably more resistant to such conventionalisation, since they challenge more deep-seated and inflexible embodied-cognitive schemas and sense-making processes (see, for a more elaborate discussion on this, Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 91-103; Coëgnarts, Kiss, Kravanja and Willemsen 2016).

(3) *Subjectification*: viewers can ascribe impossibilities to the subjective experience or interiority of a character or narrator. By this strategy, impossibilities are explained as internal states such as dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, distorted perceptions and so on. This strategy is an effective dissonance-reduction tool, because it helps viewers to bring seemingly impossible events back to the realm of the physically and psychologically possible. Moreover, it may allow viewers to invest these subjective events with meaningfulness, through, for example, ‘psychoanalytic’ readings that relate the impossibilities to the actual psychological state of a character in a diegetic world (for example, as expressive of a character’s jealousy, frustration or desires). Seeing *Enemy*’s Adam and Anthony as two sides of the same person is a one example of such a psychological reading of dissonant narrative events.

Subjectification is a prominent strategy in making sense of complex narrative structures. Historically speaking, many puzzle and art films have explicitly cued viewers to take this stance (whether through narrative patterns, stylistic markers or explication in narration). Matthew Campora has identified the historical tradition of films that combine subjective narration with complex or embedded multiple-storyline structures. He has labelled this line of movies as *subjective realist multiform* narratives (Campora 2014) – a category that includes films ranging from Robert Wiene’s *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) (1920) to David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and from Federico Fellini’s *Otto e Mezzo* (*8½*) (1963) to Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010).

(4) *Foregrounding the thematic*: sometimes viewers do not treat impossibilities as being mimetically motivated (that is, not as a diegetic element of the storyworld), but rather as ‘exemplifications of particular themes that the narrative addresses’ (Alber 2013a: 77). In these cases, the thematic function of the unnaturalness overrides its mimetic (or, actually, diegetic) impossibility. The impossibility then is held to serve a more thematic or rhetorical function that relates to the point that a given work is found to convey. This, of course, is also ultimately in some ways mimetic (in the broader sense of being expressive of something), but

this mimetic function is a somewhat meta-fictional one, relating to the work as a constructed, composed whole.

For instance, the impossible metaleptic structure in Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (in which Nicolas Cage plays actual screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, who writes himself into his film script, which is the film that the viewer is watching) can be seen as a narrative reflection of the film's central theme of a writer's block. By foregrounding the thematic function in interpretation, viewers can understand the experienced complexity as an expression of the work's concern beyond its actual story, thus attributing a meaningfulness that makes dissonant elements consonant within the work as a thematically composed whole. This strategy is usually more appropriate in art-cinema narration, which (as we will argue in the next chapter) is more encouraging of thematically expressive readings; the classical mode of narration (to which we claim that most contemporary mainstream complex films belong) tends to remain somewhat more focused on *mimetic, intra-diegetic motivations* to account for formal story experimentations (for instance, by including storyworld elements like time machines, mental illness, hallucinations and so on). Yet classical narration does not exclude thematic motivation, and as the example of *Adaptation* also demonstrates, contemporary complex narratives represent a particular niche that has frequently utilised such thematically motivated narration within the (post-)classical narrative domain.

(5) *Reading allegorically*: readers and viewers 'may also see unnatural elements as representing abstract ideas in allegories that say something about the human condition or the world in general' (Alber 2013a: 77). The difference between thematic and allegorical readings – at least as we see it – is that whereas the strategy of foregrounding the thematic function relates the unnatural to the intratextual composition of themes and patterns within the work, allegorical reading assigns it to *extratextual* frames and knowledge. Allegorical readings are thus *naturalising explanations* that invoke extratextual frames of knowledge (cultural, philosophical, actual, historical and so on) to which the textual oddity is taken to refer, and by which it can be understood or given a function.

Perhaps even more than thematic foregrounding, such allegorical readings tend to be more commonly elicited by art cinema as a means to motivate formal narrative experimentation. For instance, a confusing narrative structure in Resnais's and Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year at Marienbad* can be naturalised by treating the film's intricate plot as an allegory of the human condition, in which the contradictory and troubling elements serve as a reflection on (the limitations of) human memory, perception and emotion. Mainstream narrative complexity, however, is sometimes read allegorically too. For example, stories involving the unnatural scenario of a character duplication, like *Being John Malkovich*, *Enemy*, *The Double* or *+1* have been read as allegories of the effects of new technologies, the internet and social media on the fundamental experience of the unity of our selves (Wilkinson 2014). Such allegories, materialised in *doppelgänger* and other schizophrenic stories, are said to be fuelled by our everyday experiences with new technological affordances, including our habituation with the practice of lossless digital copying, the virtualisation of our selves through online second lives and videogame avatars, our creation and maintenance of different user profiles on different digital platforms represented by different thumbnail pictures of our multiple selves and so on. Likewise, forking-path and multiple-draft narratives have been understood to allegorically expose the effects of digital technologies on modern subjects,

such as the non-linearity of network or database logic, the non-destructive digital text processing and video-editing technology or the immortal agency (in terms of having many lives and endless attempts) that the modern subject can assume in videogames. However, probably '[t]he most popular reason given for unusual narration', as Elliot Panek notes, 'is that such narration is part of the film's critique of Enlightenment values, specifically the values of order and reason' (Panek 2006: 67).

(6) *Satirisation or parody*: Alber further notes how 'narratives may also use impossible scenarios or events to mock certain entities. The most important feature of satire is critique through exaggeration, and grotesque images of humiliation or ridicule may occasionally merge with the unnatural' (Alber 2013a: 77). This option, we should add, shares some overlap with the generification principle (since the generic context of comedy may allow impossibilities in such a way that they are not experienced as disturbing in the first place; after all, parody films may constantly transgress real-world possibilities for comic effects) as well as with allegorical readings (as the exaggeration can be understood to stand for something extratextual, that is, something in the real world to be ridiculed).

Although it is not particularly common, complex and impossible narrative structures too may be understood primarily in terms of their comic effects, allowing them to be naturalised as exaggerations or caricatures. For instance, the otherwise little motivated time loop in Harold Ramis's 1993 *Groundhog Day* can be seen as a comic exaggeration of protagonist Phil's (Bill Murray) cynical attitude, and particularly as a hyperbolic punishment for his arrogant dislike of celebrating Groundhog Day in the small town of Punxsutawney, a day he has to relive over and over again. Also, moments of impossible metaleptic transgressions in film, such as breaking the fourth wall, can function as an often rhetorical tool for sophisticated mockery, as happens for instance in Woody Allen's 1977 *Annie Hall* (think of the sudden, more or less impossible appearance of Marshall McLuhan, who helps Allen's character prove a point to a snobbish intellectual, followed by Allen directly addressing the audience). Moreover, complex narrative story formats can sometimes be read as self-parody. Examples of this can be found in television shows like *Community*, which in the episode *Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples* (Tristram Shapeero 2010, season 2, episode 5) has parodied several complex story formats, including Charlie Kaufman-esque metaleptic and self-reflexive filmmaking, or *South Park*, whose episode *Grounded Vindaloo* (Trey Parker 2014, season 18, episode 7) provided not only a tongue-in-cheek comment about narrative complexity, but also a clever illustration of the experiential confusion that multiply embedded narrative modes can cause. Some viewers may attribute a similar satirical intention to a film like Quentin Dupieux's *Reality* – probably the most overtly playful and self-conscious of all impossible puzzle films. Given the film's overall absurdity, its excessively complex dissonant structure can be seen as a caricature, reflecting on the trend of narrative complexity rather than asking viewers to actually untangle its impossibly intertwined narrative levels (see Willemsen and Kiss 2017).

