

CORNELIA KLECKER, *Spoiler Alert!: Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 172 pp.

The book, originally conceived as a dissertation, is dedicated to the exploration of a phenomenon that has become a staple of popularity in contemporary Hollywood film since the 1990s and that has provoked critical commentary by a variety of scholars for the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> Klecker's stated goal in the introduction to salvage Hollywood film from accusations of solely producing dumb, flat, one-dimensional entertainment by pointing out the narrative sophistication and intellectual stimulation of what she calls mind-tricking narratives may therefore seem unwarranted. In her words, "mainstream phenomena are well worthwhile an in-depth academic discussion" (15). This should go without saying and should therefore not necessarily be the objective but the basis for analysis. Nonetheless, it is this obvious desire to convince the reader of the artistic value of the films she analyzes that animates the author's attempts to describe and categorize the elements and qualities that characterize mind-tricking films and by which they enrich the narrative possibilities of the medium. While the resulting observations are eminently worthwhile, what seems to be missing occasionally is a consideration of the cultural function that mind-tricking narratives fulfill. Beyond pointing out how "intricate and demanding" (15) these films are, one could interrogate what the films' flattering of viewer sophistication is used for.

In the second chapter of the book, Klecker is at pains to establish the uniqueness of mind-tricking narratives in comparison to standard Hollywood fare. Following Bordwell, she argues that, just like art cinema, they violate an essential quality of classical narrative films, namely the emphasis on the clarity of causality. Mind-tricking narratives are radical in featuring resolutions that completely undermine the viewers' assumptions about what they have seen so far by withholding crucial information. Klecker defines this essential characteristic as "an *extreme* case of a surprise gap that causes a radical correction of hypotheses that occurs once the gap is disclosed in the end of the film" (27). Examples include *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Identity* (2003), or *Shutter Island* (2010). She acknowl-

edges that every narrative, film or otherwise, works on the principle of withholding and releasing narrative information. Hence, her insistence on the radicalness of mind-tricking narratives is first and foremost a question of degree rather than an absolute. Despite relying on Bordwell's observations on film narratology, she also has to acknowledge his skepticism of the subversive or innovative potential of mind-tricking narratives. Bordwell sees them as basically conforming to the tenets of classical cinema. He writes about one of the "genre's" essential representatives, Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, that its "real achievement [...] is [...] to make his reverse-order plot conform to classical plot structure" (qtd. in Klecker 21). Despite Klecker's rebuttal of Bordwell, he has a point because what Klecker largely ignores about art cinema is its ambiguity and crypticism. We never find out what has happened to Anna in *L'avventura* (1960), nor can we securely reconstruct the plot of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), let alone of surrealist works like *L'âge d'or* (1930). In contrast, mind-tricking narratives by definition rely on a solution that vehemently affirms a completely logical, causal, unequivocal explanation of the plot, despite obscuring causality and tricking the reader about narrative assumptions. They could even be said to defend causality in the face of art cinema's destabilization of it. Nowhere is the sense of closure more emphatic as in films like *The Sixth Sense* or *Shutter Island*, as disturbing as their resolutions may be. Klecker goes on to suggest that because of their twist ending, mind-tricking narratives not only demand a second viewing, they also shift viewers' attention from what is being told to how it is told, thus becoming opaque meta-reflections on the manipulative mechanisms of movies ("The artifice of film is minutely laid bare" (36)). While this may be true for some mind-tricking films, like *Fight Club* in which the meta-discourse is underlined by a variety of elements, this can hardly be called a general quality, as an illusionist approach to the rendering of the storyworld remains the favoured approach in such films. Rather, following Elsaesser, mind-tricking narratives discipline the viewer to develop flexibility, attention, and an accommodation to (narrative) rules, cinematically reflecting today's complex regulatory societies.<sup>2</sup> In this view, mind-tricking narratives

<sup>1</sup> Klecker provides an extensive and useful bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Hollywood heute: Geschichte, Gender und Nation im postklassischen Kino* (Berlin: Bertz+Fischer, 2009), 237-63.

do not undermine or oppose narrative conventions, but they teach the viewer an awareness of classical narrative principles (causality, logic, closure) as a principal value of film art.

In fact, Klecker herself displays how much she has been primed by mind-tricking films in her third chapter in which she provides various case studies. In a particularly telling section, she compares the similar films *The Illusionist* (2006) and *The Prestige* (2006) and suggests why *The Prestige* is the better mind-tricking narrative. It is because it most commendably obeys the rules of how a mind-tricking narrative is supposed to work. It is the “perfect embodiment of a mind-tricking narrative” (54) because form and theme work so perfectly together. This prescriptivism of endorsing obedience to formal principles as an end in itself rather than describing how the form is used or creatively violated is not the only problematic aspect of this section. The chapter, which also provides close readings of a *Simpsons* episode, *Fight Club*, and *Memento*, cannot conceal the fact that the whole book integrates several published individual articles, which often lack an overarching coherence. The individual readings certainly provide valuable observations of the various manifestations of mind-tricking techniques and effects, such as categories of deception, relations to authenticity construction, and the postmodern treatment of time, but they hardly gel into exemplary insights and also spend a lot of time reiterating the plots.

Chapter four addresses the ways in which mind-tricking films have “taught” viewers to be sophisticated. Klecker points out how this sophistication derives primarily from the unusual ways in which time is manipulated in such films. *21 Grams* (2003) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), although only tangentially mind-tricking films, are appropriate examples for the study because, she argues, they obscure cause-effect relations and, in a postmodernist fashion, emphasize the random, fragmented, and chaotic in our existence. In this they are simultaneously extensions of a fragmented media culture since the rise of television, as

they are proof of its sophistication. Her attempt to connect such notions of postmodernism with Jameson’s critique of late capitalist nostalgia and superficiality (in order to rebut him) is, however, not wholly convincing and seems a bit far-fetched.

The final chapter applies the cognitive film theories of David Bordwell and Edward Branigan to mind-tricking narratives. Klecker elaborates on the way such films manipulate and undermine narrative schemes and cues in order to lead viewers astray but also to flatter their capabilities of piecing the plot puzzle together after the film is over and to tease them to watch the film a second time in order to pick up on hidden clues. The film *Lucky Number Slevin* (2006), which features particularly striking and abundant twists, serves as illustration of how mind-tricking films use the viewers’ knowledge of film conventions in order to mislead them. Klecker calls into question in how far this use has the instructive effect of making the viewer aware of these conventions and their manipulative implications in a sort of Brechtian sense. However, instead of exploring any further implications of this insight she stops at her initial observation that “mainstream does not automatically entail dumb entertainment” (154).

It is unfortunate that the book does not significantly transcend this observation. In her conclusion Klecker reiterates the point, but she also acknowledges the undeniable commercial appeal of films that demand a second viewing. It is in such moments that the book points to more complex implications of the subject matter but also exposes its own limitations. The observations on the narrative mechanisms that underlie mind-tricking films are certainly valuable and so are the plentiful individual case studies, but the absence of a more substantial insight into the cultural implications that are opened up by the overriding thesis keeps Klecker’s study from being a truly beneficial contribution to the subject.

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