

Cinema of morphing

Storytelling strategies in the age of digital media

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1. Introduction

With the introduction of digital cinematography film theory has been posed with some uncharted questions as to the ontology of film as art. As digital media continuously replace analogue ones the photographic process no longer constitutes the foundation of cinematic representation. While the debate on film and photography used to be anchored in the notions of analogy, indexicality and materiality of the medium, such notions are no longer applicable for computer-generated graphics and the abstraction that an algorithm constitutes. Virtual simulation is deemed less real than analogue representation, even though both create an equally fictional diegesis. Not only have the digital recording processes made the celluloid film almost obsolete, the process of replacement goes much further. Having started with the digital reworking of the actors body in live action sequences has now called for a complete substitution of the physical presence of real actors with their virtual avatars.¹

One of the probing questions film theory has been addressing in the past decades is whether cinema is threatened by the elimination of film as a medium. Digital media has brought about a crisis of identity as well as questioned the classifications used to theorize cinema. Can one still transcribe the axiomatic accounts of film theory into a seemingly foreign language of digital cinema and will it do justice to a comparatively new medium? Facing the challenge of understanding digital cinema, many have turned for answers to the dawn of filmmaking as a prototype of a similar exponential technological revolutionizing of the medium.

Arguably, the most distinctive trait of the twentieth century cinema is that the films produced are largely based on live action and depend on the lens-based registration of actuality. What lies behind any even the most intricately composed and technically innovative cinematic picture is the fidelity of the photographic process. It is the basic principle of analogue filmmaking, to record that which is in front of the camera. Digital imaging however opens up a whole new range of possibilities, starting with manipulation and adjustment of separate frames to generating an entire universe from scratch and doing so with flawless photographic plausibility. Lev Manovich suggested, that this shift from recording towards manual production and assembly of images is

¹ This is perhaps most evident in the motion capture technology employed in such films as *The Lord of the Rings* franchise (2001, 2002, 2003), *Avatar* (2009), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) or *King Kong* (2005). Motion capture has human performance at its foundation: the camera captures all the slightest movements and subtle facial expressions. Animators use this raw data to build and animate a digital character. To this day Andy Serkis's performance in the role of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is considered to be one of the biggest accomplishments of motion capture technology.

reminiscent of pro-cinematic animation techniques of the nineteenth century: “As cinema enters the digital age, these techniques are again becoming commonplace in the filmmaking process. Consequently, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting.”² However, downgrading photographic process and relegating the task to animation³ does not seem to have such a radical impact on the image as such. What is achieved by digital rendition of the image is not realism, but photographic realism. Instead of simulating the embodied human perception of the world, digital representation continues to employ a lens-based model of perception. D.N. Rodowick in *The Virtual Life of Film* makes an observation that virtual simulations and digitally constructed spaces are still based on the same rules of perspective and culturally established criteria of what counts as optical realism and realistic representation: “If the digital is such a revolutionary process of image making, why is its technological and aesthetic goal to become perceptually indiscernible from an earlier mode of image production. A certain cultural sense of the “cinematic” and an unreflective notion of “realism” remain in many ways the touchstones for valuing the aesthetic innovations of the digital.”⁴ However objectivity derived from the direct photographic inscription of the original object onto film “automatically, without the creative intervention of man”, what André Bazin held to be an exceptional quality of photographic arts against all other arts of image making, is certainly missing in digital representation.⁵ André Bazin’s argument anchored in automatism and objectivity bestowed an air of credibility onto film: “In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.”⁶ Such an argument may still appear valid for some films, however one must take into account not only a fundamentally drastic change in the technology of representation, but also a growing popularity of films

² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 295.

³ Lev Manovich argued that the inverted process defined the step over from animation to cinema, displacing the handcrafted animation techniques by the uniform language of cinema, once the later had ripened as a technology. Animation was therefore left on the periphery of the cinematic process, a mere cache of pro-cinematic endeavors to eliminate the evidence of production methods. (Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 296-299.)

⁴ David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

⁵ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 13.

⁶ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 13-14.

depicting virtual worlds, physical existence of which is impossible. This can be achieved through the use of any possible illogicalities CGI can conjure or fabrication of the virtual through clever use of set constructions, lighting effects and manipulation of perspective on set. For instance, the rotating corridor fight sequence in *Inception* (2010) was achieved through repurposing the centrifuge technology already employed in Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey* (1968), with actors maneuvering inside the revolving sets, creating an impression of being suspended in zero gravity. Such an approach creates an indexical paradox. Jan Simons described it (in relationship to a similar manipulation of physics achieved on set in making of *Europa* (1991)) as follows: they are "indexical registrations of *virtual* worlds that could never exist as such in the physical world. The film is neither a depiction of a virtual reality (the reality depicted was recorded by photographic means), nor the analogue registration of physical reality (the reality depicted is physically impossible)."⁷ Perhaps such a contradiction is indicative not only of a shift in film methodology, but of a much larger phenomenon: the viewer rather than passively absorbing that which is offered to him as reality is now engaged in a game of mental reconstruction of the artificial reality, in rationalizing the improbability of the given universe by deciphering the rules of the game. Such an approach is not necessary symptomatic of a rupture in the narrative film tradition. However, each alteration in film history in terms of representation strategies denotes a modification in its spectator address. Thomas Elsaesser in 'Mind-Game Film' arrived at a conclusion that cinema is currently undergoing a crisis in the audience address: "...The traditional "suspension of disbelief" or the classical spectator positions of "voyeur", "witness", "observer" and their related cinematic regimes or techniques (...) are no longer deemed appropriate, compelling, or challenging enough."⁸ Attempts to steady, fix or arrange the means of meaning making are held constraining to creative opportunity, which results in a significant shift in contemporary narrative film strategies: jumbling of temporal sequences, hybridizing of genres, employing a collage of citations from films and various other media as well as flattening of simple and complex discourses, to name a few. Elsaesser designated a term 'mind-game films' to films, which toy with the spectator, activating him as a meaning-maker by obscuring narrative coherence. Such films often share non-linear narrative structures with temporal and space ruptures, inversions of causality, unconventional double takes and various other puzzles. Elsaesser points out: "A countervailing strategy in the field of narrative analysis has been to consider the

⁷ Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 125.

⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film", in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 16.

mind-game films as leftovers of classical narrative, during a period of transition, when the default value of cinematic storytelling is rapidly becoming that of the interactive video-game and the computer simulation game.”⁹

Interactive narrative, however, implies segmentation: the viewer is able to independently adjust the storyline at predetermined marks by moving within various narrative trajectories or even extend the experience by exploring the same event from the perspective of multiple characters. If cinema were indeed one day to achieve the same level of interactivity, some argue that this would lead to a loss of cinema’s engagement faculties and to a user/viewer who is unable to retain prolonged attention. Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul maintained that conventional forms of cinematic narrative address a goal-oriented viewer, who is stimulated to form a hypothesis as to what is to happen based on a given narrative template to later negate or confirm it finally achieving closure. Furthermore, he insists that narratives should reward the spectator’s strive for coherence, rather than frustrate it. This, however, does not imply restricting narrative to linearity, but rather that it must sustain cause-and-effect comprehensibility “...through an overall, continuous editing style, synchronized or otherwise cohering audio-visual formations, character focalized narrative development, and narrative re-centring and closure”.¹⁰ Ben-Shaul argues that attempts at hyper-narratives largely fail due to misconstrued presumptions about human perception (ability to maintain focus whilst splitting attention) and misguided attempts to comply with database characteristics foreign to human cognition. Arguably, non-coherent split narratives and lack of closure lead to disorientation and frustration, rather than to a more engaged viewing.¹¹ Ben-Shaul therefore insists that game-like cinematic multi-narratives must reconcile their database aspirations with viewers’ mental pursuit of coherence and closure.

⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “The Mind-Game Film”, in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 22.

¹⁰ Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul, *Hyper-narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2008), 10.

