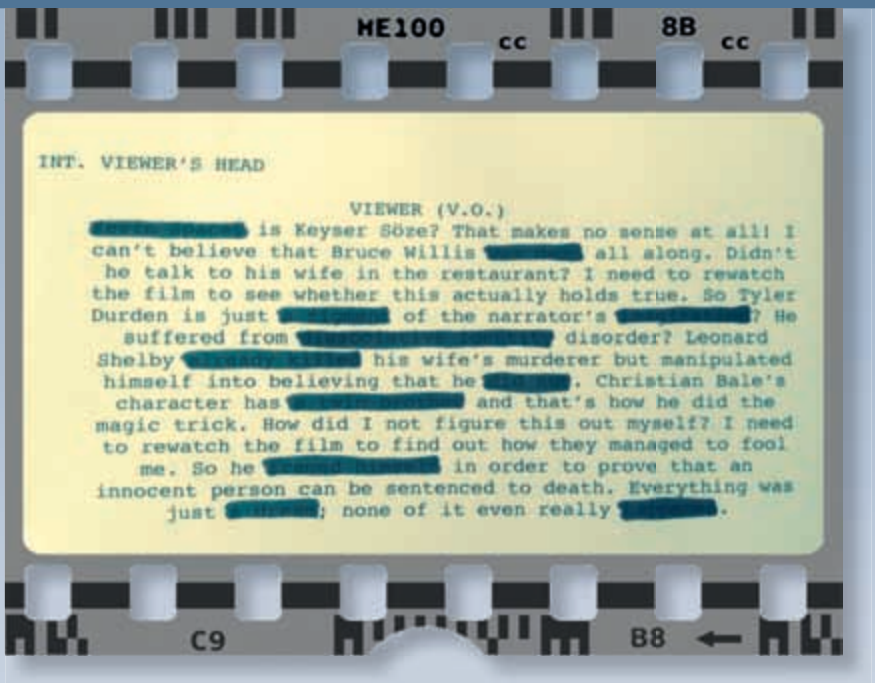
CORNELIA KLECKER

Spoiler Alert!

Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film

FILM AND TELEVISON STUDIES 2



Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg

FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES
Volume 2

Edited by
ERWIN FEYERSINGER
MARIO KLARER
CORNELIA KLECKER
JOHANNES MAHLKNECHT

CORNELIA KLECKER

Spoiler Alert!

Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über *http://dnb.d-nb.de* abrufbar.

A similar version of chapter 2 was originally published as "Mind-Tricking
Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration" in *Poetics
Today*, Volume 34, no. 1–2, pp. 119–146. © 2013, the Porter Institute for
Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University. All rights reserved. Republished
by permission of the copyrightholder, and the present publisher,
Duke University Press. www.dukeupress.edu.

Parts of chapter 4 were originally published in "Chronology, Causality, …
Confusion: When Avant-Garde Goes Classic" in *Journal of Film and Video*,
Vol. 63, no. 2. © 2011 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

ISBN 978-3-8253-6473-1

Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany
Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

This work has gone through quite a journey and, especially since this is my first book, I would like to take the opportunity here to thank quite a number of people who contributed to this publication in various ways.

This project started as my dissertation, so I am naturally greatly indebted to my two thesis advisors Mario Klarer and Bradley Chisholm, whose valuable feedback and re-assuring words I would not want to miss. I would also like to thank Gudrun Grabher for her continuous and priceless encouragement throughout my studies and well beyond them to this day. Furthermore, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Sonja Bahn, not only for proofreading every single word I have ever written but also, and even more importantly, for being a true inspiration and role model – not to mention that she was also the one who first drew my attention to film studies. Therefore this book in so many ways would literally not have happened without her. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, for pointing out relevant films and articles to me as well as for believing in me and helping me through times of frustration.

This is dedicated to my brother Gerald and my late sister Eva.

