



Deceptive Retrospective Narrative Strategy and Synchronistic Prerequisite: Case Study on the Design of Impossible Puzzles

Yu Yang, Zhengzhou University; University of Lisbon

yang.yu@edu.ulisboa.pt

Volume 11.1 (2023) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2023.475 |

Abstract

The deceptive clues in the impossible puzzle film confirm the viewer's internal expectations and allow retrospective attributing. In the film, a transcendental object negates an internal expectation, causing a retrospective blockage. Retrospectivity does not stop there; the transcendental object reinterpreting deceptive clues in the associative area leads to repeated attribution. This article consists of three parts. First, it discusses impossible puzzle films in the context of complex narrative classification. The following section introduces the Jungian concept of synchronicity and illustrates how it works. The article concludes with a case study of *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018), which contains more complicated puzzles and explains how mind-game narrative techniques create deceptive clues and induce deceptive retrospective attribution.

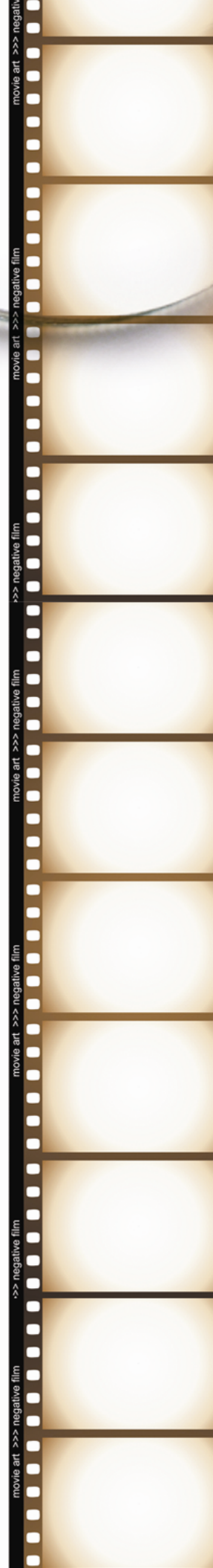
Keywords: Bi Gan; cinema narrative; impossible puzzle films; Jungianism; *Long Day's Journey into Night*; mind-game films; narrative prerequisites; retrospectivity; synchronicity



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).



Deceptive Retrospective Narrative Strategy and Synchronistic Prerequisite: Case Study on the Design of Impossible Puzzles

Yu Yang

The Uniqueness of Impossible Puzzle Films

Since the narrative revolution of the 1990s, there have been several complex narrative films that deviate from the classical paradigm, and their diverse techniques (such as shuffling chronology with editing, using flashbacks to create actual and fake narratives, and nesting stories within stories) make these films the most suitable objects for the study of this movement. As a term coined by researchers after 2000, “puzzle film” categorises different genres of complex narratives, and it can be traced back to the “psychological puzzle” proposed by Elliot Panek (2006), which was further discussed in the collections *Puzzle Films* (2009) and *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (2014) edited by Warren Buckland. Puzzle film is not a uniform term for cinematic classification, and it has different names in the theories of other researchers, such as David Bordwell’s (2002) so-called forking-path, Allan Cameron’s (2008) modularity, and Thomas Elsaesser’s (2009) mind game. These diverse titles overlap in the film genres they cover, but by the definitions of the researchers mentioned above, puzzle films belong to a category of films in which the plot is chronologically disorganised and fragmented, and an episodic act cannot directly serve as a compelling narrative trigger for the next scene.

However, there is an ongoing debate behind the diversification of puzzle film naming — do they belong to a new type of narrative beyond the old paradigm, or is it simply a narrative style?¹ Various researchers have presented opposing viewpoints on this. For example, Kristin Thompson (1999) demonstrated that complex narrative films from the 1990s did not deviate from the classical paradigm. Dana Polan (2000) shows signs of departing from traditional narratives in his dissertation on the aesthetics of computer hypertext. Marsha Kinder (2002) later proposed a database narrative structure. However, according to Allan Cameron (2008), complex film narratives after the 1990s are distinct from the classic paradigm.

This ongoing controversy in the study of complex narrative classification serves as the study's first premise. Another premise came from the second controversy, which is about the difference between the cases chosen by researchers in theories that support complex narratives that do not fit into the classical paradigm: in research on puzzle films, many researchers consider some films to be typical cases, and from the viewer's point of view, there are apparent differences between these films.

