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The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

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STUDY 3

Impossible Puzzle Films: Between Art Cinema and (Post-)Classical Narration¹

The impossible is one thing when considered as a purely intellectual conceit ... It is quite another thing when one faces a physical reality the mind and body cannot accept.

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*

Dreaming about a breakthrough invention, four young, bright engineers struggle with small tech projects in a messy garage. While working on a box intended to reduce the weight of any object put in it, Aaron (Shane Carruth) and Abe (David Sullivan), the smartest of them, encounter a strange physical anomaly. As a side-effect of their experiment, the box has accumulated a protein-like fungus. It is not so much that the material is strange – what is weird is that under natural conditions, the amount of protein found in the box would need around five to six years to build up. Testing the machine's effects by leaving a watch in it, they start to understand the enormous potential of their invention: according to their calculations, when in the activated box, time moves differently relative to the outside. Without articulating it, they both realise that what they have built works, in effect, as a time machine. Shutting their partners out of the garage (using the pretext of spraying against bugs), the two excited engineers start to contemplate possible applications ... One day, during their regular brainstorming sessions, a slightly distressed Abe hands a pair of binoculars to Aaron and warns his friend that what he is about to see is not a trick. While standing next to Abe, Aaron witnesses another version of Abe, around a hundred metres away, carrying an oxygen tank while approaching a suburban storage complex. They follow the 'other' Abe who enters one of the complex's storage rooms. Abe asks Aaron to wait exactly six minutes, after which they step into the storage room. It is hard to tell what is more disturbing: Aaron's realisation that the bigger box they just agreed to create has already been built and tested by Abe, or the fact that the 'other' Abe has disappeared from the room ... Notwithstanding the first noticeable cracks appearing in their friendship, Abe and Aaron start to fantasise about the possible utilisations of their time machine box. They opt for the obvious: either winning the lottery or manipulating the stock market. But first Aaron wants to test the machine himself too. To stay in sync with each other, both Aaron and Abe take an oxygen tank and go into the machine for six hours. After they come out, instead of going for the lottery prize, they agree on cashing in on the stock market. They play it carefully (avoiding making any noticeable impact on the market, they go for stocks in the mid-cap funds), but things soon get out of hand: they earn more and more money, start dreaming about a new life, lie increasingly to their partners and colleagues, and even play heroes by saving the life of Abe's girlfriend. But their differing views on the use of the machine are ruining their friendship. On top of it all, it becomes clear that the machine has other repercussions too, causing more and more concerning health

¹ 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. 140-82.

issues for its users. Their reading and handwriting skills deteriorate, Aaron starts to bleed from his ears and there are other symptoms that indicate a stroke and developing brain damage ... Meanwhile, we also learn that the time traveller who is about to go back in time is already back from his trip and exists in overlap with his original self (who is about to go back in time). They co-exist, at least for the six hours during which the original self is studying the stock market. During this period this original is hiding in a hotel room in order to avoid any confrontation with his already returned self, who is then reaping the benefits of their 'clairvoyant' knowledge ... We gradually learn that from the point when we saw Aaron and Abe watching their 'other' selves approaching the storage complex carrying oxygen tanks, it has been impossible to tell which version(s) of them we are following. Exploiting the full potential this created logic, the film's plot spirals into a dizzying whirlpool of manipulations, deceptions, crossings and double-crossings of different versions of Abe and Aaron, including additionally rented storage rooms for secretly built 'failsafe' machines, and so on ... And by this point, we are only halfway through the movie ...

Confusing? Just providing a lucid plot synopsis for Shane Carruth's 2004 *Primer* already proves highly challenging, if not impossible. Its immense complexity, constructed in a mere seventy-seven minutes of labyrinthine plot, makes *Primer* probably the most discussed (and debated) story among forensic film fans. The film gained a cult status due to its unique experience, which resides somewhere between an intimidating test of its viewers' puzzle-solving skills and an astounding, basically experimental, descent into the innermost depths of the time-travel paradox.

Balancing these options, it seems as if the movie entirely entrusts its own assessment to its viewer's judgement: one can accept the challenge to search for logical explanations, or enjoy the ride and let oneself be entertained by a kaleidoscopic mind trip. But how does Carruth create and maintain such a balance in possible viewer responses? What does *Primer* owe to our routine in evaluating as well as interpreting film narratives, and how does it exploit these conventions? The leading question for this chapter can be summarised as 'How do impossible puzzle films regulate viewer responses to their excessive complexity?' Paramount to this, as we will see, are the ways in which these films draw on earlier traditions of filmmaking and the reception strategies associated with them.

So far we have discussed how complex films can offer puzzling experiences through paradoxes, ambiguities, overstimulating plots, character multiplications, and other narrative and cognitive incongruities and impossibilities. We have argued that both the telling modes of and the stories told by such complex narratives evoke mental states of dissonance, and that they inspire viewers to engage in various interpretive operations. This chapter will explore two particular traditions of complex films in more depth: *impossible puzzle films*, like *Primer*, which we singled out in Study 1 as the most complex subset of contemporary (post-)classical cinema; and the tradition of *art cinema*, the most prominent historical precedent to today's complex cinema.

One of the remarkable features of impossible puzzle films is that they seem to walk a tightrope in balancing their viewers' fascination and frustration. These films challenge,

perplex or even overwhelm viewers with complexity, like the example of *Primer*, but must simultaneously also prevent viewers from losing interest in their stories or faith in the solvability of the presented puzzle. In other words, these films' exceedingly complex narratives do not only create dissonance and confusion, but must also manage to maintain viewers' interest, immersion and willingness to engage with their convoluted storytelling mechanics. It appears that an enduring sense of dissonance can only become a source of sustained engagement and fascination under specific narrative conditions.

Crucial in this respect is that the effect exerted by dissonant cognitions is not only dependent on the complex or confusing moment itself; it is also largely determined by the broader narrative context. The particular *narrative system* within which a given complexifying narrative device operates significantly influences how we experience, interpret and evaluate the film's complexity. The mode and perceived context or tradition of narration can exert a background of conventions and expectations against which the dissonance stands out, thereby influencing what hermeneutic responses and routines viewers determine as appropriate to explain and interpret the dissonance (as discussed in the previous chapter). Questions like 'Is it a classical genre movie or a modernist art film?', 'Is the film encouraging us to solve a puzzle?' or 'Does this film contain an allegorical message?' can become crucial in the way in which one commits oneself to taming the dissonance at hand.

On this account, another goal for this chapter is to answer the question 'What kind of narrative and generic context do impossible puzzle films provide to embed their complex and dissonant narrative devices, and to thus create their distinct viewing effects?' This inquiry will lead us to a discussion of impossible puzzle films in comparison to *art cinema*, a tradition of filmmaking with which they share quite some common ground. As we will see, art films and impossible puzzle films have used rather similar strategies of complex and dissonant narration. The question for this chapter is to what degree today's impossible puzzle films overlap with and differ from the art-cinema tradition. This chapter argues that for their viewing effects, impossible puzzle films are not only dependent on highly complex storytelling strategies comparable to those of the art cinema, but also on traditional *classical narrative tactics* that maintain a notable degree of story-related interest and engagement. These classical storytelling tactics serve to maintain viewers' immersion in the mimetic dimensions of the story and their faith in the possibility of narrative recuperation.

The comparative perspective on the art-cinema tradition will take up the first half of this chapter (3.1), which will also allow us to explore the topic of narrative complexity in relation to art cinema a bit more in depth. In the second half of the chapter (3.2), we turn our focus back to impossible puzzle films, analysing how their narrative make-up and techniques also ensure distinct viewing effects through an appeal to and use of *classical* strategies of narration, occupying a position 'in-between' the *classical* and *art-cinema* traditions of narration.

3.1 From art cinema to puzzle films

Historically, there seem to be two general 'modes' of film narration in which complex and dissonant storytelling strategies have frequently been used. First, the contemporary mainstream examples of complex storytelling that have been discussed in this book can be

said to belong to the predominant *classical narrative* formal system – or, as some theorists would argue, to the ‘post-classical’ category (which would allow a relatively higher degree of mediacy, complexity and self-reflexivity than that of the truly ‘classical’ storytelling paradigm²). Second, dissonant effects feature prominently and frequently in the tradition of *art cinema* – most notably in the modernist art films of the 1950s and 1960s; the films that Norman N. Holland at the time labelled as (the original) ‘puzzling movies’ (Holland 1963).

Throughout film history, *art cinema* has traditionally been the prime site for experimentation with disruptive and complex storytelling. In fact, the complex narration strategies that we find in contemporary mainstream films can be understood as continuations, appropriations or modifications of techniques once pioneered in art-cinema narration. Many of the complex storytelling strategies and innovations in popular film were indeed first used in art-cinema narratives – a connection that only relatively few theorists working on narrative complexity have pointed out (such as Cameron 2008; Klecker 2011; Campora 2014). In some cases, disruptive and complex art-cinematic techniques entered the mainstream in watered-down form; in other cases, they found their way into popular cinema through sheer familiarisation and habituation. Interestingly, however, this process seems to have intensified over the last two decades, resulting in an increasing overlap between art cinema’s experimental techniques and mainstream films’ more exploratory (post-)classical narration. In the words of András Bálint Kovács:

in the 1980s and 1990s some modernist narrative techniques became increasingly popular not only in European art films but also in America, and some of them were clearly appropriated by the Hollywood entertainment industry ... David Lynch, Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers, or films like *Crash* or *Fight Club* are systematic manifestations of several sophisticated modernist narrative procedures ‘infiltrating’ probably the world of quality Hollywood production. (Kovács 2007: 60)

Striking overlaps in narrative strategies between (modernist) art-cinema and contemporary complex mainstream films include the use of elaborate flashback structures and other non-linear and fragmented temporalities; an emphasis on subjectivity in narration; unmarked point-of-view shots, dream sequences and fantasies; the presence of self-reflexive, metaleptic and meta-fictional narrative elements; as well as a variety of ambiguous, dissonant and contradictory narrative structures. Given the richness of these overlaps in terms of narrative techniques, one may wonder: are contemporary complex films simply popular versions of ‘art films’? Can these films be seen as art-cinema narratives that have crossed over into the mainstream, shifting their target audience? Or should one rather focus on the differences and scrutinise how the narrative (and institutional) context of art cinema facilitates other functions for complex storytelling than its mainstream counterpart?

This chapter will argue for the latter option. For that reason, we will first briefly develop a comparative perspective to examine the functions of narrative complexity within

² For an elaboration on the notion of ‘post-classical’ narrative film, see Thanouli 2009a. For a discussion regarding the classical, post-classical, or even ‘post-post-classical’ labels in relation to complex cinema, see Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 18-23.

the imbricated domains of art-cinema and classical narration. This will require some considerations on the slippery problem of defining ‘art cinema’ in the first place. We will suggest and discuss both narrative (3.1.1 and 3.1.2) and cognitive (3.1.3 and 3.1.4) approaches to this conceptualisation. Following this, in section 3.2 we will come back to impossible puzzle films, and see how these films achieve their specific viewing effects by balancing their complex dissonant elements, known from art cinema, with elements established and utilised within the classical narrative paradigm.

3.1.1 Art cinema as a narrative mode

Although the scope and particular interest of this study do not allow an exhaustive definition of the term ‘art cinema’, it is important to note that the notion, although often referred to, becomes rather problematic under closer theoretical scrutiny. As Eleftheria Thanouli has pointed out, art cinema ‘is one of the fuzziest and yet least controversial concepts in film studies’ (Thanouli 2009c: 1). Indeed, viewers and critics can consider a wide range of films to be ‘art films’ for a variety of reasons.³ The problem of defining ‘art films’ is in this respect closely related to the problem of defining ‘art’ itself, and different conceptions of art cinema often follow from different conceptions of ‘art’. For these reasons, one should readily acknowledge that no singular encompassing definition of art cinema can be formulated satisfyingly. Rather, the phenomena that the term covers are best approached by applying Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblance’, acknowledging that even though there are certain overlaps and similarities in these films’ characteristics, they lack a single essence in the form of a unifying trait or a set of features that is common to all cases. Nevertheless, moviegoers customarily speak of art cinema and have some tacit notion of which films they are discussing.