(7) *Positing a transcendental realm*: in some situations, 'we can make sense of impossibilities by assuming that they are part of a transcendental realm such as heaven, purgatory or hell' (Alber 2013a: 78). This principle can help viewers to resolve strong narrative incongruities and impossibilities by imagining a type of storyworld in which real-world parameters do not apply, and in which anything impossible might be considered

possible. Positing a transcendental realm can become a particularly tempting strategy when there seems to be no other diegetic and mimetic motivation to account for a complicated narrative structure or an impossibility-ridden storyworld. For instance, Alber notes how a seemingly inexplicable time loop could be motivated as ‘a continuous cycle as a form of punishment’ (ibid.: 78) in an afterlife.

Indeed, viewers have used this interpretive strategy in response to the time loop of *Triangle* for instance, understanding the film’s unexplicated impossible loop structure as a form of atonement that the protagonist must perpetually undergo; this reading is also reinforced by some clues in the film, such as the name of the ship, *Aeolus*, on which the loop takes place (in Greek mythology, Aeolus is the father of Sisyphus, who has been fated to roll a massive boulder up a hill and is forced to fruitlessly repeat his action forever). We might also add that the strategy of positing a transcendental realm can conflate with the principle of subjectification as well. Viewers may treat an entire storyworld as a kind of ‘mental landscape’, thereby understanding the entire narrative as taking place in a metaphysical or transcendental mental realm that represents sub- or pre-conscious or symbolical psychological struggles – a strategy we will discuss later (in subsection 2.4.1) with regard to impossible puzzle films such as *Enemy* and *Mulholland Drive*.

(8) *Do it yourself*: this is a principle that Alber borrows from Marie-Laure Ryan, who has noted that in some texts contradictory and mutually exclusive versions of events are offered to the reader or viewer ‘for creating their own stories’ (Alber 2013a: 78 quotes Ryan 2006b: 671). Contradictory storylines can sometimes ask viewers to adopt a ‘quasi-interactive’ stance, leaving them with the task of arranging the story or choosing which version of events they consider the ‘true’ outcome. ‘Do it yourself’ works exchange authorial control for a wider interpretive freedom. Alber’s literary example is Robert Coover’s 1969 short story *The Babysitter*, for which ‘[o]ne might argue that this narrative uses mutually incompatible storylines to make us aware of suppressed possibilities and allows us to choose the ones that we prefer for whatever reasons’ (Alber 2013a: 78).

This option opposes Bordwell’s seventh storytelling convention, according to which, in cognitively manageable complex film narratives, ‘parts [of the multiple-draft storyline] are not equal; the last one taken, or completed, is the least hypothetical one’ (Bordwell 2002a: 100). A ‘do it yourself’ narrative, as Alber defines it, would thus have to go beyond Bordwell’s examples of relatively ‘simple’ complexities like Tom Tykwer’s 1998 *Run Lola Run* or Krzysztof Kieslowski’s 1987 *Przypadek (Blind Chance)*, as in these films the final draft seems to have a privileged reality status (that is, the one last presented is the ‘true’ outcome). The radical type of contradictory ‘do it yourself’ option that Coover’s story exhibits, however, seems to be rare in contemporary complex cinema. An overt optionality that fully entrusts the viewer to make his or her choice from the presented unresolved contradictions is probably beyond the (post-)classical domain, and remains restricted to art-cinema narratives. In movies like *Last Year at Marienbad*, ‘the transparently purposive avoidance of closure’ (Carroll 2009: 214) works less as a narrative question to be answered, let alone a puzzle to be solved, but more like an explicit call for meta-narrative reflection and interpretive creativity. One could, however, argue that strategically ambiguous open endings in mainstream complex cinema can have a somewhat similar effect: an ending like that of *Inception*, for instance, creates a multi-stability of interpretations that outsources the decision

to settle on any single, unambiguous outcome to the viewer. Yet, it does so while keeping its viewers immersed in its storyworld; moreover, Nolan presents the options (Cobb accepts to live in a dream to be reunited with his children versus he has finally found a way to meet his children in reality) as if they could be deciphered by a sharp-eyed viewer from within the narrative storyworld.

(9) *The Zen way of reading*: the final strategy discerned by Alber interestingly represents somewhat of a departure from all of the above strategies. Whereas the previous strategies are all focused on resolving dissonances through various interpretive moves, a Zen way of reading is about accepting that dissonance. In Alber's words, this way of reading (or viewing, for that matter) 'presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the above mentioned explanations and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry and panic that they might evoke in her or him' (Alber 2013a: 78). Narratologists (among others, Tsur 1975; Abbott 2008; Richardson 2011; Nielsen 2013) have called for the emancipation of this open-ended strategy, stressing that rather than coming up with interpretive closure, viewers, critics and academics should be more open to celebrate the polysemy of such challenging instances, or to accept and revel in the unnatural as such (Alber 2013a: 78–9). Of course, the willingness of readers or viewers to engage in something like the Zen way of reading depends strongly on individual preferences, and is arguably also related to individual variables in one's personality traits – such as what is known in psychology as the need for cognitive closure, a scale of people's individual tendency to accept or need to resolve ambiguous situations (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). Yet, we would argue that the more a given film problematises traditional narrative comprehension and naturalisation, the more appealing this viewing stance can become. We would further assume that strategies like the Zen way of viewing form 'last resort' strategies, meaning that viewers are particularly prone to take this stance if all other strategies to deal with the impossibilities and dissonances fail. It must however also be noted that this viewing stance is usually no longer a strictly 'narrative' engagement, in the sense that viewers who find themselves in this situation tend to 'give up' on the formation of an actual concrete narrative and go for more affective, lyrical or associative formations of meaning (although little 'threads of narrativity' may still be teased out). We will further explore how this viewing stance reduces dissonance in the next section (2.3), where we discuss what we call aesthetic and 'poetic' stances and other similar 'recuperative' frame-switches that serve to deal with irresolvable dissonance.

Prior to Alber's work, narratologist Tamar Yacobi (1981) already described five *integrating mechanisms* with which viewers can naturalise textual inconsistencies. Yacobi's work deals with various degrees of 'reliability' that readers attribute to a text or narrator (as in any other communicative situation) in response to textual tensions. When readers run into incongruities or other difficulties, they reconsider their assessment regarding the level of 'fictive reality' on which they hold the text to take place, and evaluate the inconsistency as having a possible function or traceable origin. In terms of 'dissonance reduction', we could thus say that Yacobi's principles cover different attitude changes that viewers can utilise in response to texts' evoking dissonant cognitions. According to Yacobi, readers can integrate inconsistencies by (1) genetic, (2) generic, (3) existential, (4) functional and (5) perspectival

strategies (Yacobi 1981). The *genetic* principle (1) covers the strategy by which readers resolve oddities by relating them to the origin of the text's actual production (as coming from a different cultural background, or as the result of a mistake in production for instance); the *generic* mechanism (2) relates to naturalisation through genre conventions (that is, inferring appropriateness within a work's generic context, like with Alber's strategy of generification); the *existential* principle (3) solves inconsistencies in terms of the structure of reality that a viewer attributes to the work in question (as part of the work's particular storyworld; for example, within the world of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, readers have to come to terms with a storyworld logic in which, apparently, people may suddenly turn into large insects); through the *functional* principle (4), viewers take the work's thematic, aesthetic or persuasive goals as the reason behind the text's peculiarities (for example, interpreting the inconsistency as an intended aesthetic effect, comparable to what Alber calls thematic reading); and, lastly, by the *perspectival* principle (5) viewers connect inconsistencies to the internal focalisation of the narration (analogous to Alber's subjectification), treating diegetic anomalies as part of a character's subjective perception, dream, hallucination or fantasy (Yacobi 1981: 115–17). These strategies are all aimed at integrating the dissonance by attributing a function to it; furthermore, Yacobi also holds open the option that viewers may seek an unintended reason behind the dissonance, for instance by attributing it to a production error, or to cultural differences in terms of the work's context of production.