For example, In terms of cognitive outcomes, the three films (*Lost Highway* [1997], *Mulholland Drive* [2001], and *Inland Empire* [2006]) by David Lynch differ significantly from the films that rely on plot twists to rationalise fragmented plots (such as *Fight Club* [1999]), which are

also compatible with psychoanalytic models. For another example, Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) never explains the connection between its disparate plots; in contrast, Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) rationalises the first half which is a confusing plot with special effects that serve as clues for the plot twist. The prison scene in *Lost Highway* depicts the hero Fred transforming into another character named Pete, but it is more difficult to comprehend than the two identical-looking heroines in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1994), despite the fact that the latter also appears to lack clues that clearly state causality. These two examples illustrate the differences between puzzle films, which primarily reflect the cognitive hindrance that the narrative segments of the film impose on the viewer.²

Before Edward Branigan (2014) discovered this issue and attempted to resolve it from a cognitive standpoint, several puzzle film researchers failed to identify this inherent difference, resulting in contradictory findings in some studies. He extended puzzle films into three subcategories: “camouflage puzzles,” “flip puzzles,” and “impossible puzzles” (Branigan, 2014, p. 234). This classification was a crucial step in resolving puzzle films’ internal contradictions. Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen (2017) took Branigan’s classification and reinvented it as “deceptive [and] unreliable films,” “disorienting but solvable puzzle films,” and “impossible puzzle films” (p. 52). Like Branigan, they suggest adopting “a primarily experiential—rather than strictly formal—approach” (p. 27) to categorising complex narratives from a cognitive perspective.

In a sense, this view subverts the previous research (e.g., Ramírez Berg [2006], Azcona [2010], or Peter F. Parshall [2012]) that relies on structural elements (such as character[s], plot[s]) to classify narratives and another type of research that relies on narrative rules and techniques (e.g., narratology, temporality) — how complex film narratives should be understood (e.g., Panek [2006], Mittell [2006], Cameron [2008] or two collections edited by Buckland [2009] [2014]). Kiss and Willemsen address issues that have not been explored in depth since Bordwell.³

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this section, is puzzle film a narrative genre or a narrative style? Kiss and Willemsen’s cognitivist classification of complex narratives, particularly puzzle films, will undoubtedly inspire other scholars to reexamine the controversy. Initially, the study of the taxonomy of complex narrative films that emerged in the 1990s sparked a debate between genre and style. Second, most multiline narratives can be effectively analysed using a formalist framework, indicating that they do not challenge the conventional narrative paradigm. However, a small number of films are still incompatible with formalist analysis. In other words, the study of puzzle films presents taxonomic difficulties. Thirdly, from a cognitive standpoint, complex narrative films include “deceptive unreliable films” and “puzzle films,” which can be subdivided into “disorienting but solvable puzzle films” and “impossible puzzle films.”⁴

The “deceptive unreliable film” in complex narratives and the “disorienting but solvable puzzle films” in puzzle films are complex but fit the classical paradigm, according to the third point above. Their plot setting is frequently twisted at a crucial clue and returns to causality. The distinction lies in the fact that “impossible puzzle films” weaken or eliminate causality. The portion of complex narrative and puzzle films that adhere to the classic paradigm can therefore be considered a narrative style, whereas impossible puzzle films can be categorised as an alternative narrative type.

In conclusion, impossible puzzle films are distinct from other complex narratives. It has a fragmented plot that is typical of puzzle films to confuse the audience, but it lacks crucial narrative clues that restore causality.⁵ This article’s focus, a discussion of the narrative techniques used in impossible puzzle films, stems from this premise.

Retrospective Narrative Strategy

In his research, Elsaesser (2021) distinguishes between puzzle films and mind-game films, arguing that puzzle films are deliberately designed “to have gaps or missing pieces, to be counterintuitive, or [to] pose an enigma” (p. 265). In other words, puzzle films and mind-game films overlap significantly. Still, puzzle films have a more powerful narrative strategy to create puzzles to solve, whereas mind-game films set up a dilemma without prioritising a solution. The

concept of “agency” in narratology can be applied to the majority of mind-game films due to the reliance of film dilemmas on character schizophrenia. Consequently, puzzle films with a high degree of overlap with mind-game films can also be analysed using a variety of psychological trauma and narrative agents. Gary Bettison (2020) investigated the film *The Great Hypnotist* (2014), which features a mind-game’s apparent dilemma: the male protagonist suffers from mental trauma. This situation does not prevent Bettinson from classifying it as a puzzle film, as its narrative strategy involves an “oblique treatment of the detective genre” (p. 149).

Therefore, when discussing puzzle films, it is often necessary to revisit the techniques of the mind-game that overlap them. This behaviour is not redundant, as its ultimate purpose is to discuss the narrative strategy of puzzle films, i.e., how to design puzzles that impede the restoration of the prototypical narrative.

