The Mind-Game Film: A New Genre, or an Old Ontological Doubt?

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Playing Games

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

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

First of all, a broad description of the mind-game film. It comprises movies that are "playing games," and this at two levels: there are films in which a character is being played games with, without knowing it or without knowing who it is that is playing these (often very cruel and even deadly) games with him (or her): in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) the serial killer "Buffalo Bill" is playing games with the police (and the women he captures) and Hannibal Lecter is playing games with Clarice

Starling (and eventually, she with him). In David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995), John Doe, another serial killer, is playing games with the rookie policeman played by Brad Pitt. In Fincher's *The Game* (1997), Michael Douglas is the one who is being played games with (possibly by his own brother). In Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), the eponymous hero leads an entire life that for everyone else is a game, a stage-managed television show, from which only Truman is excluded.

Then, there are films where it is the audience that is played games with, because certain crucial items of information are withheld or ambiguously presented: Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), John Woo's *Paycheck* (2003), John Maybury's *The Jacket* (2005), David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Dr*. (2001) fall in this category. The information may be withheld from both characters and audience, as in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), where the central protagonists are already "dead, except [they] don't know it yet," to quote one of the opening lines of Sam Mendes" *American Beauty* (1999). Sometimes, the "masters" of the game reveal themselves (*The Truman Show*, *Se7en*), but mostly they do not, and at other times, a puppet master is caught up in his own game, as in Spike Jonze/ Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), the hypochondriac writer in the same team's *Adaptation* (2002), or the two magicians in Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006).

Other films of the mind-game tendency put the emphasis on "mind:" they feature central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable or pathological; yet instead of being examples of case studies, their ways of seeing, interaction with other characters and their "being in the world," is presented as normal. The films thus once more "play games" with the audience's (and the characters') perception of reality: they oblige one to choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible "realities" or "multiverses:" Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), David Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001), or the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999). The nature of consciousness and memory, the reality of other minds, and the existence of possible/ parallel worlds are equally at issue in films like Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001), Shane Carruth's *Primer* (2004), Michael Gondry/ Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* (2001, a remake of Amenábar's *Abre los Ojos*, 1997), Mike Newell's *Sliding Doors* (1998).

The last two titles indicate that the tendency is not confined to Hollywood or North American directors. To varying degrees and in sometimes surprisingly different ways, "mind-game" films are also being made in Germany, Denmark, Britain, Spain,

South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan: Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998), Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996), Julio Medem's *Tierra* (*Earth*) (1996), Pedro Almodovar's *Habla con ella* (*Talk to Her*) (2002), Kim Kii Duk's *Bin-Jip* (*Three Iron*) (2004), Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* (2004). Park Chan-Wuk's *Oldboy* (2003), Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Inconnu* (2000) and *Caché* (2005) with their sado-masochistic undertow of revenge and guilt, also qualify, along with many others.

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

Yet one overriding common feature of mind-game films is their aim to disorient - some would say - mislead spectators, but one might also argue: lead them to other realities, other possibilities (besides carefully hidden or altogether withheld information, there are frequent plot-twists and trick-endings, but also moments of perfectly 'suspended animation' and ontological hesitation). For one further notable feature is that spectators on the whole do not mind being 'played with': on the contrary, judging by the comments on the web, they enthusiastically rise to the challenge. The fact that audiences are set conundrums, are sprung "traps for mind and eye," or that they are – as with von Trier's lookeys – confronted with odd objects or puzzling details that do not "add up", even though the overall experience "makes sense", would indicate we are dealing with a phenomenon that spectators recognize as relevant to their own worlds. Mind-game films thus transcend not only genre, but also authorial signature (even though recognized auteurs are prominent) and national cinema (even though a Europe-East Asia-American independents triangle can be discerned). If read symptomatically, from the point of view of reception, what is at stake are new forms of spectator-engagement and new forms of audience-address (although "new" here functions merely as a diacritical marker of difference: the genealogy of the mind-game film includes such venerable master-magicians of surprise, suspense and the double-take as Fritz Lang, Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, as well as 1950s/1960s "art cinema" films by Akira Kurosawa, Alain Resnais and Ingmar Bergman).

As such, mind-game films could be seen as indicative of a "crisis" in the spectator-film relation, in the sense that the traditional "suspension of disbelief" or the classical spectator positions of "voyeur," "witness," "observer" and their related cinematic regimes or techniques (point of view shot, "suture", restricted/omniscient narration, "fly on the wall" transparency, *mise-en-scène* of the long take/depth of field) are no longer deemed appropriate, compelling or challenging enough for the way we want to engage with, or are interpellated by media of the moving image. It would not be the first time that the "institution cinema" experiments with spectator-address, in the face of technical, economic or demographic changes. Lars von Trier's Lookeys, for instance, and the idea of offering prizes to the audience for correct guesses, deliberately confuse film viewing with game-shows on television, in order to provoke a different, more direct form of participation: the cinematic equivalent of the phone-in. But in the early- to mid-1910s, when the so-called "cinema of attractions" was said to give way to the "cinema of narrative integration" a German director, Joe May, initiated a successful, if brief vogue for so-called "Preisrätselfilme" or prize-puzzle-films as a sub-genre of the (Danish-inspired) detective film, where clues were planted without being revealed at the end. Instead, prizes were offered to spectators who identified them (Pehla, 1991).

On the other hand, besides the transition from "early" to "classical" cinema, drastic changes in audience-address (at least in mainstream cinema) have been relatively rare, and are usually coded generically (comedy and the musical allowed for frontal staging and direct address, which would not have been common in Westerns or thrillers). If mind-game films are indeed harbingers of such changes in audience-address and spectator-engagement, then the underlying transformations of the "institution cinema" would presumably have to be correspondingly momentous. Some candidates suggest themselves, such as the changes brought by digitisation, but perhaps better to first consider some alternative definitions and explanations.

A List of Common Motifs

Taking a step back: what goes on in mind-game films, what stories do they tell, what characters do they depict, and why should they be so popular *now*? Even though this is not an exhaustive catalogue of typical situations, here are some of the most frequently named features of the mind-game film, by way of a map or directory of motifs:

1) A protagonist participates in, or is witness to events whose meaning or consequences escape him: along with him, the film asks: what exactly has

happened? There is a suspension of cause and effect, if not an outright reversal of linear progression (*Memento, Donnie Darko, Lost Highway*)

2) A protagonist seems deluded or mistaken about the difference between reality and his/her imagination, but rather than this inner world becoming a clearly marked "subjective" point of view of a character (as in the European art film), there is no perceptible difference either in the visual register or in terms of verisimilitude, between real and imagined, real and simulated, real and manipulated. As one commentator puts it: films like *The Matrix, Dark City* (1998) and *The Truman Show* involve "a hefty plot twist, one that forces the protagonist to question reality itself. Said reality tends to be nothing more than a simulation, and a conspiratorial simulation at that" (Sankey, 2001).