### 2.2.1 Foregrounding

Sense-making in response to textual oddities has also been subjected to empirical literary work. In a psychological study, Katalin Bálint and Frank Hakemulder have related the perception of textual deviancies – among them narrative dissonances – to the notion of *foregrounding*.<sup>6</sup> The concept of foregrounding has been used frequently in literary and aesthetic theory, and holds some similarity to ideas such as Russian formalism's notion of estrangement (*ostranenie* or *ostrannenie*). Foregrounding occurs when viewers perceive a strong deviancy (such as narration that is clearly dissonant) which draws their attention to the text's narrative strategy itself, as well as a renewed perception of the material that is being foregrounded. In their study, Bálint and Hakemulder argue for the (somewhat counterintuitive) hypothesis that such foregrounding may enhance (rather than just disrupt) narrative absorption, as it can trigger more active meaning-making in viewers (absorption here may be defined as immersion, but also as a sensed 'presence', or as character identification).

Blending a phenomenological perspective with approaches from empirical psychology, Bálint and Hakemulder developed an empirical study to test their hypothesis and to categorise viewers and readers' responses to moments of foregrounding. Working only with narrative artworks that the participants had personally selected as meaningful, the researchers used qualitative methods to collect participants' meaning attributions in moments that the subjects identified as striking. The results have led to a (preliminary) taxonomy of

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<sup>6</sup> Bálint and Hakemulder's 'Phenomenology of the foregrounding experience in film and literature' was presented as an invited lecture at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands (2013), and at the conference of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media, in Torino, Italy (2014). A published version of this work is currently under review (Bálint et al.).

how viewers engage with and make sense of surprising or troubling (narrative and/or stylistic) devices. Distinguishing seven general strategies, Bálint and Hakemulder found that readers and viewers can interpret strong deviations as being (1) *symbols* carrying added meanings (these meanings can be subjective, relating to the diegetic world and characters, or may have a symbolic relationship to the real, external world); (2) *obstacles* to be overcome (an example would be a text that is written backwards, which offers momentary challenge or frustration in the reading experience, somewhat in the sense of a ‘puzzle’); (3) *blanks* to be filled in (a film scene that suddenly lacks sound, for instance, asks viewers to actively construct or imagine the missing elements); (4) *ambiguities* to be disambiguated (as perceived ambiguities spawn different possible interpretations in the viewer, they may set in motion interpretive activities that can create a stronger mental connection between the viewer and the text); (5) *novelties* to be considered as striking and appreciated for their uniqueness; (6) *strangenesses* in the form of bizarre ‘attractions’ (such as the eccentric and grotesque oddities that are abundant in the films of David Lynch for instance); and lastly, (7) as *immersive forces*, occurring, for instance, in ‘stream of consciousness’ fiction, where the deviancies are – somewhat counterintuitively – meant to construct a smooth, life-like reading that is closer to real-life experience.<sup>7</sup>

The above findings by Bálint and Hakemulder thus emphasise how moments of strangeness, dissonance and deviance need not be entirely disruptive; rather, by inviting viewers to actively engage and come to terms with them, such moments may lead to a higher appreciation of and a stronger or more prolonged mental connection to the text. We may conclude from their findings that dissonant textual strategies can be appreciated by viewers for the sake of the dissonance, provided that the viewer can recognise an aesthetic effect or find a textual function in it.

### 2.2.2 Narrating agency and authorship

In addition to the range of strategies outlined above, we would like to emphasise the prominence of the option of attributing certain intentions to a film’s narrating agency, or, by extension, to a film’s ‘author’ (as in Yacobi’s ‘genetic principle’). Attributing intentions to an (inferred) film author or to the narration itself can form a key strategy in coming to terms with dissonances. This will however need some explanation, as film narratology has had a somewhat polemic history in defining the role of narrators and authors.

Unlike novels, most films do not make use of an actual narrator who presents the story to us viewers. However, some theorists have posited the notion that film must have a *narrating instance* – some agent responsible for selecting and arranging the presented material. Seymour Chatman argued for the notion of the cinematic narrator (comparable to Wayne Booth’s 1983 [1961] literary concept of the implied author) to theorise the organising, sending, and controlling agency in the communicative process of film viewing; after all,

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<sup>7</sup> For a naturalising reading of the modernist aesthetic in film, see Kiss 2010. By scrutinising the viewing experience of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 *Pierrot le fou*, the article highlights the similarity between the experience of the film’s violation of representational realism on the one hand, and the real processes of viewers’ perception and comprehension on the other. If the claim that in moments of emotional stress ‘physical reality might be linear and chronological, but the experience of this reality is non-linear, achronological’ (ibid: 171) is correct, then Godard’s neo-cubist montage works not as a deviance to but exactly as a ‘technical – and therefore poetic – restitution of reality’ (Pasolini 1966: 42).

Chatman claims, the act of watching and receiving a film by necessity includes the postulation of a sender or creator (Chatman 1978: 146–51; 1990: 109–23). Several other theorists have followed Chatman, working with comparable concepts like the implied filmmaker (see Alber 2010: 163–4 for an overview), or, in a somewhat less anthropomorphic fashion, the filmic composition device, defined by Manfred Jahn as ‘a theoretical device that need not be associated with any concrete person or character, particularly neither the director nor a filmic narrator’ (Jahn 2003: F4.1.2–F4.1.3). These theoretical models all assume that there must be a sender (actual or inferred) for the communicative process of film viewing and interpretation to work. At the other end stands David Bordwell, who has questioned the need to construct such a theoretical communicating agency. According to Bordwell’s *inferential model*, a film narrative can also be understood as emerging in the reception process. A film narrative can be simply seen as ‘the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story. This presupposes a perceiver, but not any sender, of a message’ (Bordwell 1985: 62). According to Bordwell, it is better ‘to give the narrational process the power to signal under certain circumstances that the spectator should construct a narrator ... No purpose is served by assigning every film to a *deus absconditis* [sic]’ (ibid.: 62). To wind up his debate with Chatman, Bordwell concludes:

Of course, we don’t think that narratives fall from the skies. They are created by humans. But the relevant agents in this context are real people, not the postulated agents that Chatman argues for. To undergo the experience of a roller-coaster ride, I don’t have to imagine a ghostly intelligence standing between the engineer and me, shaping the thrills and nausea I feel ... The very concept of a storyteller doesn’t entail a virtual storyteller of the sort that Chatman proposes. (Bordwell 2008: 128)

Leaving aside the question of whether film narratology is fundamentally in need of defining a filmic narrator or not, the interesting question for this study is whether actual viewers use such a concept to make sense of complex and dissonant narration. Can the invocation of a narrating or authorial agency help viewers to interpret complex and contradictory narratives? We will argue that narrating agencies and authors often function as *interpretive constructs* (no matter whether they correspond to actual authors or not) that helps viewers to interpret certain qualities of a film by inferring intended meanings on behalf of the film or its creators. Viewers often attribute intentions to the film’s narration itself (for instance when saying that ‘*Memento* mimics anterograde amnesia’); however, implicitly, this entails that they naturally see all such experiences as results of a human design, manifested as a result of what they perceive to be the intentions of the film’s author (for example, ‘Christopher Nolan is posing us a puzzle’). As Jason Mittell summarises, despite the highly collaborative nature of film production, notions on film’s authorship remain closely connected to a reconstruction of the intentions of a single (or a few) author(s). As Mittell notes,

[u]sing approaches such as biographical criticism or close textual and intertextual analysis, critics strive to understand what a text means by discovering what the author’s intended meaning was. Although such traditional notions of explicit intentionality are less common within criticism today, a looser form of intentionality



follows from the auteur model of film criticism, where a director's body of work is analyzed for consistencies of theme and style – while these authorial markers need not be identified as explicit 'intent,' such criticism assumes that directors bring particular concerns and approaches to their work, and that the critic's job is to uncover those commonalities to reveal an authorial presence. (Mittell 2015: 96)