Additional Meaning-Making

Before discussing narrative premises, it is necessary to return to the classification of complex narratives, or more specifically, the narrative strategies of puzzle narratives. While Kiss and Willemsen’s views resolve the long-standing internal inconsistency of narrative classification, researchers still face an unresolved issue. Kiss and Willemsen further reformed Branigan’s

classification of puzzle films according to the different roles and effects each narrative had on cognitive processes, based on Bordwell's four-tiered definition of "meaning-making" in the film.⁶

Meaning-making is inappropriate as a theoretical foundation for explaining the narrative strategy of impossible puzzle films. Because impossible puzzle films differ from ordinary puzzle films, which use "mind-tricking plot-twist[s]" (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017, p. 54) or "curiosity gaps" (Sternberg, 1978, pp. 244–245) to deceive the audience with false narratives before proposing the final solution, impossible puzzles "refuse to completely close complex curiosity gaps" (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017, p. 59). However, Bordwell's research on complex narratives is based on the cognitive premise of "folk psychology," that is, "habits, proclivities, and skills we take for granted," which does not satisfy the need for narrative strategies that block the path of association in impossible puzzle films (Bordwell, 2007, p. 88). Bordwell's framework cannot provide a practical analysis of the narrative strategy of impossible puzzle films because it assumes that only unqualified narrative films are unintelligible to the audience.⁷

The distinction between a "narrative must be cognisable" and a "narrative that can be recognised" should be emphasised, given that meaning-making is contingent on the narrative being recognisable. As a condition of narration, the former entails that a film's ultimate purpose must be comprehension. It involves recognising that there are only two primary ways for a qualified

narrative to influence cognition: through causality or by destroying causality. Bordwell believes that,

[i]n classical narration, style typically encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space for the fabula action.[...] Each scene's temporal relation to its predecessor will be signaled early and unequivocally [...] Momentary disorientation is permissible only if motivated realistically. [...] Stylistic disorientation, in short, is permissible when it conveys disorienting story situations (1985, p. 163).

According to this quotation, Bordwell and his fellow critics believe that complex narratives do not depart from the classical paradigm—essentially a narrative style. Bordwell's narrative research is predicated on the premise that the strategy of film narrative is deterministic. Before using Bordwell's theory of meaning-making as a significant reference theory for the narrative strategy of puzzle films, its prerequisites must be understood, which Kiss and Willemsen's research on puzzle films does not do.

In short, the answer to the first question posed in this section is that meaning-making requires a deterministic premise, which Kiss and Willemsen fail to articulate. The classification of complex narratives has generated controversy over narrative types and styles primarily because the distinction between determinism (classical paradigm) and indeterminism has yet to be clarified (new paradigm). In a smooth, linear narrative, meaning-making is more readily apparent. Due to the core of the classical paradigm, some complex and puzzle narratives can be applied to meaning-

making after key clues restore chronology or events sequence. Since the impossible puzzle film is unique and distinct from the traditional paradigm, Bordwell's method of meaning-making analysis becomes unsuited.

Do we, therefore, no longer need meaning-making when analysing films containing impossible puzzles? The answer is no. The difficulty with meaning-making revolves around its final point, "repressed or symptomatic." Bordwell's definition of "repressed/symptomatic" states that the audience adds more significance to the film than it expressly or implicitly conveys. This assertion appears acceptable. However, a difficulty arises when a puzzle film is the object of investigation. Is the viewer's behaviour of continual attribution when watching puzzle films sporadic? The filmmakers did not intend for meaning to be uncertain but ongoing.

As established by Veerle Ros and Miklós Kiss (2018), the criterion for determining if an impossible puzzle film lives up to its moniker is the induction of a persistent reductive prototypical narrative. This conclusion also implies that the film's puzzle must not be solved at the finale; therefore, audience interpretation must continue. Other than that, from Kiss and Willemsen's research, impossible puzzle films establish a never-recoverable sequence of events.⁸ This demonstrates that depending exclusively on meaning-making to study unsolvable puzzle films risks overlooking the creator's intentional construction of additional meaning.

James P. Carse's (1986) "infinite play" concept helps us understand this additional meaning-making act. Panek (2006) contends that the rules of this infinite game are the primary means by which films generate ambiguous narratives. According to his assertion, the strategy of this type of film is to leave viewers searching for (reasonable) connections. In an interview, Damon Lindelof, director of *The Leftovers* (TV series, 2014–2017), provides an accurate description of how infinite games work in films:

if you're going to do a long-form mystery show, you have to have a plan for what to do once you resolve the central mystery [...] there just has to be multiple, multiple, multiple mysteries, so every time you knock one off, there's still two unresolved ones in its wake, and you see how long you can play that game (Jensen, 2017, May 03).

In conclusion, when examining impossible puzzle films, we must evaluate the creator's narrative strategy and meaning creation, as the creator's narrative method is intended to motivate the audience to generate additional meaning.

Deceptive Retrospectivity

According to the study in the previous section, the infinite delay of meaning-making in the impossible puzzle film is caused by deceptive retrospectivity. Retrospectivity typically occurs in "deceptive unreliable films" and "disorienting but solvable puzzle films" in which the previous

plot segments are logically rationalised when the key clue appears, and I refer to this as genuine retrospectivity.

Impossible puzzle films, according to the infinite game strategy, they (deliberately) set up clues that create ambiguous connections between unrelated plots, compelling viewers to constantly search for relationships in the rules of the (infinite) game but never receiving a valid final explanation from the film's narrative, so they either fall into cognitive confusion or find a way to explain it coherently. This attribution is called deceptive retrospectivity.