3) A protagonist has a friend, mentor or companion who turns out to be imagined (*Fight Club, A Beautiful Mind*, *Donnie Darko, Lost Highway*).

4) A protagonist has to ask himself: "who am I and what is my reality?" (the Philip K. Dick adaptations *Blade Runner* [1982], *Total Recall* [1990], *Paycheck* and *Minority Report* [2002]), and even "am I still alive or already dead" (*Angel Heart* [1987]*, Jacob's Ladder* [1990]*, The Sixth Sense, The Others*).

5) Not only is the hero unable to distinguish between different worlds: he or she is often not even aware that there might be parallel universes, and neither is the audience – until a moment in the film when it turns out that the narrative and plot have been based on a mistaken cognitive or perceptual premise (*Fight Club, The Sixth Sense, A Beautiful Mind*). The point in the story at which it undergoes such drastic revision, where the ground is pulled from under the audience's feet, is commented on by one of the fans as follows: "You want that big, juicy, brain-blasting, oh-my-god-everything-has-changed feeling," to which another blogger replied: "Yes – but the 'oh-my-god-everything-has-changed' feeling in *The Sixth Sense* is reinforced by the 'gotcha' feeling of replayed scenes from earlier in the movie that you now understand differently. The viewer gets to have it both ways: have the oh-my-god feeling and watch the protagonist experience it too."

6) A character is persuaded by his – or more often, her – family, friends or the community that she is deluded about the existence or disappearance, usually of a

child – a self-delusion brought upon by trauma, excessive grief or other emotional disturbance. He/she insists on maintaining this delusion against all odds, and is usually proven right, by uncovering a conspiracy, either of a very sophisticated, diabolical kind, or on the contrary, consisting of a very "scientific," bureaucratic or routine "test" or "measure" ordered by the powers that be (*Minority Report, The Forgotten* [2004]*, The Village* [2004], *Flight Plan* [2005]).

From such *ad hoc* definitions and the folk/fan wisdom, it is evident that the mind-game film can usefully be analysed under several headings: for instance, one can foreground issues of narrative and narratology (by concentrating on the unreliable narrators, the multiple time-lines, unusual point of view structures, unmarked flashbacks, problems in focalisation and perspectivism, unexpected causal reversals and narrative loops); one can highlight questions of psychology and psychopathology (characters suffering from amnesia, schizophrenia, paranoia, "second sight" or clairvoyance); philosophers of mind can find conundrums about the relation of body, brain and consciousness that challenge concepts of "identity," or ask what it means to be "human" as we share our lives with ever smaller machines and ever more "intelligent" objects. Mathematicians can elucidate game theory, explicitly thematized in *A Beautiful Mind* and implicitly instantiated in David Mamet's *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), or they can comment on the role of contingency, chance, stochastic series, and explain the "butterfly" effects of chaos theory, the "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" thesis, (positive) feedback loops as opposed to linear causality (in films like *The Butterfly Effect* [2004] or *Donnie Darko*). Several films raise matters of *ontology* and parallel worlds, while scepticism and doubt, but also their obverse: belief and trust are often the *epistemological* issues at stake. Not all of these approaches or entry-points can be discussed here, and I shall limit myself to three: the case for "complex storytelling" (and the possible disjuncture between "narrative" and "database," "narrative logic" and "game logic"), the idea of identity crises and personality disorders as "productive pathologies," and the "social uses" of mind-game films as either helping to "discipline and control" or to "teach and train."

The Mind-Game Film: A Case of Complex Storytelling?

There is clear evidence that cinematic storytelling has in general become more intricate, complex, unsettling, and this not only in the traditionally difficult categories of European auteur and art film, but right across the spectrum of mainstream cinema, event-movies/ blockbusters, indie-films, not forgetting (HBO-financed) television. Several of the features named as typical of the mind-game film are grist to the mill of professionally

trained (literary) narratologists: single or multiple diegesis, unreliable narration and missing or unclaimed point of view shots, episodic or multi-stranded narratives, embedded or "nested" (story-within-story/ film-within-film) narratives, and frame-tales that reverse what is inside the frame (going back to *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* [1919]). As a consequence, the films I group under the mind-game tendency are generating a broad literature focussing on the narratological issues raised, with corresponding terminologies: some talk of "forking path" narratives (David Bordwell 2002; see below) or "multiple-draft" narratives (Bordwell; Edward Branigan, 2002), others refer to them as (psychological) puzzle films (Elliot Panek, 2006), twist films (George Wilson, 2006), complex narratives (Janet Staiger, 2006), or try to define them as special cases of "modular narratives" (Allan Cameron, 2006). Jason Mittell (2006) has also studied the complex puzzle narrative in contemporary television.

Let us assume that the mind-game film sets the viewer a number of *narratological problems or puzzles*: Mind-game films at the narrative level, offer – with their plot twists and narrational double-takes – a range of strategies that could be summarized by saying that they suspend the common contract between the film and its viewers, which is that films do not "lie" to the spectator, but are truthful and self-consistent within the premises of their diegetic worlds, that permit, of course, "virtual" worlds, impossible situations and improbably events. Audiences, for instance, felt cheated by a film like *The Usual Suspects* (1995), because it involved not only an unreliable narrator, Keyser, but also a mendacious point of view shot, implying the presence of a witness in a crucial scene, when there was none. *Bona fide* mind-game films by contrast maintain a basic consistency and self-consistency or they enact the very condition their hero suffers from, in the structure of the film itself, as in *Memento*, where the film, as it were, wipes out its own memory, by being told in short segments that precede each other, rather than follow each other. Films such as *The Matrix, Donnie Darko* and *Fight Club* present their parallel worlds without marking them off as different by superimposition, soft focus or any of the other conventional means by which films indicate switches of register or reference. The question then becomes: do the films "lie," or is it the very opposition of truth and lie, between the actual and the virtual, the subjective and the objective that is at stake? The disorientation of the spectator extends to the reality-status of what was being shown, and unlike other forms of deception, illusionism and make-believe, the mind-game film does not involve a matter of ocular (mis-)perception, nor does it have to do with perspectivism; it is neither a matter of the human eye missing something (such as the body in Antonioni's *Blow Up* [1966], which is then revealed via the mechanical camera),

nor are we presented with several versions of the same event, as in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950).