¹¹ Ben-Shaul cites *Adaptation* (2002) as a vivid example of a decentralized split-narrative that according to him fails to accommodate narrative coherency and viewer’s engagement. *Adaptation* is split threefold: not only are there two twin protagonists, but also two corresponding narrative developments and two stylistic choices: “Spectators are pulled out from the depth and involvement they were in when following the stream of consciousness film, and pushed towards an action film that starts all of a sudden without serious earlier development and out of materials that have been differently contextualized and are alien to the action film. (...) This perspective shift, which if coherently construed could have deeply involve us in the textual or life and death implications that are at stake in the film’s relativity of perspectives, ends up neutralizing the impact of both views due to its split narrative construction, engendering a gaming distraction and frustration rather than deep emotional-cognitive engagement.” (Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul, *Hyper-narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2008), 21-23.)

However constraining the vastly intricate and elaborate film plots by imposing game architecture logic onto them may be an oversimplified allegation as to the nature of digital film. In the following paragraphs I am going to discuss the influence of (computer) gaming as well as other new media objects that have cast their shadow on storytelling in the digital era.

1.1 What constitutes a narrative?

Perhaps manifestations of a shift from analogue to digital are unmistakable in production methods, image aesthetics and technological artifacts of the digital, however one must recognize much deeper impacts it had on storytelling infused by characteristics of new media objects. Many film scholars have picked up on those imminent changes in the narrative strategies brought about by the shift from analogue to digital. In the following paragraphs I will introduce several seminal approaches that have been used to describe and theorize such changes in the past decades. Those are: substitution of narrative structures by database logic, as suggested by Lev Manovich, the influence of game playing on cinematic narratives (and respectively application of game theory as an angle to read such films) and the reloading of the cinema of attractions, as originally coined by Tom Gunning. To define the points of deviation from narrative that those concepts introduce or whether they are indeed essentially anti-narrative, it is important to establish what a narrative is. Even though it is difficult to reconcile the whole scope of cross-disciplinary and often contradictory definitions and heterogeneous arguments related to the term, I will use Gerald Prince's classic account of narrative as my point of departure, for it transcends idiosyncrasies of various semiotic shapes and representational media. Prince defines narrative as follows: "Narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other."¹² Prince argues that our understanding of what makes up a narrative and what does not is firmly entrenched in our consciousness and transcends cultural and social descent of the viewer or listener: "People of widely different cultural background frequently identify the same given sets of elements as narratives and reject others as non-narratives and they often recount narratives which are very similar."¹³ So what are the principles that form what we implicitly recognize as narrative? Apart from having a causal correlation, the elements

¹² Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982), 4.

¹³ Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982), 79.

binding the narrative must exist in a temporal sequence. This does not necessarily require ordering the events consecutively; they may very well be split or dislodged on a timeline. However, the events must be connected (or at least understood as connected) within an overarching temporal sequence. Christian R. Hoffman in *Narrative Revisited* points out that temporal sequence decidedly prevails in most definitions of the narrative. Causal logic being an instrumental element is, however, a common, yet not a mandatory principle of storytelling.¹⁴ Next to temporal sequence and causal relations Hoffman introduces a third characteristic essential to compiling a narrative: evaluation. While a narrative constitutes evidence of an incident, it is never devoid of a subjective viewpoint and evaluative contribution to the story - a teller's perspective or a recipient's perspective: "In a sense, evaluation does not relate to the denotative content of the narrative (as temporality and causality) but rather connects to its subjective appraisal by a certain individual (or a group of individuals). It represents the emotive and interpersonal level and the way it semiotically enters into the narrative act."¹⁵ Evaluation is, therefore, not embedded within the narrative, but is negotiated between the teller and the recipient. The three concepts outlined above thus form a theoretical core that I will further employ in the discussion of narratological problems that a shift from analogue to digital poses to film theory as well as in defining the deviations from this system that arguably proliferate in contemporary cinema.

1.2 Database logic

Lev Manovich argued that narrative having defined modernity's basic system of locution no longer constitutes a dominant form of storytelling; it has been substituted by the logic of a database. This shift correlates with computerization of culture and transcription of computer logic onto human perception of the world. Manovich describes database logic as follows: "Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or an end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise, which would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as

¹⁴ Christian R. Hoffmann, "Introduction. Narrative Revisited: Telling a story in the Age of New Media," in *Narrative Revisited*, ed. Christian R. Hoffmann. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2010), 3.

¹⁵ Christian R. Hoffmann, "Introduction. Narrative Revisited: Telling a story in the Age of New Media," in *Narrative Revisited*, ed. Christian R. Hoffmann. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2010), 3.

any other.”¹⁶ In his article ‘Database as Symbolic Form’ Manovich addresses the preeminence of database model in various new media (often web based) that are fundamentally non-narrative because they have to accommodate variability, mobility and potential augmentation and content buildup. Such features determine the nature of new media forms; they are exponential collections, rather than stories, they offer several points of entry and possibly several interfaces accessing the same content. The dominance of such forms dictates that they become a new cultural norm: a world of non-systematized cataloging of data and events. Unlike narrative, database model does not necessitate a cause-and-effect continuity.

To theoretically set narrative and database off against one another Manovich employs a semiological binary opposition of syntagm and paradigm, as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, where a syntagmatic model arranges signs linearly and sequentially, while paradigmatic approach groups signs associatively, each element belonging to a number of different sets, with varying relationships. According to Manovich, a classic cinematic narrative is constructed of both types of elements, where “the database of choices from which narrative is constructed (the paradigm) is implicit; while the actual narrative (the syntagm) is explicit.”¹⁷ One may argue that cinema has always resided somewhere on a cross-section between database and narrative, if one considers the material component of film production: the accumulated footage of various takes (and sometimes a number of alternative endings) forming a film’s database and a unique narrative path constructed in the editing room. The viewer, however, remains unaware of the database component for he is presented with a singular rendition of a film instead of a number of narratives that could have been produced based on the given collection of data. New media make the inversion of this correlation a possibility, embodying database while virtualizing narrative.

It is inevitable that this shift is also manifested in contemporary cinema. Having firmly rooted itself in public consciousness database logic brought about the expansion of cinematic narrative vocabulary through attempts to reconcile the paradigm with the syntagm. Lev Manovich, however, points out that database fantasy is not an exclusive prerogative of the digital age and lists Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as one of the most significant modern achievements of the experimentation with

¹⁶ Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5 (1999): 81.

¹⁷ Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5 (1999): 89.

database format.¹⁸ Vertov's films may in many ways be considered precursive of digital cinematic practices in his groundbreaking exploration of narratological possibilities of the medium, such as geographical and temporal continuity ruptures and film-within-a-film structures.

1.3 Game Cinema

Arguably, the ubiquity of the database logic in new media objects is an aftermath of adopting computer ontology into cultural sphere. Manovich argues that digital technological determinism reduces the world "to two kinds of software objects that are considered complementary to each other: data structures and algorithms."¹⁹

Manifestations of algorithms in modern culture are perhaps most evident in video games, unlike database objects, games are experienced as types of narratives because events in a game do not occur arbitrary; they are all subordinated to an objective, be it skill acquisition or problem solving. The player has to discover, implement and complete a certain predetermined algorithm to achieve the goal. He must learn how to operate within a given universe, recognize the patterns and act based on that logic.

Mark J.P. Wolf suggested that we may anticipate the precedents of digital cinema in video games and vice versa: "The use of space – on-screen and off – in video games is certainly linked and owes a great deal to cinematic space, which was an important influence on its development (...) broadening the sense of what a diegetic world can be through added elements like navigation and interaction."²⁰ While traditionally cinema defines a hard framework of the world, games make such framework subject to expansion through interaction and exploration. It may be argued that digital cinema is adopting such characteristics, while film theory is respectively exploring game theory to understand the shifting nature of cinematic narrative architecture based on (or reminiscent of) game design. In the following paragraphs I will briefly outline some prominent game characteristics embodied in new film narratives.