In short, in the process of retrospective attribution, impossible puzzle films use (invalid) clues to connect several indeterministic plots so that the viewer's ability to trace events is impeded and a new meaning is assigned.

It is essential to note that deceptive retrospectivity does not imply that the film's narrative lacks cause and effect. The impossibility puzzle film mentioned earlier in the article lacks a logical plot, but this merely demonstrates that its narrative lacks a deterministic prerequisite and a priori rationality (so-called "folk logic"). This viewpoint appears vague and requires clarification. To borrow Mark Bould's apt explanation, the distinction between determinism and causality in films is as follows:

[D]eterminism argues that the state of a system at one moment gives rise to the state of that system in the following moment [...] Cause-and-effect is a narrative technique by which we make

sense of the transition of a system from moment to moment. It is always a retrospective and partial account, an abstraction which marginalises or ignores the totality of the system (2005, p. ix).

As such, the author demonstrates that determinism does not equal a cause-and-effect relationship in a film.

The preceding discussion further illustrates how retrospectivity functions as a narrative strategy in puzzle films. The terms “deceptive unreliable films” and “disorienting but solvable puzzle films” imply that the plot elements cannot be immediately reassembled. In the viewer’s associative zone, however, the plots of the puzzles function as a compelling retrospectivity due to their reliance on intrinsic rationality. In the process, meaning-making comes into play, allowing the crucial clues (plot twists) to connect previously fragmented secondary clues.

The term “impossible puzzle film” suggests that the plot never returns to normal, but there are puzzling clues that manifest as intuitive sensory connections between characters (or episodic action). In this sensory experience, the viewer intuitively believes that a causal link connects the two plot segments. Frequent confusion between causation and determinism forces the audience to develop new meanings based on their experiences.

In this instance, retrospectivity becomes a perpetual cycle. In conclusion, any film with a disjointed plot can induce retrospectivity. The difference is that genuine retrospectivity restores

the chronological order in the association area, whereas deceptive retrospectivity allows clues to circulate within the association. This distinction establishes that when deceptive retrospectivity is employed as a narrative technique, the film's puzzles are essentially unsolvable. Some narrative experiments in post-World War II art cinema, such as Alain Resnais' *The Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), can confuse the audience. While textually sufficient to constitute a puzzle, art films of this type lack an adequate number of episodic segments in formalism. In the New Hollywood period, the art cinema style was incorporated into narrative film: after the 1970s, mainly since the 1990s, many fiction films possessing art cinema characteristics have been produced. This category of "artistic" fiction films conforms substantially to the prototypical stories and narrative structures that the formalist analysis method must account for. For instance, the mutation of the male protagonist and the doppelganger of the female protagonist in *Lost Highway* can be viewed as a variation of the method of character establishment in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) or even *The Double Life of Véronique*. To be an effective strategy, deceptive retrospectivity requires a combination of formalism.

In the same way that Kiss and Willemsen argue that cognitivism can affect formalism, the study of retrospective narrative strategies must also consider formalism. Thus, the retrospective narrative strategy is better understood: it can be applied to all films with fragmented plots. Because

some episodic fragments are interspersed with narrative experiments in art films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* or *8½* (1963), this can also result in retrospectivity.

It must be emphasised that the retrospective narrative strategy establishes an internal expectation before the audience's attribution behaviour.⁹ Some art cinemas may inspire attributive behaviour, but this does not imply that they employ a retrospective narrative strategy. In conclusion, the logic of a deceptive retrospective strategy is as follows:

A film contains an internal expectation commonly found in puzzle films, and this expectation establishes a priori plausibility. However, the film creates several intentionally confusing clues that do not restore chronological order but can establish connections between episodic segments. In retrospective attribution, these puzzling clues lead the viewer into a continuous and endless excessive meaning-making state.

The Synchronistic Narrative Prerequisite

What is the new narrative prerequisite now that the deceptive retrospective narrative strategy has abandoned the narrative prerequisite of determinism?

Cognitive dissonance can somehow be induced in the viewer by deceptive retrospectivity. According to social psychologist Leon Festinger, cognitive dissonance is reflected in the cognitive

process in which “pairs of elements can exist in irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant relations” (Festinger, 1957, p. 260).

As stated previously, abandoning determinism in strategy does not equate to abandoning causality, as determinism is commonly confused with “fate, fatalism, cause-and-effect, or predictability” (Bould, 2005, p. ix). In the deceptive retrospective technique, deceptive clues in various plot fragments lead to excessive association, giving the audience a sense of *déjà vu* or predestination. These preconditions, which reflect fatalism, are synchronistic.

