

Subjective Realist Cinema

SUBJECTIVE REALIST CINEMA
From Expressionism to Inception

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For Sally, Max, and Sophia

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INTRODUCTION



In an article on narrative in contemporary cinema, *New Yorker* film critic David Denby writes about a cycle of mainstream films with complex narratives that seem more suited for the art houses than the multiplexes. Denby considers a number of these films, including *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino 1994), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry 2004), and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2007), and situates them in relationship to their precursors in the European cinema of the fifties and sixties. He writes:

Resnais's formalist work in the sixties was solemn and analytical. In the same period, Jean-Luc Godard, interrupting his commonplace B-movie plots with jokes, political lectures, and notes on film history, was savage and joyous. But both directors served a knowing audience, for whom experimentation was almost a norm, or at least something expected. By contrast, the recent examples of *cinéma désordonné* are meant for a mainstream audience. Suddenly life has become more interesting: when the audience's pleasure in narrative is diverted, or postponed, it may realize how conventional that pleasure usually is—how easily most movies yield to the desire for tension, release, and resolution. The kind of revelation that was once the possession of a privileged few—that formal play could not only enlarge your notion of art and entertainment but change your life—has moved out into the more volatile region of popular culture. (Denby 2007 n.p.)

Whether these kinds of narratives are providing audiences with life-changing experiences or even expanding their notions of art is debatable; what

is certain, however, is that experimental narrative styles have indeed made their way into the mainstream. Films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Inception* (Christopher Nolan 2010), for instance, have reached wider audiences than the films of Godard and Resnais ever have. In contrast to the formal experimentation of 1960s European cinema, Hollywood cinema has traditionally been characterized by its conservative style aimed at generating spectatorial absorption in narrative. Hollywood's continuity style was developed to achieve a kind of transparent immediacy through cinematography and editing techniques that promote temporal and spatial continuity in conjunction with narrative conventions that offer a clear chain of character-centered cause and effect. Filmmakers like Resnais and Godard, by contrast, employed and developed techniques that sought not to hide the mediated nature of cinema but to foreground it, often by distorting and disrupting the conventions of the continuity style in ways meant to confront or alienate spectators. Their audiences were smaller than those of Hollywood and expected to be challenged in ways that they would not be by commercial cinema. What is to be said, then, of films such as *Eternal Sunshine* and *Inception*, which are clearly aimed at mass audiences? How and why have formally complex narrative styles become fodder for mainstream films? Where does this contemporary cycle of films fit into the categories employed by critics and film scholars? And how are we to categorize films that are largely funded by studios, feature superstars like Leonardo DiCaprio, George Clooney (*Syriana* [Stephan Gaghan 2005]), Brad Pitt, and Cate Blanchett (*Babel* [Alejandro González Iñárritu 2007]), and yet significantly depart from the conventions of the traditional Hollywood style of filmmaking? These are some of the questions I want to explore in the first part of this book, and, interestingly, they are not completely new.

Three Periods of Narrative Experimentation

The use of complex narratives in Hollywood is not new; in fact, it is something of a cyclical event. A survey of the narrative trends in Hollywood cinema reveals three distinct periods of experimentation during which unconventional narrative forms have been employed in mainstream films: the first took place in the 1940s, the second in the 1960s, and the third in the 1990s. David Bordwell argues that the first period was spawned by two "trailblazing flashback movies, *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles] and *How Green Was My Valley* [John Ford] (both 1941)" (Bordwell 2006: 73). In the years following these films, Hollywood offered a host of films with complex narratives including features such as lying flashbacks (*Crossfire*

[Edward Dmytryk 1947]), flashbacks-within-flashbacks (*The Locket* [John Brahm 1946]), subjective narration (*The Lady in the Lake* [Robert Montgomery 1947]), and unmarked ontological shifts (*Laura* [Otto Preminger 1944]) (Bordwell 2006: 72). The most commercially successful innovator of this period, Alfred Hitchcock, kills his protagonist in *Psycho* (1960), intertwines story lines connected by chance in *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), and uses flashbacks, flash-forwards, and changes in points of view in others (Bordwell 2006: 72).

