

The Mind-Game Film: Provenance of a Concept

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During the 1990s I co-taught with Thomas Elsaesser on the MA Film Theory seminar at the University of Amsterdam. The seminar focused on contemporary American cinema; Thomas presented on classical/post-classical Hollywood, deconstruction, Oedipal and post-Oedipal narratives, feminism, Foucault, and Deleuze, amongst other topics, and I focused on *mise-en-scène* theory, statistical style analysis, thematic analysis, theories of narration, and videogame logic. We collaborated on writing up our separate notes as a book. This took several years, but the co-authored volume eventually emerged under the title *Studying Contemporary American Film* in 2002.¹ During this MA seminar both of us worked on post-classical cinema. At that time, Thomas defined post-classical films, not in terms of an excess of spectacle and a diminishing role for narrative, but as an excessive or self-referential classicism. Post-classical films are films that have “mastered the codes of the classical, and they are not afraid to display this mastery as ‘play’, in the way they are able to absorb, transform, and appropriate also that which initially opposed the classical – be it other film-making traditions, such as European art cinema, Asian cinema, television advertising, or even video installation art ...”² (See also Dana Polan’s Introduction in this volume.) However, during the 1990s a series of films challenged this conception of American post-classical cinema, a new type of filmmaking whose possibilities outstripped the post-classical – including *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). I formulated my thoughts on these films around the narratological concept of the puzzle film, while Thomas objected to the term “puzzle” and instead developed the broader concept of the mind-game film. At the same time, we expanded our scope to include the study of world cinema.³

The Mind-Game Film: 2006-2018

Thomas’s idea of the mind-game film crystallized in written form in 2006. His ideas came together in a keynote paper presented at the international Colloquium “Moving Images – The Morphing of the Real and Its Vicissitudes” held at Tel Aviv University on June 7-9, 2006.⁴ Thomas sent me the first draft as an attachment in an email dated 22 August 2006 to see if it would fit into my forthcoming *Puzzle Films* book: “here it is,” he wrote in the accompanying

email, “not quite in the way I presented it in Tel Aviv, but with all the half-finished thoughts and repetitions of a spoken presentation. It will at least give you an idea whether (some of) it fits into your book.” He called the 14,000 word paper “Mind-game Movies: Tel Aviv Paper.”

This 2006 paper begins with the well-known crises and symptoms created by the human/ machine interface, in which machines are not only extensions of the human senses but also alter the senses, with cinema (the vision machine, the cinematic apparatus) extending but also altering our sense of memory and experience, as well as the boundary between public and private space. This leads to an anxiety over subjectivity and identity – specifically, the integrity of the body and the trustworthiness of the senses. These initial observations set the stage for the theory of the mind-game film.

Thomas emphasized in this 2006 paper that the mind-game film covers mainstream, independent, and avant-garde films from across the globe with similar aspects of style, narrative, and character-interaction. They can be analyzed from multiple perspectives: narratology, psychology, history, politics, ontology. In this early formulation, he thought of mind-game films as complex hybrids of horror, science fiction, teen film, and film noir, in which fragments of these prior filmmaking trends interact with each other and are incorporated into the mind-game film.

He formulated a list of the mind-game film’s features: (1) the protagonist (and spectator) participates in unusual events, whose structure does not follow cause-effect logic/linear progression; (2) a deluded protagonist who cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality (and their experience is shared with the spectator); (3) the protagonist has a friend who turns out to be imaginary; (4) the protagonist questions his-her own identity and existence; (5) the narrative undergoes a dramatic plot twist; (6) the protagonist is plagued by delusions about the disappearance of a child.⁵ The invariant core these six features share is the idea that mind-game films revolve around mentally unstable characters. In modernist narratives, for example, the stable center moved from the external narrator to the internal character – that is, shifted from the external all-knowing narrator to being focalized closely around the perceptions and thoughts of characters embedded within the narrative. In mind-game films, this internal center is no longer stable. The pathologies of the mind-game protagonists include paranoia, schizophrenia, and amnesia (usually based on a traumatic past). These concepts are key to Thomas’s discussion of mind-game films, but what is most important is that he discusses them in terms of his central concept of “productive pathologies” (which features prominently in the current volume). Drawing upon Benjamin, Foucault, and Deleuze, Thomas argues that these pathologies are productive in that they are a

response to a new symbolic order based on control societies – the individual’s adaptation to a “new world of flexible bio-power, multi-tasking and parallel processing, where long term memory, linear thinking and mono-causal chains of reasoning are all becoming if not ‘evolutionary’ disadvantages, then distinct drawbacks in the modern labour market.”⁶ He defined the mind-game film as a symptom of this new symbolic order, and these symptoms are manifest not only in pathological protagonists (especially in their bodies and experiences) but also in forms of textual organization that transcend the spatio-temporal limitations of a linear cause-effect narrative logic.

