

University of Groningen

## The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

Willemsen, Steven Petrus Martinus

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Willemsen, S. P. M. (2018). *The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

## STUDY 4

### *Last Year at Mulholland Drive: Ambiguous Framings and Framing Ambiguities<sup>1</sup>*

---

‘sense is not the point:  
the responses are the point’  
STANLEY KAUFFMANN (2001: 28)

This study proposes a cognitive-narratological perspective (as outlined in the previous chapters) to zoom in on the strategies and effects by which David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) has gained a cult – if not classic – status in recent film history. Rather than offering an(other) interpretation of the film, this study takes a meta-position, aiming to expose some of the *reasons why* Lynch’s highly complex and avant-gardist narrative has spawned an abundance of interpretations and continues to fascinate a large audience. We propose to analyse the film’s complex narrative in terms of its interpretive effects, addressing both the textual and contextual triggers that shape the viewing experience. Reviewing the variety of responses to the film’s narrative complexity, our hypothesis is that part of *Mulholland Drive*’s attractiveness arises from a possible oscillation that the film allows between profoundly differing, but potentially equally valid interpretive ‘framings’ of its enigmatic story: as a perplexing but enticing puzzle, sustained by (*post-*)*classical* cues in its narration, *and* as an *art-cinematic* experience that preys upon elements from experimental, surrealist, or other film- and art-historical traditions. The urge to ‘narrativize’ *Mulholland Drive*, we argue, seems to be caught in a distinct ‘cognitive hesitation’ between conflicting arrays of meaning making. As such, the film holds a unique position in contemporary cinema, pushing the boundaries of what critics and scholars have called ‘complex cinema’ or ‘puzzle films.’

#### 4.1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, the emergence of complex storytelling has been one of the most striking developments in popular fiction film. Contemporary audiences witnessed a notable increase of intricate narrative forms across mainstream film and television, extensively discussed by critics and scholars under a multitude of newly coined labels and terms, including ‘complex films’ (Bordwell 2006; Mittell 2006; Staiger 2006; Simons 2008), ‘puzzle films’ (Buckland 2009, 2014), ‘mind-game films’ (Elsaesser 2009), ‘mind-tricking narratives’ (Klecker 2013) ‘riddle films’ (Kiss 2013), ‘modular’ (Cameron 2008) and ‘subjective

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is currently under review as an article in the journal *Screen* (Willemsen & Kiss 2018). Due to its origin as a standalone paper, some of the theoretical discussion in this chapter will be in overlap with previous chapters. As a result, I invite my readers to read these parts with selective attention, focusing primarily on the case study.

multiform narratives' (Campora 2014), or more general categories, such as 'post-classical' (Thanouli 2006) or even 'post-post-classical cinema' (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Among the complex narrative films that have been classified under these headers, David Lynch's enigmatic neo-noir thriller *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is not only often named as one of the catalysts of the trend, but also marks one of the most enduringly discussed cases. The continuing cultural impact of Lynch's unconventional film is surprising in several respects. On the one hand, as critic Ignaty Vishnevetsky (2015) has noted, *Mulholland Drive* is 'an avant-garde film by most metrics', occupied with 'warping filmic narrative to the edge of incoherence.' Indeed, upon its release, Lynch's film was criticised by many viewers and critics for being incomprehensible or chaotic (see Andrews 2004: 25). At the same time, however, *Mulholland Drive* also gathered acclaim from a large share of moviegoers and critics: it launched the career of lead actress Naomi Watts, earned director Lynch an Oscar nomination, gained a cult following, sparked countless analyses and readings, and ultimately became a key film that 'defined the modern puzzle-box movie' (Vishnevetsky 2015). Today, more than fifteen years after its debut, discussions around *Mulholland Drive* have far from subsided. They even seemed to return to full swing following the film's 2015 re-release in the esteemed Criterion classic films DVD series, and its recent number one spot in a massive BBC poll of 177 film professionals, electing it as the best film of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far.<sup>3</sup> Such a level of impact and mainstream acclaim is usually hardly achieved by 'incoherent,' 'incomprehensible' or 'chaotic' avant-garde cinema.

The main reasons for *Mulholland Drive*'s success, besides the idiosyncratic affective qualities of Lynch's trademark style, tone, and tropes,<sup>4</sup> have arguably been the film's narrative complexity and its hermetic themes. Skilful analyses, clever explanations and creative interpretations of its plot, riddles, and possible meanings have been offered by the dozens, across both popular and scholarly platforms, and discussions on the film's thematic and narrative (in)coherence continue to attract fans, critics, and scholars alike (see, among others, Lewis 2002; Buckland 2003; Andrews 2004; Hudson 2004; McGowan 2004, 2007; Olson 2008; Bartyzel 2010; Nieland 2012; Akser 2012; Mittell 2013; Nochimson 2013; Campora 2014; Lim 2015; Winter 2015; or Bailey 2015).<sup>5</sup>

The abundance of work discussing *Mulholland Drive*'s exceedingly enigmatic plot has covering many interpretational, philosophical, critical and subtextual angles on the film. This article does not seek to provide a(nother) hermeneutic inquiry about *Mulholland Drive*'s potential meanings, or all the thinkable thematic or allegorical reasons behind its fragmented organization; rather, what interests us is the question *how* the film's particular complexity has attracted, fascinated and divided such a relatively large audience in the first place, and how it,

---

<sup>2</sup> The now flourishing trend was triggered by pioneering cult hits such as Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* [*Open Your Eyes*] and David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (both 1997), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) or Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), and continued in the mainstream successes of films such as Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014), Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), Doug Liman's *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) or Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160819-the-21st-century-100-greatest-films>.

<sup>4</sup> For a quick glance on such 'Lynchian' tropes – 'A road at night. A woman's crimson lips. Red drapes and a spotlight stage. (...) a flicker of a lightbulb or a swelling rumble on the soundtrack, (...) an untimely pause or a charge of déjà vu' (Lim 2015: 6) – see Kevin B. Lee's (2015) video essay, based on Dennis Lim's comprehensive book about Lynch's cinema.

<sup>5</sup> On IMDb, to date (15-03-2017), there are 1782 user and 255 external reviews of the film.

to this day, keeps on spawning so many different (and frequently contradictory) interpretations.

In earlier work, we conceptualised the cognitive effects and interpretive responses that characterise the viewing experiences of the narrative puzzles of contemporary complex cinema (Kiss and Willemsen 2017). We contended that narrative complexity should not only be seen as an ‘objective’, formal-structural feature intrinsic to the narration, but is best understood by its cognitive effects – that is, in terms of how such formal narrative play works to hinder spectators’ comprehension and meaning making routines. Narrative complexity, by this definition, can be seen as a temporary or permanent inability of the spectator to order film’s multi-modally channelled information into a clear and coherent narrative chain of meaningful events. This challenge encourages viewers to engage in a variety of intensified cognitive and interpretive sense making efforts.

*Mulholland Drive*’s complex narrative offers a remarkable case, not only because of the sheer amount, but particularly also the *diversity* of the responses it triggers. Lynch’s film appears to have a distinct protean effect, evoking strikingly different responses and interpretations in viewers. It is this effect (and its appeal) that we seek to comprehend.