¹⁸ Manovich explains: "Film editing in general can be compared to creating a trajectory through a database, in the case of *Man with a Movie Camera* this comparison constitutes the very method of the film. Its subject is the filmmaker's struggle to reveal (social) structure among the multitude of observed phenomena. (...) This process of discovery is the film's main narrative and it is told through a catalogue of discoveries being made." (Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5 (1999): 96-98.)

¹⁹ Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5 (1999): 85.

²⁰ Mark J.P. Wolf, ed., *The Medium of the Video Game* (Austin: the University of Texas Press, 2001), 74.

Jan Simons argues that Lars von Trier, being a visionary and a game master par excellence, was perhaps one of the first filmmakers to embrace new media culture in his “cinematic games” even before the digital conversion and a fully-fledged takeover by new media genres. In his extensive study of Von Trier’s work Simons approached the analysis of his cinema from an angle of new media and game studies arguing: “The overarching principle and common ground in all of his films is gaming: Von Trier defines the practice of filmmaking as a game, he performs the founding of film movement as a game, he builds the story worlds of his films as game environments, he models film scenes like simulation plays, and he treats stories as reiterations of always the same game.”²¹ Furthermore von Trier is known to devise new possibilities of direct audience involvement. For example in *The Boss of It All* he placed a number of hidden objects he called Lookeys: misplaced visual elements that clashed with original context and did not conform to the general logic of the film. Simply finding the Lookeys was not enough; to get a reward the viewer had to decode the system, to explain the rules behind their placement. Just like any game needs a set of rules, so does each of von Trier’s films. Those are usually accompanied by a manifesto or a production doctrine.²² Such rules are not a goal as such and neither do they aim to impose a certain aesthetics onto the film; instead they are stimulating (like a game) in that the filmmakers are bound to develop new strategies and solutions based on the existing prohibitions. The analogy of a video game extends to von Trier’s story worlds, which never amount simply to visualization; He suggests rather than defines an unstable virtual environment reminiscent of a database, accommodating multiple imaginations and options. His characters are normally pit against an alien and hostile universe where they have to adopt new behavioral patterns and learn to operate within a new system. All action is therefore an attempt to implement a certain algorithm, but is not necessarily most productive or logical. Von Trier is, however, but one example of a director who has taken on a role of a game master; implementation of game architecture in cinematic worlds is a reoccurring (be it implicit or explicit) motif in contemporary cinema. Simons argues that game

²¹ Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Triers’s Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2007), 8-9.

²² Such rules (especially pronounced in the Dogme95 Manifesto) are usually seen as an appeal for greater realism: Dogme genre negates special effects and post-production gimmicks instead introducing an approach to filmmaking that would more effectively engage the viewer with the story. But more importantly the Dogme95 Manifesto reformulates filmmaking as a procedure defined by rules, like the rules of a game, the imposed restrictions bereave the players from executing the job in a customary, straightforward manner, instead prompting them to adopt new strategies and unconventional methods. Such rules may be seen as an exercise in creativity. (Jan Simons, “Von Trier’s Cinematic Games,” *Journal of Film and Video* (Spring 2008): 3-4.)

theory may help explain certain characteristics of such narratives, which elude narratology: “Game theory takes a *probabilistic* approach to a sequence of events and tasks. (...) Narratology, on the other hand, takes the outcome of a storyline as a *given*, and looks backward for an explanation of the outcome in the particular events and circumstances that preceded it.”²³ Game theory therefore allows for a multiplicity of various outcomes depending on strategic choices the character makes, a particular trajectory becomes but one possibility. Arguably this may lead to open-endedness and lack of closure inherent to gaming. In the case of von Trier’s universes the strategies of his players consistently lead to their defeat and which, as Simons pointed out, always subscribe to a general form of Prisoner’s Dilemma²⁴, resulting in reduction of infinite possibilities of various endings to one (invariably tragic).²⁵ Simons makes a strong case in comparing von Trier’s cinematic worlds to game architecture, but what is perhaps more important is the implementation of a respective methodology (game theory) to understand the ramifications of game references in such films.

1.4 Cinema of Attractions 2.0

It may be argued that recent developments in cinema show a proliferation of “attractions” in a sense that a film may foreground the spectacular in its many detours from the narrative in favor of majestic explosions and incredible car chases. Spectacular film events may even seem like self-sustained acts, instead of being carefully integrated into the main plotline. An anthology of the “cinema of attractions” compiled by Wanda Strauven, addresses the implementation of the phenomenon of attraction in studying what the author calls “post-cinematic media”. Viva Paci, one of the contributing authors, suggests that an important distinction between attraction and narrative lies in the fact that the pleasure of attraction is drawn from its self-sufficient temporality. Unlike narrative chained to the logic of linear unfolding of events in a particular sequence, attraction is a single eruption unconcerned with causal relations. This attraction model, according to Paci, is especially made evident in digitally composed cinema: “High-tech special effects films and films composed largely of digital images undermine the

²³ Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Triers’s Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2007), 197.

²⁴ A prisoner’s dilemma is a canonical case in game theory originally developed by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher in 1950’s. The problem demonstrates that rational individuals may defect and betray one another (which is strategically advantageous for each of the players individually) even if collaboration seems to be in their best interests.

²⁵ Jan Simons, *Playing t he Waves: Lars Von Triers’s Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2007), 198.

homogeneity of the narrative by their proximity to the ways of seeing closer to those introduced and developed by forms of popular entertainment.”²⁶ The term “attractions” which seems to be at large again in film theory refers to the concept originally coined by Tom Gunning in his seminal article ‘the Cinema of Attractions’. According to Gunning, the contributions of early filmmakers such as Georges Méliès have been largely neglected in film history writings but for their tentative participation in the evolution of cinema in terms of narrative editing and storytelling. Gunning however argued: “Although such approaches are not totally misguided, they are one-sided and potentially distort both the work of these filmmakers and the actual forces shaping cinema before 1906.”²⁷ According to him early cinema was not wrought by narrative, but was rather concerned with demonstrating various curiosities to the viewer; Méliès himself stressed that for the filmmaker the premises of the story were of secondary importance, a pretext for magic tricks and arranging fantastic sets and props demonstrating the illusory power of cinema.²⁸ Gunning designates a term “the cinema of attractions” to a Mélièsque form of spectator address, suggesting that the term can be transferred onto contemporary cinema as a way to read recent developments in cinematography. It may be argued that digital cinema also demonstrates the primal authority of attraction underlying the framework of rules of narration: the viewer is once again confronted with often unmotivated and narratively incomprehensible spectacles of excess. Solicited by digitally generated and enhanced imagery such excess stimulates contemporary audience, thus appealing to senses, sacrificing the self-enclosed diegesis to establish a dialogue with the spectator, encouraging a physical response. Over-the-top visual effects, aimed to thrill, shock and entertain often offer nothing in terms of implying or developing the narrative flow. As suggested by Thomas Elsaesser in the ‘New Film History as Media Archeology’, “The revival of Hollywood since the 1980s around the re-invention of special effects was also interpreted as a breaking away from the classical cinema’s form of narrative-realism-illusionism, with its psychologically motivated character and single diegesis anchored in time-space verisimilitude.”²⁹ One may compare the effect early cinema had on its viewer (the amazement, disbelief and allure

²⁶ Viva Paci, “The attraction of the Intelligent Eye: Obsessions with the Vision Machine in Early Film Theories,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 122.

²⁷ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser. (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 56.

²⁸ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser. (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 57.

²⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History as Media Archaeology,” *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* Vol. 14, No. 2-3 (Spring 2004): 81.

of the technological possibility to animate) to the effect that the digital image has on a modern viewer: the eye sees incomprehensible things that the mind can barely follow. Extrapolating from Gunning's discussion of the cinema of attractions, one can conclude that the realism in contemporary cinema is also subordinate to inversely enthused kinds of fantasy, comparable to those of early farces or chase films. The externalized action in early films again finds its reflection in contemporary cinema and even more so in various interactive digital environments, such as video-games, which Elsaesser also lists under the label of cinema of attractions because of their specific forms of spectator address: inviting the viewers to submerge themselves in the image as absolute environment, rather than seeing it as a window on the world. The possibilities of digital technology themselves dictate the reign of attraction if only to show off the fantastic technological achievements at the disposal of contemporary filmmakers. Such ways of seeing are understood to forefront the pleasure of looking, the anticipation of the thrill, being amused and dazzled, rather than being engrossed in the narrative. However, should one treat attraction and narrative as inherently opposite? Elsaesser points out that the two have been perhaps unfairly conflated as binary opposites and stresses the importance of reassessing both the cinema of attractions and narrative integration by examining performative qualities of cinema in relation to diegesis, the temporal and spatial localization of action and its affiliation to embodied experience.³⁰ While digital cinema may deviate from what we traditionally expect from narrative (an account of consecutive events in a predetermined timespan), the fact that it allows for simultaneity and intersection of various time frames and coexistence of multiple worlds does not necessarily mean it is not diegetic. A cinematic event persists in its role of an enunciative agency, what has changed is a diegetic space it inhabits. Such space may prompt the viewer to adjust to new modes of spectatorship, assuming a role of a user or a player. Attraction therefore does not eclipse or substitute narration; in fact narration continues to be a structuring convention that may include attraction as its component, while attraction may be seen as an intermezzo embedded within a larger structure.

³⁰ Thomas Elsaesser, "Discipline through Diegesis: The Rube Film between "Attractions" and "Narrative Integration"," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam university Press, 2006), 215.

2. *The Fall* (2006, Tarsem Singh)

2.1 Complex narratives

The last decades of filmmaking bear a striking proliferation of the so-called multi-protagonist films (films that are not confined to a single main character). The archetypal examples in contemporary cinema are perhaps *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999). However, the phenomenon of the non-individualistic organizational method is certainly not confined to Hollywood, in fact since 1990's a large spectrum of examples noticeably propagates in all film cultures across all continents.³¹ Peter Verstraten in "Rethinking Narrativity in Cinema" argues that the so-called contiguous approach such films adhere to "...differs from classical narration in that coincidences now take precedence over causal relations: something might happen 'out of the blue' and events do not require a thorough introduction."³² Such disordered and tangled narratives might be strange from the point of view of classic narrative tradition; however they find their counterparts in new media narrative forms.

Even though many scholars have addressed the problem of complex narratives with multiple storylines or detached protagonists who never or hardly intersect, there seems to be no general consent as to terminology one should apply to the film(s)-within-film constructs, however such features as non-linearity, multi-strandedness, spatial displacement and temporal fragmentation are commonly emphasized. Framing and embedding are common concepts in describing complex multi-level narratives. Such narratives tend to be polyphonic instead of character-centered, accentuating relations between protagonists to the disadvantage of tight plot lines. In the following sub-chapters I am going to address the newly emerged narrative structures through a case

³¹ Samuel Ben Israel in "Inter-Action Movies: Multi-Protagonist Films and Relationism" provides a comprehensible, but certainly not an exhaustive list of films (of European, Latin American, Middle Eastern and Asian directors) to define the category: Mike Leigh's *Secrets & Lies* (1996) and *Life Is Sweet* (1990), Robert Guédiguian's *The Town is Quiet* (*La Ville est tranquille*, 2000), Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (*Code inconnu*, 2000), Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), Lone Scherfig's *Italian for Beginners* (*Italiensk for begyndere*, 2000), Hong-Sang-soo's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (*Dajjiga umule pajinnal*, 1996), Edward Yang's *Yi Yi: A One and a Two* (*Yi yi*, 2000), Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (*Dayereh*, 2000), Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Love's a Bitch* (*Amores perros*, 2000), Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002). (Samuel Ben Israel, "Inter-Action Movies: Multi-Protagonist Films and Relationism," in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, eds. Marina Grishakova, Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 122-146.)

³² Peter Verstraten, "Between Attraction and Story: Rethinking Narrativity in Cinema," in *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, eds. Sandra Heinen, Roy Sommer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 154-169.

study of *The Fall* (2006), a largely underappreciated film, that nevertheless presents a curious conjunction of the techniques mentioned above: multiplicity of characters, heterogeneous plotlines embedded within one film, mise-en-abyme framework, abandonment of causality in favor of serendipity, open-endedness etc. Those features abundant in contemporary films are perhaps all evident to a lesser or larger degree in *The Fall*. Even though the film does not employ any digitally created or enhanced imagery, it is even more surprising how emblematic it is of a digital shift in filmmaking.

2.2 Multi-strand and multiform narratives

The Fall consists of two mutually integrated narrative levels. The embedding storyline is set in a Los Angeles hospital “once upon a time”, as the opening titles announce (presumably in the 1915), where the viewer is introduced to the two central characters. Roy is a stuntman who suffered a grave injury by making a life-threatening jump from a bridge in an attempt to impress a fellow actress starring in the same film. It was his very first film. Since the injury had incapacitated him, it might as well turn out to be his last one. At the opening of the film he finds himself in a hospital facing a prospect of permanent paralysis. Alexandria, to whom Roy tells a tale in an attempt to befriend her, is a little Romanian girl, daughter of immigrant workers. She has incidentally also injured herself falling, in her case while picking oranges. The viewer later discovers that Roy’s ploy from the very beginning was to trick Alexandria into helping him commit suicide by having her steal a lethal dose of morphine. To get closer to the girl and persuade her to help him, Roy tells Alexandria an epic tale of love and revenge. The embedded story is a legend describing five unlikely companions coming from very different places and historical periods, but somehow united together at a certain point in a joined effort to avenge the evil governor Odious who has in one way or another harmed each of them. In contrast to the stifling hospital environment where Roy and Alexandria find themselves, the legend is set in lavish open landscapes and grand palaces.

Perhaps, a useful theoretical framework applicable to this particular film can be found in Matthew Campora’s analysis of multi-strand narratives. Extrapolating from Janet Murray’s classifications of complex narratives, Campora distinguishes two related, but distinctive forms: multi-strand and multiform narratives. While both concepts relate to films that have multiple narratives and/or multiple protagonists, multiform narratives incorporate not only several narrative stands, but also ontological breaks in that they

feature alternate universes.³³ The two denotative categories are of course subject to intense subcategorizing due to a vast variety of integration levels between separate strands in various films. The formal devices used to interlock or disconnect various strands are also numerous: temporal and spatial ruptures for instance may create very challenging and complex narratives. Furthermore, the worlds described on different levels of the narrative often confirm to mismatched laws of physics. Campora argues: “The narrative multiplicity of multiform narratives is not simply structural but also ontological: multiform films feature parallel or alternate realities in one or more of their strands. Multiform narratives are common in science fiction, horror, and fantasy cinema where parallel worlds are common features.”³⁴ The markers signifying a shift from one state (world) to the other are often ambiguous or even intentionally hidden. This causes an ontological discontinuity. Most common examples would include shifts from waking state (or being sober-minded) to dream state, hallucinatory experiences or flashbacks. Being a multiform narrative, *The Fall* always clearly marks the transition from reality to Roy and Alexandria’s joint dream world. Even though the diegetic shifts are always made evident, it does not stop one reality from penetrating the other. It is interesting to note that by employing multiform narrative structure, the film fuses both narrative and non-narrative methods. On one hand the framing narrative encompasses a fully-fledged character development, conflict and transformation, which would nevertheless seem incomprehensible but for the existence of the second storyline. On the other hand the seeming aimlessness of the embedded narrative suspends the temporal development of the main narrative and substitutes it with a different mode of expression – emotional, especially on an interpersonal level. Even though Roy’s story may seem to have little narrative function, it is hardly redundant. It has a practical purpose as well and cannot be attributed merely to an attempt at substituting realistic representation with spectacular. Roy tells his story to amuse the girl so that he can

³³ Campora illustrates films with multi-strand narratives by providing such examples as *Crash* (2005), *Syriana* (2006), *Amores Perros* (2000) and *Babel* (2006), all of which demand that the spectator makes meaning by stringing together multiple elements. Some of those examples fragment temporal order, further dismantling immediate coherency. Multiform narratives in contemporary cinema can be found in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Memento* (2000), however examples of multiform narratives predating recent interest in complex narratives are also abundant in art cinema classics, for instance *Rashomon* (1951) or *Persona* (1966), to name a few. (Matthew Campora, “Art Cinema and New Hollywood: Multiform Narrative and Sonic Metalepsis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7(2) (2009): 121-122.)