This interpretive practice is not limited to critical discourse; many non-professional viewers also interpret in terms of authorial intentions, building on their film literacy, previous knowledge and expectations (such as the director's background, a specific body of work, a visible 'authorial signature', intra- and intertextual references), and the viewing context (for example, in an arthouse cinema, as part of a DVD boxset and so on). Finding a compromise between Chatman and Bordwell's conflicting theories, Jason Mittell calls this interpretive construct the *inferred author function*. To differentiate this from notions like the implied author, the choice of the term 'inferred' highlights 'that authorship is not (solely) being construed through textual implication, but is constituted through the act of consumption itself' (ibid.: 107). As a definition,

*the inferred author function is a viewer's production of authorial agency responsible for a text's storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses. In more practical terms, when we watch a program and wonder 'why did they do that?' the inferred author function is our notion of 'they' as the agent(s) responsible for the storytelling. (ibid.: 107)*

Mittell follows Bordwell's account, at least in theory, by agreeing that 'viewers do not need to construct an authorial figure to comprehend a narrative' but, he emphasises, in practice, 'per pervasive fan discourses and accounts of personal viewing practices, many often do' (ibid.: 115).

Mittell's inferred author function seems to be particularly suitable to more complex forms of narration, as these tend to require more interpretive activity and invite more viewer inferences, often reaching out to the extratextual domain and asking an authorial agency to lend a hand.<sup>8</sup> As we have seen in this chapter so far, most interpretive strategies in fact involve explanations of narrative complexity as being intentional (for example, deeming it an authorial expression of the work's themes; as carrying a covert symbolic meaning that must be denoted; as a consciously placed puzzle for the viewer to solve; and so on). The guiding hypothesis of authorship entails that viewers anticipate that complexity will be in some way meaningful, since, presumably, it has been intentionally built into the narrative's design (by 'narratively wired' and purposefully communicating human agents). This anticipation guides the process of interpretation: it helps viewers suspend or tolerate momentary feelings of dissonance for a later payoff, and encourages them to actively speculate on the possible point or on possible outcomes. No matter how strong the perceived dissonances in a narrative are,

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<sup>8</sup> Mittell's original research domain concerns television series and serials, whose formats entail long-term narratives. Viewers of long-term narratives may be even more inclined to create a kind of authorial construct, as this allows them to hypothesise where the show is heading or what its creators intended with certain choices. Serial narratives sometimes also enable actual viewer-author correspondence while a show is still in production.

this stance can cause some viewers to believe that there must be a ‘masterplan’, some purposeful construct that ultimately integrates everything consonantly and provides it with meaning. After all, as Mittell notes in his discussion of contemporary complex serial television,

many viewers want to imagine a creator with full knowledge and mastery guiding the outcomes, and in moments of doubt or confusion, they put their trust and faith in this higher power ... The inferred author function offers a model for the pragmatic use of an imagined, all-powerful creator to guide our faithful narrative comprehension. (ibid.: 116–17)

The overarching hypothesis of inferred authorship – or what Jan Alber has called *hypothetical intentionalism*<sup>9</sup> – may thus support viewers’ hope in resolving complex narratives, as the assumption of a controlling author-figure with a coherent vision helps to retain their faith in a rewarding outcome. It also goes without saying that film authors’ public personas can also include certain expectations with regard to narrative complexity. This may help more experienced and ‘auteur literate’ viewers to cope with recurring complexity within a director’s or screenplay writer’s oeuvre.<sup>10</sup> Compare, for instance, the possible variety of expectations that an informed moviegoer might bring to a complex film directed by Christopher Nolan, David Lynch or Terrence Malick. Knowledge of these directors’ bodies of work and idiosyncratic auteur approaches will presumably influence what intentions viewers initially assume to underlie moments of narrative dissonance, since they may be expecting, for example, a mind-bending puzzle, a disorienting subjective realist experience or a (pseudo-)profound philosophical exploration, respectively. In such situations, authorship functions as a cognitive frame connected to specific expectations, as well as interpretive and evaluative routines.

### 2.2.3 Artefact emotions and meta-reflexive appreciation

Notwithstanding the above, it must also be stressed that viewers need not be familiar with a film’s director or writer to appreciate its complex narration. Moments of strong narrative deviance can also be scrutinised and valued for their own sake: a challenging enigma, a strikingly unconventional structure, or an unexpected resolution can all be understood by viewers as moments of ‘narrative spectacle’. Mittell calls such instances the narrative artwork’s *operational aesthetic* – a notion he borrows from Neil Harris (1973). The term discerns a mode of viewing that invites viewers to engage in a pleasure that is ‘less about “what will happen?” and more about “how did he do that?”’ (Mittell 2015: 42). Some complex films indeed seem to aim to ‘outsmart’ or ‘trick’ the viewer. Their operational aesthetic extends the fictional engagement with ‘artefact emotions’, triggering ‘fascination

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<sup>9</sup> Alber’s notion of hypothetical intentionalism provides another interesting alternative to theories of the filmic narrator (Alber 2010). Drawing from cognitive theories on folk psychology and everyday mind-reading, Alber assumes that ‘we all attribute intentions and motivations to films in order to find out what they might mean’ (ibid.: 167), and suggests that in film viewing spectators create cohesion and make meaning by inferring a kind of ‘hypothetical filmmaker’ to whom such intentions may be ascribed.

<sup>10</sup> For the latter, see, for example, Chris Dzialo’s (2009) analysis of Charlie Kaufman’s complex screenplays.

with the construction of a film narrative or production design' (Plantinga 2009: 89). Complex films often invite us to marvel at their cleverness, unexpectedness, uniqueness or other striking qualities demonstrated in their ingenious narrative constructs. As Mittell notes in his seminal article 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television',

[t]hrough the operational aesthetic these complex narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst [sic], dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these [complex contemporary serial] programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers. (Mittell 2006: 36)

The operational aesthetic of narrative artworks thus invokes a partially 'meta-reflexive' appreciation; with complex films, viewers, through their confusion, become aware of the intricate storytelling techniques being applied, and are incited to actively resolve the narrative puzzles. And yet this meta-narrative exploration does not necessarily hamper them in their immersion in the fictional storyworld. Again, in Mittell's words:

what seems to be a key goal across videogames, puzzle films, and narratively complex television series is the desire to be both actively engaged in the story and successfully surprised through storytelling manipulations. This is the operational aesthetic at work – we want to enjoy the machine's results while also marveling at how it works. (ibid.: 38)

With the rise of mainstream narrative complexity, such partially meta-reflexive modes of viewing have arguably become more commonplace in popular film consumption.

#### **2.2.4 In sum: Interpretation as dissonance reduction**

In conclusion to all of the different naturalisation strategies above, it must first be noted that the discussed rationalising and sense-making activities are not restricted to complex or dissonant films and texts. Viewers and readers, in their strenuous search for meaning, always and constantly naturalise even the most basic of stories, relating texts to available cognitive schemas and generic codes, as well as to the real world and to actual contexts or authors. It is by reference to these cognitive and cultural frames of knowledge that it becomes possible to understand and interpret any text in the first place. Such elementary hermeneutic processes are arguably a key part of the mental activity that makes reading a narrative or watching a film an engaging and even pleasurable activity. However, complex stories, we would argue, often deliberately emphasise our reliance on these strategies by resisting habitual sense-making (either locally, through perceptual paradoxes and other instant modes of foregrounding; or globally, by more pervasive contradictions or incoherencies) in such a way that interpretation becomes a conscious, central and ultimately engaging or rewarding activity. This can function 'online', while watching the film (as the formation of interpretive hypotheses is often implicated in the act of complex film viewing), but also 'post-hoc', in the form of reflective engagement after the viewing – for instance when we look back on a film,

discuss it with a friend, or spend extra time on online message boards and review platforms to read or share different interpretations.