#### **4.2 The narrative complexity of *Mulholland Drive***

Effects of complexity – that is, a sense of temporary or permanent cognitive confusion regarding comprehension and meaning making – can be achieved through various formal-structural manipulations across most key parameters of film narration. Looking at the popular complex films that emerged from the mid-1990s onwards, one can observe experimentations *in time* (e.g., non-chronological arrangements of events, reversed or inversed telling, multiple timelines, spatiotemporal fragmentation), *in narration* (e.g., notable information gaps or overloads, incongruities, ambiguities), *in focalization* (e.g., unreliability, internal focalization, hidden focalization shifts and unmarked subjective realism), *in character continuity* (e.g., split personalities, duplications, Doppelgängers) or *in complex spaces and storyworlds* (e.g., multiple, multi-dimensional or parallel universes, impossible storyworlds, ontological metalepses). Of course, many of these storytelling strategies are not new to feature films, let alone to the literary narrative tradition.<sup>6</sup> The complex and disruptive narrative forms that found their way to the mainstream film from the mid-1990s onwards were already pioneered and explored in earlier traditions of filmmaking, most notably in 1930s avant-garde films, the European ‘modernist’ art cinema of the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (Bordwell 1979; Kovács 2007: 120-40), and, somewhat less radically, even in the 1940s Hollywood film noir (Bordwell 2017).

*Mulholland Drive* draws from all these previous traditions, both in narrative and stylistic terms. However, especially for a project emerging from a commercial context,<sup>7</sup> Lynch’s film is unique in its radical undermining of narrative stability, mostly because it overthrows *many*

<sup>6</sup> Although there is an extensive history of complex narrative experimentation in literary traditions such as modernism, the *nouveau roman* or the postmodern novel, narrative complexity in literature does not seem to have reached the widespread, ‘mainstream’ appeal that complex films currently have.

<sup>7</sup> *Mulholland Drive* was originally commissioned by the ABC channel, subsidiary of Disney, as a pilot of a potential television series. About the ‘protracted’ and ‘haunted’ production history of the film, see Buckland 2003 and Mittell 2013, respectively.

of the above listed parameters *at the same time*. The film starts out as a seemingly traditional crime story in which a woman (Laura Harring) survives a car accident, suffers from amnesia, and flees into the home of a young would-be actress Betty (Naomi Watts). No longer able to remember her real name, she introduces herself to Betty as 'Rita.' When in Rita's bag the two find a large amount of cash and a mysterious blue key, they commit themselves to investigating Rita's real background and identity. However, Betty and Rita's journey soon disintegrates into a series of perplexing and uncanny scenes (including a Hollywood director in a casting procedure impeded by mobsters, an underworld cowboy, a story of an unhandy hitman, a nightmare manifesting in an eerie creature behind a Winkie's diner, and more), some related to, while some seemingly loose from the initial plot. The organization and hierarchy of the primary and side-events appears non-causal and a-chronological, often lacking clear spatial or temporal markers. In addition, through metaleptic destabilizations, the focalization of the primary story becomes fuzzy and intensely ambiguous, leaving spectators to wonder how and whether events are connected – in terms of spatial, temporal, causal and/or thematic relations – at all. The plot further disintegrates during the final twenty minutes of the film, when earlier introduced characters re-appear in different incarnations, under different names and roles (Betty now seems to be Diane, a has-been actress, also played by Naomi Watts), fundamentally riddling the story with contradictions and incoherencies.

Especially for first time viewers, it may appear as if *Mulholland Drive* features subjective unreliability, multiple ontological levels, contradictory and paradoxical elements, a non-linear progression, plus an overstimulating amount of information and incomplete plotlines, *all at once*. Notwithstanding this excessive complexity (which was experienced particularly strongly in the moment of its release), the film apparently also kept many viewers' narrative interest alive concerning questions as to how the zigzagging events and unresolved plotlines are related, how stable character identities can be inferred from a story that constantly changes their identities, and whether episodes are embedded in each other as dreams, realities, fantasies, parallel universes, allegories, or perhaps are just meant as a set of powerful standalone scenes and playful self-reflections on Hollywood filmmaking.

#### **4.3 The variety of responses to the narrative complexity of *Mulholland Drive***

*Mulholland Drive* has spawned (and keeps spawning) a remarkable amount of speculation and interpretations. From its release onwards, critics, as well as the general audience have been divided over the film, even questioning whether a (relatively) stable and coherent interpretation of it is possible at all. Sampling the available responses from critics, roughly two types of dealing with the film's complex narration emerge: treating it either [4.3.1] as a perpetually elusive mystery with no (need for a) logical way out, or [4.3.2] as an exceedingly challenging puzzle that the viewer must solve.

##### **4.3.1 A dead-end journey**

*On the one hand*, many commentators see Lynch's film as fundamentally incoherent and therefore intentionally 'anti-narrative.' For instance, according to film critic Roger Ebert,

The movie is hypnotic; we're drawn along as if one thing leads to another but nothing leads anywhere, and that's even before the characters start to fracture and recombine like

flesh caught in a kaleidoscope. ‘Mulholland Drive’ isn’t like ‘Memento’, where if you watch closely enough you can hope to explain the mystery. There is no explanation. There may not even be a mystery. (Ebert 2001)

Likewise, writer and editor Jennifer A. Hudson argues that

defying semblances of cohesion (...) any logical nucleus for *Drive* remains elusive and indefinable. (...) *Drive* remains a spiral, a circle, a series of unexplained pulsions that blur and destabilize traditional concepts of intellectual sense. (...) Once *Mulholland Drive* becomes your universe, you will find yourself lost in confusion. (...) what Lynch rejects in the film is the discourse of traditional logic itself. (Hudson 2004: 17, 23, 24)

Whereas some reviewers found this to be a reason for dismissing the film – accusing it of being a ‘chaotic’ ‘dead-end journey’, a ‘headscratcher without continuity’<sup>8</sup> –, the perceived lack of narrative coherence was hailed by other interpreters as the film’s primary achievement. For example, *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott argued that while *Mulholland Drive*’s

tangled story will be experienced by some as an offense against narrative order, (...) the film is an intoxicating liberation from sense, with moments of feeling all the more powerful for seeming to emerge from the murky night world of the unconscious. (Scott 2001)

Many interpreters who have taken this position imply that *Mulholland Drive*’s fragmented ‘anti-narrative’ makeup primarily serves not story-relevant, but more aesthetic, thematic, expressive, or even meta-fictional aims. Such interpretations assume, like Justus Nieland argued, that *Mulholland Drive* is

a remarkable meta-cinematic film (...) exploiting the ambiguities of art cinema, setting into motion its most obviously self-referential categories (time, cinema, spectatorship, authorship) (...). David Lynch has often been described as a kind of late surrealist. Like the historical surrealists of the interwar period, he values what André Breton famously described as cinema’s ‘power to disorient,’ its status as an arena for the experience of otherness and the unknown. (Nieland 2012: 95-7, 111)

Reflecting on the excess of symbolic and symptomatic readings of *Mulholland Drive*, Jason Mittell has highlighted how many of its reviewers have felt that the resolution of the film requires

interpretation; looking for the meanings beneath the surface, at the level of symbolism, thematics, or subtextual significance. Unsurprisingly, this has been the main purview of academic analyses, where we can find readings of the film as illustrating Lacan’s theories

---

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of these critical opinions see Andrews 2004, 25.

of fantasy, desire, and reality; evoking contemporary technologies of virtual reality; dissolving boundaries between semiotic oppositions; offering a lesbian tragedy as an indictment of homophobia; and critiquing the dream-crushing logic of Hollywood cinema, among many others. (Mittell 2013: 28).