The term “synchronicity” was first introduced to analytical psychology by Carl Gustav Jung “to describe circumstances that appear meaningfully related yet lack a causal connection” (Kerr, 2014, pp. 1905–1906). According to the two classic cases used by Jung, “rose-chafer” (Jung, 1952/2010, p. 22, pp. 109–110) and “flock of birds” (pp. 22–31), the identifiability of synchronistic events can be summarised into three aspects: “meaningful coincidence, acausal connection, and numinosity” (Kerr, 2014, p. 1906). In contemporary cognitive science research, synchronicity is seen as a subjective experience that “refer[s] to the subjective evaluation that coincidences between inner and outer events may not be causally related to one another, but connected by some unknown principle” (Sacco, 2019, p. 46). In terms of film studies, Greg Singh (2009) believes that,

[s]ynchronicity is therefore not a deterministic system in which one state gives rise to another in the following moment, but is meaningful in terms of the retrospective (or spontaneous) attribution of fate, predictability (or unpredictability) and causality (or acausality) (p. 182)

When viewers watch impossible puzzle films, the narrative modules that cannot directly generate meaning lead to cognitive dissonance, and then the viewers begin to engage in interpretive strategies. That is to say, at this time, “[v]iewers actively strive towards making a text or film intelligible, even if the narrative at hand seems to resist their efforts at ascribing meaningful coherence” (Kiss & Willemsen, p. 108). At the same time, “synchronicity involves strong parallels between interior and exterior events that are emphatically endowed with meaning” (Peat, 1987, p. 25).

With the prerequisite of synchronicity, the principle of creating impossible puzzles can be summed up as follows:

1. To create a synchronistic effect, it is necessary to satisfy the overlap between the external and internal meanings. Therefore, the film sets up deceptive clues to temporarily satisfy the internal expectation. In this instance, retrospective attribution temporarily satisfies the internal meaning with the external meaning (the audience believes the puzzle is solvable)
2. When the predetermined transcendental object in the film appears, the first point’s internal expectation is broken. Due to its transcendence, the external meaning no longer overlaps with the internal meaning, denying the internal expectation.
3. When an internal expectation is negated, the associative area readjusts retrospectivity. Deceptive clues also play an additional role, triggering persistent attribution behaviour. The transcendental object is no longer an obstacle but a new indicator for attribution behaviour.
4. Even beyond film viewing, attribution may become a topic of public discussion. In further discussion, the synchronistic nature of deceptive clues or the transcendental

object itself is obliterated, and the rule of the infinite game is established (all conditions are reasonable).

Case Study: *Long Day's Journey into Night*

To illustrate its operation, I will use Bi Gan's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018) as an example of deceptive retrospectivity in this article. By analysing its internal meaning, exterior meaning, and transcendental object, its false retrospectivity can be understood.

Long Day's Journey into Night is Bi Gan's second narrative feature film. In contrast to Bi Gan's first film, *Kaili Blues* (2015), the story in *Long Day's Journey into Night* does not have too much-localised context—analysing *Kaili Blues* cannot ignore the locality, such as the folklore about Tuomeng (giving dreams) and the background of the Cultural Revolution and urbanisation movement. This work was chosen as a case study because its puzzle setting is more apparent than those in *Lost Highway*, which is obscured by excessive imagery, and *Triangle* (2009), which includes exceedingly complicated nested puzzles. This article's subject will be more accessible to readers by analysing work with straightforward puzzles and clear false clues than by analysing those films with extremely complicated problems (although they are more fascinating).

Long Day's Journey into Night is broken into two distinct halves. Most of the first section focuses on the love affair between Luo Hongwu and Wan Qiwen twelve years ago, as well as Luo Hongwu's journey to find Wan Qiwen twelve years later. The second section is a long shot

describing a dream that Luo Hongwu experienced following the failure of the investigation. The plot is fractured and can be reconstructed roughly as follows:

Previous twelve years ago. When Luo Hongwu was a child, his mother abandoned him. Luo has yet to do anything after adulthood. His pal White Cat was murdered and thrown into a mine one day. Luo discovered his enemy's lover Wan Qiwen (played by Tang Wei), to get retribution, but he fell in love with her because she resembled his mother when she was young. During their relationship, they likely had a child. Later, the enemy discovered their underground romance, and they made plans to flee. Wan urged Luo to murder his adversary so he would not be threatened again. Wan, however, escaped alone as Luo attempted an assassination.

Now, twelve years have passed. In the film's opening scene, Luo, twelve years later, has just completed a sex exchange with an unidentified woman (played by Tang Wei). Following the news of his father's passing, he went to his long-forgotten hometown. In the wall clock left by his father, Luo discovered a broken photo of his mother, and upon turning the image over, he found a phone number. According to this number, he investigated and discovered that his ex-girlfriend Wan Qiwen had assumed a false name, prompting him to examine Wan's true identity. Along the way, he encounters White Cat's mother (played by Sylvia Chang) and discusses Wan and White Cat's father with her. Eventually, he discovers an inn where Wan (and possibly her children) lives

in isolation. Then he found that Wan's identity was Chen Huixian and that she worked as a singer in a dilapidated entertainment complex. When Luo arrived at the amusement complex, he did not find Wan, so he headed to the movie theatre. During the film, he slept off and had a dream.