This insight constitutes the first possible explanation that can account for the seeming paradox of the attractiveness of dissonant cognitions: it is not the felt dissonance itself that appeals to readers and viewers, but the creative act of finding and applying strategies or ascribing meanings to reduce the dissonance that may constitute the fascination with (and assumed pleurability of) complex narrative experiences. Several reasons could underlie this explanation.

First of all, successfully reducing dissonance may be rewarding, if not pleasing, because it allows viewers to feel competent and insightful – in having solved the puzzle, in comprehending the narrative machinery, in mastering the appropriate interpretive moves and so on. This explanation can account for a significant part of the gratification of complexity in art (an idea that will be further explored in the final *Outlook* chapter).

Second, naturalising interpretations can have a rewarding effect because they bring formal narrative complexities back to the realm of the mimetic. The interpretive work serves to (re-)connect abstract, formal complexity to the realm of the humanly meaningful, as naturalisations make the dissonance expressive of, or relevant to, some aspect of everyday lived experience. As such, narrative complexity can be taken to express something about our lives, experiences, or the world we live in.

Lastly, viewers' naturalising interpretations can also have another, intellectually 'reflective' dimension. By foregrounding potential ambiguities and ambivalences, dissonances in narrative artworks invite viewers to consciously apply different cognitive and cultural frames to resolve them. This means that viewers are asked to try out different knowledge frames, to consciously process them, to examine them and to reflect on them. Engaging in such intensified (and multi-perspectival) acts of interpretation may have a philosophically reflective side-effect, as they can make us aware of our own interpretive activity, and may, in the process, reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the work interpreted. These reflective opportunities to be hermeneutically and interpretively critical and creative can form an important part of the gratification of art experiences.

We will come back to some of these hypotheses in the final *Outlook* chapter. For now, however, it must be noted that claiming a central role for these naturalising or reduction strategies does not yet solve our paradox (between the attraction to versus the reduction of dissonant cognitions in fiction) entirely. Looking at the case of the 'impossible puzzle films' that we discerned in the last chapter, it is apparent that these films often exploit the effect of dissonance more enduringly. Films like *Donnie Darko*, *Enemy* or *Mulholland Drive* do not offer the type of local impossibilities and incongruities that one can easily naturalise – sometimes not even after prolonged efforts. The paradoxes and counterintuitive events they present are stubborn, and the evoked effects of their dissonances tend to be more global and lastingly disconcerting. Impossible puzzle films often do not readily or straightforwardly hand their viewers the above pathways to naturalise their strangeness in an unambiguous manner, nor do they give viewers the instant gratification of having 'solved the puzzle'. The question thus remains: when a narrative resists these familiar strategies of naturalisation and rationalisation, then how do viewers engage with highly unnatural, paradoxical or counterintuitive story elements? In the below, we will first look at how dissonant film

narratives may inspire viewers to take different aesthetic stances towards the work as a whole – laying less stress on narrativisation efforts and rather focusing on a film’s poetic, aesthetic, or lyrical qualities (section 2.3). This will be followed by the unpacking of a hypothesis according to which some complex films – including impossible puzzle films in particular – may encourage viewers to repeatedly switch between different interpretations (rather than settling on a single interpretive strategy) in response to persistent dissonance (in section 2.4).

### **2.3 Coping with dissonance: frame-switches, or: poetic and aesthetic readings**

A high degree of dissonance or unnaturalness can cause a more fundamental shift in the apprehension of a text, triggering an altogether different kind of interpretive response. We will call this kind of viewer activity a *frame-switch*: when local textual conflicts become too severe or numerous, and naturalising strategies fail, viewers often alter their stance towards a text as a whole. That is, they change the ‘macro-frame’ through which they apprehend the work. Sometimes, such frame-switches direct viewers’ assessments to different (but in some ways ‘neighbouring’) types of narrative engagement, such as ‘poetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ modes of viewing and reading, or even modes of viewing that abandon narrativity altogether, or what Jan Alber called the Zen way of reading, all of which allow different aesthetic effects than traditional narrativisation.

One such theory comes from Torben Grodal, who has described the viewer mechanisms that are active in the confrontation with dissonant narrative experiences from an embodied-cognitive angle. According to Grodal, movies ‘presenting paradoxes and counterintuitive events ... arrest the PECMA flow and overactivate the association areas’ and, by doing so, provide ‘experiences of deep significance’ (Grodal 2009: 149–50).<sup>11</sup> For Grodal, dissonant experiences trigger a frame-switch in viewers’ evaluations of a given narrative: he suggests that rather than focusing on concrete action, viewers will take a different stance and look for more symbolic and higher-order meanings in such narratives. This means that they detach their interpretation from immersion in the ‘online’, embodied and concrete actions of a story, and rather focus on the more abstract, ‘disembodied’ realm of ‘higher-order’ meaning-making systems. This frame-switch partially suspends the mimetic make-believe in the storyworld, and exchanges it for a more interpretive apprehension, a shift that ultimately justifies the categorisation of these experiences under a reception-defined label of art film, which, according to Grodal, is ‘a subcategory within film art in general’ (Grodal 2009: 207). In this sense, according to Grodal, art cinema is not just a set of conventional principles and representational modes (that is, not only a genre), but also forms a label for describing actual viewers’ embodied-cognitive film experiences (that is, a particular stimulation of viewers’ cognitive faculties that results in their specific labelling of a film as an art film; we will explore this idea further in the next chapter).

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<sup>11</sup> Grodal’s PECMA (Perception, Emotion, Cognition and Motor Action) model ‘describes how the film experience relies on a processing flow that follows the brain’s general architecture, namely a flow from perception (ear and eye), via visual and acoustic brain structures, association areas, and frontal brain structures to action (motor activation) ... In films ... it is the perception of activities on the screen that cues the viewer’s simulation of the flow’ (Grodal 2009: 146, 151). For an examination of narrative complexity’s possible disruptive – blocking – effect on this PECMA flow, see Ros and Kiss (2018).

In her influential cognitive-narratological volume *Towards a Natural Narratology*, Monika Fludernik argues for a similar strategy of frame-switching, albeit without the ‘hard’ neuro-scientific and embodied-cognitive claims that characterise Grodal’s work. According to Fludernik, when dealing with a (potentially) narrative artefact, readers and viewers engage in an act of *narrativisation*. Narrativisation comprises the reading and viewing routine of assigning a cognitive macro-frame that imposes narrativity onto a text; it naturalises the artefact as a story by recourse to narrative schemas (Fludernik 1996: 34). This process involves both culturally acquired schemas (for instance, familiar storytelling situations and generic patterns) and natural embodied-cognitive parameters (such as knowledge about human action, communication, perception, emotions and so on) to render certain artefacts or events ‘narrative’ (ibid.: 22–5). For Fludernik, narrativity is thus primarily a natural cognitive act, a frame that viewers apply (actively, but typically subconsciously) to artefacts or real-life events. Some texts, however, resist this process of narrativisation. Fludernik uses the term ‘non-natural’ texts for works of art that challenge mimetic models, routines of comprehension and real-life cognitive parameters: ‘Recuperation of narrativity from non-naturally coded texts ... becomes possible through recourse to a variety of natural cognitive parameters ... [However, w]here narrativity can no longer be recuperated by any means at all, the narrative genre merges with poetry’ (ibid.: 36).