#### 4.2 A narrative puzzle to be solved

*On the other hand*, however, another, equally substantial group of critics, scholars and viewers does not see *Mulholland Drive* as fundamentally or intentionally incoherent at all. Rather, they read it as a puzzle that just needs some rearranging and deciphering for the story to make logical sense. In Matthew Campora's words, 'a growing consensus of commentators' argues that 'although *Mulholland Drive* has affinities with the open-ended narratives of art cinema, its fragmented multiform plot structure does allow for a coherent narrative reading' (Campora 2014: 69). Building on the categorization of critical work by David Andrews (2004: 25), Campora divides the interpretations of this set of reviewers up into two camps: critics who have argued that the film is a fully coherent, 'utterly comprehensible' narrative of 'subjective realism', and those who find that the film is complex, but 'mostly comprehensible with varying degrees of incoherence' (Campora 2014: 74). Jason Mittell has noted how this share of viewers and critics tends to behave like 'forensic fans' (2009). For them, making sense of the film is mostly

a question of comprehension, trying to make coherent sense of the film's narrative events (...). The most common explanation for the film's narrative is that the first 80% of *Mulholland Drive* is Diane Selwyn's (Naomi Watts) dream imagining herself as Betty Elms while the final act portrays the reality she is trying to escape. Many other explications present theories of dreams, reality, deaths, and parallels, all catalogued online on websites like *Mulholland-Drive.net*. (Mittell 2013, 27)

Regardless of the accuracy or (scholarly) value of the different interpretations, this forensic engagement is paramount to the pleasure the film offers to many of its viewers. The evidence for this unappeasable puzzle-solving appeal can be found not only in academic journals and books, but especially also on many blog posts, websites, and online discussion boards. As Lynch biographer Dennis Lim notes,

Audiences who responded to *Mulholland Drive* loved it precisely for its unique architecture as a puzzle movie that required some degree of assembly in the viewer's head. The online magazine *Salon* ran a piece titled "Everything You Were Afraid to Ask about *Mulholland Drive*," untangling the film's narrative threads and mapping out its cosmology; various websites, some maintained to this day, went even deeper, parsing the significance of minor characters and the symbolism of individual objects. The cult that emerged around *Mulholland Drive* bespoke a participatory engagement with fiction, a collective hunger – to solve, decode, demystify – that Lynch had tapped into with *Twin Peaks*. (Lim 2015: 154)

This pleasure taken in piecing together the film's story differs from the earlier identified – more symbolic, thematic or subtextual – responses in that they are occupied with story logic and the re-ordering of scenes and occurrences into a more or less stable, chronological, causal, and diegetically motivated chain of events.

So how can these contrasting interpretive stances co-exist? We propose that these divergent responses reflect two fundamentally different ways of dealing with the narrative's complexity: one works to preserve incongruities by attributing a variety of artistic strategies or meanings to the incoherence, while the other is mainly occupied with resolving and naturalizing the complexity and ambiguity into a coherent story. We aim to understand these two 'meaning making pulls' as two different ways of *framing* the film's narrative complexity, both of which, as we will argue in the below, are evoked and afforded by Lynch's film through *textual* and *contextual* cues.

#### **4.4 Frame theory and *Mulholland Drive*: a hypothesis**

*Frame theory* provides a particularly useful conceptual tool to get a grip on viewers' interpretive operations. The concepts of 'frame' and 'framing' have been among the most influential notions to have travelled from the cognitive sciences into narrative theory.<sup>9</sup> In its most common use, *frames* refer to dynamically applied structures of memorised knowledge that become active in response to familiar situations and settings. In the words of its pioneering theorist Marvin Minsky, a 'frame' is

a data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room, or going to a child's birthday party. Attached to each frame are several kinds of information. Some of this information is about how to use the frame. Some is about what one can expect to happen next. Some is about what to do if these expectations are not confirmed. (Minsky 1974: 1)

Frame theory offers a heuristic tool to conceptualise mental structures of knowledge that function 'top-down' (in response to available 'bottom-up' cues) to control the cognitive effects of a given situation. Frames can be seen as 'cognitive shortcuts' that help to set expectations, steer attention, recognise patterns, detect novelties, determine salience, evaluate available information and choose further actions. *Framing* then refers to the activity of selecting the clusters of knowledge and interpretive stances deemed the most appropriate in response to the given situation.

Cognitive narratologists have widely adopted the notion of frames (or scripts or schemata)<sup>10</sup> to conceptualise how narrative understanding takes shape by recourse to memorised knowledge and patterns from previous real life and mediated experiences (for examples, see Bordwell 1985; Branigan 1992; Jahn 1997; Herman 2002; or Caracciolo 2012). In the case of film viewing, frame theory offers a tool to describe how viewers rely on

---

<sup>9</sup> Along with related terms like 'scripts' and 'schemata' – all of which can be traced back to early artificial intelligence research of the 1970s (e.g., Minsky 1974; Rumelhart 1975; Schank and Abelson 1977).

<sup>10</sup> 'Whereas scripts typically represent sequences of events, frames and schemata represent points in time' (Alber 2009: 94).



previous experiences, knowledge, and strategies in their encounter with new cinematic narratives. This can be particularly important regarding complex narratives, the challenges of which often test and play on viewers' reliance on their knowledge clusters. Some cases of complex, non-conventional, or 'anti-mimetic' narratives may even foreground or even problematise these basic processes, emphasizing the central role of framing decisions (such as to what genre, style, or artistic tradition we take a work to belong to) in interpretation and evaluation. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes has noted,

As soon as contexts are less clear in their framing indications, readers need to select between alternatives according to the relevance context they construct for the case at hand. Moreover, some kinds of texts, and some kinds of reading strategies, require that we hold in mind alternative, conflicting framings and oscillate between them, as this may result in pleasurable ("aesthetic") mental activity. (Korthals Altes 2014: 33)

As such, framing decisions are paramount to interpretation, determining what knowledge, experiences, routines, and tools we select from our extensive 'experiential backgrounds' (Caracciolo 2014) to make sense of a work of art. Different experiential backgrounds trigger different framing choices, which can result in very divergent apprehensions and appraisals of the same material, simply because they may lead viewers to supply very different 'input' in their interpretive interactions with a work.