Luo's fantasy. Luo initially visited a mine. Here, he encounters a child who calls the mine home. Following his departure from the mine, Luo arrived in a tiny town. Here, he met Kaizhen, a young woman (played by Tang Wei) with red hair. Kaizhen discussed her future ambitions, which resembled Wan's life in Luo's recollection. In the square, Luo sees an elderly "lunatic" (Sylvia Chang) who resembles his mother in behaviour; she is going to elope with a man. In the end, Luo assisted the "lunatic" in successfully eloping and fell back in love with Kaizhen.

The preceding three paragraphs describe the plot of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It appears as confusing as any other film with an impossible puzzle plot. Then, how does deceptive retrospectivity emerge and function in this film?

To determine whether a film is a puzzle narrative, it must contain at least one apparent puzzle to be solved. Panek considers detective metaphors an essential component of puzzle films, such as who murdered Dick Laurent in *Lost Highway* and the blue box with no key in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), which lead to puzzle-solving operations. *Long Day's Journey into Night* contains the puzzle, "Where did Wan Qiwen go?" which leads to the hero Luo Hongwu's detective

behaviour. It also offers the following question, “What does Wan Qiwen look like?” sets off Luo’s childhood trauma, similar to the “schizophrenia” when Elsaesser discusses the dilemma in mind-game films; Luo discovers that Wan had different identities when she was a teenager, a young adult, and a middle-aged woman, leading to the final question, “Does Wan Qiwen exist?”

According to the narrative, there are no clues for solving the above puzzles, making this an impossible puzzle film. How do the film’s narrative techniques express and negate the internal expectation, given that it is a film about an impossible puzzle?

Bi Gan employs four techniques in this film to set up clues corresponding to the viewer’s categorisation experience.

1. Figure projection. In the flashback, Luo believes Wan resembles the young mother in the photograph.
2. Projection of the self-referential fallacy. Luo met a child who lived alone in a mine in his dream. The child represented both Luo (he was left alone at home by his mother) and his friend White Cat (he was murdered and abandoned in the mine). In another flashback, Wan told Luo that she was pregnant with his child, and Luo imagined playing table tennis with the child in the future. However, Wan then revealed that she had an abortion; this narrative is projected in a dream in which Luo plays table tennis with the child in a mine.
3. Doppelganger. The film’s opening scene implies that the middle-aged Luo has just completed a sexual transaction with an unnamed woman portrayed by actress Tang Wei, who plays two roles in the subsequent episodes: Wan in Luo’s memories and Kaizhen in his dream. In addition, the actress Sylvia Chang portrayed White Cat’s mother in reality and Luo’s mother in the dream.

4. Objects with intertextuality. In the father's belongings, the middle-aged Luo discovers a photograph of his mother without a face, and this photograph also appears in subsequent flashbacks. Three abandoned houses are difficult to distinguish in the film's reality, memory, and dream. Kaizhen and an older woman suspected to be Luo's mother have dark red hair in the dream.

This method enables the observer to generate relationships between multiple roles in retrospective attribution. Although these roles lack a deterministic connection, they are projected onto one another. This environment creates a sensual (acausal) link between non-deterministic characters (or plots). First and foremost, figure projection establishes the condition that Wan Qiwen in memory = mother in the photograph; immediately after, the doppelganger creates a visual link between Wan Qiwen in reality and Kaizhen in the dream, and the White Cat's mother in reality and the older woman in the dream. As a result, the doppelganger confirms the premise established by the figure projection. When these strategies are successful, the audience develops the impression that Wan Qiwen and her mother are inextricably linked when attributing, even if there is no (direct) causal relationship between them.

The photograph of the mother when she was young becomes the key to creating the paradox in the retrospective process. This photograph reminds viewers of the film's untrustworthy narrative, making attribution attempts to solve the puzzle difficult. The photo-damaged face reminds us of the unreliability of memories, no matter how much the doppelganger enhances Wan and Luo's mother's physical resemblance.

The puzzle is rendered impossible due to the photo-triggered negation. The audience gradually solves the mystery of “where did Wan Qiwen go?” at first, guided by the established detective metaphor. After the audience relied on retrospectivity to investigate and even obtained some clues that could solve the mystery of “what Wan Qiwen looks like,” the clues abruptly ended when it came to the photograph. In retrospective attribution, the photograph (transcendental object) causes the internal expectation to be negated, resulting in excessive meaning-making.

The photograph is a crucial transcendental object. This category of transcendental object is seen in numerous unclear narratives. In Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), for instance, a transcendent glass sphere emerges in both Poland and France. In *Lost Highway*, a strange group photo takes on a peculiar turn: before Dick Lauren’s murder, it contained four persons, but after his death, it only contained three. In *Triangle*, the entire plot is depicted as a cycle in which the characters repeatedly commit a predetermined slaughter. Through its inherent “impossibility,” the transcendental object overturns all of the audience’s previously drawn judgements.