Film scholars who have turned to narratology to explain these films can point to precursors of the complex story-telling mode and of multiple point of view narration, such as Bergman's *Persona* (1966), the unreliable narration from Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950), with its "lying" flashback, Fritz Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) or Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), not to mention Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *F-for Fake* (1974) or almost the entire oeuvre of Luis Buñuel, mind-game player par excellence, who needed to invoke neither external agents nor aberrant psychology to persuade the audience of multiple universes, held together by chance and contingency, between which characters may switch on a mere whim or when perceiving a seemingly banal object. In literature, too, there is no shortage of precursors: Boccaccio, Cervantes, Lawrence Sterne, tracing a line to Chesterton, Borges, Gide, Nabokov and Calvino (each one a master of the shaggy dog story of mutual/multiple embeddedness), as well as including the classic modernists from Flaubert to Proust, Virgina Woolf and Joyce, or Conrad, Mann and Faulkner.

Narratologists tend to perceive mind-game films either as occasions for refining existing classifications or as challenges to prove that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to storytelling. A head-on exercise in demystification of mind-game films has been undertaken by David Bordwell (2002). Under the name of "Forking Path Narratives" he discusses among others, Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blind Chance*, Mike Newell's *Sliding Doors*, and Wai Ka-Fai's *Too Many Ways to be No. 1* (1997) (while in another publication, Kristin Thompson set out to prove just how "classical" films like *Groundhog Day* [1993] are, appearances to the contrary [Thompson 1999]). Bordwell's main line of argument, for instance, is that the paths (or narrative trajectories) are still linear once they have forked, that the forks are signposted and foreshadowed, that forks are made to intersect eventually, that all paths are not equal: there is a hierarchy, and the last one taken presupposes all others. And finally, that there are still deadline structures (such as in *Donnie Darko*, or *Run Lola Run),* which hold the narrative universe together and inflect it with a linear causality.

The perspective taken by Bordwell, Thompson, as well as Murray Smith (2001) and others is that this is a challenge to theory that can be "mastered" simply by extending classical narratology to include some of the recent work in cognitive psychology, about how the mind organizes visual cues, how perception, identification and mental schema

function. The result is that the para-normal features are given normal explanations, and the narratives are restored to their "proper" functioning.

The problem with such approaches is that they tend to reduce the films to business as usual, making one wonder why the writer or director went to such trouble in the first place. Surely, in these films (as indeed, some earlier ones as well), the most intriguing and innovative feature is this insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on non-linear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity and their effects on characters, agency and human relations: we are in worlds that often look just like ours, but where multiple time-lines coexist, where the narrative engenders it own loops or Moebius strips, where there may well be a beginning, a middle and an end, but they certainly are not presented in that order, and thus the spectator's own meaning making activity involves constant retro-active revision, new reality-checks, displacements and re-organisation of not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space, and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect.

A countervailing strategy in the field of narrative analysis has been to consider the mind-game films as leftovers of classical narrative, during a period of transition, when the default value of cinematic story-telling is rapidly becoming that of the interactive video-game and the computer simulation game. In practice, there clearly are crossovers, as many Hollywood blockbusters (from *Die Hard* [1988] to *King Kong* [2005]) have lucrative parallel lives as computer games, and stories originating as games have found their way into the cinemas, such as *Resident Evil* (2002), *Doom* (2005) and *Silent Hill* (2006). The crossover "graphic novel" has also been a recent phenomenon much remarked upon, after the box office success of *Ghost World* (2001)*, V for Vendetta* (2005)*, Sin City* (2005) and *300* (2006). But the assumption of video-game architecture now determining narrative is as much an over-simplification as the earlier voiced complaint that special effects were driving out narrative and plot in the blockbuster film. Both assertions should certainly leave the theoretician dissatisfied: the literature on whether games are narratives at all, or need to be seen as an entirely different species is vast and vastly divided, and the arguments for blockbusters still being intricately plotted, as well as multimodal with respect to video-game logic have also been made (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002, chapter 5; King and Krzywinska, 2002, Simons, 2007).

Narrative versus Database

The popularity and profitability of computer games has nonetheless given rise, among film and humanities scholars, to a renewed interest in mathematical game theory.

Especially "new media" theorists have begun to rethink the logic of traditional narratives, arguing that the story-telling we know and are familiar with from Homer to Homer Simpson may itself be a historically specific and technology-dependent – and thus a doubly variable – way of storing information and of organizing direct sensory as well as symbolic data. It would therefore be not altogether unreasonable to assume that new technologies of storage, retrieval and sorting such as the ones provided so readily and relatively cheaply by the computer or internet servers will in due course engender and enable new forms of "narrative," which is to say, other ways of sequencing and "linking" data than that of the story centred on single characters, and with a beginning, a middle and an ending.

For contemporary cinema, the challenge might be: what is the equivalent, or rather: what sorting principles can replace or complement narrative? Because narrative, considered as a universally prevailing basic ordering principle, does have peculiarities: it enforces a linearity and teleology; it operates a logic of sequential implication (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*), and it tends to rely on causally motivated chains of events, propelled by identifiable agents, usually human beings. That is fine as far as it goes, but if one considers it purely under the aspect of its ordering function, it also looks very self-limiting and possibly even unsuitable for a whole range of tasks at hand.

These new tasks or challenges to narrative can be defined in three directions: one leads us towards the rhizome, the archive, the database, as foreseen in the writings of Vanevar Bush and Ted Nelson, the Cold War 1950s geniuses of hypertext architecture and cyberspace. The hotspots and network nodes that now link the web are clearly breaks with narrative linearity, and the literate community has adapted surprisingly quickly to the labyrinth pathways and navigational principles behind such architectures. The second way, in which a complement to (modernist) narrative might be conceived, is in upping the ante in terms of convolution and involution, layering and *mise-en-abyme*, i.e. accommodating seriality, multiple options and open-endedness within a still broadly telic and goal-oriented story-telling format. Narrative accommodates quite well its own enunciative double-takes, its own reflexive boot-strapping and metaleptic strategies, but computer and internet-driven demands for more "dynamic," "real-time" feedback and response are putting pressure even on (post-)modernist narrative. The third direction would re-assess the present state and future potential of the material object and symbolic form which has largely shaped linear narrative in both word and image: the printed book.

From an evolutionary-anthropological perspective, human beings have developed in the course of their history two symbolic systems of representation: the visual-mimetic and the verbal-symbolic. Both received a major boost/ underwent a quantum leap in

15th/16th century Europe: the linearization of the verbal system ("the word"), with printing and the book, and the spatialisation of the visual mimetic system ("the image") with perspectival projection and portable, oil-based, easel painting. The 20th/21st century may come to be seen has having effected a similarly epochal shift in these representational systems, around the computer, wireless telephony and digitisation. Even if the philosophical implications and political consequences of this shift are not yet as clear as those of the Renaissance and Humanist Enlightenment, it is safe to say that fixed perspective and the "window on the world" of easel painting (and cinema) is competing with the multiple screen/monitor/interface (with its virtual windows, refreshed images, embedded links, and different forms of graphics, topographies & visualizations) and that the book is also in full mutation, as written texts become both searchable and alterable, as well as dynamically linked with images, diagrams and graphics. The consequence is that narrative (as the traditionally most efficient organizing principle of connecting disparate information to a user) has to contend and rival with the archive and the database and their forms of organization and user-contact. Such "automated" user-contact, for instance, would be the "digital footprints" web-users leave behind, and the "data-mining" that connects their activity to the textual body or viewed object, often played back to them as their "choices" and "preferences."