1 Introduction

> I hope for many of you the argument here will resonate with a feeling you've had in the past, even if you may have suppressed it at the time – a feeling that the popular culture isn't locked in a spiral dive of deteriorating standards. […] The sky is not falling. In many ways the weather has never been better. It just takes a new kind of barometer to tell the difference.
>
> --- Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (xii)

When we look at the landscape of mainstream film in recent years, meticulously designed narratives that force the audience to actively participate and that lead up to the final mind-boggling plot twist have been extremely popular. M. Night Shyamalan is probably the most famous director of this spate of films, and his *The Sixth Sense*, released in 1999, most definitely the most well-known and, with about $ 300 million box office gross in the United States alone, the most successful representative[1]. In 2010, the weekly American society magazine *People* conducted a survey of their readers' favorite surprise endings. With 61%, *The Sixth Sense* won in a landslide and took "the title of best twist ever" ("Surprise Endings" 39). Furthermore, the film's line uttered by the young protagonist played by Haley Joel Osment, "I see dead people," as well as the viewers' shocked gasp of "Bruce Willis has been dead all along" have become part of mainstream culture and is not just specialized knowledge within the circle of film buffs[2]. The very same year another cult film with a stunning twist ending was released, namely David Fincher's *Fight Club*. The final revelation that Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt, was a mere figment of the imagination of the character played by Edward Norton had a similar effect on the viewers as *The Sixth Sense*'s and led the audience to re-interpret the entire film. Interestingly enough, Edward Norton had already played a character suffering from a dissociative identity disorder, also popularly known as multiple personality, before. However, in the film *Primal Fear*, which was directed by Gregory Hoblit and released

[1] Cf. analyses of the film found in Barratt, Branigan (110-1), Friedman (17-22), Harty, Lavik, Orth, Wilson (82), to name only a few.

[2] "I see dead people" came in 44th in "AFI's 100 Years … 100 Movie Quotes," a three-hour special television event on CBS created by the American Film Institute ("AFI's 100 Years"). Furthermore, it has its own entry in the online *Urban Dictionary*: "A famous quote now used by many for mocking others. [...] The popularity of this line has grown, and now many people say things similar to this, like how people always change the phrase 'got milk?.' Some examples of how it has changed are, 'I see white people,' 'I see black people,' or 'I see naked people'" ("I see dead people").

in 1996, the twist at the end is not that the character played by Norton is mentally ill but that, in fact, he is not. He merely pretended to be so that he would be acquitted of murder by reason of insanity.

A character's mental illness is a common motivation for films to employ this kind of narrative structure. Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2002), John Polson's *Hide and Seek* (2005), and Joel Schumacher's *Number 23* (2007), and Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010) use similar techniques, to name only a few. Con films, too, often build up to a more than surprising outcome. Perhaps, the most prominent example is Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects*, released in 1995. The fact that Verbal Kint (played by Kevin Spacey), who serves as the narrator of the story being interrogated by the police, turns out to be the legendary mastermind criminal Keyser Söze, caused a tremendous amount of debate among film critics and moviegoers alike. One or even a team of con men who fool their opponents, whether it is the police or other criminals, and the audience along with them, has been a frequent scenario ever since. James Foley's *Confidence* and Ridley Scott's *Matchstick Men*, both released in 2003, as well as, at least to some extent, the *Ocean's* Trilogy, directed by Steven Soderbergh and released in 2001, 2004, and 2007 respectively, and Glenn Ficarra and John Requa's *Focus* (2015) starring Will Smith as the leading con man are further examples. In Paul McGuigan's *Lucky Number Slevin* (2006) we are led to believe that Slevin, Josh Hartnett's character, is accidentally mistaken as an assassin only to discover in the end that he himself was the puppet master of the whole plot right from the beginning. Conversely, in Tony Gilroy's *Duplicity* (2009) we are convinced that Julia Roberts's and Clive Owen's characters are in full control of their scheme; yet, we realize in the end that they were conned themselves.