When the transcendental object prevents the audience from forming a reasonable prototypical narrative in the associative area, supplementary deceptive clues are considered, resulting in additional interpretive behaviour, namely the “repressed/symptomatic” in meaning-

making. Elsaesser notes that the online fan community refers to mind-game films that cause persistent confusion as “mind-fuck films” (2009, p. 30) and has enthusiastically continued infinite game discussions throughout the years. In doing so, fans interpret these films’ deceptive techniques as credible hints. In *Lost Highway*, for instance, Fred mutates into Pete in prison, and this surreal approach becomes a new clue when the original narrative cannot be recovered. It could be interpreted as a daydream or a wish, along with another piece of information gleaned from the retrospective process — Fred’s bad sexual experience that he shared with his wife — to solve a mystery that the director may have concealed.

Similarly, when the photograph triggers the denial of an internal expectation, some surreal clues become involved in the retrospective process, leading to the emergence of other mysteries. Unable to locate the reclusive Wan, Luo went to the theatre alone to watch the film *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. This plot was initially a surreal effect caused by Bi Gan’s use of nested or self-referential techniques, but it acquired significance under the influence of “repressed/symptomatic.” While we have no way of knowing what some surreal techniques were intended for in the first place, we must concede that the technique’s original intent is irrelevant when the internal expectation is subverted. They will cause and continue the reconstruction of a nonexistent prototypical story as an infinite game that, according to James Carse, is “[played] for the purpose of continuing the play” (1986, p. 3).

In reconstructing a prototypical narrative, *déjà vu* is frequently employed to encourage the audience to continue playing infinite games. For instance, in *Three Colors: Red*, a retired judge named Joseph Kern tells the protagonist in the film's second half about his youth. Due to a fortunate discovery, he passed the exam the following day, but he lost his girlfriend after the exam. The story of Kern is retold in a plot starring the young judge, Auguste. Similarly, in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Kaizhen states that her dream is to become a singer, which corresponds with the last plot in the retrospective attribution: after seclusion, Wan changes her name to Chen Huixian (an anonym refers to a Hong Kong singer) and works as a singer. The conclusion of the projective relationship between the miner's child, Luo Hongwu, and the White Cat is also supported by *déjà vu*.

Conclusion

Kiss and Willemsen's research on impossible puzzle films did not consider this question: In impossible puzzle films, the retrospective attribution used in ordinary (solvable) puzzle films is ineffective. When it is determined that a puzzle film's plot is not deterministic, Jungian synchronicity is required to explain the causes and effects. Without clarifying the premises, meaning-making fails to answer how the viewer perceives the meaning in the impossible puzzle film. It is because many puzzle-making techniques common in (solvable) puzzle films and mind-

game films are also present in impossible puzzle films. In narrative strategy, however, these techniques aim to create “constitute—destroy—reconstruction” between external and internal meanings, resulting in deceptive retrospective attribution.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

This article’s fundamental concepts are derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation, “Ambiguous Characters in Film Narrative: The Synchronistic Relationship between Similar Characters,” written while the author was a student at the University of Lisbon. The author initially utilised the “compilation thesis” paradigm, so no conflict of interest exists.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azcona, M. M. (2010). *The multi-protagonist film*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Berg, C. R. (2006). A Taxonomy of alternative plots in recent films: Classifying the “Tarantino Effect.” *Film Criticism*, 31(1/2), 5–61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44019213>.

Bordwell, D. (1985). *Narration in the fiction film*. The University of Wisconsin Press.

Bordwell, D. (2002). Film futures. *SubStance*, 31(1), 88–104.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2002.0004>.

Bordwell, D. (2006). *The way Hollywood tells it: story and style in modern movies*. University of California Press.

Bordwell, D. (2007). *Poetics of cinema*. Routledge.

Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., & Thompson, K. (2005). *The classical Hollywood cinema: Film style & mode of production to 1960* (E-Library ed.). Routledge.

Bettinson, G. (2020). Chinese censorship, genre mediation, and the puzzle films of Leste Chen. In F. Lin & J. Aston (Eds.), *Renegotiating film genres in East Asian cinemas and beyond* (pp. 137–162). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bould, M. (2005). *Film noir: From Fritz Lang to Fight Club*. Columbia University Press.

Branigan, E. (2014). Butterfly effects upon a spectator. In W. Buckland (Ed.), *Hollywood puzzle films* (pp. 233–264). Routledge.

Cameron, A. (2008). *Modular narratives in contemporary cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Carse, J. P. (1986). *Finite and infinite games*. The Free Press.