Like Grodal, Fludernik’s notion of switching to a different frame altogether also allows for a kind of interpretive ‘last resort’ strategy. When the dissonance is too insolubly large, or the incongruities are too numerous, viewers may abandon the mental formation of a prototypical narrative, and construct meaning and assign significance on a level that is not strictly narrative. Such a shift towards a (more) poetic reading can provide a satisfying recourse when the story(-logic) of a text is no longer recuperable through conventional story patterns or mimetic parameters. This frame-switch arguably entails a fundamentally different viewing stance – one that is no longer aimed at forming prototypical narrativity (that is, constructing a causal and chronological chain of events around agents in a spatio-temporal setting), but also allows more connotative and reflective modes of interpretation. Returning to David Bordwell’s four-tier model of cinematic meanings (see our discussion in section 1.2), Bordwell has called this viewer-inclination the *symbolic impulse*. ‘The spectator,’ Bordwell notes, ‘may seek to construct implicit [i.e. symbolic] meanings when she cannot find a way to reconcile an anomalous element with a referential or explicit aspect of the work’ (Bordwell 1989: 9).

These strategies can work to reduce dissonance because a poetic frame of assessment will lay less stress on the importance of narrative coherence and logic. It thus downplays the magnitude of the dissonance that is caused by incongruent, incoherent or impossible narrative elements. At the same time, it allows for a wider interpretive range to make meaning, to produce consonant readings, to assign significance to the work, or to be captivated by non-conceptual moods or feelings it evokes. Modes of viewing that allow such attitudes (like the aforementioned Zen way of reading discerned by Jan Alber) can serve to give way to the more affective dimensions of a cognitively problematic narrative. Arguably, one possibly enjoyable (side-)effect of a cognitively baffling story is that it can make room for viewers to simply undergo the perceptual or affective sensations of wonder, strangeness, beauty or anxiety that the work evokes. In the next chapter, we will come back to these frame-switches

with regard to art-cinema viewing, where such strategies seem to be more prominent and, in certain artistic traditions, sometimes even the desired effect.

Interestingly, the implicit consensus among the above models of naturalisation and narrativisation seems to be that whereas *physically* impossible features can usually be explained or naturalised as part of a storyworld or genre, strong *logically* unreasonable scenarios (like those in impossible puzzle films) are supposedly usually tamed through more ‘distancing’ frame-switches – that is, by transforming their strong paradoxes or incongruities into associational, allegoric, symbolic, symptomatic and other extradiegetic domains of meaning-making. Such frame-switches are generally taken to be characterised by a certain decrease of immersion in the mimetic qualities of a text, and, in turn, by an expanded emphasis on more meta-fictional or extra-textual modes of meaning-making. Yet, again, when regarding impossible puzzle films, it seems that viewers’ *narrative* inclination usually remains stronger than the reflective aesthetic pleasure that a symbolical interpretation or other frame-switch can provide. These films do present logically unreasonable and mutually incompatible events, but do not seem to trigger art-cinematic feelings of ‘deep significance’, as Grodal assumes, nor do they encourage viewers to direct fully their meaning-making activities towards the poetic, associative, aesthetic or lyrical dimensions. Instead (as we will argue more extensively in the next chapter) it seems that impossible puzzle films often tempt viewers into a more intensive narrative investigation, encouraging them to closely map the plot and carefully scrutinise the storyworld in an insistent endeavour to reveal possible, logically reasonable solutions.

#### **2.4 Frame-switching as hermeneutic play in impossible puzzle films**

Lastly, a third strategy, in some ways complementary to the previous two, but arguably more suitable to the particular challenges of impossible puzzle films, has been proposed by literary theorist Liesbeth Korthals Altes. She relates some puzzling narrative experiences to the idea of repeatedly *switching* between different explanatory and assessment frames as an aesthetic effect in itself. She notes how ‘some kinds of texts, and some kinds of reading strategies, require that we hold in mind alternative conflicting framings and oscillate between them, as this may result in pleasurable (“aesthetic”) mental activity’ (Korthals Altes 2014: 33). This view acknowledges that switching between interpretations – rather than settling on one exclusively assigned meaning – can be a rewarding mode of apprehension too.

Indeed, complex stories may appeal to readers and viewers by requiring them to apply and test different frames of knowledge, thereby inviting them to check the flexibility of their interpretive and critical competences. This oscillating frame-switching activity can function as a kind of *hermeneutic play* in the process of making meaning of complex narratives. Dissonant cognitions, in the form of unresolvable ambiguities, impossibilities or contradictions, can present powerful triggers to engage viewers in this hermeneutic play, as such challenges can be particularly stimulating for viewers’ need for resolution and their general urge to construct meaning. This can create an opportunity for viewers to be imaginative, reflective, philosophical or meta-cognitive, or to simply try out and train any combination of these sensibilities.

Some impossible puzzle films enhance such effects by leaving strong ambiguities in terms of the possible meanings (that is, framing options) of their dissonances. For instance,

they may create and maintain uncertainty about the objective or subjective nature of their narration, or between the appropriateness of literal, concrete narrative readings and more associative, poetic or allegorical ways of making meaning of the events. When viewers experience such ambiguities, we can roughly discern two general types of narrative frame-switching activities that they may resort to. These concern (2.4.1) *switching between macro-frames* (that is, deciding on, for example, ‘What text type or genre is at hand?’; ‘How should it be watched?’; ‘What meaning-making and evaluative procedures are appropriate?’) and (2.4.2) *local frame-switching* between possible interpretations and naturalisations of local textual elements (addressing questions such as, for example, ‘How should this particular contradiction be understood within the represented boundaries of the narrative world?’ or ‘Is it a subjective representation, an aspect of the storyworld, a symbol or a meta-fictional reflection?’). The divide is, of course, not so clear-cut, as these two levels of framing operate in close connection: a change in the chosen macro-frame (for example assessing the text as a detective story, as lyrical poetry or as a political manifesto) also entails the application of different local naturalisations. Conversely, local problems and shifts in meaning-making can cause viewers to take a different stance towards the text as a whole. Nevertheless, in the sections below, we outline the two options independently, as they may relate to different (albeit closely related) possible viewing effects of impossible puzzle films.

#### **2.4.1 Switching between narrative and symbolical readings: *Enemy & Mulholland Drive***

In some cases, viewers may remain in disagreement not just on specific interpretations, but also in terms of which macro-frame is most appropriate to understand the narrative at hand. Denis Villeneuve’s *Enemy*, our case study at the start of this chapter, offers an example of an impossible puzzle film that knowingly plays with the options of reading its story through different macro-frames. In director Villeneuve’s words: ‘You don’t know if they are two in reality, or maybe from a subconscious point of view, there’s just one. ... It’s maybe two sides of the same persona ... or a fantastic event’ (Lewis 2014). Indeed, upon first viewing, the initial apprehension and interpretation of most viewers of the film will be that of a mimetic, perhaps magical-realist narrative, comparable to the original story of José Saramago’s novel *The Double*, on which the movie is based. This means most viewers are likely to first see the story as a (semi-)realistic tale about Adam Bell (Jake Gyllenhaal) who discovers that he has a perfect double, Anthony Claire (Jake Gyllenhaal); after all, no narrative cues to believe otherwise have been presented.

The fundamental difference between Saramago’s novel and Villeneuve’s film, however, is the way in which they approach the same basic idea of someone being confronted with his exact double. While the original novel takes the bizarre situation as a strange but real anomaly of the fictional storyworld, the film, by playing on its protagonist(s) and viewers’ natural scepticism about the very possibility of this unnatural occurrence, focuses on the intrinsic ambiguation of the (im)possible character duplication. While Saramago’s treatment evokes rational questions like ‘How would one deal with or resolve such a strange simultaneity?’, Villeneuve raises more ontological and epistemological narrative concerns, asking ‘How is this possible at all?’, ‘Who is who?’ and ‘Is what we see real?’