In film theory, however, some consensus has been established in identifying art cinema on the basis of its specific *narrative strategies*. In a narrower sense, the term ‘art cinema’ is often used to refer to the post-war – predominantly European – auteur films and national cinemas of the 1950s and 1960s. These prototypical art films include the work of the renowned and strongly canonised auteur directors of the era, such as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luis Buñuel, Alain Resnais, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, or Yasujirō Ozu, (self-)proclaimed ‘movements’ like the French Nouvelle Vague and other international new waves or auteur exponents from various other non-European national cinemas. Drawing on Clement Greenberg’s notion of modernism as art’s ‘aesthetic self-reflection’ (Greenberg 1940), András Bálint Kovács has identified these post-war art films as a second wave of cinematic modernism (Kovács 2007: 12).⁴ In defining its specificity, Kovács notes that ‘[b]y far the most spectacular formal characteristic of modern

³ For instance, viewers and critics may consider a movie to be an ‘art film’ because of its narrative experimentation, but also because of its style or stylistic innovation (for example, films of Robert Bresson or Béla Tarr) as well as its themes and subject matter (Jean Renoir or Yasujirō Ozu), a certain psychological depth (Michelangelo Antonioni or Ingmar Bergman), or social engagement (Vittorio de Sica or Jean-Luc Godard), its specific historical or cultural importance (Roberto Rossellini or Satyajit Ray), symbolical allusions (Luis Buñuel or Lars von Trier), or phenomenological revealing power (Andrei Tarkovsky or Terrence Malick), or through the status of its director as an auteur (*a* François Truffaut, *a* Luchino Visconti, or any of the above), its references or affinities to other art forms (like with Jean Cocteau or Sergei Parajanov), and so on.

⁴ This second modernist movement followed avant-garde’s first wave of the interbellum era.

cinema is the way it handles narration and how that relates to storytelling’ (ibid.: 56). More precisely, ‘[w]hen contrasted to Hollywood classicism, modernism may appear as an almost uniform set of “*disturbing*” narrative practices’ (ibid.: 55 – emphasis added).

The most influential conceptualisation of art cinema as a set of narrative strategies has come from David Bordwell’s work on film narratology. Outlined in his 1979 article ‘The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice’, as well as in his seminal 1985 book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (205–33), Bordwell argued that ‘the overall *functions* of style and theme remain remarkably constant in the art cinema as a whole. The narrative and stylistic principles of the films constitute a logically coherent mode of cinematic discourse’ (Bordwell 1979: 57). As Kovács has summarised, Bordwell’s taxonomy of the art film holds a middle ground between a historical inventory and a more ahistorical technical characterisation: ‘Bordwell does not link any of his categories to historical contexts, and he leaves open the possibility for anyone to discover them in any period of film history’ (Kovács 2007: 59). Over the past thirty years, Bordwell’s conceptualisation of art cinema as a mode of narration has proven widely influential in film studies, and remained surprisingly unchallenged; with the most notable objections coming from scholars who have suggested that art cinema be understood as an institutional construct rather than as a formal category (see for instance Neale 1981; Thanouli 2009c; Andrews 2010).

The central aspect of art-cinema narration, according to Bordwell (1979), is that it defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode. Classical narration forms the historically and technically dominant mode of story representation in cinema. It presents a unified and construable chain of causes and effects, through which psychologically and rationally motivated characters strive towards clearly set, identifiable goals. In classical narratives, narrative time and space are subordinated to and governed by the plot’s causality, whereas stylistic devices serve to retain clear mimetic representation and immersion, relying on and reinforcing known narrative procedures and markers (see Bordwell 1985: 156–204). The art-cinema mode of narration, on the other hand, uses a very different set of strategies. It often opposes or undermines the unobtrusive transparency of the classical style. Rather, art-cinema narratives use techniques that are motivated by a stronger sense of ‘realism’. This can be *objective realism*, in the form of de-dramatised plots and episodic stories, which are justified as being ‘truer to life’; or *subjective realism*, emphasising psychological or emotional states and trajectories of complex characters who often lack the clear-cut traits and undoubted motives of classical protagonists. The art-cinema mode also makes room for authorial expressivity, which manifests in an ‘authorial signature’ that favours overt auteurial display over immersive qualities of the classical mode.

A wide range of narration techniques can be used to this end. As Kovács summarises:

Here are the most important features that, according to Bordwell, characterize narrative techniques as they diverge from the classical norm: non-redundant ‘suzhet’ (plot) structure; a story less motivated by genre rules, not so easily associated with a common genre; episodic structure; the elimination of deadlines as a temporal motivation of the plot; concentration on the character and the ‘condition humaine’ rather than on the plot; extensive representation of different mental states, like

dreams, memories, fantasy; self-consciousness in stylistic and narrative techniques; permanent gaps in narrative motivation and chronology; delayed and dispersed exposition; a subjective reality that relates to the story; a loosening of the chain of cause and effect in the plot; extensive use of chance as a motivation; a concern within the plot for psychic reactions rather than action; frequent use of symbolic rather than realist linkage of images; radical manipulation of temporal order; increased ambiguity regarding the interpretation of the story; open-ended narratives; ‘retheorizing’ the *fabula*, that is, subordinating the plot to the development of rhetorical (mostly political) arguments; overt political didacticism; use of collage principle; the dominance of style over narration; and serial construction. (Kovács 2007, 61–2)

Kovács divides the above strategies into two categories. The first category concerns those aspects of art films

whose effect is to create a multilayered description of the characters, the environment or the story itself. The function of these traits is to create a *complex signifying structure* in which the viewer’s attention is diverted from the direct cause-and-effect chain of the plot toward information that is only indirectly related or unrelated to causality. (ibid.: 62 – emphasis added)

These strategies encourage viewers to look beyond the concrete dimensions of the plot and to engage in more thematic, symbolical or psychological inquiries, establishing meanings beyond the concrete events in the diegetic cause-and-effect chain. Returning to Bordwell’s typology of narrative meanings (discussed in Study 1.2), one could say that these art-cinematic strategies shift the emphasis from directly ‘referential’ and ‘explicit’ types of meaning towards more ‘implicit’ and even ‘symptomatic’ kinds. This is a classic trait of the art film (and, some might say, a precondition of any work with artistic pretence). Moreover, by de-emphasising and therefore discouraging the viewer’s construction of a classical story, these techniques may also work to support more lyrical, contemplative or style-driven aesthetic modes of viewing.

The second category that Kovács discerns covers techniques more specific to the modernist tradition (and that are also associated with some branches of literary modernism such as the *nouveau roman*). It concerns those narrative techniques which relate to the

three main principles of modern art: *abstraction*, *reflexivity*, and *subjectivity*. In other words, art-cinema narrative involves *ambiguity* of the interpretation, the spectator’s conscious intellectual *involvement* in the plot construction, and the *subjective* character of the story. Those are the traits that are responsible for creating the modernist effect in narration. (ibid.: 62 – emphasis added)

Most of art cinema’s complexifying and dissonance-inducing narrative techniques can be filed under this second category. Art films have commonly included narrative incoherencies, incongruities and ambiguities to deliberately problematise and reflect on the straightforward construction of their narratives. These strategies serve to obfuscate meaning-making,

sometimes already on the referential level, by undermining elementary narrative principles that go unquestioned in classical narration: linear time and unified space, rational agency, the clear epistemological divide between objective reality and subjective experience, the separation of memorised past and the present, or the general reliability of representation in the film medium. All of these aspects may be challenged by the self-reflexive strategies of modernist narration devices. As Torben Grodal has noted, '[t]he term *idealist* could be applied ... to many art film narratives. In art films, the problem of interpreting and understanding the world precedes concrete action and often renders it impossible' (Grodal 2009: 222). Art films often openly use narrative dissonances and ambiguities to deconstruct classical mimesis and emphasise the relativity of notions of truth, as well as to engage their viewers in an active, conscious co-construction of their denotative and connotative meanings.

3.1.2 Dissonance in modernist art cinema

In short, whereas classical narration's mimetic realism offers accessible, epistemically clear, unambiguous but stimulating immersive stories, part of the enjoyment of many complex art-cinema narratives stems from a deliberate refusal of this mimetic transparency, foregrounding a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. As Kovács concludes, '[c]lassical art films make narration a multilayered, complex system, and the modernist art film makes this complex system essentially ambiguous or even self-contradictory' (Kovács 2007: 64). Materialising these ambiguous and self-contradictory tendencies, the modernist art cinema offers a variety of examples of dissonant narration. Many of the classic modernist art films are constructed around fundamentally dissonant or confusing scenarios; one can think here of films such as Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad*, Federico Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), Akira Kurosawa's *Rashômon* (1950), or Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966). These 'puzzling films' (to return to Norman N. Holland's original use of the term) have arguably introduced and certainly established complex storytelling and dissonant techniques in narrative cinema (along with the pre-war European art films from which these movies themselves took inspiration⁵). As for contemporary complex films, a traceable key influence too comes from the pre-war surrealist cinema in particular. Elliot Panek has noted (referring to Jonathan Eig) how 'many psychological puzzle films owe a great deal to the surrealist and avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and '30s, particularly the work of Luis Buñuel' (Panek 2006: 66; Eig 2003). Buñuel's cinema indeed seems to offer a fruitful case for illustrating the overlaps between early avant-garde, second-wave modernism, and contemporary complex narrative techniques, which all frequently represent 'ambiguous, occasionally contradictory relationships between diegetic events' (Panek 2006: 66).

Avant-garde and art films have indeed pioneered several ambiguous, subjective, self-reflexive and self-contradictory patterns of narration that later re-emerged in contemporary complex films, and in impossible puzzle films in particular. For example, Fellini's modernist art film *Otto e Mezzo* employed a style of 'subjective realist' narration, in which memories,

⁵ Particularly in terms of stylistic innovation, precursors to the modernist art film can be found in avant-garde traditions of the 1920s and 30s (such as to the Soviet montage film, the French impressionism of Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac and Abel Gance, the expressionist qualities found in the filmmaking in Weimar Germany or in the films of directors like Carl Theodor Dreyer, as well as to the work of film artists in *cinéma pur*, dadaist or surrealist film, including Marcel Duchamp, René Clair, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau).

dreams and fantasies are not demarcated from objective story representations (neither stylistically nor narratively), but rather converge in the same narrative or sometimes even the same visual frame. Such narration evokes dissonances between conflicting versions of events or conflating timelines and spaces, and taxes viewers with the interpretive activity of having to determine which of the events are to be considered objectively ‘true’ and which should be understood as interior states or fantasies of the protagonist – or, perhaps, whether the difference can be made at all. This particular strategy, reminiscent of literary modernist techniques that emphasised a similar pervasive sense of subjectivity, has proven influential, and can be said to form the basis for the complexity in impossible puzzle films like *Mulholland Drive* or *Donnie Darko*. Impossible puzzle films similarly create ‘cognitively dissonant’ viewing experiences by blurring subjective and objective modes of narration.