Mind-Game Films as Examples of "Productive Pathologies"

What one can say about mind-game films with respect to narratology is thus that they are different from their literary forebears that play with narrative *mise-en-abyme*, unreliable narrators, and the multiple embedding of points of view, in that the latter emphasize, not a ratching up of auto-reflexivity and self-reference, but instead a "lowering" of self-consciousness and a different form of recursiveness, by in some cases, knocking out part of the conscious mind altogether, and replacing it with "automated" feedback: this is signalled by protagonists suffering from various personality disorders, among which schizophrenia or amnesia are the two favoured forms of dis-ordering identity and dis-associating character, agency and motivation, and thus of motivating a "re-boot" of consciousness and the sensory-motor system.

Some critics (Stewart, 2005) have pointed out a certain nihilism in Hollywood's manipulation of referentiality and temporality in these films. While there are cases where this may be so, I would argue also for the possibility of a properly philosophical nihilism about the conceptual and perceptual impasses, which our image worlds have burdened us with. At the same time, I see a certain radical ambivalence in the way these films present their characters as suffering from particular pathologies, for – as indicated – mind-game

films tend to revolve around mentally or psychologically unstable characters, whose aberrations fall into three major types: paranoia, schizophrenia, and amnesia. Even though the films identify them as 'conditions', the fact that these characters' point of view is usually privileged over all others (and thus functions as the spectator's guide) is more than a 'trick': it points to a peculiar aspects of their mental state, namely that it suspends our usual categories of sane/insane, as well as those of victim and agent (and even: dead/alive). As to the latter, the pathologies are often connected to a personal past: mostly a traumatic incident that keeps returning or insists on manifesting itself in the present, such as the violent death of Lenny's wife in *Memento*, the death of John Anderton's son in *Minority Report*, or a childhood injustice that comes to haunt the hero in *Caché*. This would call for a psychoanalytic approach, and indeed, once one begins to assess the different traumata from this perspective, one can see the mind-game protagonists' plight as the pathologies of individual lives, but just as forcefully, opening out to contemporary issues of identity, recognition by others and subjectivity in general, so that the pathologies prevailing in the films reveal other dimensions as well:

Paranoia. Recent paranoia films include Hollywood films where women – mothers – grieve for a child, or are haunted by the loss of children. Often it is not clear whether these children were ever there, or whether husbands, therapists or doctors are merely trying to persuade them they never existed. Examples are *The Forgotten, Flight Plan, The Others, What Lies Beneath* (2000), *The Village* and even Spielberg's *Minority Report*. Usually some conspiracy – instigated by a powerful father figure – lies at the bottom.

In many ways the paranoia mind-game film is a revival of a classical genre, derived from the Victorian Gothic tale, such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, or Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, still the two most frequently used templates. Feminist critics have exhaustively studied these "paranoid woman's films," ranging from *Rebecca* (1940) *Gaslight* (1944)*, Experiment Perilous* (1944) to *The Locket* (1946), *Two Mrs Carrolls* (1947), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) and *Caught* (1949) (see Doane, 1987). In all of them, women fear for their sanity because of the mixed messages they get from the world around them, or are driven insane by husbands whom they no longer think they can trust, until they are either disabused of their delusions, or in the case that their worst fears are confirmed, until they are rescued by another male, usually younger and more "modern," but male nonetheless. *Flight Plan* knowingly reverses the stereotype by making the younger man the villain, not the racial or ethnic other, and the unwittingly colluding therapist is a woman, rather than an instance of paternal authority.

Yet paranoia, one can argue, is also the appropriate – or even "productive" – pathology of our contemporary network society. Being able to discover new connections, where ordinary people operate only by analogy or antithesis; being able to rely on bodily "intuition" as much as on ocular perception; or being able to think "laterally" and respond hyper-sensitively to changes in the environment may turn out to be assets and not just an affliction. The "creative potential" of conspiracy theories lies in the way they help deal with impersonal bureaucratic systems, based on protocols and routines, and practicing mysterious forms of inclusion and exclusion, rather than implementing transparent laws and explicit prohibitions. Paranoia might also be seen as a response to the crisis in subject-formation, which instead of following the Oedipal trajectory of law versus desire and accept "castration" as entry point, engages with the symbolic order by constant dis-articulation and vigilance towards its systemic intentions and disembodied intelligence. Paranoia and conspiracy theories, by shifting perspectives and generating horizons with higher degrees of complexity, can lead to new kinds of knowledge.

Schizophrenia. Classical films featuring protagonists with mental problems, such as Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1943) or Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956) tended to focus on the family and on patriarchal authority as the root cause of the affliction. A loving and understanding partner was seen as the best cure. In this respect, the films of Roman Polanski marked a change: in *Repulsion* (1965), for instance, the spectator observes and sides with Carol's terrified realization of how predatory and casually aggressive the male world around her behaves, before beginning to suspect her to be not only unusually sensitive but mentally unbalanced. As in several other films by Polanski, one is invited, indeed seduced into entering another mind, and see the world from his or her perspective, before being led on a downward spiral to murder and/or suicide (as in *The Tenant* [1976]*, Death and the Maiden* [1994], or *Bitter Moon* [1992]). Yet however shocking the dénouement, the spectator is usually allowed to withdraw into a relatively safe zone of fascinated, spellbound or horrified observation, rather than being caught entirely unawares or left in mental and moral limbo.