In this article, we hypothesise that a central reason behind *Mulholland Drive*'s persistent attractiveness lies in a balance that the film maintains between at least two different 'gravitational pulls' on viewers' meaning making. These, we propose, can be understood as emerging from two *different but equally reasonable framing options* of the film's complexities, based on concurring textual and contextual cues. As we will elaborate in the below, the two opposing poles of these pulling forces are

(I/a) on the one hand, a '*classical narrative drive*', nourished by immersive story patterns and familiar generic and narrative conventions;<sup>11</sup>

(I/b) as well as its post-classical '*puzzle variant*', asking from viewers to reorganise linearity, chronology, or untangle embedded levels, thereby luring them to keep trying to restore narrative order from the complex narration;

(II) and, on the other hand, the option of an '*art-cinematic*' appreciation, which offers an alternative to the problematised classical narrative recuperations of story logic, and which is

---

<sup>11</sup> *Classical narration* is the dominant paradigm of film storytelling, and also the mode of film viewing that most western spectators are mainly accustomed to (see Bordwell 1985, 156-204 and Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985 – to name the most seminal references). Traditionally, classical narrative films have been constructed in ways that allow viewers to integrate the presented events into a chronological event-chain that provides a clear cause and effect logic, and that leads to some kind of closure with regards to main goals and questions posed in the story. Classical narration also usually implies that the story adheres to the laws of the everyday world in terms of spatiotemporal, logical, and physical laws (unless indicated otherwise, either by explication or through established genre conventions) and implies a sense of *realism* in that spectators have epistemological access to the story's ontologically knowable world.

fed by the recognition of elements from experimental, surrealist, or other film- and art-historical traditions.

It appears that *Mulholland Drive* occupies a volatile position between these simultaneously enticing framings of its narrative complexities. This mutability, we propose, leaves the interpretative process in a permanent instability that is paramount to the film's complexity, as well as its sustained attraction. Once again, this article is not an attempt to put forward an interpretation of our own; but rather we sample available responses to 'reverse engineer' the film's distinct viewing effects. To understand the different framings of *Mulholland Drive*, the analysis should focus on both *formal-textual* characteristics of the film's narration as well as its relevant *contextual* components. After all, viewers do not just respond to textual cues – such as style or narration – when making sense of a complex narrative, but also work with contextual, paratextual and intertextual inferences – such as knowledge about a film's context of production, its relation to other films, genres and film-historical traditions, or earlier meaning-making that they found successful with comparable films – in order to choose pertinent interpretive pathways. We propose that the experience of narrative complexity emerges from this contextually situated, dynamic interaction between spectators and a work of narrative art.

The next two sections aim to provide a detailed explanation about the ingredients that make up the opposing but co-existing forces through which the [4.4.1] art-cinematic and [4.4.2] (post-)classical poles allow simultaneously applicable interpretive framings.

#### **4.4.1 Framing complexities: the inducement of art-cinematic readings**

The first set of responses that we identified links *Mulholland Drive* to the tradition of art cinema – or, more specifically, has used interpretive and evaluative routines from the art cinema tradition to get a grip on the film's excessive narrative complexity. Art cinema has been recognised as constituting a *narrative mode* (Bordwell 1979; Kovács 2007) and/or *institutional context* (Neale 1981; Thanouli 2009; Andrews 2010) of filmmaking, characterised by its own formal, stylistic, interpretive, contextual, and economic norms that are often defined in opposition to the classical narrative film. Art films have often attempted to deconstruct or question classical storytelling principles, allowing other subject matter or modes of expression to take centre stage (see Bordwell 1979, 57).<sup>12</sup> In such readings of *Mulholland Drive*, critics and scholars often point to *textual* cues connecting Lynch's film to notable art films and traditions, such as the surrealist cinema of the likes of Luis Buñuel (beyond Nieland 2012: 111, see for instance also Eig 2003, or Panek 66), German expressionist cinema (Campora 70-3), or the associative, dream-like 'trance films' such as Maya Deren's 1943 *Meshes of The Afternoon* (Perlmutter 2005). The most frequent comparison is that to the cinematic *modernism* of the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s found in

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Art cinema' can, historically speaking, be roughly divided into two poles: the somewhat anti-narrative tradition of *avant-garde* on the one hand, which has often explicitly aimed to substitute narrativity for more purely cinematic, visual, or associative modes of filmmaking; and the tradition of *cinematic modernism* on the other, which sought to complicate and undermine classical ways of storytelling without shedding off narrativity altogether (not unlike literary modernism).

the films of prominent auteurs such as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, or Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>13</sup> For András Bálint Kovács, contemporary complex films like *Mulholland Drive* are ‘systematic manifestations of several sophisticated modernist narrative procedures ‘infiltrating’ probably the world of quality Hollywood production’ (Kovács 2007: 60).<sup>14</sup>

Many of the film’s *narrative strategies* and *thematic choices* indeed seem inherited from the art-cinematic tradition: the dissolution of boundaries between reality and dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, or subconscious projections (or however else one might rationalise some of the film’s perplexing story paths), as well as its deconstruction of realist spatio-temporality and character-integrity are easily associated to the surrealist films of the pre-1930s European avant-garde (in his follow-up review, Ebert [2002] calls *Mulholland Drive* ‘the first surrealist film of the 21st century’), as well as to the post-war European modernist tradition (Ingmar Bergman’s 1966 *Persona* is probably the most often-cited title of reference). Besides its manifest conflation of ‘objective’ (zero focalised) and ‘subjective’ (internally focalised) modes of narration, other strategies of storytelling that are particularly reminiscent of the post-war European modernist tradition are the film’s utilization of metafictional and self-reflexive elements (thematising the struggles of its own creation, Lynch’s film often invites a comparison to Federico Fellini’s 1963 *8½*), the story’s foregrounding of ambiguities and incongruent versions of events (Alain Resnais’ 1961 *Last Year at Marienbad* is another recurring association, being one of the few films that can concur with *Mulholland Drive* in terms of the amount and variety of interpretations that it has spawned), and the deconstruction of elementary – and therefore rarely challenged – parameters of classical narration (for instance the bizarre shifting, splitting or collapsing of characters – which is not uncommon in art cinema, as can be seen, among others, in Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1968 *Partner* or, indeed, Bergman’s *Persona*).

These associations with art cinema are further reinforced by Lynch’s trademark *style*: his idiosyncratic offbeat *cinematography* – hand-held obscure point of view shots, superimpositions, shaky focus, etc. –, *lighting* – more atmospheric than communicative –, *acting* and *characterization* – remember Betty’s inconsistently extreme acting skills ‘from guileless pretending to majestic double-dealing’ (Toles 2004: 8) –, and choice of *soundtrack* – eerie soundscapes and dreamy but ominous music from Angelo Badalamenti’s ‘darkest yet’

---

<sup>13</sup> Modernist art films have pioneered many forms of complex storytelling in film narration, foregrounding ambiguities, contradictions, permanent gaps, spatiotemporal fragmentation, distorted and highly subjective narration (often including dreams, memories or fantasies), thematic or even political emphases, loosened causality, and other relatively radical modernist techniques (for encompassing overviews, see Bordwell 1979 and Kovács 2007: 57-62).