The emphasis on subjective dimensions of narration has been pushed even further by other art films, such as Bergman’s 1966 *Persona*. Bergman’s most radically modernist film reaches a point where the ontological status of the film’s entire narrative becomes enigmatically unstable. The film’s mimetic properties are undermined already from its self-reflexive and meta-fictional opening scene onwards. In *Persona*, the option that the entire narrative could be seen as the projection of an individual’s psychological conflict space is left open – much in the same way as the earlier discussed character conflation in Denis Villeneuve’s recent *Enemy*. *Persona* experiments with a similar idea of merging its characters, playing a subtle game on art cinema’s recurring trope of the ‘double’ (Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann’s psychological fusion can be seen as a suggestive version of *Enemy*’s more direct confrontation of character doubling). As for further examples of more concrete, hence more dissonant character duplications in art cinema, one can think for instance of Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1968 *Partner* – doubling its protagonist (Giacobbe I and II, both played by Pierre Clémenti) in a Brechtian fashion – or a film like Krzysztof Kieslowski’s 1991 *La double vie de Véronique* (*The Double Life of Véronique*), in which the Polish Weronika sees, for a brief moment, her French counterpart Véronique (Irène Jacob), or Buñuel’s doubled female variation of his 1977 *Cet obscur objet du désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*), which famously swapped actresses (Carole Bouquet and Ángela Molina) playing the same role of Conchita. Such character duplications and splits are frequent occurrences in impossible puzzle films too, where the trope manifests in various ways that range from examples that viewers will most likely motivate psychologically (like in Villeneuve’s *Enemy*, Lynch’s *Lost Highway* or Richard Ayoade’s *The Double*) to more supernatural and generically determined multiplications (as in science-fiction narratives like Carruth’s *Primer*, James Ward Byrkit’s *Coherence*, Christopher Smith’s *Triangle* or Nacho Vigalondo’s *Timecrimes*).

Art films have also experimented extensively with contradicting storylines and other, ‘cognitively dissonant’ narrative incongruities. A classic example is Kurosawa’s *Rashômon*, which offers four incompatible versions of the very same event, recalled from the perspectives of four different witnesses. The different accounts of the event, a story of a murdered samurai, can never be integrated into a coherent and ‘truthful’ whole; they remain dissonant with each other, creating a central narrative mystery that emphasises the narrative’s fundamental epistemological relativity (now well-known as the ‘Rashomon effect’). In art cinema, ‘mysteries’ like these are often kept unresolved or unsolvable, preserving effects of

ambiguity or dissonance – the pervasive effects and interpretive offshoots of which are the actual ‘points’ of these narratives. Here too, the most radical instances of such techniques can be found in the post-war modernist tradition. In Resnais’s and Robbe-Grillet’s nouveau roman film *Last Year at Marienbad*, for example, the narrative revolves around a single dissonant ambiguity (‘A and X met last year at Marienbad’/‘A and X did not meet last year at Marienbad’): viewers are presented various contradictory versions of the past events, without an indication of any hierarchy of reliability among them. In Resnais’ film, the boundaries distinguishing subjective and objective modes of narration seem to be entirely blurred. On top of that, the film also presents a highly fragmented spatio-temporal structure, mingling past and present in a single spatial setting. As Kovács notes, comparable to Robbe-Grillet’s earlier literary work with the nouveau roman,

[t]hese films work like a mental labyrinth with no way out. The different solutions for the plot are systematically destroyed as one plot is succeeded by another one until the viewer finds himself with a story that has *multiple solutions*, which are *incompatible with each other*. The contradictory nature of past, present, and future is homogenised by the continuous flow of narration, which simply makes passages between them without dissolving the contradictions. (Kovács 2007: 129 – emphasis added).

These storytelling experiments, Kovács further notes, have paved the way for narrative complexity in contemporary mainstream films:

The fact that *Mulholland Drive* was not only made but that director David Lynch was awarded an Oscar nomination for it proves that narrative ambiguity, which was introduced into modern cinema by Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet as a highly avant-garde artistic element, forty years later has finally become a mainstream norm. (ibid.: 60)

More generally, one could argue that the highly ‘self-conscious’ and ‘meta-reflexive’ approach to narration found in contemporary complex cinema is a repurposed inheritance of art cinema. Art cinema has traditionally had a tendency to work against classical narration; that is, art films have frequently sought to ‘lay bare the devices’ of classical narration and film style, to challenge the established norms and rules, to reflect on them or to work self-reflexively (cf. Bordwell’s and Kovács’s characterisations). One may think of the modernist examples outlined above, or of the playful Brechtian self-reflexivity of a director like Jean-Luc Godard, whose films popularised a renegade approach to classical notions of narration, plot, editing, style and sound. Although contemporary complex films do not carry a similar ‘hostility’ or deliberate opposition against classical narrative norms and rules, the post-(post-)classical paradigm also allows (or even celebrates) modes of self-reflexivity to serve its interest in evoking cognitively challenging experiences. Films like *Adaptation* or *Mulholland Drive* invite incongruities and impossibilities to thematically reflect on and play with the style, form and conventions of Hollywood storytelling. Moreover, in their overt display of what Jason Mittell calls an *operational aesthetic* (discussed in subsection 2.2.3), contemporary complex films frequently invite viewers to be aware of the techniques that are

being applied, inserting meta-fictional modes of apprehension into the traditionally non-reflective engagement of classical narrative film viewing.

In conclusion to the above, it is clear that there are formal similarities and functional overlaps in the complexifying strategies of art-cinema narration and (impossible) puzzle films. But how should this commonality be interpreted? Does the overlap indicate that over time, the once radical art-cinematic experiments have ‘trickled down’ into mainstream complexity? Has the appreciation for complex storytelling techniques shifted from arthouse to mainstream audiences? Or are there still fundamental differences between the modes of (post-)classical and art-cinema narration, and between the ways in which they have embraced narrative complexity? The following sections will point out some of the remaining differences and argue for their significance, thereby defining the idiosyncrasy of impossible puzzle films’ narrative workings. To articulate these boundaries, we will first identify the particular viewing experience and effects that are specific to the experimentation in art-cinema narratives, before moving on to itemise the distinctive complexification strategies that regulate viewer responses in impossible puzzle films.

3.1.3 Art cinema as a cognitive reception frame

According to film theorist Torben Grodal, two key aspects separate art cinema from classical narrative cinema: first, art films tend to be deviant in terms of *stylistic innovation*, and second, they seem to trigger entirely different kinds of claims in terms of *higher meaning*. As Grodal has analysed,

[a]n art film is supposed to express not only formal (stylistic) skills, but also skills relating to content: deeper ‘visions,’ for example, into certain central and permanent aspects of the world, society, or the human psyche ... On the one hand, therefore, the concept of high art highlights the concrete perceptual level of style, but on the other it focuses on an abstract level of permanent (transcendental) meaning ... the prototypical art film combines stylistic innovation with a claim to higher meaning. (Grodal 2009: 207–8)

Central to Grodal’s argument is that art films are not just different in their formal make-up, but, through their combination of the above aspects, also evoke very distinctive viewer responses. For Grodal, a key difference lies in the orientation of classical narrative films towards clear, concrete, transient, goal-oriented action with certain concrete embodied affordances (involving basic emotional patterns like love, survival or social status). Art cinema, by opposition, allows for ‘higher-order’ types of meaning that Grodal characterises as being more permanent and ‘disembodied’ (as already briefly discussed in section 2.3). He argues that, generally,

[classical] narrative films are based on concrete embodiment; they concern actions carried out by human agents for whom mental processes are intimately linked with physical actions aimed at concrete goals. Style in such films thus serves to flesh out these concrete actions and the emotions that go with them. In art films, by contrast,

style is often associated with the portrayal of a deviant reality, one that is not accessible through standard online interaction ... The abstract, disembodied nature of this type of representation has emotional consequences, for here the viewer cannot have the tense emotional involvement that he or she experiences with concrete phenomena that allow for embodied action. Such disembodied categories may nevertheless exert a powerful fascination. (Grodal 2009: 208–9)

Grodal contrasts the two types of narrative cinema by arguing for a fundamental difference between their emotional and narrative stimulation. Art cinema's lessened emphasis on the enactment of concrete action, as well as its distinct emotional stimulation, he claims, lead to different viewing experiences and prompted meanings compared to the ones that classical cinema provides. 'Melancholia, nostalgia, and empathetic distance are among the emotions that art films tend to cue, because by blocking enactment, such emotions promote in the viewer a mental experience instead' (ibid.: 226–7). As Grodal further notes, '[w]atching films with extended scenes that cue saturated (mental, disembodied) emotions is a minority taste; most people prefer films that cue tense (embodied) emotions based on action tendencies' (ibid.: 210).

Although Grodal's characterisation of classical narration as 'embodied' and art films as 'disembodied' may be somewhat (over)generalising, we will follow part of the argument.⁶ Without fully subscribing to the more 'hard', neuroscientific claims of his work – as we are not in a position to either confirm or disconfirm these – we would agree that art cinema offers specific kinds of narrative stimulation, and that this often prompts viewers to take a different viewing stance compared to classical narratives. More precisely, we would argue that art-cinema narration encourages the application of some very specific cognitive routines that lead to distinctive strategies of meaning-making (regardless of whether such routines are prompted through embodied-cognitive effects, or through convention and habituation).

In section 2.3, we called these shifts in viewing stances, like the one between art-cinema and classical narrative apprehension, *frame-switches*. As discussed, frame-switches can include shifts to viewing strategies, for example to aesthetic, allegorical, associative or symbolical readings that do not belong to classical narratives' predominantly referential and explicit meaning-making procedures. Indeed, in narrative film, art cinema seems to be the privileged site for alternative modes of narrative apprehension. Yet, one should be careful not to relate this narrative framing solely as a response to narration (to its complexity, recurring patterns, 'disembodied' representation, or other formal aspects); the interpretive process of reception and cognitive framing is always more complex, and involves textual and contextual as well as paratextual features. We would therefore suggest reconceptualising 'art-cinematic' viewing stances themselves as 'framing judgements' – meaning that the act of framing should be seen as a dynamic interpretive response. This conceptualisation entails some minor but

⁶ As Miklós Kiss clarifies, '[n]aturally, Grodal does not mean that the experience of art cinema is fully detached from embodied cognition. Although he talks about "disembodiedness" ([Grodal 2009] 208–11), what he describes is the detachment of our comprehension from an actual and concrete bodily immersion (see how mainstream narrative films offer "concrete embodiment" [208]), where the experience finds outlets in more abstract, somewhat "disembodied" meaning-making strategies (see how art cinema gives rise to feelings of "deep significance" [149–50])' (Kiss 2015: 310).

consequential amendments on structural and formalist, as well as strictly cognitivist approaches to the reception issues of concern.

By suggesting that ‘art-cinema viewing’ is itself a mode of ‘framing’, we claim that when viewers mentally label a film as an art film, this judgement entails an assignment of a specific ‘macro-frame’ of knowledge. As noted in section C.2.3, cognitive frames refer to sets of top-down schemas, scripts and information held in one’s memory. They involve expectations, steer attention, determine salience and serve to govern appropriate interpretive and evaluative routines. Art cinema can be seen as such a frame in the sense that (re-)cognising (on whatever textual or contextual grounds) that a given film would be an ‘art film’ is related to the activation of a considerable set of knowledge involving expectations, conventions and norms – both culturally distributed and, with more or less experienced film viewers, cognitively operational. What is important to acknowledge is that an ‘art-cinema frame’ is assigned not only in response to textual cues, but also through contextual ones, as well as through different individual dispositions (these latter aspects all too often remain overlooked in strictly cognitive models).

As for contextual cues, the institutional setting of arthouse cinema may play a key role in assigning the frame of art-cinema narrative to the experience. In this sense ‘framing’ can take on the meaning that it acquired in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, namely to denote socially shaped and transmitted constructs that guide the individual’s cognition and experience (see Goffman 1974). After all, when we watch a film in an arthouse cinema or at an art film festival, such social contexts (reinforced by established institutional discourses) influence our individual meaning-making strategies. Involving cognitive, contextual, pragmatic and hermeneutic aspects, such framing appraisals entail interpretive choices.