Mental illness in a mind-game film is generally not signalled in the way it is in Polanski. Usually the frame of "normality," against which a character's behaviour can be measured is absent, and even the revelation of his or her condition does not provide a stable external reference point. In David Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002), the protagonist is schizophrenic, a condition made clear both by plot and behaviour, but the fusion of memory and delusional fantasy engenders its own kind of unframed vision, increasing the spectatorial discomfort, as we realize the nature of the delusional labyrinth we have come

to share. It provides the film with an unreliable narrator, whose unstable mind and oedipal obsessions create a state of tension and suspension, without endowing the hero with special insight, as does *Rain Man* (1989), a film that rewards the autistic Raymond (Dustin Hoffman) with a photographic memory and a phenomenal ability with numbers. By contrast, *A Beautiful Mind* begins with a character who, while shy and withdrawn, seems different only by degrees from the Princeton freshmen he shares his time with. Awkward social behaviour is here compensated by a mind – at once more acute and more dissociative – that makes some astonishing discoveries, which begin relatively harmless, like spotting patterns and resemblances where no-one would suspect them (between neck-ties and cut-glass fruit-bowls), or being able to translate the random scurrying of pigeons for bread-crumbs in the quad into mathematical formulas. The apotheosis of this paradox of the supremely gifted misfit comes in a scene where he and his friends are trying to seduce some girls in a pub, and John Nash comes up with a formula that guarantees success, but which inadvertently, lays the foundations for a whole new branch of mathematics – game theory – to which the "Nash equilibrium" makes a major contribution. During the first half of the film, as John is inducted into the rarefied and highly competitive world of Princeton's mathematics department, he has a room-mate, whom we only much later realize is a figment of his troubled mind, aggravated by his involvement in the shadowy world of the Rand Corporation and Cold War espionage. Yet *A Beautiful Mind* is about mind-games (as played by mathematicians and US government agencies), more than it is itself a mind-game film. For that it would need to maintain the premise of the first half, where we share John Nash's "deluded" world and assume it to be normal. Instead, the plot gradually dismantles the layers of invisible framing, so central to the mind-game film, turning an initial pleasure in sharing the exhilaration of a brilliant mind and his special insights into patterns, where ordinary mortals see nothing but chaos or contingency, into the disappointment at having been "had," followed perhaps by pity for Nash, his schizoid delusions and marriage-destroying self-deceptions, from which the true devotion of his wife eventually rescue him. *Donnie Darko*, on the other hand, is a more achieved mind-game film, even though the hero's schizophrenia is clearly sign-posted from the start. At first, Donnie's "weirdness" is more like a probe, by which the nuclear family, the school dynamics and the small-town suburban community are tested and found wanting. On the margins of this world, a wise but mad old lady, and a frightening figure in a bunny suit called Frank emerge as ambiguous figures of authority and agency, but not necessarily of wisdom and salvation. However, the character of Donnie Darko remains darkly mysterious in his motivation, perception and possibly pre-emptive action, even given the ample clues and references to the

supernatural, string theory and books about black holes. Indeed, they almost seem to be planted in the film, in order to divert attention from some of the more "unframed" events that structure the narrative, such as the airplane engine that drops out of nowhere on his parents' roof, or the figures he encounters during his nightly sleepwalking. Donnie "keeps it low," meaning that he stays matter-of-fact even in the face of the most extraordinary encounters and events, so that nothing gives us access to his mind other than the reality that we experience in his presence. Without endorsing R.D. Laing's motto "schizophrenia isn't always a breakdown; sometimes it's a breakthrough," *Donnie Darko* presents its hero's condition as a pathology with a special kind of use: at the very least as a different way of connecting mind and sensation/perception, but possibly as the redemptive and saving grace in a world in denial of its fallen state.

Amnesia. *Memento*'s Leonard Shelby has become the archetypal example of the character who suffers from a loss of memory. His condition not only damages his personality and subjectivity, but also utterly transforms the way he views and interacts with the world. While, to all appearances, Leonard struggles to regain his memory, in order to avenge the death of his wife, the very fact that the film "runs backward" allows also an inverse reading of his intentions and goals. Considered as a productive pathology, Leonard's amnesia would remind one of the importance of forgetting, rather than remembering. The "stripping" of long-term memory into traumatic programming, i.e. the way that repetitive tasks are inscribed in the body, and by the manner in which revenge becomes a meaningless concept, the film foregrounds the idea of "programming," as opposed to remembering: it points to the importance of the change from a society based on law/prohibition (so strong in analyses of myths and narratives) to one organizing itself around procedures and protocols (in systems analysis, engineering and information sciences). As one can see from the uses that the other protagonists in *Memento* – especially Teddy and Natalie – make of Leonard, in order to further their own ends and objectives, the amnesiac hero is in his pathology programmable like a weapon: he is like a smart bomb, a repeat-action projectile on auto-pilot. To this extent, Leonard represents not the old-fashioned film noir detective, but the new multi-tasking personality (dissociative, reactive: not rapid reaction, but random reaction force), with a subjectivity programmable not through ideology and false consciousness, but programmed by a fantasy, or self-programmed through the body (where the body functions as a technology of recording, storage and replay: the somatic or pathologized body as an advanced "neural" or " biological" medium, in its mental instability and volatility potentially more efficient than the current generation of electronic media, at least for certain tasks.

Schizophrenia, Paranoia, Amnesia and the Risk Society. What used to be private detectives looking for clues down those mean street in *film noir* appear now to be insurance agents assessing risk on behalf of their corporate employers in the neo-noir films of the 1990s. Not since *Double Indemnity* has this profession played such a prominent role in the movies, when we think that Leonard Shelby, the hero of *Memento* is an insurance man, and so is Jack, played by Edward Norton, the hero of *Fight Club,* who also works for an insurance company as a risk assessor and loss adjuster. In Leonard's case, his job is directly related to his memory disorder, insofar as the disavowal of his guilt-feelings regarding his role in the death of his wife converge with his guilt-feelings regarding one of his clients, the wife of amnesiac Sammy Jankis, with whom Leonard increasingly comes to be identified. In Jack's case, guilt-feelings are a no less prominent motor of his behaviour that finds in the split self and alter ego Tyler Durden its most stabilizing form. But 'trauma-theory' is only one path to access the mind of mind-game protagonists. If we understand these illnesses as anthropomorphized versions of mathematical code and automated programs, then they seem to liberate and create new connections, establish new networks, but these are not 'open' and 'free'. They are contained and constrained within a protocol, whose subjective dimensions have not yet been fully understood, not least because of the way they model the future at the same time as they pre-empt it, and thus potentially short-circuit the very connections they seek to establish: hence the allegorical (and tragic) figure of the 'risk-insurer', who risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophet.

In each pathology of subjectivity, I would argue, the mental condition is such that it exceeds the clinical case-story. Indeed, the point of giving such subjectivities-in-action the format of a mind-game film would be to draw the audience into the protagonists' world in ways that would be impossible if the narrative distanced itself or contextualized the hero via his or her (medical) condition. In other words, the hypothesis would be that mind-game films imply and implicate spectators in a manner not covered by the classical theories of identification, or even of alignment and engagement, because the 'default values' of normal human interaction are no longer 'in place', meaning that the film is able to question and suspend both the inner and outer framing of the story.