The mind-game film’s new forms of textual organization point to one of its more general features: its critique of Western notions of knowledge and representation:

[Mind-game films address] 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 [...] regarding multiple worlds, Plato’s parallel universes and post-Cartesian philosophies of mind, that is: the relation between body, matter, perception, self-reflection and inter-subjectivity.⁷

Mind-game films “work through” paradoxes of representation and paradoxes of time. In a paradox, if one part of a statement is true, the other part cannot be true. The time loop paradox (such as the grandfather paradox, which Thomas discusses throughout this book) is a common paradox of time. In regard to paradoxes of representation, a representation makes present again, via resemblance or reproduction, something that is absent, or makes visible an intangible abstract object. But these meanings create paradoxes in that they present something that is not literally present, or they represent the unrepresentable, and even represent something that does not exist – in which a representation creates the illusion of a referent, one that does not exist but which the representation is purportedly imitating.

“The Mind-Game Film,” the revised conference paper published in *Puzzle Films* in 2009 and reprinted in this volume (chapter 3), addresses many of these issues again – in particular: complex storytelling (investigated through the concepts of the “database,” “narrative logic” and “game logic”); the idea of identity crises (paranoia, schizophrenia, amnesia) as “productive pathologies”; and the social uses of mind-game films that function either as forms of “discipline and control” or to “teach and train.”

Thomas emphasizes that the mind-game film is not a genre, but a mode or tendency in contemporary world cinema, and he lists the six common features he first formulated in the

2006 Tel Aviv paper. He also expands upon the words “mind” and “game” to pinpoint what meanings refer to the mind-game film. “Game” operates at two levels – films in which a character is subjected to a game, and films in which the spectator is subjected to a game (the same film can embody both types). “Mind” also operates on the same two levels – characters suffer from unstable identities, and their unpredictable view of the world is conveyed to spectators as the film’s norm. What is distinctive about the mind-game film is that the spectator becomes caught up in the game and in the character’s unstable mind. The spectator’s positioning is therefore key to the mind-game film. In the 2009 chapter (chapter 3 of the current volume), Thomas framed his conception of the mind-game film in terms of a crisis in the traditional film-spectator contract:

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.

The traditional film-spectator contract creates a stable subject position and a reliable form of narration from which to view (the illusion of) a spatio-temporally unified, enclosed, fixed, autonomous, linear diegesis. In place of this traditional subjective position, mind-game films create a new film-spectator contract via “unreliable narrators, the multiple time-lines, unusual point of view structures, unmarked flashbacks, problems in focalization and perspectivism, unexpected causal reversals and narrative loops” and the “insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on nonlinear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity and their effects on characters, agency, and human relations” (chapter 3). This new film-spectator contract expresses changes brought about by contemporary control societies, in which individuals need to adapt to a new social order that is under continual surveillance and constant change, which requires cognitive skills such as multi-tasking and parallel processing, and where data is organized nonlinearly in databases and networks. Within this new environment, cognitive skills limited to linear cause-effect reasoning that search for a singular, fixed, permanent meaning are distinct drawbacks.

Due to the success of the puzzle film book, I decided to edit a sequel, called *Hollywood Puzzle Films*.⁸ I again approached Thomas to contribute. In an email dated 5 August 2013, he wrote: “Personally, I am fascinated by the phenomenon of ‘retroactive anticipation’, i.e. the loop where something is recognized in the present as having been anticipated in the past, which is, of course, an effect created in the present in order to make the past enable or empower the present.” He suggested analyzing retroactive anticipation in the many Hollywood adaptations of Philip K. Dick’s fiction, for Dick not only predicted the post-World War II surveillance state, his productively pathological characters also demonstrate how to survive and thrive within it. In November of the same year we were both invited to present keynotes at the conference “Film, Virtuality, and the Body” in Rome,⁹ where Thomas updated me on his chapter, now called “Philip K. Dick, The Mind-Game Film, and Retroactive Causality.” It was published in *Hollywood Puzzle Films* in 2014 and is reproduced in this volume (chapter 7).