Besides their cognitive basis and social transformability, frame attributions also involve more individual dispositions. The information content of frames will vary significantly according to an individual’s acquired knowledge, personal competences, subjective conceptions and experience: the films that an individual has seen before, reviews that he or she has read, his or her degree of ‘artistic’ socialisation and personal life experiences – all such factors can become relevant in framing operations. Yet the recognition that narrative understanding in art cinema may be partially dependent on an individual’s preconceptions does not exclude the possibility of making valid generalising claims on how such strategies are brought about. To some degree, one can assume that the subjective response is embedded in socially and conventionally shared paths of narrative meaning-making (as addressed by both David Bordwell (1979) and Steve Neale (1981) in their respective formal and institutional characterisations of the term art cinema). After all, storytelling and film viewing, as well as general conceptions of ‘art’ or ‘culture’, are socially constructed acts and classifications: they follow conventionally established rules which enable and guide their cultural exchange and meaning.

In sum, the art-cinema frame – distributed to viewers through specific formal traits and contextual embeddings, and acquired through film viewing and general acculturation – provides an essential grip on certain film experiences, and hands viewers alternative pathways for narrative interpretation beyond referential and explicit meaning-making.

3.1.4 Narrative complexity and meaning-making in art cinema

Although there are many ways in which ‘art cinema’ can be said to be operational as a cognitive reception frame (which are related to the diversity of art cinema itself, and its various traits in terms of style, cultural context, psychology, plot construction, realism, authorial expressivity and so on), we will restrict our discussion here only to matters of narrative complexity. The question is: what kind of strategies does art cinema usually cue and encourage viewers to use in response to narrative complexity? And do such strategies elicit different experiences of complexity compared to those in (post-)classical narratives?

We argued that when traditional narrative coherence is persistently being hampered – by gaps, incongruities or incoherencies, for instance – viewers will be encouraged to interchange their traditional story-focused viewing stance for alternative strategies. Building on the theories of meaning-making in response to complexity discussed in Study 2.2, we can observe how treating a film as an ‘art film’ usually entail specific *coping strategies* to deal with the particular challenges of narrative complexity that appear in the art-cinema mode of storytelling. As this section will show, a number of viewing strategies for dealing with complexity converge in the art-cinema frame. These include particular strategies for naturalising strange or deviant textual elements, such as (1) the possibility of employing a broader conception of mimetic properties; (2) the application of aesthetic and meta-fictional viewing stances; (3) the option of having recourse to non-prototypical narrativising efforts; and, lastly, (4) taking a more charitable stance towards stylistic excess.

First (1), in Study 2.2 we introduced Jonathan Culler’s notion of *naturalisation*, the meaning-making process that involves the invocation of reading strategies and conventions along which viewers shape their interpretation of odd textual elements. As Culler wrote,

we can always make the meaningless meaningful by production of an appropriate context. And usually our contexts need not be so extreme. Much of Robbe-Grillet can be recuperated if we read it as the musings or speech of a pathological narrator, and that framework gives critics a hold so that they can go on to discuss the implications of the particular pathology in question. Certain dislocations in poetic texts can be read as signs of a prophetic or ecstatic state or as indications of a Rimbaudian ‘*dérèglement de tous les sens*’. To place the text in such frameworks is to make it legible and intelligible. When Eliot says that modern poetry must be difficult because of the discontinuities of modern culture, when William Carlos Williams argues that his variable foot is necessary in a post-Einsteinian world where all order is questioned, when Humpty-Dumpty tells Alice that ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe’ and ‘slimy’, all are engaged in recuperation or naturalization (Culler 1975: 138).

Culler’s choice of examples already indicates that the process of naturalisation becomes more prominent in complex and experimental texts. Such works tend to present a higher number (and level) of inconsistencies that, in turn, may inspire their audiences’ creative sense-making activities. The same can be said for modernist art cinema, especially when compared to classical narrative films. David Bordwell discerned certain ‘motivations’ – objective realism, subjective realism, authorial expressivity and ambiguity – that are characteristic of art-cinema narration. Rather than as formal elements of a film, we will understand these as naturalising

strategies of viewer responses, possibly but not necessarily associated with specific formal narrative and stylistic devices.⁷

Objective and *subjective realism*, first and second, may both be called upon as a naturalising response to narrative complexity. As Bordwell notes, often, in art films, '[v]iolations of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters' (Bordwell 1979: 58–9). In this way, any registered dissonance can be perceived as an inherent part of the mimesis: the incoherence is given an expressive function within the story, decreasing the need to reduce the dissonance or untangle the complexity.

The third motivational criterion around which art-cinema narration revolves is *authorial expressivity*. Art films, according to Bordwell, foreground their authors as part of their overtly self-conscious narration, presenting them in the form of an 'authorial signature'. This signature is a kind of 'trademark' that can be found in recurrent violations of classical filmmaking norms, as well as by an 'extratextual emphasis on the filmmaker as source' (Bordwell 1985: 211). Yet here, one can wonder how the art film could be able to foreground, on a formal basis, its author as a structural aspect of the text. We would argue that authorship too is best understood as a naturalising inference made by a viewer, based on his or her application of knowledge and cognitive frames. Following Jason Mittell's (2015) proposition, we called this the inferred author function (see subsection 2.2.2). Film-literate viewers often use a known director's authorial persona to rationalise narrative intrusions, especially when these cannot be readily naturalised in a mimetic, diegetic manner. Many of Jean-Luc Godard's films, for instance, use the *Verfremdungseffekt* to consistently block the classical mimetic representational norms and rules of narrative filmmaking, creating distancing effects that most viewers will justify as rhetoric interferences of Godard's omnipresent authorial figure. Especially in art-cinema, where 'a body of work linked by an authorial signature encourages viewers to read each film as a chapter of an oeuvre' (Bordwell 1985: 211), the convention of authorial expressivity reinforces the inferring of authorial intentions on behalf of the viewer. Practised viewers of art films are particularly attuned to this dimension of authorship, and naturalise the effects of diegetic or narrative complexities as a gesture of a consistently present – auteur – authorship.

Bordwell's fourth and last characteristic of art-cinema narration lies in its affinities to *ambiguity*. There seems to be a tension in art cinema between its focus on 'realism' on the one hand and the intrusion of a pervading 'authorship' on the other. Bordwell argues that it is the device of *ambiguity* that solves this conflict. While 'classical narration tends to move toward absolute certainty' (ibid.: 212), art cinema often conveys relativistic notions of truth that invite ambiguity into their narratives. As Bordwell playfully proposes, in terms of viewing strategies, the art film's procedural slogan could be '[w]hen in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity' (Bordwell 1979: 60).⁸ The acceptance of ambiguity is an important

⁷ Although Culler stressed that the Russian formalist notions of 'motivation' and naturalisation are not exactly the same – as naturalisation is done by a reader or viewer individually, in response, but not as a binding relation, to textual elements (see Culler 1975: 137–8) – these 'generic' motivations can be seen as conventional 'naturalisation pathways' for art films.

⁸ Some years later, from a cognitive-constructivist perspective, Bordwell gives practically the same advice: 'Interpret this film, and interpret it so as to maximize ambiguity' (Bordwell 1985: 212).

feature of the art-cinema frame with regard to narrative complexity too. Art films generally encourage viewers to retain the ambiguity and dissonances, rather than to readily disambiguate or solve the puzzle – as they would be inclined to do in (post-)classical films, which commonly direct them to restore certainty in narrative situations. This ‘narrativising lenience’ lessens the pressure to resolve dissonances, or to untangle complex mysteries, as in art cinema viewers may accept dissonance and ambiguity as the intended narrative state of affairs, rather than as a puzzle that needs to be solved.

In short, the above four principles – objective and subjective realism, authorial expressivity and ambiguity – can all help to render narrative dissonances meaningful. Yet, arguably, these interpretive strategies can lead to many different paths by which viewers naturalise cognitively problematic elements in art-cinema narratives. As a more general principle, we could say that the art-cinema frame allows a *broader recognition of narrative mimesis* than classical narrative engagement. Traditional conceptions of mimesis and narrative are often restricted to concrete, conventional narrative ‘realism’ – that is, ‘make-believe’ stories that mimic or evoke aspects, qualities or events analogous to ‘everyday’ human experience. The art-cinema frame, however, allows recuperation of mimetic meaning far beyond this restriction. Through a large variety of naturalising frames – including a profusion of allegorical, authorial, subjective or thematic readings – art films allow for mimetic experiences beyond the classical narrative presentation of a cause-and-effect chain of lifelike events. Viewers can make sense of art films by deeming them as primarily expressive of, for instance, cultural, existential or experiential issues.

Framing a narrative as art cinema means that viewers open up their viewing stance to an arguably wider range of naturalising frames than they would in response to a classical narrative. When a relatively dense, concrete and logical narrative chain of events cannot be formed, the art-cinema frame helps viewers to recover different levels of mimetic content. By this, narrative complexity may not only be interpreted as subjective realism or an authorial poetics, but also as representing an existential predicament, as a symbolisation of philosophical issues, as reference to the cultural context of the film’s production (social, political, historical), as a reflection on perception, cognition and emotion or on art and culture itself – and so on. For instance, in their reviews of Antonioni’s modernist 1966 movie *Blow-Up*, different critics attribute different mimetic functions to the film’s fundamentally dissonant story. For Roger Ebert, for instance, the film’s unresolvable mystery primarily highlights the nature of the protagonist, and his modern consumerist-materialist values:

Antonioni uses the materials of a suspense thriller without the payoff ... Whether there was a murder isn’t the point. The film is about a character mired in ennui and distaste, who is roused by his photographs into something approaching passion. As Thomas moves between his darkroom and the blowups, we recognize the bliss of an artist lost in what behaviorists call the Process; he is not thinking now about money, ambition or his own nasty personality defects, but is lost in his craft ... ‘Blow-Up’ audaciously involves us in a plot that promises the solution to a mystery, and leaves us lacking even its players. (Ebert 1998)

Geoff Andrew of the British Film Institute rather deems *Blow-Up* a ‘metaphysical mystery’, concerned with ‘questioning the maxim that the camera never lies, and settling into a virtually abstract examination of subjectivity and perception’ (Andrew, n.d.), while, according to the editorial of *Variety*, ‘[t]here may be some meaning, some commentary about life being a game, beyond what remains locked in the mind of film’s creator ... As a commentary on a sordid, confused side of humanity in this modern age it’s a bust’ (*Variety* staff 1965). Such naturalisations locate the unity and expressiveness of a work on different, more abstract levels than that of concrete narrative events, but ultimately also provide them with a *mimetic function*: the dissonant plot is seen as a socio-cultural critique, a reflection on representation, or as an expression of the enigma of subjectivity, the fallibility of perception, or of the *condition humaine*. Naturalisations like these entail that viewers or critics accept narrative confusion or incoherence as mimetically expressive, in a manner that is less restricted than in classical narrative meaning-making. Curiously, refusing to attribute any such meanings can become a way of rejecting the artwork altogether. For instance, in an unfavourable review of *Blow-Up*, Pauline Kael expressed her dislike of the film by refusing to attribute any meaningfulness to it, and to, rather, mock the film by wondering: ‘Will *Blow-Up* be taken seriously in 1968 only by the same sort of cultural diehards who are still sending out five-page single-spaced letters on their interpretation of [*Last Year at*] *Marienbad*? (No two are alike, no one interesting)’ (Kael 2010). For Kael, ‘Antonioni’s new mixture of suspense with vagueness and confusion seems to have a kind of numbing fascination for them that they [the film’s proponents] associate with art and intellectuality’ (ibid.).