Disavowal. Finally, there is disavowal, not only on the part of the protagonists, but also at the level of reception. I noted earlier on that internet fan communities are particularly aware of the mind-game film (which features there under the different label of the "mind-fuck film" [Eig, 2003]). But the fan sites and internet forums for mind-game films also

seem to operate according to their own mind-game principle: irrespective of how implausible the causes or "magical" the agents are that the film deploys, the status as artifice is disavowed. Instead, the world depicted is taken as real: as if this is the rule of the game, the condition of participating in the postings. No more "representation," no insistence on "cultural constructions:" the discussions take for granted ability to live in fictional or rather virtual worlds, often enough amplified and extended by links to recommendations or other forms of advertising. The directors themselves, as integral parts of the film's marketing, provide additional clues (notably David Lynch, but as we saw, also Lars von Trier with his lookeys), to suggest that the featured world can be opened up, expanded, making the films into occasions for further para-textual or hypertextual activity. As a node that sustains and distributes a particular form of (floating) discourse, a given film allows fans to engage with each other, by suspending their "reality-check," while nonetheless endowing the text with a plethora of clues, on which paranoia can feed, networks can proliferate, and conspiracy theories can blossom.

On the one hand, thus, we are dealing with pathologies (of subjectivity, of consciousness, of memory and identity): indications of crisis and uncertainty in the relation of the self with itself and with the world (and by extension: of the spectator with the screen). On the other hand, these apparently damaged minds and bodies are capable of displaying remarkable faculties at times, being in touch with agents from another world (*The Sixth Sense*), intuiting imminent disaster (*Donnie Darko*), or starting popular protest movements (*Fight Club*). Their disability functions as empowerment, and their minds, by seemingly losing control, gain a different kind of relation to the man-made, routinized or automated surroundings, but also to the more "cosmic" energies, which usually centre on the new physics of time travel, curved spaces, stochastic systems and warps in the universe. In other words, these pathologies are presented to the spectator in some sense as *productive pathologies*.

Discipline and Control, or Teach and Train?

This would indicate that "trauma" is not only something that connects a character to his past, but also opens up to a future. It suggests a Foucault-inspired approach: Foucault sought to explain mental pathologies in terms of bodily regimes, discourses, and institutional practices, which go beyond the individual instance, and inscribe pathology "productively" – in terms of the micro-politics of power – into society at large. Given the resonance that his theories have had in most humanities fields, we should perhaps read the mind-game film also across the paradigms of "discipline" and "control." For instance, seen from the Deleuzian interpretation of Foucault's shift from "disciplinary" to

"control" societies (Deleuze, 1992), these pathologies of the self are a way of making the body and the senses ready for the new surveillance society. They inscribe "index and trace" in the form of *Aufschreibsysteme* (systems of inscription) on the individual body, much the way that Kafka depicts the governor in *The Penal Colony* being inscribed by his own machine, or the way Leonard in *Memento* has his body tattooed, in order to remember not to forget, much the way he uses his Polaroids. A line could even be drawn from Walter Benjamin's theories of the technical media and the body (around concepts of "shock" and the "optical unconscious"), which (in German philosophy) leads to thinkers like Friedrich Kittler, Klaus Theweleit and Peter Sloterdijk, with their interest in extending "materialities of communication" to writing and literature (their examples are drawn, besides Kafka, from modernist writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Gottfried Benn, not usually associated with the "technical media.") Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999) would be the most systematic attempt, in this vein, to analyse the physiological effects of media-practices, including those of writing, recording and imaging. Mind-game films would thus be the narratives of such 'inscription systems' under the conditions of generalized surveillance and real-time, permanent feedback.

For French philosophy, on the other hand, in the wake of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (originally 1961) and following on from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (originally 1972), madness, rather than signifying, as it had done for the Romantics, exceptional talent and genius, becomes a way of "socializing" subjectivity in bourgeois society and under the conditions of liberal market economics. Read 'politically' in the light of Foucault, mind-game films would show how perceptual or somatic faculties released or manifest by illness are equally "socialized:" they either represent the (individual) solution to a (collective) problem – rather than constituting the problem, as in the case study – or the illness is made to work, fitting a body (through its mind no longer "in control") around a new set of social tasks and political relations. In this way "aberrant" mental states signify the effects of the new disciplinary machines of which they are the early warning systems, heralding the next step after internalizing (bourgeois) self-discipline and self-monitoring, where it would no longer be the mind – not even the Freudian mind, with its unconscious and super-ego competing for control – that is in charge, but instead, where the senses, the sensations, affects and the body are the ones that are being directly addressed, stimulated and appealed to, and thus "organized" and "controlled," in order to fit the subject into the contemporary world and the social matrix of "affective labour" (Hardt and Negri, 2001).

While this recalls once more Walter Benjamin, and his theory of the cinema as a disciplinary machine, "training the senses" for modernity and urban life, it also provides

a bridging argument to an apparently quite different school of thinking about re-ordering and re-aligning our somatic responses with the sensory overload of contemporary life. According to Benjamin, shocks to the body are "buffered" by the cinema, in that films duplicate, repeat and thereby make pleasurable in the form of humour (slapstick, Charlie Chaplin) the terrors of a world, where the human body is exposed and subjected to the logic of abstract systems or machines, be they bureaucratic or technological. Cinema thus rehearses and readies the human sensorium for the tasks of "distracted attention," especially with respect to the perceptual organisation of the visual field at the place of work and in everyday life (for instance, when crossing a street with traffic, as in Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton films).

Thus, on the one hand, Benjamin's thinking seamlessly precedes (and in its historical reference, follows) that of Foucault about the body and the senses in the "classical age," except that for Foucault, the micro-systems of power (of the 18th and 19th century) had ways of inscribing themselves directly onto the body, in the form of sexual mores, rules of hygiene or the rigid time-tabling of the working-day, rather than "mediated" by modern audio- and visual entertainment forms. On the other hand, within an apparently quite different ideological context, because given a positive turn, one finds a similar argument made by the American social analyst Steven Johnson, in his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (2005). There, Johnson develops a theory about the post-industrial role for the modern media, by arguing that computer games, and especially contemporary American television, notably some of the HBO-produced or inspired programmes such as *The X-Files*, *The Sopranos*, *24* or *Lost* (as well as "weird" movies: more or less the same titles I cite as mind-game films) are "good" for the young, because they train new cognitive skills and teach appropriate ways of responding to and interacting with automated systems of surveillance and control, such as they increasingly predominate on the work-floor and in offices, as well as in the home and in interpersonal discourse. Johnson, in other words, takes a pragmatic and proactive view of the new control society, making the best case for America's mass media fulfilling their historic role in adapting the working population to the social technologies that promise their economic survival, maintain civic cohesion and assure America's hegemonic position in the world. Trend-watcher Malcolm Gladwell's review of Johnson's book, tellingly entitled "Brain Candy" (a possible alternative for mind-game) sums up the case as follows:

> To watch an episode of "Dallas" today is to be stunned by its glacial pace—by the arduous attempts to establish social relationships, by the excruciating simplicity

of the plotline, by how obvious it was. A single episode of "The Sopranos," by contrast, might follow five narrative threads, involving a dozen characters who weave in and out of the plot. […] The extraordinary amount of money now being made in the television aftermarket — DVD sales and syndication — means that the creators of television shows now have an incentive to make programming that can sustain two or three or four viewings. Even reality shows like "Survivor," Johnson argues, engage the viewer in a way that television rarely has in the past: When we watch these shows, the part of our brain that monitors the emotional lives of the people around us—the part that tracks subtle shifts in intonation and gesture and facial expression—scrutinizes the action on the screen, looking for clues… How can the greater cognitive demands that television makes on us now, he wonders, not *matter*? […] Johnson's response [to the sceptics] is to imagine what cultural critics might have said had video games been invented hundreds of years ago, and only recently had something called the book been marketed aggressively to children:

> "Reading books chronically understimulates the senses. Unlike the longstanding tradition of gameplaying — which engages the child in a vivid, three-dimensional world filled with moving images and musical sound-scapes, navigated and controlled with complex muscular movements — books are simply a barren string of words on the page […]. Books are also tragically isolating. While games have for many years engaged the young in complex social relationships with their peers, building and exploring worlds together, books force the child to sequester him or herself in a quiet space, shut off from interaction with other children […]. But perhaps the most dangerous property of these books is the fact that they follow a fixed linear path. You can't control their narratives in any fashion—you simply sit back and have the story dictated to you […]. This risks instilling a general passivity in our children, making them feel as though they're powerless to change their circumstances. Reading is not an active, participatory process; it's a submissive one." (Gladwell, 2005)

While tongue-in-cheek and deliberately provocative, the argument put forward here by both Johnson and Gladwell about television watching, game playing and movie going is clear. The counterintuitive and counterfactual example of the book being invented *after* the videogame is a useful reminder of the role which systems of representation occupy in

human history as "symbolic forms", besides being techniques or machines. But above all, it confirms that media consumption has become part of the "affective labour" required in modern ("control") societies, in order to properly participate in the self-regulating mechanisms of ideological reproduction, for which retraining and continuous learning are now a life-long obligation. Undergoing tests – including the "tests" put up by mind-game films – thus constitute a veritable "ethics" or "hygiene" of the (post-bourgeois) self: to remain flexible, adaptive and interactive, and above all, to know the "rules of the game."

The Rules of the Game

This may explain why mind-game films are at once so popular and give rise to such a flurry of hermeneutic activity. The films are experienced as pleasurable, but also perceived to be relevant. What is, however, remarkable is that this relevance is neither mimetic (based on "realism") nor therapeutic ("cathartic" in Aristotle's sense). We noted the extraordinary diversity of the commentators, from internet fan communities to philosophers, from literary scholars to trend-analysts, from high theory to social analysis: not only does everyone have something to say, they say it at a meta-level, of which one extreme is to treat the mind-game films as "symptomatic" and the other, to treat them as "literal": this, too, a form of meta-commentary. Postings on fan-sites are usually grouped under FAQ's, so that, for instance, for *Silence of the Lambs*, one finds questions like: "Buffalo Bill's House: How many rooms were in that basement?" "Who did everyone find scarier, Jame Gumb or Hannibal Lecter?" "What order should I watch these in?" "What is the song that is playing when Buffalo Bill is dancing in front of his video camera?" "What does Hannibal Lecter mean when he says that 'Anthrax Island' was 'a nice touch'" "What is [on] Buffalo Bill's tattoo?"

In other words, the FAQ either ignore the fictional contract and treat the film as an extension of real life, to which factual information is relevant, or they tend to use the film as the start of a database, to which all sorts of other data – trivia, fine detail, esoteric knowledge – can be added, collected and shared. What they do not seem to be engaged in is (symbolic or allegorical, intentionalist or symptomatic) *interpretation*. This is surprising, given the patently impossible or at least highly implausible "realities" the films deal with, and since this fan-base is rarely a credulous new-age cult community, but made up of very savvy media-consumers, one has to assume that such "taking for real" is one of the rules of the game that permit participation. The film is thus part-text, part-archive, part-point of departure, part-node in a rhizomatic, expandable network of inter-tribal communication.

The narratologist, too, is not interested in interpretation, but concerned with definition and the general rules by which certain effects are generated or validated. George Wilson, elaborating a theory of what he calls "perspectively impersonal, but subjectively inflected" film sequences in *Fight Club* and *The Others* concludes:

> It would be interesting to inquire why cinematic assaults on the norm of narrational transparency have become so common around the turn of the century. I do not know the answer, and I am not sure how such an inquiry, responsibly conducted, should proceed. No doubt a certain amount of copycatting has gone on, and perhaps some kind of postmodern skepticism about the duplicity of reality and the photographic image has drifted over Hollywood. In any event, my present aim has been to say something fairly systematic about what some of these sub-versions of cinematic transparency amount to. (Wilson, 2006, p. 93).

By contrast, high theory and social commentary could be said to be nothing but interpretation. They take the films as symptomatic for broader changes in the field of (bourgeois, Oedipal) subjectivity, of (theories of) consciousness and identity (as I did above, with "productive pathologies" and Slavoj Žižek has done in his readings of Lynch [2000] and Kieslowski [2001]), they promote the cinema – across such films – as examples of "doing philosophy" (Mulhall, 2002; Smith and Wartenberg, 2006), or they ask: what are these films (good) for (and answer in the way that Johnson, Gladwell or Douglas Rushkoff [1995] have done). Yet, these too, like the other communities, have their "structuring absences," which define the rules of the game. What is left out (though hinted at in Johnson), for instance, are the material conditions (e.g. the economic benefits of making films that require repeated viewings) of the mind-game film. But these are not "repressed" truths that somehow need to be brought to light; rather, the material conditions and the hermeneutic games are each the recto of a verso, where both sides cannot be visible at the same time.

In this case, moving from the recto to the verso means to shift from reception to production, and to consider, however briefly, what the rules of the game now are for, say, Hollywood film production, but also for other filmmaking nations (another symptomatic feature of the mind-game films, is that they are, as indicated, not limited to Hollywood, but appear a typical product also of Hollywood's alter ego, in respect to production, distribution and marketing: the international film festival circuit [Elsaesser, 2005]).