In the second period of narrative experimentation, which took place from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Robert Altman brought a European-inspired aesthetic into their films. The period of experimentation in the United States inspired by this is referred to as either the New Hollywood, the American New Wave, or the Hollywood Renaissance and will be considered in more detail in chapter 1. The style of “art cinema” that influenced these directors was primarily the French New Wave and the works of directors such as Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, Kurosawa, and the like. (“Art cinema” can also be used to include “such disparate cinematic phenomena as Italian neorealism, German silent cinema, the Soviet classics, and the pre-war French cinema, from *films d’art* through surrealist works” [Cook and Bernink 1999: 106]. The term is also used to identify films that are marketed as distinct from the average Hollywood film. I will employ the term in the above ways, following scholars such as Cook and Bernink, Bordwell, and Sconce. Ultimately, however, my goal is to help refine such broad categories by offering a thorough analysis of a very particular style of narration that has emerged from the art cinema of the twentieth century.)

The third period of narrative experimentation arguably began in the mid 1990s after the unexpected success of “independent” films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella 1996), the narrative styles of which were unusually complex for the mainstream audiences who made them successful—demonstrating that not only were tastes changing, but that, as in other areas of popular culture, the formerly clear boundaries between the aesthetics of high art and those of commercial forms were not as clear as they once were. In the United States, this blurring of boundaries bled over into the industry as well, as many independent film production and/or distribution companies such as Miramax were acquired by multinational media corporations seeking to capitalize on this thriving sector of the industry, particularly after the box-office success of *Pulp Fiction*. It is this third period of narrative experimentation that is the primary focus of this book, which will specifically address the question of how to conceptualize and categorize the complex narrative

styles of a diverse group of films including but not limited to films such as *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch 2001), *Eternal Sunshine*, *The Fountain* (Darren Aronofsky 2006), *Stranger than Fiction* (Marc Forster 2006), *Inception*, and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones 2011) (as well as many other related films in the cycle).

A range of reasons has been offered for the emergence of these films. David Bordwell, for instance, cites the boom in independent production of the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that narrative complexity became a way of marketing certain movies as distinct from run-of-the-mill Hollywood fare (2006: 74). This explanation provides some idea of why filmmakers and distributors invested time and money in these films, but it does not explain why audiences paid to see them. For this, Bordwell turns to other factors, including the fact that younger audiences raised on cable television and video games craved the novelty offered by films with complex narratives such as *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski 1999) (Bordwell 2006: 74). Other reasons complex narrative forms have migrated from the art houses of Europe and New York City to the multiplexes of Memphis and Taipei is that access to alternative cinema has increased as a result of new technologies. Digital technology has made accessing films from outside Hollywood much easier than in the past, giving audiences much wider exposure to unconventional forms of cinema, which may also contribute to a willingness to endure the challenges presented by films with unconventional narratives. These technologies have had an influence in other ways as well, and scholars like Alison McMahan and Marsha Kinder have argued that the influence of databases, video games, multiuser domains, and online gaming have contributed to the changing narrative styles of mainstream cinema. While this influence seems obvious, assertions by scholars such as Kinder that link the popularity of complex narrative films to the influence of video games or cyber-narrative often overstate this influence (2006: 74). By contrast, I will argue that the cycle of complex narrative cinema that began in the 1990s has been influenced less by databases or cyber-fiction than by the complex narratives of the cinema of the twentieth century.