³⁴ Matthew Campora, “Art Cinema and New Hollywood: Multiform Narrative and Sonic Metalepsis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7(2) (2009): 122.

manipulate her into helping him access morphine. In case of *The Fall* the imaginary worlds Roy's characters occupy is not only an excuse to show off fantastic landscapes, but rather an insight into internal struggles of the central characters. However, this may be interpreted not as a description of a disruptive mental disturbance, but rather an example of what Elsaesser referred to as a "productive pathology" so common in mind-game films. As opposed to the depiction of mental disturbances from which the characters inevitably suffer in art cinema, in recent films such psychopathological conditions become beneficial in dismantling traumatic experiences and solving the "puzzle". Such conditions are therefore productive, unlike the self-destructive states of mind in the Roman Polanski films (*Repulsion* (1965), *The Tenant* (1976)). Furthermore, they are usually not openly signaled to the viewer, suspending the baseline of normality and indications on which ontological level the protagonists are operating (*eXistenZ* (1999)). The divergent world-views of the protagonists, no matter how implausible, are presented and consumed as real. Elsaesser argues: "One can see the mind-game protagonists' plight as the pathologies of individual lives, but just as forcefully, opening out to contemporary issues of identity, recognition by others, and subjectivity in general."³⁵ Such pathologies are productive for protagonists that are now able to use their afflictions in a revolt against the system (*Fight Club*, (1999)) or in solving the puzzle (*Donnie Darko* (2001), *The Sixth Sense* (1999)), operating on a higher level of cognition or perception.

2.3 The triumph of multi-strand and multiform narratives.

Arguably the multiform narration is normally a convention employed by and associated with art cinema, its roots tracing as far back as Robert Weine's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920). However, in the past decades complex narratives seem to have migrated from arthouse to multiplex movie theatres, having become financially viable. Complex narrative structures are certainly not a recent invention and nor are they a sole prerogative of digital cinema. The precursors of the digital aesthetics and narrative logic can be traced to German expressionists of 1930's and 1940's and experimental work of such directors as Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais in the 1960's. What is perhaps more important and surprising that now such films are targeted not at an enlightened few, but at mainstream audiences. Campora argues that the omnipresence of multiform narratives is a sign of gradual dismantling of boundaries between artistic and

³⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film", in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 25.

commercial aims: “multiform narrative structures – which were generally developed in contexts that overtly rejected classical Hollywood storytelling – are being used to create unusually challenging films for mass audiences, demonstrating that, as in other areas of popular culture, the formerly clear boundaries between the aesthetics of art and commercial forms have blurred.”³⁶ If traditional techniques of storytelling (such as spatial and temporal continuity) may be seen as attempts at erasing the evidence of mediated depiction of reality, transgression of such in avant-garde cinema (and now again in digital cinema) is often attributed to the practice of hypermediacy, which emphasizes the importance of the process, rather than the final product. The renewed interest in hypermediation, according to Bolter and Grusin lies in the cultural logic of the digital: “the practice of hypermediacy is most evident in the heterogeneous “windowed style” of World Wide Web pages, the desktop interface, multimedia programs, and video games. It is a visual style that (...) privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity.”³⁷ A representation is now understood not as a window on the world, but rather as a window accessing an array of other windows and representations, which finds its reflection in contemporary film narratives.

It is difficult to provide hard evidence as to why multi-strand and multiform narrative films have become not only so common, but also commercially successful. As I mentioned above, their triumph may be attributed to a general modification of audience sensibilities, programmed by a digital shift. Technological determinism may also prove useful in defending narratological complexities of cinematic puzzles. It is important to note the diversification of platforms a film has to be adjusted for. It has to sustain multiple viewings as well as multiple entry points to be viable on all media platforms: in cinemas, on television, on DVD etc. As Elsaesser pointed out in his article ‘The Mind-Game Film’, to be DVD-enabled, “it would have to be a film that requires or repays multiple viewings; that rewards the attentive viewer with special or hidden clues; that is constructed as a spiral or loop; that benefits from back stories (bonuses) or para-textual information, that can sustain a-chronological perusal or even thrives on it.”³⁸ *The Fall* alone has inspired two follow up documentaries on the making of the film: *Wanderlust* (2008) and *Nostalgia* (2008) as well as the formation of fan communities debating the many perplexing details invisible to a one time viewer. Many complex narrative films

³⁶ Matthew Campora, “Art Cinema and New Hollywood: Multiform Narrative and Sonic Metalepsis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7(2) (2009): 122.

³⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 31.

³⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, “The Mind-Game Film”, in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 38.

have inspired cult followings often upheld by large internet fan bases exchanging trivia and speculations as to unresolved or ambiguous film twists. New media forms have not only provided new distribution channels, but also ensured the convergence of various narrative forms; video gaming and Internet are often listed among the most authoritative forces behind the shift towards multi-standing and open-endedness. Žižek, however, argues that it may be too quick a judgment to attribute proliferation of complex narratives in film to the rise of cyberspace technology, since technology is always embedded in ideology. In other words, technology only serves the purpose of rendering a more realistic representation of reality based on how we already experience it. Multiform narratives have therefore risen to the occasion in response to new existential sensibilities, which Žižek described as follows:

“a new “life experience” is in the air, a perception of life that explodes the form of the linear centered narrative and renders life as a multiform flow. (...) Either life is experienced as a series a multiple, parallel destinies that interact and are crucially affected by meaningless, contingent encounters, the points at which one series intersects with and intervenes into another, or different versions/outcomes of the same plot are repeatedly enacted.”³⁹

It is only natural that awareness of reality as frail, uncertain and only one of the possible would find its correlative in new forms of complex cinematic narratives. Digital media may be seen in this process not as a cause, but rather as a signal of a larger shift in the collective consciousness, where “productive psychopathologies” I referred to earlier in this chapter are a preferred mode of meaning making.

2.4 A Film-within-a-film

The Fall's narrative is established in a mise-en-abyme framework and comprises two parallel storylines that are interwoven by the very act of narration. Even though the viewer is aware that Roy phrases the story, the visuals the spectator sees are a figment of Alexandria's imagination. This is almost immediately made evident when they first meet and Roy tells the little girl that she was named after Alexander the Great. As Alexandria is standing in the corridor listening to the legend about “the greatest warrior who has ever lived”, an image of a horse appears on the wall, projected through a hole in the door, as if the room were a pinhole camera. Alexandria closes her eyes and envisions Alexander the Great riding a horse. Even though Roy is telling the embedded story, it is

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's lost Highway* (Seattle: Walter Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000), 43.

in fact the visual narrator who shows it to us. This narrator conforms to Alexandria's vision, offering us her internal focalization. There is a difference therefore between the auditive and visual narrator. Focalization, a term originally coined by Genette describes whose perspective it is that is being presented. Burkhard Niederhoff suggested the following definition: "a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the story world."⁴⁰ Roy's narrative seen through the mind's eye of Alexandria creates an interesting tension between the two slightly different renditions of the same story. The visual tapestry is woven out of Alexandria's memories, what we see is at times at odds with what we hear, because even though the story is controlled by Roy, he has no control over the visual representation based exclusively on Alexandria's experiences and what she knows of the world.⁴¹ The Indian in the embedded narrative can illustrate an example of such discrepancies. Roy explains that the Indian was married to the most beautiful squaw in the world. He is clearly referring to a Native American, as the word "squaw" refers to ingenious women of America. Alexandria however imagines an Indian in a grand palace and wearing an exuberant outfit, as she has no concept of Native Americans, but used to know an Indian at the plantation where she used to work.. At another instance Roy introduces Sister Evelyn into the story; she later betrays the Red Bandit and chooses Odious instead. For Roy she is a representation of his ex girlfriend who similarly betrayed Roy in real life. In the embedded narrative however Sister Evelyn bears resemblance to nurse Evelyn from the hospital. Apparently Alexandria associated one with the other because of the same name, however if it were Roy's visualization sister Evelyn would likely resemble his girlfriend and not a nurse, whom he probably had never even crossed paths with as she worked at the children's ward. The film-within-a-film is virtual in two senses. First of all, the embedded narrative of five vagabonds on a quest to find evil governor Odious conceived by Roy remains reimagined for the viewer through a mind's eye of Alexandria. It is thereof a mental construct. Secondly, a feedback loop endures throughout the film between the depicted reality of the framing narrative where Roy is a bedridden stuntman telling a story and

⁴⁰ Burkhard Niederhoff, "Focalization," *Handbook of Narratology* ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 115.