<sup>14</sup> Other scholars too have drawn such connections between techniques explored in earlier – mostly modernist – art films and narrative experimentations trending in contemporary complex films (e.g., Cameron 2008; Klecker 2011; Campora 2014; Kiss and Willemsen 2017). To illustrate the habituation effect of complex storytelling techniques, Cornelia Klecker recalls the analogous movement in literary history by which ‘[m]odernist novels, such as works by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, were exceedingly avant-garde at the time they were published, yet they became established classics in the second half of the twentieth century’ (Klecker 2011: 24). According to András Bálint Kovács, ‘[t]he 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’ (Kovács 2007: 60).

main theme (Norelli 2009: 41) to Rebekah del Rio's a cappella version of Roy Orbison's *Crying* –, all together convey a hypnotic and expressionistic quality.

Prototypically, “art film combines stylistic innovation with a claim to higher meaning” on the narrative level (Grodal 2009: 207-8). For many viewers, *Mulholland Drive* ticks both boxes. Cued by these narrative, thematic, and stylistic elements, and possibly further guided by *contextual* knowledge (e.g., knowledge of Lynch's earlier work and his reputation as an ‘auteur’ director; the film's success at the Cannes Film Festival; or its presence in the context of ‘arthouse’ institutions or academic journals), viewers may find sufficient reason to conclude that the ambiguities of *Mulholland Drive* should be understood and interpreted in light of the art-cinema tradition.

As we have argued more extensively elsewhere (see Study 3.1), framing a film as ‘art cinema’ entails more than the mere application of an arbitrary classificatory label. Framing a film as art film comprises a reasoned appraisal relating to a significant set of cognitive, interpretive and evaluative routines, distributed to viewers through art cinema's narration, institutions, and practices. Especially when confronted with the excessive complexity of ‘non-naturally coded texts’ (Fludernik 1996: 36), experienced art-cinema literate viewers can make use of a variety of symbolic or even symptomatic meaning-making strategies that are alternative to their more referential and explicit narrativizing routines trained in classical narratives. In other words, when a story's complexity or confusing effects become extensive or foregrounded, and leave little chance for a classical narrative recuperation, the art-cinema frame of viewing can offer alternative interpretive paths, promoting the construction of meaning beyond the more ‘strict’ mimetic and referential narrative sense. Art films have traditionally cued, invited, and perhaps even trained viewers to downplay the importance of plot, concrete events, and explicit meanings. Invoking a broader pallet of possible mimetic recuperation, they promote poetic, lyrical, associative, contemplative allegorical, style-driven or expressionistic modes of meaning making (see also Bordwell 1979; Grodal 2009: 207-9; Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 156-163). One may for instance infer that a narrative's *incoherence* forms the film's deliberate point, as, for example, signalling the fallibility of memory, illustrating the instability of perception, or representing a fundamentally ambiguous *condition humaine*.

As we noted (in section 4.3.1), many such readings have been inferred by viewers of *Mulholland Drive*. Interpreters have seen the film as, among others, a deliberate ‘reversal of coherence’ demonstrating the point where ‘language fails to define and construct reality’ (Hudson 2004: 23), an illustration of ‘the role of fantasy in providing reality with structure’ in a Lacanian fashion (McGowan 2004, 68), or as an ‘embodiment of postmodern theory’ such as the hyperreality of simulacra, the pastiche as ‘blank’ meaningless parody, and the, once again, Lacanian construction of self (Bartyzel 2010). Apprehension under the art-cinematic frame is also more prone to recognise explicitly ‘meta-fictional’ forms, directing attention at the very process of narrative understanding and its ‘raw materials’, or at the artistic or medial tradition in which a work self-consciously stands. In his book on Lynch, Justus Nieland epitomises this meta-fictional aspect of art-cinematic readings, claiming that

The historical horizon of art cinema is of particular relevance [for *Mulholland Drive*] because of the familiar challenges its modernist textuality poses to the kinds of

personalities associated with Hollywood cinema – their psychologies, their affects and motivations, their relationships to the structuring of space and time, their status as erotic spectacles, their “aura,” and their reification in stardom. (Nieland 2012: 96)

#### 4.4.2 Framing complexities 2: the triggers of (post-)classical narrative readings

Notwithstanding these art-cinematic interpretations of *Mulholland Drive*, an equally substantial share of viewers does not downplay the possible coherence of the film’s events and their referential meaning at all. Rather, behaving like what Mittell called ‘forensic fans’, these viewers see the film as a puzzle to be solved, and pursue explanations and interpretations that provide narrative logic and closure to its challenging story and structure. We would not suggest that these attempts are misguided, or that such viewing strategies are not being ‘film-literate’ enough to possess and employ the necessary modernist or art-cinematic meaning making competences (although familiarity with art-cinematic conventions and routines can certainly play an important role). Rather, we would argue that *next to* its invitation of applying art-cinematic framings to its ambiguities, Lynch’s film *simultaneously* warrants an explicit and referential meaning-making of a more classical narrative stance, appealing to coherent narrativization, real-life cognitive parameters and other conventional mimetic patterns.

It must be noted that *Mulholland Drive* appeared at a moment when more ‘art-cinematic’ viewing strategies (such as interpreting confusing narrative events as the subjective reality of a focalizing character) had begun being applicable to more mainstream fiction films. In Dennis Lim’s words,

Fractured, elliptical stories were not new to cinema – they were in fact the stock in trade of modernist giants like Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni – but *Mulholland Drive* coincided with a mounting appetite for narrative complexity. Audiences were by then accustomed to the shifting time signatures of Quentin Tarantino’s movies, or to the gentler fissures in the films of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, who explored the cosmic patterns of interlocking lives in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991) and the *Three Colors* trilogy (1993-1994). The rug-pulling trickery of hits like *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) popularized the notion of narrative as a game; Christopher Nolan’s reverse-chronology *Memento*, another amnesia neo-noir, was released several months before *Mulholland Drive*, and temporal loops were becoming an increasingly common device, in such films as *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Primer* (2004), and *Déjà Vu* (2006). (Lim 2015: 155)

Most of these contemporary complex films, however, retained fairly classical narration in that they ‘counter’ their complexities with a strong reliance on classical storytelling patterns, ensuring their viewers’ narrative interest, sense-making drive, and, ultimately, comprehension. Although *Mulholland Drive* arguably appeared as part of this emerging line of ‘mainstream complexity’ (Kiss 2012), it cannot be unproblematically grouped with these (post-)classical narratives. Lynch’s film strays away from many principles of classical narration maintained by puzzle films like *The Sixth Sense* or *The Usual Suspects*; but simultaneously, unlike most modernist art films, it also preserves some powerful *features of*

*classical narrativity*. These appeal to viewers' habitual 'narrativizing urge', luring them into attempts to construct a more-or-less objective, causal, and chronological story.

In the final section of this article, we call up and review five (post-)classical storytelling strategies that we discerned as common to many contemporary complex popular films (Kiss and Willemssen 2017: 163-182), which also seem to actuate interpretive cueing functions in *Mulholland Drive*. These 'classical narrative' cues include the presentation of stories with [1] a high degree of *tellability*, [2] local and global narrative *cohesion devices*, [3] palpable *genre* conventions, [4] the opportunity for *character identification* as well as [5] recourse to *naturalization* and *rationalization*.