Hollywood has always had to produce "texts" that are highly ambiguous, or permeable, when it comes to meaning-making: movies had to permit multiple entry-

points without thereby becoming incoherent. This is what David Bordwell has called the "excessively obvious" nature of the classical film, and why he and others, such as Edward Branigan, have insisted on comprehension (along with transparency, linearity and closure) as the abiding virtues of Hollywood, while others – with equal justification – have pointed to the lacunary, redundant and circular nature of the same classical cinema. One might call it a policy of "access for all" ("a Hollywood film is a party to which everyone can bring a bottle" is how the director Robert Zemeckis once phrased it), and no small achievement, when one considers that multiple entry-point means: audiences of different gender, different age-groups, different ethnic or national identities, different educational backgrounds, but also quite literally, audiences that "enter" a film at different times during a given performance (on television) or at different points in its history (the "classic" or "cult" film). Films have also had to perform well on different media-platforms, at least since the 1960s: as theatrical releases, as television re-runs, as pre-recorded videotapes. Since the 1990s, both the market place has expanded (it has become global, rather than merely US-domestic, European, Japanese and Australian) and the platforms have diversified: besides the ones named, one needs to add: a film's internet site, the movie trailer, the video-game and the DVD. And while scholars can draw up useful binary distinctions – between special effects and intricate plotting, between cinema of attraction and narrative integration, between narrative structure and game logic, between linearity and seriality, between "optical vision" and "haptical vision", between classical and post-classical cinema, between "home entertainment" and "event-movie", between private realm and public space – Hollywood has no such luxury. As the phrase goes: in order to exist at all, it has to be "a major presence in all the world's markets," but also, one can add, "a major presence in all the world's modes of representation." This is no longer only "no small achievement," but a truly daunting challenge, when one considers the proliferation of reception contexts and media-platforms. What once was "excessively obvious" must now be "excessively enigmatic," but in ways that still teach (as Hollywood has always done) its audiences the "rules of the game" of how a Hollywood film wants to be understood, except that now, it seems, at least as far as the mind-game film is concerned, the rules of the game are what the films are also "about," even more overtly than before.

My conclusion would therefore be something like this: the new contract between spectator and film is no longer based solely on ocular verification, identification, voyeuristic perspectivism and "spectatorship" as such, but on the particular rules that obtain for and, in a sense, are the conditions for spectatorship: the double-register, meta-contact established by the different interpretative communities with the films, across the

"rules of the game" that each community deems relevant and by which it defines itself: its 'felicity conditions', as linguists might say. What makes the mind-game films noteworthy in this respect is the "avant-garde" or "pilot" or "prototype" function they play within the "institution cinema" at this juncture, where they, besides providing "mind-games," brain-candy" and often enough, spectacular special effects, set out to train, elaborate and, yes: "test" the textual forms, narrative tropes and story motifs that can serve such a re-negotiation of the rules of the game. Mind-game films, we could say, break one set of rules (realism, transparency, linearity), in order to make room for a new set, and their formal features – whether we examine them from a narratological angle, from an ontological, epistemological, psycho-pathological or pedagogical perspective (for all of which they provide usable "entry-points') – represent a compromise formation, which is itself flexible, adaptable, differential and versatile: not unlike its ideal (implied) spectators, if we follow the arguments I have presented here. In addition, they fulfill the material conditions of multiple entry, as well as of multiple platforms. To take just one example: for a feature film to be not only recordable, storable and playable as a DVD, but in some sense, particularly "DVD-enabled", it would have to be a film that requires or repays multiple viewings; that rewards the attentive viewer with special or hidden clues; that is constructed as a spiral or loop; that benefits from back-stories (bonuses) or para-textual information; that can sustain a-chronological and non-linear perusal or even thrives on it. All these conditions chart the type of textual organization which responds to the conditions of distribution, reception, consumption, cinephilia, connoisseurship and spectatorship appropriate for the multi-platform film, which can seduce a theatre-going public with its special effects and spectacle values, engage the volatile fan-communities on the internet by becoming a sort of "node" for the exchange of information and the trade in trivia and esoterica in social networking situations, as well as "work" as a DVD and possibly even as a game. It will not come as a surprise, if I have described several salient features of the mind-game film, now looked at from the point of production.

We seem indeed to have come full circle. Initially, I posited that the main effect of the mind-game film is to dis- and re-orient the audience, and put up for discussion the spectator screen relationship. The notable emergence (some would argue: re-emergence) of mind-game films since the mid-1990s would be one sign of this "crisis," to which they are the solution at a meta-level. After exploring some of these meta-levels, and showing why there might be too many explanations of the phenomenon, only some of which complement each other, while others could prove incompatible, I can now conclude that as a solution, the mind-game films set out to aggravate the crisis, in that the switches between epistemological assumptions, narrational habits and ontological premises draw

attention to themselves, or rather, to the "rules of the game." These rules, in addition to what has already been said about them, favour pattern recognition (over identification of individual incidents), and require cinematic images to be read as picture puzzles, data-archives or "rebus-pictures" (rather than as indexical, realistic representations).

Thus, what appears as ambiguity or "Gestalt-switch" at the level of perception, reception and interpretation is merely confirmation of strategy at the level of production and marketing: with the mind-game film, the "institution cinema" is working on "access for all," and in particular, on crafting a multi-platform, adaptable cinema film, capable of combining the advantages of the "book" with the usefulness of the "video-game:" what I have called the DVD-enabled movie, whose theatrical release or presence on the international film festival circuit prepares for its culturally more durable and economically more profitable afterlife in another aggregate form. Which leads one to conclude that the mind-game films make "mind-games" out of the very condition of their own (im)possibility: they teach their audiences the new rules of the game, at the same time as they are yet learning them themselves.

It is for this reason that I want to insist on treating these films as a "phenomenon" and a "certain tendency". It may be true that many, if not all, can – in due course and given sufficient determination – be disambiguated by narratological frames, forcing the analyst to refine his tools, and in the process, forcing the films to yield their secrets. Yet given their often cult status, the interest they have elicited from pop culture fans, philosophers, public intellectuals and even people who usually do not write/think about movies, it is probably equally sensible to treat them as symptomatic for wider changes in the culture's way with moving images and virtual worlds. Mind-game films may show how the cinema itself has mutated: rather than "reflecting" reality, or oscillating and alternating between illusionism/realism, these films create their own referentiality, but what they refer to, above all, are "the rules of the game". This means that, indeed, we cannot be sure if contemporary cinema is "part of the problem" (Foucault, Deleuze) or already "part of the solution" (Johnson, Gladwell) in the re-orientation of the body and senses, as we learn to live symbiotically with machines and 'things', as well as with hybrid forms of intelligence embedded in our many automated systems. In this respect, the cinema – even more than a machine of the visible – may be a mode of performative presence, teaching us not only to think, but to *be* in several dimensions at once: that is why I believe these films are mind-game films, and not merely complex narratives, or rather: why complex narratives are only one of the games they play with our minds.

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