Multiform Narratives

Now, returning to the problem of classification raised by these films. To call *Eternal Sunshine* a comedy or *Babel* a melodrama is not incorrect. However, neither of these categories offers a very rich description of these films. Critics such as Denby have refrained from creating labels for either

the specific styles of the films or the more general cycle of which they are a part, whereas film scholars have proven far less reluctant. Bordwell, for instance, in a series of articles and books on films with complex narratives, has employed a new set of terms for these films that includes *forking-path* and *multiple-draft narratives*, *subjective stories*, *network stories*, and *multiple-protagonist* and *converging-fate films*. Warren Buckland's *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (2009), a collection of wide-ranging articles on films with complex narratives, also employs a set of terms including *puzzle films*, *mind-game films*, and *twist films*. Each of these emphasizes different aspects of the complex films it describes and is useful and illuminating in the contexts in which it is used. There are, however, still gaps in the conceptual work as well as a lack of specificity in some of the analysis, which has led to a profusion of labels and categories. The lack of specificity frustrates attempts to catalogue the narrative styles of the recent wave of complex films, and a simple example of this can be seen in the critical work on *Memento*, a favorite of scholars working on complex narrative films. *Memento* has been called a "twist film" (Wilson 2006), a "puzzle film" (Buckland 2009), a "mind-game film" (Elsaesser 2009), and a "subjective story" (Bordwell 2003). Each of these scholars offers unique insights into particular facets of the film and their categories are undeniably useful. The problem, however, is that with each new analysis comes a new label for the film. To date, there are no agreed-upon narratological categories in which to place films such as *Memento*. Most importantly, the terms that are used to describe *Memento*'s narrative structure are often rather general, so, although it been given multiple labels based on its different attributes (nonlinear temporality, unreliable narration), it is invariably situated in a category among a host of other films with which it has very little in common. In light of these problems, it seems that a more specific narrative taxonomy needs to be developed and employed to account for the unconventional narrative forms that are emerging in the cinema. This can be done by modifying and refining current narrative taxonomies and employing terms and categories useful in a wide range of contexts.

The goal of this book is to offer such modifications. The refinements it proposes have grown, in part, out of an analysis of a range of films with complex narratives including *Mulholland Drive*, *Memento*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. These films were chosen on the basis of a narrative structure they share with antecedents from German Expressionist and surrealist cinema, from films from various movements of the 1950s and 60s, as well as from a number of films from Hollywood. Many of these precursors will be considered here, along with more contemporary

examples of films that employ the structure in question, which I will call *multiform narrative*. The concept of the multiform narrative comes from the work of Janet Murray and has proven immensely useful for me in refining the broad categories of complex narratives in two key ways. First, the term designates a specific type of narrative on the basis of a structural feature: multiple ontologies. This is useful because it delineates the multiform narrative from the *unified narrative structure*, the default mode of storytelling in commercial cinema for over a century, and the *multi-strand narrative structure*, a more complex narrative form that often features multiple protagonists. Multiform narratives are different from unified narratives in that they employ multiple narrative strands, yet they also differ from multi-strand narratives in their use of mixed or multiple ontologies. The second and related reason that Murray's term is useful is that it can be used to categorize not only recent examples of multiform films, but also a number of international art cinema films that precede them, including *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine 1919), *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel 1927), *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa 1951), *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman 1957), and *8½* (Federico Fellini 1962). This second aspect of the category of the multiform is important, because it provides a flexibility not provided by categories such as "art cinema" or "modernist cinema," which do not fit many recent multiform films that come out of very different cultural, industrial, and historical contexts. Yet, as we shall see, these contemporary multiform films do share many narrative and aesthetic characteristics with earlier films that have become exemplars of "modernist cinema" and/or "art cinema." Categorizing such films under the rubric "multiform cinema," then, enables a comparison of films across movements and time periods on the basis of a shared structural feature, multiple ontologies.

Subjective Realism

Multiform cinema as a category, however, has limitations of its own, the most important of which is that it includes a very large number of films that fall outside the parameters of complex narrative cinema. As such, it is too large a category to be dealt with comprehensively in these pages. In order to limit the focus and scope of this work and avoid the risk of merely adding to the already overcrowded field of general analysis of complex narrative, what this book will do is focus on a decidedly small group of films that share multiform narratives of a very specific type. This choice has led to the creation of a specific subcategory of the multiform based on the identification of a trait that unifies the films I am interested in