As we get lost in *Enemy*’s schizophrenic spider web, it becomes clear that the film does not settle upon the novel’s realistic treatment and rational contemplation of this strange



phenomenon. Instead, by cumulating incongruities and ambiguities, the film version gradually challenges the realistic reading of the story's strange (or magical) premise. The two physically identical characters seem to conflate increasingly throughout Villeneuve's rather free adaptation. Moreover, the suggestion of strong psychological themes and recurring motives and symbols (such as the spider figures and cobwebs) underline the ambiguity as to how the story could be read as a whole: perhaps the two men form a duality of two aspects of the same person, manifesting an old interpretive trope that is often present or implied in the literary theme of the *doppelgänger*. Or, some would say, there is actually a single protagonist, and his apparent physical split – focalised through a subjective realist point of view that creates an alter ego – is an unreliable representation of his mental disintegration (fuelled by his insecurities of being unable to commit to his family and to his soon-to-be-born child, or, according to another possible interpretation, by his guilty conscience causing a fatal car accident in which he lost his pregnant wife).

By accumulating dissonances, the narration in *Enemy* thus gradually suggests a second, *psychological* or *symbolical* framing of the events, warranting the possibility that all events may be subconscious, sublimated or imagined. This offers an alternative viewing stance to solve the film's internal narrative conflicts: one that abandons classical narrative routines and embraces more psychological readings that treat the offbeat elements as symbols of guilt, fear or desire. The potential appropriateness of the latter stances is further reinforced by the film's puzzling, if not shocking, final scene (in which the film's narrative spider's stratagem – literally – corporealises, turning the protagonist's pregnant wife into a giant spider). Whereas, on the surface, the film seems to be a 'narrative' film in the rather classical sense, its narrative dissonances and stylistic suggestions gradually pull the viewer towards alternative symbolical or allegorical readings, as these may possibly yield a more coherent interpretation. *Enemy's* balanced ambiguity between equally possible global interpretations thus brings into effect a hermeneutic play of switching between classical narrative and symbolic explanatory assessments.

In some of the most ambiguous cases, the viewing experiences evoked by impossible puzzle films borders on viewing routines that we associate with art cinema. An illustrative example of such framing ambiguity is offered by the case of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. In a paper on the film's origins as a potential television series, Jason Mittell outlines the debate between academics, critics and fans on how the film's enigmatic complexity should be understood. Mittell notes that the readings of Lynch's highly complex narrative can be filed under two general positions:

The first is a question of *comprehension*, trying to understand the literal coherence of the film's narrative events ... The most common explanation for the film's narrative is that the first 80% of *Mulholland Drive* is Diane Selwyn's dream, and that the final act portrays the reality she is trying to escape, but many other explications argue for various versions of dreams, reality, deaths, and parallels. (Mittell 2013)

This position, we would argue, is the one that follows from maintaining a more or less 'classical' narrativising viewing stance. Relying on the subjectification or perspectival principles of sense-making outlined above, it favours structural narrative orientation on a

mimetic level, and aims to provide traditional naturalisations and motivations (subjective realism, dreams, mental illness) for the narration's complex formal functions, while accepting the film's paradoxes as part of the game. From this analytical angle, the film's confusing effect emerges from the film's narrative complexity that operates on two interlocked levels. First, Lynch provides an exceedingly complex structure that combines a severely shattered non-linear chronology with a self-contained metaleptic structure, juggling with and jumping in and out of the levels of the reality frame of the dreamer (Naomi Watts as Diane Selwyn) and the dream itself (Naomi Watts as Betty Elms). Second, adding another layer to the film's complexity, Lynch conceals the plot's non-linearity or looped metalepsis, refusing to signpost any transitions or transgression moments along its bumpy narrative ride. As a result, the viewer faces the rather impossible task of deciphering an excessively complex game without the help of any guidelines that would reveal the rules of such an intricate game.

Alternatively, in Mittell's words, 'the other way to answer the question about *Mulholland Drive*'s meaning, is to engage in *interpretation*, looking for the meanings beneath the surface, at the level of symbolism, thematics, or subtextual significance' (ibid.). The explanations offered by this second group of viewers rely on poetic, allegorical or other more 'art-cinematic' apprehensions; they favour the invocation of extra-textual, connotative or philosophical frames of knowledge to tame the film's narrative dissonances. As Mittell notes, in the abundant critical and scholarly writings on the film

we can find readings of the film as illustrating Lacan's theories of fantasy, desire, and reality; evoking contemporary technologies of virtual reality; dissolving the boundaries between semiotic oppositions; offering a lesbian tragedy as an indictment of homophobia; and critiquing the dream-crushing logic of Hollywood cinema, among many others. (ibid.)

Such readings place the film's dissonance in a discursive, naturalising context, downplaying literal narrative readings in favour of extratextual frames and other hermeneutic solutions to make its dissonant elements cohere.

A more extensive case study of *Mulholland Drive*, and the different meaning making stances it has evoked, will be the core of Study 4 of this dissertation. The case is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how narrative and cognitive macro-frames do not only underlie different interpretations, but can also shape very different *viewing experiences* and modes of engagement. It is on these thin and sometimes fuzzy boundaries that the differences between impossible puzzle films and art cinema often become articulate (or where the differences may, for some viewers, dissolve). Due to this difficulty in categorisation, we will pay more attention to the specification of the differences between art-cinema and impossible puzzle films in the next chapter, where we will discuss their divergent narration strategies. Most impossible puzzle films, we will claim, do not primarily encourage poetic, lyrical or allegorical readings, but remain (at least partially) rooted in the general confines of 'classical narrative' engagement.

#### 2.4.2 Cognitive hesitation and the fantastic

Ambiguity between naturalising options does not always only concern shifts in macro-frames, which alter viewing stances altogether. Within a more or less established classical narrative macro-frame of engagement, viewers may still experience local conflicts in naturalising or rationalising routines. These may concern uncertainty over determining how *local* incoherencies can be seen as a functional part of the narrative (see also the models of Jan Alber, Tamar Yacobi, and Katalin Bálint and Frank Hakemulder discussed earlier). Viewers can, for instance, remain unsure as to whether a certain element of the storyworld should be seen as an ontological fact of the diegetic world, or as the subjective perception of a character, or perhaps as a symbol that is to be interpreted in terms of a thematic, meta-diegetic meaning constructed by the author – and so on.

Impossible puzzle films often strategically retain such ambiguities with regard to different naturalising options. The most common strategy is to leave it unclear whether certain events, moments or plotlines are *subjective* internal states of a character, or *objective* external facts of the fictional storyworld. Such ambiguity is similar to the one we discussed in relation to *Enemy*, but with the difference that here it need not concern the status of the narrative as a whole. As Alan Cameron has noted, films like David Lynch's LA trilogy 'and other [then] recent films, including *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly 2001) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher 1999) create ontological uncertainty between "subjective" and "objective" narrative modes' (Cameron 2008: 11). Even within seemingly subjective scenes, Cameron notes, 'we are not always sure whether we are witnessing a memory, a hallucination or an alternative reality' (ibid.: 11).

Indeed, creating and strategically maintaining uncertainty between objective and subjective modes of naturalisation is a key strategy of many impossible puzzle films. In this sense, impossible puzzle films can facilitate a kind of cognitive hesitation – a felt dissonance that, as Matthew Campora describes it, 'results from the lack of sufficient information required to make a decision regarding the nature of the event' (Campora 2014: 60). As a viewing effect, this cognitive hesitation can be seen as closely related to what narratologist Tzvetan Todorov defined as the 'theoretical genre' of the fantastic. In fantastic fiction, troubling impossibilities occur in a seemingly normal storyworld. More precisely, within an immersive, realistic and natural storyworld, the fantastic presents viewers with

an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov 1975: 25)

The category of the fantastic, Todorov argues, is not defined by the choice for either one of these options (a subjective illusion or a supernatural storyworld) but rather by the uncertainty that follows from the 'equitenability' of both options. In other words,

[t]he fantastic occupies *the duration of this uncertainty*. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (ibid.: 25 – emphasis added)

A text thus belongs to the category of the fantastic when it persistently maintains a puzzling ambiguous effect as to how its presented oddities should be understood: that is, ‘until an explanation is provided, or until a decision is made by the viewer regardless of the provision of an explanation, the spectator remains in the mode of the fantastic’ (Campora 2014: 61). Texts that ultimately do offer a reasonable option to rationalise the supernatural elements (restoring the laws of a realistic world) belong to the genre of the uncanny, whereas texts that ultimately accept the supernatural as part of the laws of the storyworld belong to the marvellous (Todorov 1975: 41).