Of course, one or more characters fooling others is a narrative framework that also works outside the con man milieu. In Alan Parker's *The Life of David Gale* (2003) it is once again Kevin Spacey's character that, together with a friend, played by Laura Linney, thought up and carried out the entire conspiracy. In this case, as an ardent opponent of the death penalty, he tries to prove that innocent people can be wrongly convicted and sentenced to death. David Fincher's *The Game* (1997), Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), and Louis Leterrier's *Now You See Me* (2013) play with reality and illusion within the diegetic world, and Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) as well as Michael and Peter Spierig's *Predestination* (2014) tackles the mind-boggling concept of time travel. Some films employ a non-linear narrative in order to withhold information, which leads to the desired surprise ending. Greg Marck's *11:14* (2003) and Peter Tavis's *Vantage Point* (2007) both show the same story several times yet always from a different point of view. With every presented vantage point, the film provides more details and forces the viewers to constantly reevaluate and adjust their hypotheses about what actually happened. In *Memento* (2001), director Christopher Nolan decided to relate parts of the story back-

wards, partly, in order to mimic the protagonist's inability to form new memories. In other words, the audience experiences to some extent the condition of not knowing what happened before. However, this ignorance of previous actions is also what makes the twist ending possible, since we find out that the man whose sole quest in life it was to find his wife's murderer had, in fact, already killed him.

The list of these kinds of films could, of course, be prolonged considerably – and will be later on. For now, suffice it to say that there is clearly a trend detectable. These films almost make up a small genre of their own – one that I will be calling *mind-tricking narratives*. I use the term to classify this rather new phenomenon in contemporary mainstream film. As the expression already suggests and was sketchily illustrated above, these are narrative techniques that deliberately play with the viewers' experience, response, and expectations during the viewing of a film and feature an utterly surprising outcome in the end.

While the quality of the mind-tricking narratives employed in film varies greatly – some are extremely convincing and on-point whereas others fail miserably – it is undeniable that the structure itself has enjoyed great popularity in the past twenty years (which is not to suggest that mind-tricking narratives in film have not appeared before; they clearly have, yet not remotely in the kind of quantity we have seen in the past two decades). A great number of the most famous and critically acclaimed directors, such as Christopher Nolan, Martin Scorsese, David Fincher, and Steven Soderbergh, as well as actors, such as Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, Morgan Freeman, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Julia Roberts, and Cate Blanchett, feature one or even several mind-tricking narratives on their résumés. And this trend is not restricted to film but even some television serials have adopted this narrative structure. The end of the last episode of the third season of J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof's highly successful drama series *Lost* (2004-2010), for instance, entirely changed the previous understanding of the timeline of the events presented in this season. In other words, what initially seemed to be flashbacks turned out to be flashforward sequences, which obviously completely changes the story and many of the viewers' hypotheses. The sixth season of the premium cable show *Dexter* (2006-2013) featured a character with dissociative identity disorder, who hallucinates a religious serial killer but – similar to *Fight Club* – neither he, nor the other characters, nor the audience are aware of the fact that he is only a hallucination. The first season of *American Horror Story* (2011-) features a character who, in the manner of *The Sixth Sense*, does not realize that she died and has become a ghost; and even the political thriller *Homeland* (2011-) employed a mind-tricking narrative during the first few episodes of its third season, where the audience is kept in the dark about the two protagonists' intricate triple agent mission.

Given these abundant occurrences, the aim of this comprehensive analysis is to establish mind-tricking narratives as a distinct and clearly defined category. Films with a mere twist ending are frequent and even trademarks of certain pop-

ular genres, such as the detective story, however, mind-tricking narratives achieve much more than simply surprising the audience at the end. One core aspect of mind-tricking narratives is that they do not simply 'make people think' but deliberately deceive them. They hold back some vital information until the very end of the film. The instant this piece of information is finally revealed, the audience will experience the ultimate epiphany. This moment of recognition is, of course, a standard element of classical narration, yet, in mind-tricking narratives, it has no cathartic value (at least, not in an Aristotelian sense). On the contrary, the film's resolution will more often than not be the most unsettling scene or sequence as it changes the entire reading of the film. In *The Sixth Sense*, for instance, the final and vital input that Dr. Malcolm Crowe, the character played by Bruce Willis, has been dead all along forces the audience to re-interpret the story and completely disregard previously established hypotheses. For example, during a dinner scene for Dr. Crowe and his wife's wedding anniversary, she seems to be upset with her husband. She does not react to his apology for being late. At the end of the film, the audience realizes that the husband had died earlier and in fact has been a ghost throughout the film. At this point they know that her cold reaction was due to the simple fact that she could never see or hear him in any of those scenes, and that she was mourning her loss. Having this new knowledge, and replaying the movie in their mind's eye, the viewers now interpret things very differently and thus establish a second and corrected storyline that only became apparent through this twist ending.