[1] The notion of *tellability* is used in narrative theory to refer to the quality that makes a story 'worth telling' (or engaging to listen to). Although this quality is highly subjective and context dependent, some elementary features make certain stories more 'tellable' than others. Jerome Bruner observed a key feature of 'canonicity and breach', meaning that 'to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated or deviated from' (Bruner 1991: 11). That is, for a story to be worth telling, something 'out of the ordinary' should happen in it. Such script breaches, however, can themselves be highly conventionalised, as the driving forces behind most classical and canonical narratives are (e.g., murder mysteries, romantic encounters, quests, impending threats to peace, and so on). In terms of establishing a tellable story, *Mulholland Drive*'s exposition could have been that of a highly classical mystery plot. In the opening half hour, the narration neatly and rather rapidly establishes an initial setting, incites the action through unexpected events, poses further questions, and paves the way for additional complications – all conforming to the classical crime narrative tradition. Viewers are being introduced, in a swift action-reaction pattern, to a woman who is threatened by a gun but then involved in a mysterious car crash, suffers memory loss, and flees into the house of Betty, a young aspiring actress. Together, they start a quest to uncover the true identity of the amnesiac woman, who carries a large sum of cash and a mysterious blue key. Most certainly, these central questions and enigmas hook many viewers just by playing on the element of curiosity. After all, as Raphaël Baroni reminds us, '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). In short, before *Mulholland Drive*'s narrative submerges in its more experimental and potentially incoherent paths (around the two third mark), the film first sets in motion an eventful and suspenseful plot with high tellability, posing well-defined mysteries and narrative questions. These work to bias viewers to actuate an explicit and referential classical narrative reading based on potentially familiar narrative parameters.

[2] Similar story-centric inclinations are stimulated by the film's fairly conventional use of narrative and stylistic techniques on the local micro-level (i.e., within and among directly connected scenes). Again, especially in the opening parts – which set viewers' first hypotheses, and are therefore crucial in determining the framing through which one approaches the film – *Mulholland Drive* features many familiar formal-structural elements known from classical plotting. David Bordwell's term '*cohesion devices*' brings a common denominator to such narrative strategies, identifying them as 'formal tactics that link passages

at the *local* level – from scene to scene or from one group of scenes to another (...) usually serving to tighten up linear cause and effect’ (Bordwell 2002: 95 – emphasis added).

Many of the scenes of *Mulholland Drive* adhere to rules and norms of classical filmic representation – principles based on providing smooth continuity in information distribution. Simply put, by its apparently undisturbed chain of action-reaction, the film *looks and feels like* a classical Hollywood movie following the laws of classical narrative filmmaking. As Todd McGowan observes,

While the first part of *Mulholland Drive* is not without strange characters and events (such as a humorously botched murder by a hired killer), the *mise-en-scène* conforms on the whole to the conventions of the typical Hollywood film: scenes are well lit, conversations between characters flow without awkwardness, and even the plainest décor seems to sparkle. The editing also tends to follow classical Hollywood style, sustaining the spectator’s sense of spatial and temporal orientation. (McGowan 2004: 68)

Yet although events initially seem connected in an ordinary, logical manner, are organised ‘according to a familiar temporal logic,’ and ‘occur in chronological order and follow the laws of causality’ (ibid. 73), their combination on the *global* macro-level does not provide a clear, coherent and cohesive story.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, *Mulholland Drive* fits the definition of Umberto Eco’s ‘impossible possible world’ (Eco 1990: 77): it presents a storyworld that is seemingly coherent and in compliance with the logic of real-world laws, but which also introduces narrative elements – or even an overall narrative structure – that will strike viewers as incongruent or ‘impossible’ (with regard to both the internal laws of the storyworld and our sense of real-world logic).

[3] Another key contributor to the film’s classical narrative appeal is Lynch’s evocation of popular cinematic *genre* conventions – in plot, but also through prototypical characters, settings, tropes, patterns, cinematography and style. Genre conventions commonly guide viewers in their apprehension, comprehension, and evaluation of films, as these conventions come with strong expectations and interpretive routines, predominantly tied to the classical narrative tradition. As such, issues of genre are often central in framing decisions.<sup>16</sup>

Like in the television series *Twin Peaks*, or feature films like *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway* as well as *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch’s stories frequently revolve around central mysteries that are very strongly generically coded. As Elliott Panek notes, both

*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

---

<sup>15</sup> A less ambiguous but quite clear and bold signalling of global incongruity happens in Lynch’s 1997 *Lost Highway*, where protagonist Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), at two different and locally unproblematic moments in the plot, buzzes *himself* at the door of his home to report: ‘Dick Laurent is dead.’

<sup>16</sup> As Daniel Chandler highlights, ‘[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’ (Chandler 1997).

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 recognition of familiar thematic (an enigmatic femme fatale, a hitman, a mysterious creature, mobsters and cowboys) and stylistic tropes (a dark and dreamy soundtrack, chiaroscuro lighting and inquiring camera movements) signals a neo-noir detective mystery, cuing viewers into framings that activate a genre-specific routine: to inspect, puzzle, and deduct along with the characters. Once again, in Panek's words,

Clearly 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)

The recognition of the classical mystery genre in *Mulholland Drive* fosters viewers' expectation and desire that their investigative efforts in resolving both the story's and the narration's mysteries will ultimately pay off – after all, classical narrative genre films commonly provide such closure and coherence.<sup>17</sup> In Panek's conclusion,

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)

In *Mulholland Drive*, strong generic patterns may put viewers on a classical narrative track of resolving the film's complexities, thereby downplaying art-cinematic readings that would accept or even celebrate unresolved ambiguities as an artistic, authorial strategy.<sup>18</sup> Investigative, puzzle-oriented readings of the film are further reinforced by recurring narrative patterns and props such as the mysterious blue key and box. These items appear salient and significant because of their recurrence during pivotal moments of the film's narrative; yet what exactly they signal, or how they could work as narrative 'orientation points', is left unclear or ambiguous, making these objects some of the most discussed and speculated about elements in the film's story.

---

<sup>17</sup> This desire can be strategically played upon by filmmakers; for instance, Christopher Smith, the director of the exceedingly complicated horror film *Triangle*, talks about his strategy to appeal to viewers' interpretive routines trained in the horror genre. According to him, viewers engage with his film's complex incongruities 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'. See Smith's DVD commentary to his *Triangle* (Icon Film Distribution, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Monika Fludernik emphasises the importance of genre cues with specific regards to the interpretation of difficult narratives. 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).