⁴¹ In *Film Narratology* Verstraten provides an example of a similar visual reconstruction by the listener in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Hector Babenco, 1985): "the prisoner Luis Molina tells his cellmate Valentin Arregui about one of his favourite movies, A Nazi film about forbidden passion, betrayal, and death. (...) We assume that the film-within-a-film we see is not so much Luis's narrated recollection of it, but rather the way in which his listener and fellow prisoner visualizes it. In other words, the visual track is not necessarily controlled by the narrator's text but can also originate from the listener." (Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto press incorporated, 2009), 141.)

the embedded narrative where he is featured as a Red Bandit. Alexandria's mental projection is based on the people she encountered at the hospital and at the orange plantation: Luigi is a virtual double of the one legged actor, who comes to see Roy, ice delivery man turns into Otta Benga, orange picker into Indian, orderly into Darwin and so on. In the beginning of the film as Alexandria is wondering through hospital's corridors she is frightened by a doctor entering a radiology cabinet in protective metal mask and apron. He later becomes a prototype for Odious' soldiers wearing a similar outfit in the inner story. The world of the inner story resembles a virtual simulation constructed out of various given elements that can be rearranged in an indefinite number of possibilities. The instances of clarification as to the difference between visual and auditive narrator are spread all over the film, gradually the viewer gets accustomed to visual oddities, to text contravening image and to contingency of Alexandria's virtual reality.

Even though at first Roy seems to be disinterested in his own narration, often losing his concentration and looking distracted, as he comes to identify himself with one of the characters in the story, it becomes his way of rationalizing his own death wish. In *The Fall* Singh institutes a mise-en-abyme between Roy and Alexandria who find themselves in a Los Angeles hospital and Red Bandit and his daughter in the fictional quest to defeat the evil governor. However, as the story develops the line between the two is continuously blurred. According Brian McHale, a literary theorist, to comply with the characteristics of mise-en-abyme a narrative should satisfy three criteria:

"First, it is a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation *resembles* something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this "something" that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation *reproduces* or *duplicates* the primary representation as a whole."⁴²

Not only does the framing story in *The Fall* gradually establish parallels with the embedded narrative, it also helps the narrator transcend the restraints of reality (as Roy is bedridden and immobilized) to achieve closure and recover from despair. The establishment of mise-en-abyme takes place through a number of scenes as the viewer is forced to continuously jump back and forth between "reality" and fiction though subtle links between everyday objects Alexandria reimagines into landscapes and props

⁴² Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 124.

in Roy's story. Such transitions and jumps from link to link comply with the rationale of what Slavoj Žižek referred to as cyberspace hypertext. According to him, unlike solution driven single path narratives with a predetermined outcome, "hypertext rhizome does not privilege any order of reading or interpretation: there is no ultimate overview or "cognitive mapping," no possibility to unify the dispersed fragments in a coherent encompassing narrative framework, one is irreducibly enticed in conflicting directions."⁴³ The lack of orientation at the beginning of Roy's story, interchangeability of characters, transitions and developments made on demand of Alexandria and even an abrupt killing off of all the characters and their sudden resurrection in the next episode all signal the possibility of many alternative paths and absence of a final predicament. It may be argued that the *mise-en-abyme* established in *The Fall* takes a step further from the traditional understanding of the concept as mirroring the embedding narrative in the embedded story. The hierarchy between the primary diegesis and Roy's story is turned inside out. Even though the embedded story seems like a much grander undertaking (in terms of production) and a more important plot line (in terms of screen time), its content is irrelevant to the narrator, it is only an excuse to befriend Alexandria and entertain her so that Roy can manipulate her into stealing morphine. Not only does Roy adjust the story as he goes along according to Alexandria's wishes but also in the embedding story coincidences take precedence over causes (I am referring to the accidental meeting of the protagonists, when Alexandria's note to the nurse thrown out of the window lands on Roy's lap or to another instance when Alexandria misreads the e in morphine as number 3), thus turning the overarching method of *The Fall* into what one might call a cinema of morphing.

At first the relation between the inside and the outside narratives is rather subtle and at times may be attributed simply to an attempt at smooth visual transition between the two. People Alexandria encounters in the hospital are transformed by her imagination into characters of the legend (not only do they bear a physical resemblance, but also their personal traits are transcribed onto the heroes), simple objects and gestures have their fictional counterparts as they morph into landscapes, e.g. a close-up of a butterfly in Alexandria's treasure box segues into an aerial view of the Butterfly Island, where the bandits are stranded in the inner story. Gradually Roy's mental state infracts the inner narrative more and more to the point when it completely invades the fictive reality of his characters. When Roy takes what he thinks is a lethal dosage of pills, so does the Red Bandit in the legend, both Roy and his fictional alter ego start losing consciousness and

⁴³ "The Cyberspace Real," Slavoj Žižek, accessed July 31, 2014.
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-cyberspace-real/>.

Alexandria's attempts to wake Roy up are mimicked in the inner story, when Alexandria inserts herself into the narrative in the role of Red Bandit's daughter and comes to his rescue. When Roy is falling asleep in real world, he is describing a wedding ceremony to Alexandria, at odds with what is happening in the inner story, Darwin present at the ceremony says to the Red Bandit: "The mystic spies danger in your palm. You've taken too many pills, death is near. Suicide is not the answer", clearly referring to the situation in reality. Odious, the faceless embodiment of evil is finally identified as the actor who stole the girl in real life and Red Bandit (Roy's alter ego) has not only to defeat him, but also come to terms with the betrayal by his loved one. He therefore duplicates his dilemma, putting Red Bandit in the same circumstances as himself. Having established the palpable mise-en-abyme correlation, the viewer must acknowledge the duplication of motifs and may interpret the denouement of Roy's tale as a foreboding of the outcome of the framing narrative. It may be argued that such fragmentation and duplication can be justified because it suggests a more genuine depiction of the existential truth of protagonists, an insight into their inner psyches. Without the inner story, the embedding narrative would most likely have characters with dubious motivation. But what makes *The Fall* outstanding amongst the many films that employ the mise-en-abyme structure is that the film somehow overdoes the convention alternating the roles of the embedding and the embedded narratives: in terms of screen time Roy's narrative takes precedence. However the narrator is either oblivious or disinterested in the mirroring effect, which is only important for Alexandria who is seeking out a possibility of Roy's salvation through the story. Furthermore, I would like to point out a certain tendency of similar inversions of mise-en-abyme constituted in such films as *Southland Tales* (2006), *The Fountain* (2006), *Mr. Nobody* (2009) and *Primer* (2004), all of which came out in close proximity to each other.