Elsaesser, T. (2009). The mind-game film. In W. Buckland (Ed.), *Puzzle films: Complex storytelling in contemporary cinema* (pp. 13–41). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

- Elsaesser, T. (2021). Contingency, causality, complexity: Distributed agency in the mind-game film. In T. Elsaesser (Ed.), *The mind-game film: Distributed agency, time travel, and productive pathology* (pp. 260–296). Routledge.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Jensen, J. (2017, May 03). *How 'Twin Peaks' inspired 'Lost' and 'The Leftovers': Damon Lindelof tells EW why 'The Leftovers' would not be possible without David Lynch's classic series*. Entertainment. <https://ew.com/tv/2017/05/03/twin-peaks-podcast-lost-leftovers-damon-lindelof/>.
- Jung, C. G. (2010). *Synchronicity: An acausal connecting principle* (R. F. C. Hull Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published in 1952).
- Kerr, L. K. (2014). Synchronicity, overview. In T. Teo (ed.), *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 1905–1907). Springer.
- Kinder, M. (2002). Hot spots, avatars, and narrative fields forever: Buñuel's legacy for new digital media and interactive database narrative. *Film Quarterly*, 55(4), 2–15. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2002.55.4.2>.
- Kiss, M. & Willemsen, S. (2017). *Impossible puzzle films: A cognitive approach to contemporary complex cinema*. Edinburgh University Press.

- Mittell, J. (2006). Narrative complexity in contemporary American television. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58, 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2006.0032>.
- Panek, E. (2006). The poet and the detective: Defining the psychological puzzle film. *Film Criticism*, 31(1/2), 62–88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019214>.
- Parshall, P. F. (2012). *Altman and after: Multiple narratives in film*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Peat, F. D. (1987). *Synchronicity: The bridge between matter and mind*. Bantam.
- Polan, D. (2000). *Pulp Fiction*. British Film Institute.
- Ros, V. & Kiss, M. (2018). Disrupted PECMA flows: A cognitive approach to the experience of narrative complexity in film. *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, 12(1), 71–96. <https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2018.120106>.
- Sacco, R. G. (2019). The predictability of synchronicity experience: Results from a survey of Jungian analysts. *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 11(3), 46–62. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v11n3p46>.
- Singh, G. (2009). *Film after Jung: Post-Jungian approaches to film theory*. Routledge.
- Sternberg, M. (1978). *Expositional modes and temporal ordering in fiction*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Thompson, K. (1999). *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding classical narrative technique*. Harvard University Press.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ The controversy initially surrounded the classification of films with intricate plots, which proliferated in the 1990s. Putting the focus on the elements of complex narratives that best fit the hypertextual digital aesthetics that emerged in the 1990s, the subject of this controversy is applicable to puzzle films as well.
- ² Cameron, when analysing the forking-path narrative (another category of puzzle film previously mentioned), explicitly suggested that this category includes David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. However, when explaining this narrative type in detail, he used *Run Lola Run* (1998) as an example. From the perspective of the degree of match to the prototypical narrative, it is evident that the *Lost Highway* and *Run Lola Run* styles are distinct. However, he did not discuss this.
- ³ Bordwell has argued that *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* are narratively unqualified (see 2006, p.89). Going further than him, Charles Ramírez Berg (2006) has directly suggested excluding Lynchian films from his classification of complex narratives. Panek (2006) classified the two as puzzle films but then explained their infinite game without further discussing their specificity to other puzzle films. Especially Cameron, who, as stated previously, has divided complex narratives into several modular types. Even if he differentiated modularity and temporality further, this would not suffice to explain the essential distinction between *Lost Highway* and *Run Lola Run*. In a nutshell, despite being a subgenre of puzzle films (also known as forking-path), why can not the viewer recognise the narrative in films such as *Lost Highway*?
- ⁴ Kiss and another researcher, Veerle Ros, proposed a similar classification in which impossible puzzle films were explicitly excluded from general puzzle films. (Ros & Kiss, 2018, p. 86)
- ⁵ The primary function of narrative anchoring is to explain cause and effect between episodes to make sense of what was initially puzzling. It is reflected in the plot's incorporation of innate rationality. *Lost Highway* and *The Double Life of Véronique* are not at the same level of ambiguity despite using the character's image change (or the opposite) to create an ambiguous plot. In *Lost Highway*, a plot was established to demonstrate the transformation of the male protagonist's appearance, but it could not demonstrate the plot's inner logic. In contrast, *The Double Life of Véronique* does not explain the causal connection between the two girls; however, this does not add to the confusion. A case study is referenced at the end of this section to explain the reasons for this outcome.
- ⁶ They are "referential meanings," "explicit meanings," "implicit meanings," and "repressed or symptomatic meanings." (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017, p. 37)
- ⁷ Bordwell reduces the technique of the impossible puzzle film to "if temporality and causality did not cooperate [...] the spectator could not construct a coherent story out of the narration" (Bordwell et al. p. 44), which diminishes the distinctiveness of the narrative strategy of impossible puzzle films in comparison to that of

ordinary puzzle films (including art cinemas). In terms of cognitive effect, the former differs from the latter due to their (impossible ones’) “genuine breach with the ‘cooperation of causality and chronology’” (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017, p. 61).

⁸ Kiss and Willemsen opined, “[impossible puzzle films’] narrative modes are designed in such a way that they encourage, but do not allow, instant and easy constructions of a coherent and logical storyworld or event sequence” (p. 63).

⁹ The “internal expectation” in this article corresponds to the internal meaning in Jung’s synchronicity, echoing the clues that correspond to the external meaning.