This study contributes to the recent discussion of complex storytelling within the area of film narratology and film theory in general, concentrating on one specific trend in contemporary mainstream film that has largely been neglected. Unlike recent analyses of complex narrative that attempt to cover a wide variety of unconventional storytelling, the following narratological approach analyzes one specific isolated phenomenon that has gained considerable popularity since the mid-nineties. Given this clear focus it will be able to scrutinize in more detail two interrelated aspects: for one thing, the narrative tools and techniques frequently used in order to create a mind-tricking narrative will be identified. The other objective is to explore the scope and limitations of certain cognitive faculties in film viewing by following a cognitive approach.

The cognitive perspective has become an accepted notion in many fields of study, such as anthropology, psychology, philosophy, aesthetics and theory of the arts, linguistics, and also film studies. In order to explore the audience's activity during the viewing of mind-tricking narratives, I will draw heavily on David Bordwell's as well as Edward Branigan's cognitive film theories. Bordwell applies a constructivist theory of psychological activity, which positions the viewer as an active participant in the process of story comprehension. He argues that film is a complex system that follows certain norms and supplies the spectators with several cues. These cues trigger off the process of making inferences and hypotheses. Viewers combine these cues with other relevant in-

formation, most importantly schema-based knowledge. Schemata are organized clusters of knowledge that allow us to go beyond the information given and guide our hypothesis-making. Cognitive film theory in general and this concept of schemata in particular are central in the analysis of mind-tricking narratives. The interplay of information provided by the film and preconceived notions that shape the interpretation of the former are the key to understanding why the average spectator does not anticipate the outcome of the film despite the many clues that the films often provides in order to 'taunt' the audience to a second viewing.

Since narratology and cognitive theory provide highly effective methodologies for explicating media and cultural premises, this volume will contribute to contextualizing existing research in film and media contact studies to examine narrative feedback mechanisms in recent mainstream film. Thus it will alternately enquire how filmic storytelling has shaped the communicative frame of viewers' expectations and anticipations and how the viewers' capability of comprehension affect and guide film narratives.

This work is structured into five big parts. The chapter following this introduction, "Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration," will provide a general introduction to the kind of narrative discussed here. It will give an exact definition of what mind-tricking narratives are and also attempt to subdivide them according to three major criteria: the 'deceiver' (i.e., 'who deceives?'), deceiving devices (i.e., 'how is the deception created?'), and deceptive awareness (i.e., 'when does the audience find out about a deception?'). Finally, drawing upon Bordwell's definitions in his *Narration in the Fiction Film*, it will discuss whether mind-tricking narratives still belong to the realms of classical Hollywood narration or whether a move towards art-cinema narration is detectable.

The third chapter, "Manifestations of Mind-Tricking Narratives: Some Case Studies" compiles four close readings that will individually analyze how different mind-tricking narratives can work. The first analysis will actually briefly leave the area of film and examine an episode of the popular American television series *The Simpsons*. Already in 2007, the Emmy-winning episode "Eternal Moonshine of the Simpson Mind" was aired, which blatantly satirizes mind-tricking narratives. The discussion of what aspects they make fun of and how they do so will help deepen the understanding of how mind-tricking narratives work. The second case study will be a comparison of two films. By contrasting an exceedingly convincing execution with an utterly unsuccessful attempt, namely, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist* (2006) respectively, I will illustrate the fine line filmmakers have to walk in order to create a proper mind-tricking narrative. The third case study on *Fight Club* will focus on the narratological issues of authentication authority as well as the postmodern device of narrative self-erasure. Finally, in a fourth case study, the reverse-chronological plot structure of *Memento* will be scrutinized.

The fourth chapter, "The Sophistication of the Viewer: How We Have 'Learned' to Understand Complex Narrative," will tackle the question of why mind-tricking narratives have experienced an increasing popularity ever since the mid-nineties. For this purpose, we have to leave the area of mind-tricking narratives and turn to complex film narrative as a whole. With the aid of a discussion of non-linear narratives, I will explore how and why mainstream audiences have reached a level of sophistication that, today, enables them to understand and enjoy complex narratives in general and mind-tricking narratives in particular. The long history of non-linear editing in avant-garde film as well as the post-modern concept of time will help approach this matter. The two close readings about Alejandro Gonzáles Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003) and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) will demonstrate these theoretical concepts and also make evident that the dismal yet still very wide-spread notion of postmodernism and popular culture as the end of smart and fascinating art has few if any grounds. As a last step, I, once again, have to leave the realm of film in order to discuss the implications that our constant exposure to television and other technological advances have had on this sophistication of the viewer.