2.5 Transgressing Diegetic Borders

The mise-en-abyme between the two narrative levels in *The Fall* may be seen as a typical postmodernist play with ontological boundaries, however the film goes a step further in dismantling the margins between the two narratives. At first the embedding story and the embedded story seem to intrude on each other until they finally morph making it difficult to separate the two. Such breaches of boundaries are usually referred to as metalepsis, originally defined by Gérard Genette as follows: "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters

into a metadiegetic universe)".⁴⁴ The distinctions between the levels are usually signaled by audio-visual clues that aesthetically differentiate the intradiegetic and metadiegetic levels in the film.⁴⁵ The stifling enclosed atmosphere of the hospital where Roy and Alexandria find themselves is contrasted by sun lit open spaces of grand landscapes where Roy's epic tale occurs. Arguably, there should be no confusion as to the real and the fictional in *the Fall*, however, transitions from one to the other are sometimes accompanied by acoustic discontinuities and visual breaches from one level to the other. According to Marie-Laure Ryan's analysis of metalepsis, the border between various levels can be either illocutionary or ontological, where the former may be considered factual and the latter fictional.⁴⁶ Illocutionary boundary can be presented in form of a flashback, or any other real past event, while an ontological boundary refers to a fantasy, a hallucination or other imaginary event, in which case the viewer must acknowledge that the new world is not an expansion of the intradiegetic level and therefore may not conform to its rules. Since in *The Fall* the two levels have a different ontological status, one presented as reality, another as fiction, it can be referred to as crossing the ontological boundary. However, one can also distinguish the use of an illocutionary transition in the metadiegetic universe. Roy's fictional tale begins with a description of five unlikely companions banished by governor Odious to the butterfly reef. Each of the characters holds a grudge for the evil governor and each has sworn to avenge him for something. The viewer is then presented with a back-story for each of the bandits explaining their hatred towards Odious (incidentally the word "odious" means deserving hatred or repugnance). For example, the Indian wants to avenge the death of his wife, the most beautiful squaw in the world, whom the governor had kidnapped and thrown into the labyrinth of despair, Otto Venga swore to kill Odious because his brother died of exhaustion while working at the plantation to fill the coffers of the evil governor, Luigi was banished from his hometown and upon his return discovered that talking to him had been made illegal by Odious. These stories are

⁴⁴ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, ed. Jane E. Lewin. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 234-235.

⁴⁵ Campora distinguished three levels in complex narratives: intradiegetic, extradiegetic, and metadiegetic: "The extradiegetic is the level at which narration happens, and in a film, is represented by the camera-narrator; and the intradiegetic is the primary level at which the story is being told and is one level up in the narrative hierarchy from extradiegetic. Higher levels, referred to as metadiegetic levels, result if and when additional (embedded) narratives are generated within the diegetic world." These may appear in forms of dreams, flashbacks, memories, etc. (Matthew Campora, "Art Cinema and New Hollywood: Multiform Narrative and Sonic Metalepsis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 7:2 (2009): 124.)

⁴⁶ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines," *Semiotica*, 150 (2004): 439.

presented as a series of flashbacks, even though they are temporarily isolated, they remain ontologically homogeneous with the rest of the legend that Roy is telling.

It is interesting to note that due to the construction of transitions from one level to the other between reality and fiction, a certain amount of (mutual) contamination occurs; some elements display their affiliation to both orders at once. This is especially evident when a character or a narrator trespasser violates the boundary. Two types of breaches may be differentiated: rhetorical and ontological: "Rhetorical metalepsis interrupts the representation of the current level through a voice that originates in or addresses a lower level. (...)Ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination."⁴⁷ Ontological metalepsis may occur when elements or characters from intradiegetic level enter the metadiegetic level or vice versa. In the next paragraphs I will first argue that *the Fall* employs both an ontological and a rhetorical metalepsis and then analyze the proliferation of metalepsis in contemporary cinema and its affinities with digital culture.

A rhetorical metalepsis in *the Fall* is represented by the very act of Roy's storytelling, every time a transition from one level to the other occurs, it is Roy's voice that carries the viewer across the margin, however such manifestations leave the border intact. Other instances that have a more profound influence on the cross-dissolving of the two worlds are Alexandria's interruptions and corrections of Roy's narrative. In one of the first transitions from one level to the other as one of Alexander the Great's soldiers in Roy's story mouths the question "Why?", it is Alexandria's voice and bewilderment that we hear. The ontological metalepsis is even more distinctively formulated throughout the film. Roy tries to incorporate things that he knows about Alexandria into his narrative, like the fact that she likes to through oranges at the priest or introducing her gap-toothed father as one of the central characters (the Red Bandit) of his story. Alexandria's imagination reinterprets everyday objects and weaves them into the story. When in Roy's legend Alexander the Great is presented with a note, it is written in crude childish handwriting on a cut out piece of paper, similar to the one we see when Alexandria herself writes a note to the nurse in the beginning of the film. Narrator's hand gestures come into play: he makes a circular move indicating the spinning dance of dervishes as they give directions to the travelers in inner story. The fact that Alexandria imagines the people she has encountered in the hospital into protagonists of Roy's story point to an ontological contamination of the embedded narrative by elements of the main narrative, besides certain gestures and facial expressions migrate between the two

⁴⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines," *Semiotica*, 150 (2004): 441-442.

worlds: Roy is puzzled when Alexandria points out that there are inconsistencies in his story, but we see a puzzled expression of the Red Bandit in the inner story. Perhaps an ontological metalepsis is most evident when Alexandria inserts herself into Roy's story dissatisfied with where the narrative is going in an attempt to save Red Bandit's life in the role of his daughter (and metaphorically Roy's own life in reality). In this case it is not just objects and sounds that morph into new combinations or adjust their meanings, but an actual corporeal person appearing inexplicably in the middle of a fantasy. In the final chapter of Roy's narrative the border between the two levels is continually transgressed as the two stories bleed together and we come to understand that the embedded narrative is a reflection of Roy's mental state and his inner struggles to come to terms with betrayal, injury and desire to end his life. If I were to employ Ryan's metaphor of narrative stacks, in the final episodes of Roy's story the stack finally collapses on itself, erasing ontological boundaries.

Examples of intertwining ontological domains and violations of diegetic borders proliferate in contemporary cinema. The later often appear unmarked, further challenging the viewer. Metalepsis is however not a film-specific phenomenon, it is prevalent across many media. The computational turn has ensured the rise and proliferation of metaleptic strategies, especially if one considers the interactive possibilities of various new media. For instance, immersive strategies in video gaming through entering the diegetic worlds with the help of an avatar are an example of a perfect metaleptic vehicle. Ryan argued, "computer games offer a particularly favorable environment for metalepsis: (...) as worlds that invite the player to play the role of a character – the avatar – they can exploit the contrast between the players' real and fictional identities; and as fictional worlds, they can resort to many of the metaleptic tricks of standard literary fiction."⁴⁸ The blurring of ontological borders brought about by a feedback loop between the virtual and the actual allows creating the increasingly immersive experiences. This also has consequences for narrative structures, that rather than being static, incorporate deconstructive elements. Multidirectional, cyclical structures now take precedence over linearity, process over resolution.

2.6 Hypertextuality, contingency, and open-endedness.

As discussed previously, *The Fall* presents an interesting hybrid of various narrative conventions, but somehow seems to overplay them. For instance, mise-en-abyme goes a

⁴⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines," *Semiotica*, 150 (2004): 458.

step beyond through the use of rhetorical and ontological metalepsis morphing reality and fantasy together. Furthermore, we have a case of an auditive narrator, who is indifferent to his own story and a visual narrator who based on the clues turns it into an incredible spectacle as lavish landscapes seamlessly intertwine and characters of the embedded narrative effortlessly transgress all geographical and temporal borders. The story opens up to the many possibilities and trajectories that Alexandria as a listener can steer into any desired direction, making unpredictable jumps and substituting one character with another. The film thus stems from the logic of cinema of morphing: a string of practical impossibilities where the principle of causality seems to pale into insignificance.