[4] Another strategy often found in contemporary complex films is the appeal to classical forms of *character identification*. Classical film narratives typically present ‘accessible’ protagonists with whom viewers can connect and resonate relatively easily; they are psychologically ‘transparent’, meaning they have rational motivations and clear goals, display relatively unambiguous behaviour, and are emotionally and actively invested in the story’s events and action. Such ‘lifelike’ classical protagonists – the types about whom we easily come to care – play a key role in winning our affection, empathy or identification, thus enhancing a narrative’s tellability by providing viewers’ entry points into the story.<sup>19</sup>

In the opening hour of *Mulholland Drive*, Rita, Betty, and film director Adam (Justin Theroux) all seem to provide such access points. As Panek’s analysis highlighted, both Betty and Rita function like detectives, channelling the curiosity and rationalizing urge that viewers may have while trying to figure out the story’s mysteries. Naomi Watts’s Betty particularly appears as a highly classical, quite generic protagonist (at least during the first two thirds of the film): she is a warm-heartedly kind character with ‘the attractive innocence of a new arrival in Hollywood, someone eager to make her way as a performer’ (McGowan 2004, 77). Throughout the film, however, these familiar and unambiguous character traits become increasingly unstable – a disintegration that strongly contributes to the feeling of overall narrative fragmentation and incoherence towards the end of the film. Nonetheless, the confusing changes, through which Betty gradually departs from the heroine role and ultimately morphs back into her alternative (or real) frustrated Diane Selwyn, come only late in the plot, right when immersed viewers may have felt just one step away from untangling the film’s puzzle.

[5] Strong incongruities, like strong narrative incoherencies or inconsistencies in character integrity, ask for *naturalizations* – mimetic motivations that *rationalise* such discrepancies within the story(world). The term ‘naturalization’ was coined by Jonathan Culler (1975) and later influentially appropriated by Monika Fludernik (1996) to describe interpretive strategies by which readers (or viewers) reconcile textual inconsistencies by fitting them into overarching sense-making patterns. The earlier discussed art-cinematic readings of *Mulholland Drive* provide examples of one type of interpretations that alleviate detected incongruities: they offer ‘naturalizing readings’ of the fragmented plot structure as, for instance, Lynch’s deliberate reversal of coherence and destabilization of traditional logic (Hudson 2004), as an intoxicating liberation from logical sense (Scott 2001), as a Lacanian psychoanalytic study in the construction of identity and the self (Akser 2012; McGowan, 2004), or as an examination of postmodern concepts such as the simulacrum (Bartyzel 2010). Viewers who take a more classical narrative frame of viewing, however, tend to opt for different naturalization strategies. Rather than through indirect intellectual or discursive interpretive efforts like those that characterise the above art-cinema readings, naturalization within classical narrative framings is usually sought in more ‘direct’ referential parameters and diegetic motivations on the level of the storyworld. Most mainstream movies that feature complex storytelling provide *mimetic motivations* through which viewers can rationalise the

---

<sup>19</sup> Some narratologists have theorised the ‘experientiality’ offered by anthropomorphic agents as being the central aspect of all narratives (e.g., Fludernik 1996; Caracciolo 2014).

film's narrative anomalies: one can think here of supernatural, (pseudo-)scientific, (quasi-)rational or (quasi-)realistic storyworld elements such as time machines, crooked quantum mechanical reasoning, or focalizing characters who suffer from mental illnesses or hallucinations. Mimetic motivations like these offer 'explanatory mechanisms' that direct viewers' attention towards the internal laws of the storyworld, and that downplay the need for the invocation of allegorical or symbolical paths of naturalization.

Amateur as well as scholarly forensic fans of *Mulholland Drive* have vigorously sought for mimetic storyworld motivations to explain, naturalise, and rationalise the film's confusing narrative makeup, construing it almost invariably as a projection of one of the characters' subjective reality. Although interpreting incongruous narrative events as someone's exteriorised subjectivity had long been a strategy primarily associated with the art cinema (see, among others, Kawin 1978; Bordwell 1985: 206), the success of films like *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Memento*, or *A Beautiful Mind* had made subjective realist narration (and its corresponding viewer interpretations) a mainstream trend by the time *Mulholland Drive* was released. As a result, many interpreters have sought to resolve and naturalise Lynch's mysteries by assigning focalisers from whose minds the narrative anomalies originate (for a comprehensive account, see Campora). Attempting to discern what belongs to a dream, fantasy, or perhaps a post mortem hallucination, and what to the reality that frames it, many viewers have argued for various relatively consistent explanations of the film as being largely a dream (the imaginary world of Betty) that covers up (and/or is occasionally disrupted by) a darker narrative reality (the actual life of Diane). *Mulholland Drive* contains many clues that cue and support this subjective realist reading, ranging from the film's *stylistic tropes* (reminiscent of surrealist and expressionist techniques) and the *signposted ruptures* between the plot's first and second movements (a clear division that also characterises *Lost Highway*, yet seems badly missing from Lynch's utterly confusing *Inland Empire*), to the *incongruently returning characters* (appearing in different roles) and other, more specific *narrative clues* such as the cowboy's potential *raisonneur* role in telling Betty/Diane that it is 'time to wake up' (a moment that many interpreters take to be an authorial intervention indicating a dream narrative). Notwithstanding the abundance of these clues and triggers, the exact relation between the subjective and objective frames of narration remains indeterminate, resulting in a well-balanced ambiguity that can allow for a rich interpretive game in which narrative elements can still acquire a range of different meanings.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The observation that *Mulholland Drive* relies on a blend of storytelling devices from both experimental films as well as from classical narrative cinema may in itself not be striking; after all, most complex narratives are characterised by a trade-off between established norms and innovations, or between the comprehensible and the confusing. What makes *Mulholland Drive* unique, however, is that its distinct ambiguity also concurrently evokes interpretive strategies from these different traditions. Lingering 'in-between' the habitual interpretive options that narrative complexity in film traditionally allows, *Mulholland Drive* is demonstrative to how different framings and viewing stances can entail very different appraisals of the same work. In its peculiar case, different stances do not only lead to different interpretations of the story, but even to wholly divergent *ways of narrativizing and*

*naturalizing* its disparate elements – i.e., different – direct and indirect – ways of connecting and integrating its various scenes, characters, affects, and events into a coherent or meaningful form. Monika Fludernik has described 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). In *Mulholland Drive*, however, the ambiguity extends to precisely these generic markers and framings, integral to the process of 'recuperating' narrative meaning. Although the film resonates with familiar and trusted components of storytelling, genre, and conventions, it does not allow a single one to clearly take precedence or achieve unambiguous closure.

The resulting effect is reminiscent of what Tzvetan Todorov has called 'the fantastic' in literature. Todorov characterised the fantastic as a particular (temporary or ongoing) *hesitation* – a 'cognitive uncertainty' as to how a story's strange elements should be understood or explained: either as part of the 'uncanny' (i.e., as originating from the subjective perception or mental state of one of the characters) or of the 'marvellous' (i.e., as part of a supernatural storyworld). Moreover, according to Todorov, the fantastic requires not only 'a hesitation in the reader and the hero; but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither 'poetic' nor 'allegorical'' (Todorov 1975: 32). Remarkably, while in *Mulholland Drive* elements of uncanny and marvellous fiction are both in the mix, poetic or allegorical modes of reading are *also* afforded by the film's ambiguous textuality. Expressionistic, surrealist, allegorical or authorial motivations all may become part of the cognitive (re-)framings that viewers can try out in their meaning making. It is exactly this distinct interpretive mutability that has arguably made Lynch's film one of the most enduringly debated pieces of 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema.