The final chapter will approach mind-tricking narratives from a cognitive point of view. For many 'purists,' using classical narratology as well as cognitive film theory within one and the same work will be a massive contradiction. However, I follow Edward Branigan's argumentation in his *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, one of the most important monographs on cognitive film theory. Both Bordwell as well as Branigan disavow the existence of an implied author or narrator in film but Branigan still believes in the practicability of terms such as 'narrator' and 'focalizer.' He calls them "convenient labels" that readers/viewers can use in order to aid their process of comprehension and draws on them himself in the description of his eight levels of narration:

> When the narrative object is narrowed to the acts of comprehension by which it is known, then I believe it is possible to conceive of an "author" as merely another reader with no *a priori* message to deliver. […] "Narrator," "actor," and "focalizer" are then merely convenient labels which allow the reader to fashion his or her own redescription, or transformation, of one perception of the "here-and-now" context into a new perception of it. (Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension* 111)

For this reason, I, too, feel comfortable applying concepts and the terminology of classical narratology in some of the case studies while at the same time employing the cognitive theory in the last chapter. The focus of this chapter will be Bordwell's and Branigan's models. The main concepts will be explained and applied to mind-tricking narratives. The final close reading of *Lucky Number Slevin* will lead the reader step by step through the process of hypothesis-making in a highly complex and deliberately misleading narrative structure.

The more general aim of this volume is in the spirit of the motto of this introduction. Popular culture by no means equals dumb entertainment. Many finan-

cially successful films these days are decidedly intricate and demanding, and a large number of viewers seems to rise to the challenge. As a consequence, mainstream phenomena are well worthwhile an in-depth academic discussion, which this study of mind-tricking narratives should illustrate.

And as a final introductory remark, I would like to issue a warning about the many plot spoilers included in this work – hence, the title of this volume *Spoiler Alert!* In order to properly analyze mind-tricking narratives, it is unavoidable that some of the twists of the films discussed are revealed. So please proceed with caution.

2 Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration

2.1 A Matter of Complex Narrative

In[3] her 2009 article "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design," Marie-Laure Ryan identified and analyzed two narratival problems, namely, as mentioned in the title, plot holes and cheap plot tricks. In this article she also mentions "brilliant plot twists" and describes them as follows:

> BPTs [brilliant plot twists] are deliberately created effects that do not follow a fixed formula, cannot be repeated without losing their punch, and require a much more specialized environment. […] they aim at the standard narrative effects of suspense, curiosity and surprise, and rely on proven principles of efficient narrative design, such as sudden turn, *anagnorisis*, or directing the reader's suspicion toward the wrong character, their brilliance resides in a unique contextualization of these features which can only be studied individually. Eventually, a theory of plot design will have to […] investigate the principles that produce these effects […]. (Ryan 57-8)

The aim of this chapter is not only to accept this challenge but take it a step further. The main question raised is what distinguishes brilliant plot twists from non-brilliant plot twists or even a 'twistless' plot if, so Ryan, they all produce the "standard narrative effects" as so influentially described by Meir Sternberg (Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* 259 and "Telling in Time" 529). Ryan's suggestion that they depend on a distinctive context seems vague at most. Furthermore, her claim that they cannot be studied collectively, i.e. that these effects cannot be theorized, is highly debatable. In fact, in the following I will seek to identify common narrative features of filmic narratives that employ "brilliant plot twists," among other criteria, and these shall be referred to as mind-tricking narratives.

2.2 Hollywood and Complex Storytelling

Mind-tricking narratives are instances of what is now often simply referred to as complex storytelling, an area of film studies, which has been much discussed in

[3] A similar version of this chapter was published as "Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art Cinema Narration" in *Poetics Today* 34.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 119-46. Print.