Second (2), some art-cinematic naturalisations do not have a mimetic grounding, and should rather be characterised as meta-fictional. Meta-fictional viewing competences are not concerned with attributing a mimetic motivation to inconsistencies (that is, understanding the narrative as representative or referential to something in the diegesis or outside of the artwork), but rather provide these with some (self-)reflexive aesthetic function. Consequently, viewers may conclude that the confusion they encounter in a film like *Last Year at Marienbad* is not about representing intricate events in the first place, but about offering them an opportunity to reflect on, for instance, the interconnection of human memory, emotion, and experience. This means that viewers may treat their own confusion as an intended aesthetic effect that, in turn, allows a distanced contemplation, for instance on the human condition, artistic practice, or on the medium of film itself. Some complex structures can also be seen as part of a reflection on the process of filmmaking: for instance, the deranged narration in Fellini’s *Otto e Mezzo* is often naturalised as a somewhat autobiographical reflection on the process of creating a film (analogous to the director’s actual writer’s block). Such meta-fictional viewing stances are ‘self-conscious’ strategies, in that viewers are utilising a meta-reflexive alertness in the process of meaning-making. For example, they may infer that complicating narrative devices are ‘intended’ to make them reflect on their participation in the narrative meaning-making, or that violations of narrative coherence may invite them to form philosophical reflections or critiques on the mimetic mode of representation. Film viewers, especially when equipped with an in-depth knowledge of art films, may possess all sorts of these meta-fictional competences and strategies that can help them to deal with the variety of complex disruptions of art cinema and modernism.

Third (3), in the most extreme of these cases, when narrativity seems to be temporarily absent or lost altogether, viewers may engage in an entirely different apprehension strategy. In some art films, recurring dissonances, overall incoherency or problematic (or simply absent) narrative cues can send viewers on alternative tracks of meaning-making. Viewers may give up the construction of a prototypical narrative in favour of more poetic, lyrical, associative or aesthetic modes of apprehension. We describe this particular frame-switch as *non-prototypical narrativising efforts*, as they seem to depart from narrativisation (naturalisation by recourse to narrative schemas) as conceptualised by Monika Fludernik in her 1996 volume *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (see also our section 2.2). Fludernik argues that narrativity is attributed to a text by the reading (or otherwise spectating) subject, using a certain frame of perceiving and understanding that renders artefacts or events 'narrative' (Fludernik 1996: 22–5). For Fludernik, imposing the macro-frame of narrativity onto the (film) text means that readers (and viewers) will always

try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level. This process of narrativization, of making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it, needs to be located in the dynamic reading [or viewing] process where such interpretative recuperations hold sway. (ibid.: 25)

When this process of narrativisation fails, Fludernik notes, readers (and viewers) may shift to a more poetic apprehension to integrate the information in question (Fludernik 1996: 36). In such situations, we may 'give up' on the story, but this need not mean the end of our engagement with the work. Rather, we may watch it for its associative, aesthetic, poetic or affective affordances, deliberately suspending our narrativising efforts to allow other effects and affects, only teasing out smaller threads of narrativity on a more local level. 'Poetic reading', or strategies such as what Jan Alber called 'the Zen way of reading' (see section 2.2), constitute alternative macro-frames to retain or recuperate some mimetic dimensions; however, strictly speaking, the attribution of such frames should be seen as departures from the realm of 'narrative', since a story-concerned narrative is abandoned here. Aesthetically challenging avant-garde feature films from Jean Cocteau's 1932 *Le sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*) to Carlos Reygadas's 2012 *Post Tenebras Lux*, 'fraught with ambiguities, paradoxes and multivalent messages' (Verrone 2012: 14), offer exuberant audiovisual experiences for effectuating naturalisations of the poetic kind. Moreover, historically, positioning viewers to engage with the cinematic medium in alternative, less 'narrative' driven modes has after all traditionally been one of the key aims of the avant-garde (cf. the theoretical writings of avant-garde filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac or Maya Deren).⁹

⁹ For examples of the 'non-narrative' ambitions of avant-garde filmmakers, see Germaine Dulac's 1926 essay 'Aesthetics, obstacles, integral cinégraphie', republished in Richard Abel's (ed.) *French Film Theory and Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 389–97, or Maya Deren's 1960s treatise 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality', which originally appeared in *Daedalus* 89 (1): 150–67, and was republished in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), pp. 60–73.

Finally (4), sometimes as a last resort for our narrativising urge, problematic elements of art-cinema narratives can also be evaluated as ‘excessive’ features of a film’s style. This means that viewers accept them as stylistic exercises that are seemingly unrelated or non-contributive to the narrative. We would argue that viewers who recognise a film as ‘art cinema’ tend to be more charitable towards such stylistic excess.

The notion of ‘stylistic excess’ was coined by Kristin Thompson, marking films, or parts of and moments in films, in which style is displayed ‘for its own sake’ (Thompson 1977: 55) and can hardly be motivated by the narrative. Although Thompson finds that such noticeable moments of stylistic excess might be ‘counternarrative’ (ibid.: 57), as the viewer may not be encouraged to unify the seen into a story, on the other hand she also acknowledges the more indirect contribution of such excessive moments to the unfolding narrative. While stylistically excessive moments often ‘provide *relatively* little causal material’ (Thompson 1977: 55), they can help to augment a film’s characterisation and complement motivation for its characters’ behaviour. Agreeing with this amendment, we would like to further argue for a more reconciling view on the recognition of stylistic excess and the emergence of narrative meaning. First of all, strong classically cohesive narration can absorb some degree of stylistic excess and can neutralise its counternarrative effects. As David Bordwell notes,

artistic motivation – taking an element as being present for its own sake – is not unknown in the classical film. A moment of spectacle or technical virtuosity, a thrown-in musical number or comic interlude: the Hollywood cinema intermittently welcomes the possibility of sheer self-absorption. (Bordwell 1985: 164)

Secondly, stylistic excess occurs more frequently in art films, as its counternarrative effects seems to support the aesthetic and poetic aims of art-cinema narration. After all, as Peter Verstraten has noted, stylistic excess tends to emerge more easily when a film’s narration is less concerned with providing a cohesive story in the first place (Verstraten 2008: 30–1). An art film like Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1960 *L’Avventura*, for example, seems to abandon plot-centredness almost entirely in favour of ‘excessive’ stylistic contemplation. Underlining Verstraten’s position, we would add that stylistic excess can also contribute to the framing of a film as an art film: an excessive emphasis on style can indicate that the particular film in question has other aesthetic aims than the presentation of a straightforward story, and may therefore suggest a more pertinent framing of the experience by activating the viewing stances discerned above.

3.2 Impossible Puzzle Films and (Post-)Classical Narration

If art cinema has used contradictory narration and other dissonances to – in Bordwell’s words – ‘throw us off balance’ (Bordwell 2008: 168), and to send us on a quest for thematic, psychological, symbolical, allegorical or meta-fictional meanings, then the relevant question for this book is: how does this function compare to that of dissonance in impossible puzzle films? Does the complexity of impossible puzzle films have a similar effect? Surely one could argue that impossible puzzle films’ contradictory and impossible stories can throw some viewers ‘off balance’. However, beyond the commonalities discussed above, there are

also notable differences that can be detected; not only in their formal make-up, but also in the reception and meaning-making routines of art-cinema and impossible puzzle films. From what we have observed on online message boards, by interviewing university students and from our own viewing experiences, it seems that impossible puzzle films generally do not evoke the type of art-cinematic responses outlined above. That is, despite these films' clearly dissonant story structures, viewers tend to persistently approach impossible puzzle films using *classical narrativising* and *rationalising* sense-making strategies. Holding on to their narrativisation drive, most viewers keep trying to make sense of these films on the diegetic, intratextual and often immersed levels. They investigate how the film 'works' rather than asking 'what it means'; they attempt to 'crack the codes' of complexity, rather than extracting symbolic, symptomatic or meta-fictional meanings of the type associated with art cinema. Of course, this attitude varies among viewers, as well as across the affordances of different films: some viewers might consider a film like *Mulholland Drive* to be an 'art film' and will look for corresponding types of thematic, psychological, symbolical, allegorical or meta-fictional meaning. As we noted previously, the ambiguity of some impossible puzzle films does often allow them to be read through multiple strategies (cf. our discussion of narrativising versus interpreting approaches to *Mulholland Drive* and *Enemy* in subsection 3.4.1), making them interpretive borderline cases that can be framed in multiple ways. For most impossible puzzle films, however, the divide is clearer. Films like *Triangle*, *Timecrimes*, *Coherence* or *Primer* are generally not approached by viewers as art films. Rather, these films are usually seen as complex versions of classical narratives, inviting the corresponding viewing routines that are habitualised by viewers' recurrent exposure to (post-)classical narrative films.

Where does this difference reside? We believe that differences in interpretive stances follow mainly from *formal strategies* of narration that impossible puzzle films employ, and from the viewer expectations that go with these. More precisely, we hypothesise that impossible puzzle films achieve their effects by *countering* their disruptive narrative tactics with *classical narration* strategies. This way, they encourage their viewers to retain a high degree of classical narrative engagement – despite the excessive complexity of the story – thereby discouraging them from switching to other, art-cinematic frames of apprehension. In the following subsections, we will introduce some key strategies which we generally find in most impossible puzzle films, and which persuade viewers to take a classical narrative viewing stance. These strategies include the use of stories with a high degree of tellability (3.2.1), offering classical character identification (3.2.2), showing a strong reliance on traditional genre elements (3.2.3), retaining an adherence to narrative cohesion devices on both the micro- and macro-levels of the narrative (3.2.4) and, lastly, introducing explicit diegetic suggestions for maintaining quasi-rational frames of naturalisation (3.2.5).

3.2.1 High degree of tellability

In narrative theory, the notion of *tellability* generally refers to the somewhat mysterious quality that makes a story 'worth telling' – or, from the audience's point of view, engaging enough to listen to. Usually, this comprises some 'noteworthiness' or a 'point' to the story. Of course, the degree of tellability is often subjective, and contextually as well as culturally dependent: it is, for instance, very likely that one will deem a story about the misfortunes of a

close friend to be more ‘tellable’ than the exact same story about a total stranger. Nevertheless, some general cognitive and affective factors play a key role in enhancing tellability. First of all, as Jerome Bruner has noted, for a narrative to be tellable, some canonical script must be breached, meaning that something unexpected or out of the ordinary should happen in it. As Bruner writes,

not every sequence of events recounted constitutes a narrative, even when it is diachronic, particular, and organized around intentional states. Some happenings do not warrant telling about and accounts of them are said to be ‘pointless’ rather than story-like. A Schank-Abelson script is one such case: it is a prescription for canonical behavior in a culturally defined situation – how to behave in a restaurant, say (Schank & Abelson 1977). Narratives require such scripts as necessary background, but they do not constitute narrativity itself. For to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated or deviated from. (Bruner 1991: 11)

The degree of tellability is thus greatly enhanced by the evocation and disruption of particular cognitive scripts and frames: the occurrence of an unexpected event, a character’s exceptional behaviour, the twist of fate that befalls him or her, the complications that keep him or her from achieving a certain goal – much of what we enjoy or find engaging in stories is constituted by the breach of some ordinary script(s). Looking at impossible puzzle films, one can see how these films largely adhere to such classical story patterns. Evoking basic narrative templates or canonical scripts, impossible puzzle films usually focus on particular protagonists inhabiting a seemingly normal or recognisable storyworld. The plot is driven by a disruption of this familiar initial state through the occurrence of something out of the ordinary.