A few years after completing this extraordinary essay on Philip K. Dick, Thomas began rethinking his conception of the mind-game film. He gradually reworked his ideas via “distributed agency” (a concept he mentioned in his Philip K. Dick chapter). He presented the paper at the conference “Fast, Slow & Reverse: Faces of Contemporary Film Narration: Around Mainstream Cinema,” in Gdańsk, 24–25 May 2017 (where both of us were again invited to give keynote presentations).¹⁰ He published the final version in 2018 under the title “Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in The Mind-Game Film”¹¹ (published here as chapter 11). Thomas argues that the mind-game film replaces the “autonomous subject”/“split subject” dichotomy with a new and more complex type of agency and subjectivity: “mind-game films gravitate around one central issue: dismantling both the sovereign subject and its antidote, the divided self of modern subjectivity, in view of accepting more complex but also self-contradictory, more limited but also more extended forms of agency” (chapter 11). In the 2009 chapter, Thomas used the term “productive pathology” to characterize non-normative subjectivities within control societies. In the 2018 essay, Thomas retains the term but theorizes it within the broader context of its relational and interdependent position within networks – that is, as a form of distributed agency. This, in turn, necessitated the development of a complex network of concepts, which Thomas spelled out in the essay’s abstract:

- (1) multiple universes, (2) multiple temporalities, (3) causality between coincidence and conjunction, (4) feedback: looped and retroactive causalities, (5) *mise-en-abyme*

constructions, (6) the observer as part of the observed, (7) living with contradictions, (8) imaginary resolutions no longer dissolve real contradictions, (9) antagonistic mutuality under conditions of distributed agency, (10) agency – with the self, against the self, (11) time travel films as black boxes and (12) the mind-game film as *pharmakon*.¹²

It is difficult to single out individual concepts because they are so well integrated. But I shall simply highlight in passing features (7) and (8), which return us to the mind-game’s starting point – its difference from both classical and post-classical cinema.

In the 1970s, a number of film scholars studied film from the perspective of myth, as theorized by Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹³ Lévi-Strauss identified the structure and function of myths, focusing on how they operate as a form of symbolic reasoning that progressively resolves on an imaginary level real human contradictions and mysteries (concerning life/death, born from one/born from two, etc.). Film scholars similarly analyzed mainstream films as symbolic texts that present an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. Thomas argues that the mind-game film does not function in the same way: “The main point to stress, however, is that whereas classical Hollywood sees the world as a set of problems, to which one applies solutions, the mind-game film is more likely to see the world as full of dilemmas, which one can explore and probe, but to which one cannot apply or even invent solutions” (chapter 11). The mind-game film does not present an imaginary resolution of real contradictions but exacerbates those contradictions: the contradictions are not resolved, but remain deadlocked. (However, we can distinguish between “authentic” mind-game films, where the dilemma is foregrounded and remains unresolved, and mind-game films – usually made in Hollywood – that tend to compromise by providing some type of resolution.) This, incidentally, explains Thomas’s aversion to the term “puzzle film,” for it suggests a solution to a problem: “the term puzzle film already assumes as given what might actually be the key stake at issue, namely whether we are dealing with a puzzle that has a solution, in contrast to, perhaps, a film posing a dilemma, for which there is no solution as such” (chapter 11). For Thomas, mind-game films do not solve a problem by unpacking a puzzle, but contain unresolvable dilemmas and contradictions that they do not pretend to unravel and decipher.

Thomas tackled the mind-game film again in 2019 in a series of papers published in this volume for the first time, including “On Mind Game Films as Tipping Points” (chapter 1) and “The History of the Present as Paranoid Mind-Game” (chapter 12). Seung-hoon Jeong discusses these in more detail in his Introduction.

Notes

¹ Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (London: Arnold; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Elsaesser, *ibid.*, p. 79.

³ Warren Buckland (ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Thomas Elsaesser, “The Mind-Game Film,” in *Puzzle Films*, pp. 13-41, (which I shall call the “2009 version”).

⁴ <https://www.openu.ac.il/events/070706.html>

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7 (the list remains the same in the 2009 version).

⁶ “Mind-game Movies: Tel Aviv Paper,” p. 19.

⁷ “Mind-game Movies: Tel Aviv Paper,” p. 5. A shortened version of this statement appears in “The Mind-Game Film” (the 2009 version, p. 15; and chapter 3 of the current volume).

⁸ Warren Buckland (ed.), *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁹ “Film, Virtuality, and the Body” conference, Università Roma Tre, 26-28 November 2013.

¹⁰ https://fil.ug.edu.pl/media/promowane/65207/miedzynarodowa_konferencja_fast_slow_reverse_faces_contemporary_film_narration

¹¹ “Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in The Mind-Game Film,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 16, 1, (2018), pp. 1-39.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1 (the abstract is not reproduced in this volume). What the abstract does not spell out is Thomas’s integration of the concept of embodiment in his rethinking of the mind-game film: “An element overlooked or under-emphasized in my 2009 essay was the nature of embodiment, indeed the very status of a (human) body in mind-game films” (chapter 11). In the mind-game film the rational mind of protagonists is in fact downplayed and their somatic body takes precedence (chapter 11). For a significant development of an embodied theory of the mind-game film, see Simin Nina Littschwager, *Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp. 206–31.

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