It must be noted that *Mulholland Drive*'s interpretive elusiveness may for some viewers also enhance the viewing experience *beyond* the strictly narrative – i.e., by affording stronger perceptual, bodily, affective, or associative forms of engagement. In a 1997 article reporting from the set of *Lost Highway*, David Foster Wallace eloquently captured this powerful aesthetic potential of Lynch's cinema. Contemplating what fascinates him about Lynch's work, Wallace noted that

David Lynch's movies are often described as occupying a kind of middle ground between art film and commercial film. But what they really occupy is a whole third different kind of territory. Most of Lynch's best films don't really have much of a point, and in lots of ways they seem to resist the film-interpretative process by which movies' (certainly avant-garde movies') central points are understood. (...) This is one of the unsettling things about a Lynch movie: You don't feel like you're entering into any of the standard unspoken and/or unconscious contracts you normally enter into with other kinds of movies. This is unsettling because in the absence of such an unconscious contract we lose some of the psychic protections we normally (and necessarily) bring to bear on a medium as powerful as film. (...) This is why his best films' effects are often so emotional and nightmarish (we're defenceless in our dreams, too). (Wallace 1998: 170-1)

*Mulholland Drive*'s cinematic (anti-)logic can indeed feel all the more 'nightmarish' exactly because it escapes our grasp. But this does not stop viewers to appraise the resulting experience, for many different reasons. Some find ideological motivations and satisfactions in the film's obstruction of narrative form and resistance to sense-making. Others may locate in it a potential for meta-fictional reflection – whether on the medium of film and cinematic convention, or the process of narrative sense-making itself. Again, some may settle on interpretations that find its formal play expressive of the complexities of the human psyche, or of the fundamental ambiguity of what it means to be a subject in a world that itself appears to lack stable meaning.<sup>20</sup> While others may exactly take pleasure in the act of puzzling, carefully piecing the narrative elements together, or diving fully into the creative act of devising explanatory hypotheses. And then some might just enjoy the thrills of the ride, or the affects and sensations of being overwhelmed or perplexed. Different framings of the experience can ultimately also entail different modes of appreciation and enjoyment too.

As such, the case of *Mulholland Drive* underlines the necessity for dynamic cognitive models in order to understand and account for the potentially protean effects of highly complex narratives. The divergent viewer responses to this particular film demonstrate how the meanings that we connect to specific formal, narrative and generic features and patterns are far from fixed, and how different framings can spawn very different apprehensions of the same material. It underlines that narrative meaning-making must be conceptualised as a highly dynamic, emergent cognitive interaction that is situated in between the narrative's formal-structural features, the different frames of knowledge and experience brought in by the spectator, as well as the relevant contextual configurations that impact this interaction. These components must, especially in complex narratives, all be understood in interactive and relational terms: textual forms may have certain cognitive effects on spectators (e.g., an abundance of narrative cues and information can overstimulate our working memory; strong contradictions elicit dissonant cognitions, etc.) or entail specific conventional or contextual associations (by appearing as belonging to a certain known set of historical or generic conventions, such as surrealism, or classical narrative Hollywood cinema). Viewers, in turn, have a repertoire of interpretive strategies for these, acquired through familiarity with or exposure to different artistic traditions and conventions (e.g., strong ontological narrative incongruities can be associated with the modernist art film, or inconsistencies may be attributed to the subjective reality of a character), or in certain viewing contexts (seeing a film in an arthouse cinema, for instance, can help to privilege more art-cinematic interpretive stances). Acknowledging that this interpretive play is mutable, perspectival, and sometimes volatile does not mean that these processes and components cannot be addressed or explained. Rather, it should be emphasised how *formal-textual* elements, *contextual and paratextual* cues, as well as individual *cognitive frames of reference* should all be taken into account in a meta-hermeneutic approach to explain how viewers cope with and frame complex narrative

---

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Dennis Lim argues that '[m]uch more than an enigma to be cracked, *Mulholland Drive* takes as its subject the very act of solving: the pleasurable and perilous, essential and absurd process of making narrative sense, of needing and creating meaning. Whether or not they explicitly pose the question, Lynch's late films ponder the role of story at times when reality itself can seem out of joint' (Lim 2015: 157-8).

works, and to understand how artworks can tap into this volatility of interpretive processes for distinct aesthetic effects.

Lastly, in light of current debates in film theory, it is interesting to observe how the diverse interpretive framings of *Mulholland Drive* also mirror, and actually expose, different stances in the *theoretical* conceptualization of narrative complexity in general. Film scholars have been divided in their attempts to understand, categorise, and evaluate the wave of complex narratives in contemporary film. Dispute has emerged over whether contemporary complex films should be seen as an altogether new phenomenon, with distinct strategies, conventions and viewing effects, or as still belonging to and rooted in the tradition of classical narrative cinema. On the one hand, some have proposed that today's complex films are merely 'trickled down' mainstream incarnations of previous art-cinematic storytelling experiments (e.g., Kovács 2007: 60; Cameron 2008; Klecker 2011), whereas other scholars have argued that the trend should mostly just be seen as a series of intensified variations – mere complications – of long-established and prevailing classical narrative principles (see, most notably the consistent contentions of, Bordwell and Thompson 2006, 2013).<sup>21</sup> Also others have sought to define contemporary complex films as some form of novel hybrid, seeing them as a new and distinctly 'post-classical' breed of 'puzzle' films that question or deconstruct the narrative principles by which they are governed (such as linearity, causality, coherence and congruity, or the relative trustworthiness and transparency of narration) and that 'suspend the common contract between the film and its viewers' (Elsaesser 2009: 19; see also Thanouli 2006; Buckland 2009, 2014).

Although it was not our intention to directly engage with these ongoing scholarly debates here, it became apparent that in the case of *Mulholland Drive*, viewers' stances actually correspond to *all* these different conceptualizations. Perhaps what this soft conclusion signals is a reminder that theoretical definitions of narrative complexity are themselves imbued with framing activities and interpretive stances, and that the scholarly and critical discussions of these films might concern the elusive workings of interpretation as much as they concern formal developments and shifts in film narration and narratives per se.

---

<sup>21</sup> David Bordwell finds that the 'debate about postclassical Hollywood raises the question of how to gauge change over history. On the whole, I think, critics have exaggerated the novelty of current developments. This isn't surprising, since our perceptual and cognitive systems are geared to take a great deal for granted and to monitor the world for change. We are sensitive to the slightest break in our habits. More prosaically, many humanities professors are by temperament keen to spot the next big thing. But if we want to capture the nuances of historical continuity, we don't want every wrinkle to be a sea change' (Bordwell 2006: 9). Bordwell and Thompson have the impression that most contemporary 'puzzle' films like *Inception* might be complicated rather than complex' (2013: 53), and find contemporary complex films to be essentially 'part of business as usual' (Bordwell 2006: 73).