On the narrative surface, a film like *Triangle* is about a young single mother who goes on a boating trip with friends, is caught in a storm and seeks shelter on a mysteriously abandoned ocean liner; *Mulholland Drive* introduces a woman who survives a car accident, suffers from amnesia and must re-find her identity; *Enemy* presents a young college history professor who suddenly discovers that he has a perfect physical double. All these situations evoke canonical scripts and noteworthy breaches; they could, in fact, also have been the start of very classical narrative films, evoking a strong sense of narrativity and a high degree of tellability. What is more, impossible puzzle films (by ‘breaching the breached’) raise their ‘narrative stakes’ even further when disrupting these familiar scripts by inserting something challengingly extraordinary (the young mother is trapped in a loop of endlessly recurring events; the amnesic woman turns out to be a fantasy of a suicidal girl struggling with her own identity crisis; the oddity of a double is not a biological, but a psychological or perhaps a non-diegetic narrative anomaly). After all, as Raphaël Baroni summarises, ‘it is assumed that there is a general human interest for stories reporting events that have a certain degree of unpredictability or mystery’ (Baroni 2011). Additionally, it should be noted that (moderate) story complexity may sometimes also enhance tellability: noteworthy or unexpected events (like running into one’s doppelgänger), narrative elements of surprise or the successful evocation of curiosity resulting from a complex story structure may all enhance viewers’

general interest and immersion in a narrative – even if the presented mystery ultimately proves unsolvable.

In short, by (initially) appealing to familiar story patterns of classical narratives, impossible puzzle films hook their viewer onto their stories through engaging plots, compelling mysteries or challenging dissonances. This augmented adherence to known and popular elements of classical plots forms one of the grounds on which impossible puzzle films can generally be distinguished from the kind of complexifications that art films and high literature host. After all, as Marie-Laure Ryan has noted, '[w]hereas popular literature invests heavily in the tellability of plots, high literature often prefers to make art out of the not-tellable' (Ryan 2010b: 590).

3.2.2 Identification with goal-oriented characters

Closely connected to, or even a key part of, tellability is the role of narrative agents or characters in eliciting story-immersive viewer stances. Characters arguably function as our anchors within narratives: they provide the basis for action, empathy, emotion, interpretation and narrative orientation. Some narratologists, such as Monika Fludernik (1996), consider the role of human(-like) agents as the key component of narrativity and tellability. According to Fludernik it is not events themselves that are central to stories, but rather the ways in which these events gather meaning for the agents in a story, and by that allow immersion for the reader or viewer. This idea was conceptualised by Fludernik as 'experientiality', based on which she defined narrativity as mediated human experientiality (Fludernik 1996: 26). Building on Fludernik's notion, in his enactivist approach to the experientiality of narratives, Marco Caracciolo describes stories as 'imaginative experiences because of the way they draw on and restructure readers' [and viewers'] familiarity with experience itself' (Caracciolo 2014: 4). By drawing on our real-life experiences, experiencing agents of stories can be said to form our 'access points' into narratives, facilitating all our comprehension, communication, involvement and emotion.

The central characters in impossible puzzle films often belong to the type of 'transparent' protagonists, known from stories of classical narration, who allow high degrees of experiential resonance. Unlike the prototypical art-cinema protagonist, the main figures of impossible puzzle films have accessible rational motivations and clear goals, exhibit transparent psychology and relatively unambiguous behaviour, and are emotionally and actively invested in the unfolding story's concrete actions and events. This clear backdrop can serve viewers' immersion in and engagement with the story by providing a point of effortless identification with characters that populate the otherwise abstract and confusing narrative. As Torben Grodal notes,

[a] key to understanding the viewer's reconstruction of a narrative is the procedure by which he cognitively 'identifies' himself with the agents of fiction, using mental models and schemata from everyday psychology. Part of the motivation for the reconstruction is provided by empathy, that is, the viewer's cued simulation of emotions in identification with an agent of fiction. Cognition is intimately linked to emotions (Grodal 1997: 87)

In impossible puzzle films, we commonly closely follow one (or a few) protagonist(s) experiencing a strange storyworld. Usually, these characters have strong emotional responses; they experience the impossible and incongruent events as puzzling, disconcerting or even threatening – providing a model response for the film viewer for easy identification. *Triangle*'s Jess is in a perpetual state of perplexity and fear as she tries to escape from the anomalous loop; Adam in *Enemy*, as well as Rita and Betty in *Mulholland Drive* are distressed, but also embark on investigations to try to understand their mysterious predicaments (which ultimately only lead to more puzzling experiences). These characters thus invest the abstract narrative structure with experientiality for viewers to relate to, allowing a tense emotional and empathic involvement in the story. They can also 'mirror' and thereby reinforce viewers' own sense of surprise, perplexity or strangeness, or emulate viewers' urges to investigate and rationalise the perplexing storyworld. Characters like Rita and Betty in *Mulholland Drive* function as diegetic manifestations of our own rational quest for sense-making. Comparable to the way by which, in crime fiction, we typically try to solve a crime alongside a detective, viewers can create hypotheses and make attempts to beat the narrative maze by relying on the information that is accessible to these focal(ising) characters.

Both tellability and character identification may be enhanced by the goal-oriented action patterns of classical narrative agents. Stories are often propelled by the desires and aims of a protagonist, which entail action patterns around the accomplishment or obstruction of concrete objectives (such as reaching a destination, overcoming an antagonist, being united with a love interest, taking revenge and meting out justice, and the like). Such action patterns offer viewers something concrete and familiar to relate to, enhancing their identification, narrative engagement and immersion. Most impossible puzzle films present characters who act in pursuit of such clear goals. Moreover, in many cases, these goals are of a very concrete nature; they involve what Grodal has called 'embodied' action patterns which relate to strong ecological factors like survival, love or social status (Grodal 1997, 2009). Films like *Triangle* or *Timecrimes* are related to movies of the classical action genre in the sense that they focus on characters with very concrete and vital goals (such as survival), affording tense simulations and embodied affects (such as hunting, hiding or fleeing from threatening adversaries). In most impossible puzzle films, the labyrinth-like story forms a threat, problem or obstacle to the central characters' goals, desires or general wellbeing. Once they have overcome the hurdle of their initial puzzlement, the characters typically respond to the challenges with clear action: they try to resolve the troubling situation, make plans and, when accepting and accommodating to the unnatural storyworld, look for alternative strategies – for example by fleeing, investigating or by somehow attempting to take matters in their own hands (cf. *Triangle*'s protagonist Jess and her desperate attempts to escape the loop and the fate that comes with it). With art-cinema protagonists, on the contrary, the narration is typically not oriented towards such action patterns, but rather focuses on the psychological ramifications of distressing situations. For example, Delphine Seyrig's passive character in *Last Year at Marienbad* appears emotionally paralysed, or at least does not take any proactive steps to ease the confusion of her dissonant situation. Her 'actions' lack what Grodal characterises as embodied action patterns; as a result of the absence of goal-oriented experientiality, the film exchanges the option of narrative rationalisation for the

emergence of more abstract, ‘disembodied’ higher-order meanings (see our previous discussion in subsection 3.3). For viewers, the lack of the concrete action component thus shifts the focus away from concrete narrative involvement, and gives way to psychological, symbolical or allegorical meaning-making options that art-cinema narration usually facilitates. Of course, some of the more psychologically oriented cases of impossible puzzle films, like *Donnie Darko*, *Mulholland Drive* or *Enemy*, may also be concerned with such higher-order meaning stimulation. Nevertheless, here too, engagement and identification with the central characters and their particular goals and problems keep viewers focused on the diegetic reality and mimetic world, despite the abstract and impossible features of the presented storyworld.

3.2.3 Strong reliance on classical genre elements

Another recurrent formal strategy of impossible puzzle films lies in their evocation of known and shared conventions of classical genres. As Jerome Bruner notes in his discussion of narrative tellability, breaches of canonical scripts are themselves ‘often highly conventional and are strongly influenced by narrative traditions’ (Bruner 1991: 12). Impossible puzzle films often appeal to such familiar narrative patterns. They draw on generic conventions, not only in their plots, but also by including particular narrative elements (such as prototypical characters, settings and story tropes), characteristic film style (such as conventional lighting, colour filters) and contextual and paratextual cues outside or around the films (such as generically coded film posters and taglines).¹⁰ Typical impossible puzzle films combine their diegetic riddles with an action-driven classical genre, resulting in crossovers like ‘mystery-horror’ (for example, *Triangle*, *Chasing Sleep*), ‘mystery-science fiction’ (*Timecrimes*, *Primer*) or ‘mystery-thriller’ (*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*). The conventions of ‘strong’ genres are known to most viewers through acculturation and habituation, and this knowledge routinely guides them in their apprehension, comprehension and interpretation of films that exhibit some of these shared and prominent genre codes. In his article ‘An Introduction to Genre Theory’ Daniel Chandler highlights that ‘[g]enre provides an important frame of reference which helps readers to identify, select and interpret texts’ (Chandler 1997). Chandler notes how this top-down guidance of genres can be compared to the general functioning of cognitive frames or schemas. In his words,

[k]ey psychological functions of genre are likely to include those shared by categorization generally – such as reducing complexity ... Genre theorists might find much in common with *schema theorists* in psychology: much as a genre is a framework within which to make sense of related texts, a schema is a kind of mental template within which to make sense of related experiences in everyday life. From the point of view of schema theory, genres are textual schemata. (ibid.)

¹⁰ See, for example, the poster design of Shane Carruth’s *Primer*, which displays an entangled web of cables that gives a visual indication of the film’s convoluted plot, or the paratextual tagline of James Ward Byrkit’s *Coherence* – ‘Nothing is random’ – that clearly directs viewers’ expectations towards something logical and decipherable.

Indeed, genres, like other cognitive frames (acquired knowledge structures that provide shortcuts for understanding), entail particular knowledge and interpretive routines in viewers. Impossible puzzle films often draw generic markers from classical Hollywood narration, including elements from horror, sci-fi, thriller, mystery or detective films. For instance, in discussing David Lynch's films and the serial *Twin Peaks*, Elliot Panek notes that director Lynch draws upon conventional generic plot patterns, revolving mostly around mysterious murders, to cue viewers to engage with his films and TV series as detective stories. Whereas the cognitive function of genres usually comprises a reduction of complexity (through pattern recognition and corresponding inference-making), in impossible puzzle films, such patterns and expectations are also present, but are used to put viewers 'on the wrong track'. As Panek puts it, films like

Lost Highway and *Mulholland Drive* use the detective trope to provoke the audience into looking for answers that the film doesn't provide. Both of these films feature duos of detectives who appear in the first act, never to appear again. Though these brief appearances can be written off as red herrings, the protagonists play roles comparable to detectives throughout the narratives. (Panek 2006: 76)

The effect of such textual (and possibly contextual) markers is that they exert the corresponding 'classical' expectations that usually go with these genres. In Panek's words,

[c]learly some conventions exist for the mystery detective *noir* genre. These conventions cue the audience to look for an answer by seeing gaps as temporary and looking for clues ... It is crucial that Lynch uses detective story tropes. Detective stories set the audience the task of searching for something alongside their diegetic proxy, the detective. (ibid.: 77)

Indeed, for viewers, traditional generic framings call forth and maintain the assumption that the narrative is coherent and lucid, and that the energy they invest in trying to solve the puzzling mystery will pay off. At the same time, the recognition of elements from popular genres also restrains the emergence and applicability of other interpretive responses, like those associated with art cinema. After all, as Panek aptly concludes, regarding Lynch's narrative strategy,