Besides the presence of impossible or supernatural elements, Todorov notes that the effect of the fantastic requires immersion (‘an integration of the reader into the world of the characters’) and must be sustained by ambiguity (‘that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated’) (ibid.: 31). The fantastic, it can thus be argued, is essentially a dissonance between cognitions; it is a viewing effect characterised by a maintained cognitive hesitation that readers experience with regard to a troubling impossibility in a storyworld: ‘[t]he reader’s hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic’ (ibid.: 31). Moreover, the fantastic – like impossible puzzle films – does not allow viewers to make a definitive frame-switch that would modulate the storyworld’s mimetic and immersive qualities for a more thematic or poetic reading. In Todorov’s words, the fantastic implies ‘not only the existence of an uncanny event, which provokes a hesitation in the reader and the hero; but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither “poetic” nor “allegorical”’ (ibid.: 32). In sum, Todorov defines the fantastic as a genre as follows:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, the hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus, the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. Nonetheless, most examples satisfy all three conditions. (ibid.: 33)

All three of Todorov’s criteria for the reading effect of the fantastic hold for most impossible puzzle films too. It seems that these films also achieve their viewing effects by evoking in viewers a cognitive hesitation, as they keep open certain interpretive options to deal with the

presented dissonances. Also, in impossible puzzle films, both the protagonist and the viewers often experience comparable confusion and uncertainty with regard to the diegetic impossibilities (as happens in *Triangle* or in *Enemy*, for example). Lastly, a viewing stance that settles for a poetic (rather than narrative) engagement will downplay the hesitation in such a way that the hesitation effect is lost. Impossible puzzle films therefore often walk a similar interpretive tightrope of specific conditions which need to be balanced to trigger and preserve a particular hesitation in their viewers with regard to the narrative's non-natural elements.

Matthew Campora believes that fantastic narratives, in both literature and film, will invariably resolve themselves into one of Todorov's categories of the *uncanny* or the *marvellous* (or into one of the other two subgenres of the *fantastic uncanny* or the *fantastic marvellous*). According to him, '[e]ven if *Mulholland Drive* offers no explanation, for instance, the spectator *must* decide how to explain the event' (Campora 2014: 61 – emphasis added). Campora reasons that *Mulholland Drive* lifts its fantastic mode by offering naturalisation through positing a narrative mode of subjective realism (for example, Betty's unexplainable disappearance can only be understood in the context of a dream). But it seems more important to emphasise that impossible puzzle films like *Mulholland Drive* indeed may demand, but actually do not reassuringly allow the offloading of their dissonant elements into the (fantastic) uncanny or (fantastic) marvellous domains of naturalisation. Although impossible puzzle films may indeed evoke certain naturalising explanations to some viewers, they often do not fully commit to a single one, and will retain ambiguities. Through this resistance, they maintain a degree of cognitive hesitation instead, and are therefore capable of providing a perpetually fantastic mode of viewing. For instance, as Dennis Lim, author of *David Lynch: The Man from Another Place*, has argued,

[m]uch more than an enigma to be cracked, *Mulholland Dr.* takes as its subject the very act of solving: the pleasurable and perilous, essential and absurd process of making narrative sense, of needing and creating meaning. Whether or not they explicitly pose the question, Lynch's late films ponder the role of story at times when reality itself can seem out of joint. (Lim 2015)

Readings like this one – which take hesitation itself as their subject – are equally possible for many impossible puzzle films. They do however require an ability to suspend interpretive closure that, following Reuven Tsur, we could call 'negative capability' (Tsur 1975) – a stance which we will discuss further in this study's final *Outlook* chapter. It is true that movies like *Mulholland Drive* or *Triangle* could be naturalised as a subjective dream or hallucination (for Campora *Mulholland Drive* belongs to the *fantastic uncanny*). This option may be tempting for some viewers, because it brings the troubling dissonances back to the realm of both the humanly possible and the symbolically meaningful. However, it is not necessarily the *only* possible, nor necessarily the most attractive or 'maximally meaningful' of the options. As for *Triangle*, for instance, although the vicious loop in which the protagonist finds herself could be easily naturalised as a projection of a guilt-ridden and therefore schizophrenic mother's internally focalised subjective realist view (similar to that of *Enemy*'s protagonist), most viewers do not opt for this solution. Instead, keeping the fantastic

mode in operation, they often maintain their close analytical engagement while permanently attempting to crack the puzzle, or enjoy the film's balanced play, regulating the oscillation between their pertinent explanatory frames.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, the fundamental difference between Todorov's category and ours is that whereas the fantastic concerns questions of the ontology of the storyworld, such as the existence or non-existence of ghosts in the particular world of the fiction (that is, elements of the *told*), impossible puzzle films maintain the uncertainties on the level of narrative structure and narration (that is, in the *telling*). The fantastic can occur within relatively simple narrative structures. Impossible puzzle films, on the other hand, do not have to play with the hesitation of the fantastic with regard to the unnatural elements of their storyworlds; for example, complex time-travel films like *Primer* and *Timecrimes* leave no ambiguity as to what causes their convoluted story structures, as they construct storyworlds that host the existence of time machines. Nevertheless, impossible puzzle films do almost invariably include some strange, supernatural or disturbing elements in their storyworlds, which often serve to heighten the evoked sense of puzzlement. Moreover, sustaining uncertainty over the ontological status of these impossible story elements can be an effective (additional) strategy to increase or maintain puzzlement and curiosity. In Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), for instance, the ambiguity of who is responsible for the impossibilities and supernatural occurrences in the story (either a haunted apartment, or the distorting paranoia and identity crisis of the focalising protagonist) is the same question as to what or who is responsible for the narrative's impossible loop structure. The effects of impossible puzzle films and the fantastic can thus function in tandem, with the hesitation and ambiguity of the fantastic serving to heighten the puzzling effect of an impossible narrative structure.

All things considered, when examining the engagement with dissonant cognitions in impossible puzzle films, it does not suffice to conclude that the attractiveness of dissonant scenarios lies only in their successful resolution only. After all, some of these films strategically obstruct and enduringly frustrate exactly these viewer attempts. Rather, one could go as far as to say that the engaging power (if not appeal) of some complex films partially stems from viewers' inability to reduce the dissonance. In the engaged situation of narrative immersion, and under the right narrative conditions, an enduring sense of dissonance can become a source of fascination rather than one of sheer frustration. Dissonant cognitions can trigger viewers to keep investing mental energy in the reduction of incongruities, whether in vain or not, urging these viewers to apply different frames and to test different interpretive solutions to the options and constraints afforded by the narrative. Whether it is through the successful naturalisation, integration or rationalisation of dissonance within the fiction (2.2), through a more poetic, lyrical, associative and affective apprehension (2.3) or through the constant hesitation and mental oscillation between different hermeneutic frames (2.4), coping with dissonance in narratives gives viewers the possibility

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<sup>12</sup> Supervising more than ten seminar discussions about *Triangle* (between 2010 and 2014, at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands) and *Mulholland Drive* (2016 and 2017, University of Groningen), our experience tells us that viewers do not easily settle on the simple subjective realist explanation. Rather, as their feeling of competence seems to be provoked by the brainy narrative, many viewers tend to persistently search for some reasonable solution.

to feel competent, to try out and reflect on different cultural, cognitive and mimetic frames, or to just be overwhelmed by the perplexing strangeness, complexity or beauty of impossible worlds and illogical stories. Maintaining ambiguities in naturalising and framing options, like impossible puzzle films do, can prolong these effects for longer periods of time, possibly even long after the actual viewing experience.