[w]hether or not the viewer sees a film as a cognitive puzzle or an affective experience may shape his or her interpretation of the film. *Lost Highway*'s use of detective story tropes encourages the 'puzzle' reading strategy, but it does not provide a clear cut answer to the questions prompted throughout the diegesis. Audiences might be more likely to accept unresolved gaps and ambiguity as authorial in motivation if such generic cuing were absent. The desire for closure and concrete answers is a function of the classical Hollywood mode of narration, but it is also, more specifically, a function of the detective murder mystery. (ibid.: 78)

Genre can thus be decisive in viewers' choice of meaning-making strategies even when they face excessive amounts of complexity or confusion in a narrative. Monika Fludernik discusses the 'narrativising' drive of a recognised genre in relation to literary works that stubbornly resist sense-making. She argues that '[w]hen readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives – motivated by the generic markers that go with the book' (Fludernik 1996: 34). Similarly, the generic markers of confusingly complex impossible puzzle films seem to exert such a guiding function. For instance, in his DVD commentary to *Triangle* (Icon Film Distribution 2010), director Christopher Smith explains that he is aware of how his film's appeal to horror genre conventions steers its viewers in a particular direction. According to him, viewers tend to engage with his film's convoluted structure in a rational and analytical manner 'because it's a horror' – that is, 'because it's a movie that is watched primarily by an audience that are very into logic, and they want it to make logical sense'. Doubtlessly, in horror, detective or science-fiction films, generic expectations encourage diegetic investigation and induce a search for rational story logic. After all, most genre films reward such efforts. On the other hand, if viewers encountered similar complexities in an art film that lacked reliable generic markers, they would arguably be more prone to shift to authorial, symbolical or meta-fictional readings, or would foreground the affective dimensions of the experience, without expecting any classical narrative explanation or resolution. In short, by evoking and fostering genre-specific expectations, impossible puzzle films maintain viewers' inclination to adhere to the viewing routines that normally work for classical narratives – even if such reassuring resolutions or other indications of classical story logic remain absent. Genre expectations do not only invite viewers to rationally engage with excessive yet immersive narrative puzzles, but they can also be effective in encouraging viewers to choose certain meaning-making strategies over others.

3.2.4 Adherence to classical narrative cohesion devices

To suggest narrative transparency and coherence in their storytelling, impossible puzzle films also commonly draw on conventional techniques known from classical narration and film style. As David Bordwell has argued,

[s]tories bear the traces of not only local and historical conventions of sense-making, but also of the constraints and biases of human perception and cognition. A film, while moving inexorably forward (we can't stop and go back), must manage several channels of information (image, speech, noise, music). It must therefore work particularly hard to shape the spectator's attention, memory, and inference-making at each instant. No wonder that filmmakers balance potentially confusing innovations like the multiple-draft structure with heightened appeal to those forms and formulas that viewers know well. Artists should test the limits of story comprehension, but those very limits, and the predictable patterns they yield, remain essential to our dynamic experience of narrative. (Bordwell 2002a: 103)

Even though impossible puzzle films go beyond the early ‘unconventionally conventional’ experiments with forking-path and multiple-draft plots that Bordwell is discussing here, his concluding words remain applicable to many highly complex narratives too. For the most part, the storytelling and style of impossible puzzle films comply with classical narrative schemes to keep viewers engaged with the diegetic events. Following a term used by Bordwell, we call these strategies ‘narrative cohesion devices’, which denote ‘formal tactics that link passages at the local level – from scene to scene or from one group of scenes to another’ (ibid.: 95). Such devices, we argue, can exert their cohesive effect on both these films’ (1) *micro-narrative* level (in the use of local conventional style and narration) and their (2) *macro-narrative* level (in story structure and overall storytelling patterns). By gratifying our classical analytical routines on both these levels, such strategies help to keep the experience of impossible puzzle films within the (post-)classical paradigm.

First, on the *micro-narrative* level (1), it is apparent that many impossible puzzle films follow the representational norms and rules of classical narration and style. That is, they adhere to familiar formal and stylistic norms such as continuity editing, point-of-view structures and conventional narrative markers for scene-to-scene transitions, and follow classical principles including match on action, eyeline matches or the 180- and 30-degree rules – to name just a few. Similar to genre conventions, the presence of these familiar devices may already cue viewers to approach these films as classical narratives, evoking the corresponding expectations and analytical routines. As Elliot Panek argues, this discrepancy – between recognisable techniques of classical narration on the one hand and obfuscating complexity on the other – is a key feature of the popular contemporary puzzle film:

the films exhibit many of the characteristics emblematic of classical narration such as continuity editing, local causal logic, and a high degree of verisimilitude. However, these texts clearly do not promote narrative clarity in the way that is typical of Hollywood fare, and thus call upon different sense-making procedures on the part of the audience. (Panek 2006: 65–6)

This adherence to conventional style and classical patterns of formal representation is clearly one of the features that set contemporary complex films apart from art films. Art-cinema narration is often concerned with foregrounding idiosyncratic variations in style (cf. Grodal’s definition of the prototypical art film as displaying ‘stylistic innovation’), and these stylistic exercises do not necessarily serve the plot. In the most experimental cases, style may even deliberately work to obfuscate or problematise narrative clarity, as often happens in modernist art films. Impossible puzzle films, on the other hand, *do* include conventional and classical patterns, exactly because of the suggestion of narrative logic and transparency that these entail. Local, micro-level use of recognisable classical devices supports viewers’ overall classical narrative expectations and maintains their attempts at rational, causal inference-making. Moreover, classical formal devices and conventional style patterns may also help to ‘camouflage’ moments of narrative impossibility, which can (somewhat paradoxically) make these moments more effective. Comparable to how a Penrose or Escher drawing is partially dependent on immersive, life-like realism to draw us into a world that ultimately proves paradoxical, impossible puzzle films can use the promise of verisimilitude

and transparency of classical film style and narration to construct accessible and ‘inhabitable’, yet baffling and impossible worlds. For example, in a scene from *Triangle* that we analysed elsewhere (see Coëgnarts, Kiss, Kravanja and Willemsen 2016), protagonist Jess, caught in an impossible loop of events, is confronted with two versions of herself (one of whom is an earlier appearances of herself, already seen by the viewer earlier in the film). This scene uses very traditional point-of-view editing, representing this impossible state of affairs clearly and unambiguously. The traditional representational forms of classical realism are thus utilised to forward (neatly diegetised) events that otherwise clearly transgress reality. In another scene, at around the halfway point in the film, we see Jess on board the ocean liner watching herself in a mirror; distracted by a scream from outside, she looks away and walks off to explore the source of the distressed cry. Through the attentional continuity of her gaze, the pull of the mysterious offscreen sound, the natural connection of an eyeline match and some additional filmmaking trickery,¹¹ the film smoothly camouflages how, at the moment when Jess walks away from the mirror, the camera actually traverses into the mirror and continues following the events on the other side, into the second, doubled world of the mirror image – establishing the starting point of the film’s consecutive loop (Figures 3.1–3.5).



¹¹ The ‘mirror scene’ does not have any mirrors but a hole in the wall and a body double of Melissa George mimicking Jess. Also, the visible smudge ‘on the mirror’ was put there by CG during post-production.

Study 3





Figures 3.1 – 3.5

Classical continuity style thus initially ‘conceals’ the impossibility, by way of a reliance on stylistic conventions of realism. For those observant viewers who do notice the perceptual anomaly, however, the contrast between style and content in fact foregrounds the impossible nature of the events. Yet, the dissonant effect of such moments may be compensated for by the narration’s operational aesthetic, as viewers may appreciate the cunning narrative trickery over the logical problems such scenes entail for the story.

Besides the use of conventional style and narration on local micro-narrative level, one can also find cohesion devices on the *macro-narrative* (2) level of films’ plots and story structures. Individual storylines that remain linear, traditional developments in the plot or recurring patterns in storytelling may all suggest cohesion and causal connections, even among the otherwise highly complexified web of events. Several strategies can be used to maintain cohesion – or the suggestion thereof – in complex story structures, even if, ultimately, parts of the created cohering elements do not necessarily aggregate in a fully coherent story. Some of the macro-narrative cohesion devices are discussed by David Bordwell in his ‘Film Futures’ article. Analysing contemporary mainstream examples of forking-path films (see subsection 2.2.2), Bordwell notes how these plots use several strategies by which their potential range of complexity is ‘trimmed back to cognitively manageable dimensions, by means of strategies characteristic of certain traditions of cinematic storytelling’ (Bordwell 2002a: 91). Even though impossible puzzle films allow a much higher degree of narrative complexity than the examples that Bordwell is discussing, they do make use of similar macro-cohesion strategies to evoke a sense of order amidst their confusing scenarios (although, as we will see, they draw on these devices in a usually less prominent and sometimes more ambiguous form).

First, Bordwell notes how in forking-path films, individual plotlines are always kept *linear*, meaning that ‘each path, after it diverges, adheres to a strict line of cause and effect’ (ibid.: 92). As a trade-off between their displayed complexity and maintained sense of logical coherence, impossible puzzle films, like most narratives, usually keep large portions of their

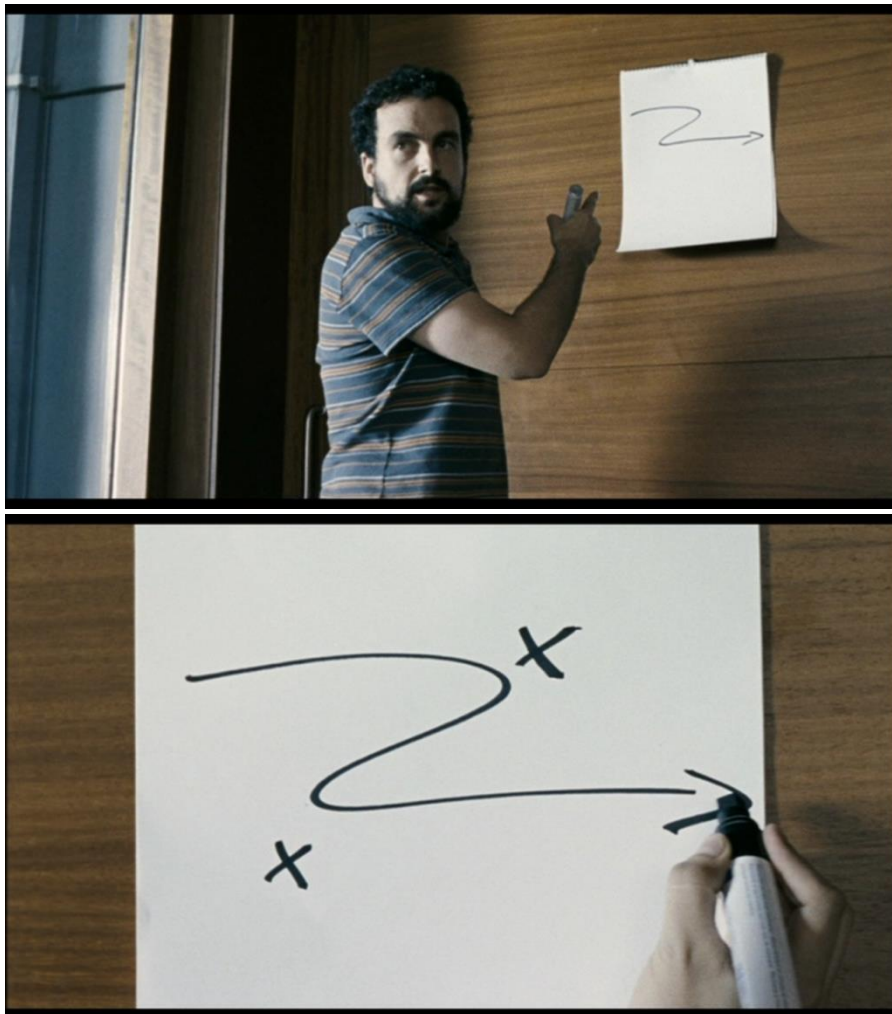
narrative or individual narrative trajectories linear and causally organised. Sticking with the example of *Triangle*, we can observe that despite its highly non-linear storytelling and complex storyworld, the plot does in fact remain linear, following one protagonist progressing through the looping world once. The non-linearity of the narrative structure is only presented in the form of inferred violations of natural laws (viewers' realisation of the looping time) and such violations' consequences on the diegetic world (like character and object duplications) that intrude on the otherwise predominantly linear storyline. Maintaining linearity in plot hereby provides viewers with an 'experienceable' entry point into an abstract and impossible storyworld, facilitating basic (embodied) cognitive viewing schemas – like SOURCE-PATH-GOAL continuity, PART-WHOLE causality and other narrative parameters deeply anchored in everyday experience.

In relation to this, Bordwell also notes how, on the level of the overall plot, forking paths are often unified by traditional cohesion devices known from classical narration. These serve to *tighten the causal relations* of these plotlines, for instance by setting appointments and deadlines around which the scattered story paths dovetail (ibid.: 95). Impossible puzzle films also occasionally use such traditional tactics to maintain some control over their intricately knotted plotlines. For instance, in *Reality*, Quentin Dupieux's tongue-in-cheek take on impossibly complex narrativity, one of the central characters, a cameraman who dreams of becoming a film director, is given a forty-eight-hour deadline by his producer to record the most terrifying scream he can come up with – or else he will not get funding for his planned movie. Such a deadline to a character's objectives (even if it is a rather absurd one) propels the entire story in a clear direction and ties the diffuse plotlines together. Not all impossible puzzle films include such common cohesion devices, but all do involve some form of goal-oriented chains of causality within individual plotlines. This common appeal to cause-and-effect logic distinguishes these films' experience from that which art-cinema narration invokes, as art films, in the words of Bordwell, often rely more on the 'sheer successiveness of events' (ibid.: 96), without forcing strong causal or temporal bonds among their presented segments.

Third, Bordwell observes that in forking-path films the scattered plotlines often cohere by certain pervasive conditions. Their multiple paths might intersect or only run parallel to each other, but contain *recurrences* in terms of settings, characters and events. After all, this way, 'even divergent futures are rendered more cognitively coherent, thanks to recurring characters and background conditions' (ibid.: 95). Likewise, many impossible puzzle films keep their conundrums manageable by restricting the number of characters, settings or timelines. They also maintain narrative logic by creating salient recurrences and other patterns and redundancies among these limited elements. For instance, films like *Triangle*, *Coherence* or *Timecrimes* make use of a constrained setting in which most of the action takes place (respectively: on a ship, within a single housing block and in and around one mysterious facility in a forest); they introduce a small, limited set of characters (no more than six); and they restrict the action to a short and specific timeframe (respectively roughly a single day; one night; or, in the case of *Timecrimes*, only around an hour). As with forking-path films, '[o]ne consequence of sticking to a core situation, the same locales, and the same cast of characters is that certain components emerge as vivid variants of one another' (ibid.: 96). Even within ultimately un navigable story structures, detecting narrative overlaps and

recurrences can encourage viewers to speculate on the possible logical interrelation of otherwise often dissonant events, and incite them to make an effort to try to establish coherence among patterns and variations. Hereby, as Bordwell argues, complex plots like forking-path narratives can ‘bring parallelisms to our notice quite vividly, thereby calling forth well-practiced habits of sense-making’ (ibid.: 97).

Lastly, Bordwell also notes how popular forking-path plots often make use of clear *signposting* through establishing salient markers for their moments of bifurcation and other narrative transitions: ‘each film’s narration sets up a pattern that clearly indicates the branching-points – a kind of highlighted “reset” button’ (ibid.: 94). Such signposting appears in impossible puzzle films too, whether as a tool of viewer orientation, or as a vehicle for showing off operational aesthetics. A film like *Timecrimes* presents its looping, forking and duplicating story through clear patterns and rather overt markers (by stylistic transitions, recurring shots, events, sounds or, in Vigalondo’s film, even with the help of an explicit drawing – see Figures 3.6 and 3.7 – and the invitation to construct a ‘precise’ plot map of happenings). As the above discussed mirror scene from *Triangle* proves, other impossible puzzle films play more ambiguously with such orienting markers and signposting elements – see previous Figures 3.1–3.5.



Figures 3.6 – 3.7

Indeed, many impossible puzzle films not only present significantly recurring shots or events, but also use ‘materialised’ signposts such as diegetic props. Through their striking recurrence and foregrounded presentation, these objects appear salient; however, most impossible puzzle films leave uncertainty over what information these signposts are meant to convey. One can think here of central props like the crashed aeroplane engine in *Donnie Darko*, the blue key and box in *Mulholland Drive* or the (strikingly similar) blue videotape in *Reality*. Through their prominence, uniqueness and conspicuous recurrence in crucial moments of the story, these props all *seem* to say something that could help viewers orient themselves in these convoluted worlds, but what exactly they are signalling is usually kept unclear or ambiguous. Their possible status as narrative markers thus evokes speculation: what do they stand for, indicate or symbolise? An *engine* that delivers Donnie’s fate, or propels a time-travel anomaly? A *key* to a portal that leads to alternative worlds of Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn? A *master tape* that rules mediated realities? Or are they just playfully indefinite red herrings, MacGuffin-like baits implying crucial information and suggesting coherence to the impossible puzzle?

In conclusion to the above strategies, we argue that these classical storytelling devices on both the micro- and macro-narrative levels work to ‘counter’ the high degree of complexity of impossible puzzle films. More precisely, these techniques do not so much reduce the confusing effect of these films’ dissonances and impossibilities per se, but they do provide viewers with the sense that they could get a logical grip on the presented. These formal and stylistic strategies *invite* logical sense-making, first because they help to maintain local cohesion and conventional progression within a plot’s development, and second because they provide the suggestion or illusion of possible logic and overall narrative coherence.

Regarding the first function, most impossible puzzle films keep large portions of the narrative (specific scenes and plotlines) comprehensible and in adherence to a linear narrative cause-and-effect logic. By contrast, ‘puzzling’ art movies, as Norman N. Holland noted, confuse viewers on all levels: ‘They puzzle us as to their meaning in a total sense [and t]hey puzzle us scene-by-scene simply as to what is going on in a narrative’ (Holland 1963: 18–19). Contemporary impossible puzzle films, on the other hand, only use the first type of global confusion; on the scene-to-scene level they largely retain transparency and comprehensibility. Their complexity only arises when viewers try to piece together the (otherwise separately mostly sensible) plot trajectories, which do not seem to add up to a coherent whole, but form an impossible or convoluted constellation.

As for the second function, the appeal of these films to classical narration also evokes certain expectations. Impossible puzzle films partially work by *suggesting* regular narrative logic and coherence. Their style and narration evoke aspects of classical narrativity without actually committing to it. And so these films provide the illusion of an unambiguous and coherent story, and encourage viewers to apply conventional inferential narrative logic. The viewing expectations and analytical routines that come with these formal strategies, however, often do not pay off, and viewers’ rationalising efforts may prove futile.

3.2.5 Inclusion of quasi-rational frames of naturalisation

Lastly, the final formal strategy common to impossible puzzle films is that they frequently include ‘quasi-rational’ or ‘pseudo-scientific’ *explanations* and *motivations* for their complex stories and narrative structures. In section 2.2 we discussed the function of naturalisations (Culler 1975) as interpretive frames. Naturalisations can help viewers to make sense of narrative complexity by attributing motivations and explanations to it. As we noted there, viewers can naturalise narrative complexity in a great variety of ways (for instance by explaining it as a distorted subjective reality, as a dream or fantasy, as an aspect of the fictional storyworld, as an allegory, as communicating a specific thematic function, as a personal expression of the film’s author, and so on). What we see in many impossible puzzle films, however, is that these movies do not keep all these potential paths of naturalisation open. Rather, in their attempt to sustain their viewers’ diegetic immersion, they include clues that usually point towards possible explanations and motivations on the level of the *storyworld*.

Two such naturalisations are particularly prominent in this respect. First, many impossible puzzle films hint at explanations of their complexity or strangeness as the product of the mental state of one of the characters (see also the ‘subjectification’ principle discussed in section 2.2). Such clues suggest that a character’s mental illness, distorted worldview, substance abuse or repressed dreams and desires cause the convoluted story presentation. Yet in impossible puzzle films, clues for subjectivity are often invoked without explicitly indicating how one could read them to establish cohesion and restore logic; these films, for example, hint at, but do not unambiguously reveal to viewers what is a dream or hallucination and what is real (cf. also our consideration of *Mulholland Drive* and *Enemy* as possible subjective narratives, discussed in subsection 2.4.1). Second, impossible puzzle films often include quasi-scientific or quasi-rational explanations that are aimed at convincing the viewer that there is a complicated but possible motivation behind their narrative complexity. Popular devices to suggest rational logic behind logical impossibilities are semi-scientific contemplations about time travelling (such as in *Primer*, *Timecrimes*), parallel universes (*Donnie Darko*, *Source Code*) and quantum mechanics (*Coherence*, or the television series *Fringe*). By pointing towards real-world scientific theory and freely adapted futuristic or fantastic versions thereof, these films suggest a ‘rationally’ motivating logic where a coherent narrative logic is absent. They advance the possibility that a rational theory may be able to account for their paradoxes, contradictions and impossibilities, but (quite understandably) without fully revealing what this logic would be.

In an interview, director James Ward Byrkit openly talks about the strategic inclusion of such quasi-scientific explanations in his movie *Coherence*:

The big difference between us and *Primer* is that Shane [Carruth, writer and director] really did a great job of making *Primer* seem like it had plausible science in it, whereas we don’t [laughs]. We don’t have plausible science ... We thought, wouldn’t that be fun to have a completely ridiculous story, but have elements of it that sounded like plausible explanations? (Lincoln 2014)

In *Coherence*, we follow six people at a dinner party on a night that, so is suggested, a comet happens to be closely passing Earth. Following a power outage, the group starts witnessing strange and disturbing events, including mysterious disappearances, looping events and duplicating characters. Halfway into the movie, while the group is trying to make sense of the anomalies, they happen to come across a book of theoretical physics that one of the disappeared characters left behind. Upon inspection of the book, one of the remaining characters recalls the famous thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat, and the multiple-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics – the suggestion of course being that (probably due to the strange influence of the comet) the characters are experiencing the interaction of different possible worlds that usually remain separated. By providing such internal 'scientific' motivations, however brief or thin, the film sends its viewers in a clear direction in terms of meaning-making: it emphasises diegetic and generic investigation, inspiring viewers to direct their sense-making at the internal laws of the storyworld (that is, solving the puzzle or cracking the code) rather than utilising authorial, allegorical, thematic or other hermeneutic and meta-fictional motivations. By providing such quasi-scientific or psychological naturalisations for the challenges of their confusingly complex diegetic universes, impossible puzzle films thus encourage viewers to keep using their toolkit of interpretations and motivations trained on classical narratives.

To conclude, we argue that it is through a combination of formal and stylistic tactics, derived from *both* the art-cinema and classical narrative tradition, that impossible puzzle films achieve their distinct viewing effects. By strategically appealing to cognitive and habitualised dispositions from classical narration in particular, these films discourage the interpretive modes of sense-making associated with art cinema; instead, they encourage viewers' immersion and classical narrative engagement, and prompt them to make sense of the dissonances and other paradoxes on the diegetic, intratextual level. These formal, stylistic and diegetic tactics serve as a kind of unattainable 'red herring' to keep viewers in a cognitive loop of sense-making, tempting them to look for rational and logical solutions to these films' 'irrational' complexities – an effect that can account for the films' engaging potential.