The flexibility of the plot in Roy's story is very reflective of the assumption that we are following but one of the possible trajectories. As Manovich suggested in relation to new media principles, "On the level of the whole object, the user is made aware that s/he is following one possible trajectory among many others. In other words, she is selecting one trajectory from the paradigm of all trajectories defined."⁴⁹ Alexandria imagines Alexander the Great riding a horse through ancient ruins, when Roy corrects her, saying that Alexander was not on a horse, because he had lost his horse in a battle, and in fact he was not surrounded by ruins either but walking through a desert, the rider gets off his horse and in one swift panning shot that begins in Rome and ends in a dessert the setting is changed. Roy shifts to a different trajectory, effortlessly adding or detracting elements as he speaks. When he says that the warrior was with a handful of soldiers, a number of people appear behind him, as if conjured out of thin air. Spatio-temporal dimensions of the inner story are subject to change, as well as the characters that do not seem to possess stable identities. For example, Alexandria decided that she wanted to substitute the character Roy identified with her father (a gap-toothed bandit) with a character she identified with Roy, because her father died. Red Bandit who originally had a Romanian accent, is at odds with Alexandria's imagination, who thought he was Spanish, while Roy claimed he was French. In a way Roy's story becomes a cyberspace that they enter as an escape from reality. The conflicting and inconsistent directions Roy's story is taking and his initial refusal to finish it, denying closure makes the viewer helplessly lost in the intricacy of various references, twists and turns. It can be argued that the inner story told by Roy is not concerned with the principles of causality, it is not a predetermined account or a chronicle. He invents the story as he goes, elements and

⁴⁹ Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5 (1999): 90.

characters become interchangeable. Just as in Roy's story coincidences and flashes of inspiration take precedence over carefully structured plot, so was the case with shaping the script for *the Fall*. Catinca Untaru, a young Romanian girl, who spoke almost no English, was cast to play the role of Alexandria. She was taught her lines word by word, but if the scene was not successful in two or three takes, the script was changed, so that the lines did not seem rehearsed. A plot twist, when Alexandria misreads the label on morphine, mistaking letter e for number three and brings Roy only three pills therefore preventing his suicide was based on actress misspelling the word in real life. Singh immediately changed the script to incorporate the clever episode.

An uninitiated viewer is likely to miss quite a few hints, links and "inside jokes" included in the film⁵⁰, however this lack of full understanding and orientation is also reassuring in a way that a cyberspace hypertext is reassuring: one is unlikely to face a dead-end, since there are always alternative paths to explore. While Roy is fixated on the idea of death, he is also refusing to bring his story to a closure. Žižek argues: "Our fixation on electronic games and stories is in part an enactment of this denial of death. They offer us the chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different solution. In this respect, electronic media have the advantage of enacting a deeply comic vision of life, a vision of retrievable mistakes and open options."⁵¹ Even though at first Roy does not realize this, his story makes him revisit the traumatic experience of physical injury and betrayal and by replaying it over and over, with various outcomes; he learns to cope with his past.

The film closes with the screening of the flicker during the shooting of which Roy had injured himself. Roy realizes that his injury was in vain, because the scene was cut. *The Fall* closes with scenes from silent films: *One A.M* (1916), *Never Weaken* (1921) and *The Counter Jumper* (1922), to name a few. A compilation of incredible stunts performed in those films may be seen as homage to cinema. Alexandria, however, imagines that Roy is the one, who performed all those stunts. Such an open end deprives the viewer of closure, since we realize it is only Alexandria's heart's desire that Roy recovered from his

⁵⁰ For instance the fictionalized version of Darwin in the film carries around a monkey named Wallace. It is said that Wallace being a fellow naturalist contributed to Darwin's work but was somehow cheated out of his rightful place in history, Darwin having taken credit for his ideas. In the film Darwin many a time allowed the fellow buccaneers to believe that it was him to suggest a clever solution, while in reality it was the monkey. However towards the end when Wallace gets shut, Darwin says: "Don't leave me, my friend. I'll tell everyone they were your ideas. They're going to find out I'm a fraud."

⁵¹ "The Cyberspace Real," Slavoj Žižek, accessed July 31, 2014.
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-cyberspace-real/>.

injury and pursued a career in film. In reality an open-ended strategy allows for multiple mutually exclusive imaginations to exist side-by-side.

2.7 Virtual spaces

In his article “Media Heterotopia and Transnational Filmmaking: Mapping Real and Virtual Worlds”, Hye Jean Chung argues: “The fantasy of global mobility (an important thematic and visual motif in *The Fall*) is embodied and articulated in the film’s narrative and its production process. The story is propelled by the inclination to show remote locations around the world, selling exotic, “othered” landscapes to a global film audience.” The traceless stitching together of an impressive number of locations used during the shooting without employing any digital effects and the insignificance of their geographical specificity to the plot may be seen as a reflection of the director’s cosmopolitanism and imagination that defies national boundaries. More importantly however, it spotlights the flawless assimilation of globally dispersed production sites as if they were contiguous. A group of bandits itself composed of various fictional characters and fictionalized historical figures of widely varied backgrounds and belonging to different historical timeframes⁵² moves effortlessly through lands and continents with improbable speed and agility. Even though to interweave the spatially dispersed locales *The Fall* employs techniques already developed by early cinema, instead of CGI, it is reminiscent of the fluidity of geographical maneuvers so common in digital cinema. The physical peculiarities of various sites are interlaced to form a single tapestry incorporating heterogeneous spatialities and even temporalities, therefore constructing a transnational landscape. Paradoxically, the authenticity and materiality of the imagery in the film bears testimony to the digitally mediated perception of the contemporary viewer, as Chung put it, “The film is still emblematic of the digital moment in which global mobility is facilitated, enabled, and embodied by technological modes of mediating sensations of physical mobility and visual fluidity, thus conveying a mode of perception that simulates a transcendence of national, physical, and ontological borders.” Through what would appear a revolt against computer generated imagery *The Fall* cultivates the aesthetics of digitally constructed spaces and illogicalities of virtual worlds, unceasingly invoked by the voice of narrator and imagination of his little listener.

⁵² The two historical figures extremely loosely referenced in *The Fall* – Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Ota Benga (circa 1883-1916) could have never met if only because they lived in different time periods.

3. *The Congress* (2013), Ari Folman

3.1 A dystopian vision of digital cinema

The Congress (2013) is a film by an Israeli director Ari Folman combining live action and animation. The script is an adaptation of Stanisław Lem's science fiction novel *The Futurological Congress*. The novel is a futuristic dystopia, a prevailing science fiction trope, where Lem prophesies a world run by pharmaceutical corporations, which instate a global dictatorship chemically suppressing riots and pacifying citizens turning them into benevolent slaves to drugs. They are unaware of reality and susceptible to complete mind control. The film deviates from the book by making an allusion to digital cinema as an evocator of an impending societal change and complete eradication of film as we know it. When discussing his work on the script, Ari Folman explained: "I was looking for a new, more current dimension to the allegory of the communist era in the book. The chemical dictatorship in the novel was transformed during the writing process into dealing with dictatorship within the entertainment business, specifically, the film industry controlled by the big studios. From there, the theme of an aging actress involved in the story was just a matter of process."⁵³

In *The Congress* Robin Wright plays a middle-aged actress, who was once in high demand but has now gone behind the scenes. She is approached by Mirramount Studios with an offer to sell her image to the company, which will from now on have an exclusive right to produce films with her scanned 3-D version and a condition that she must now forever retire from her acting career. In return she is offered an impressive amount of money and a digital immortality for she is to remain forever young, at least on screen. Mirramount Studios is however to be the sole decision maker over which films her avatar will appear in, including tasteless blockbusters with tacky scripts and sexually explicit scenes, Robin was not willing to participate in as an actress. In his interview Folman expressed a deep concern about the new film economy and especially that of digital actors, use of which seems to become mainstream. In what Folman calls a post-*Avatar* era filmmakers must contemplate whether real actors can be completely substituted by their virtual avatars, having been scanned in and rebuilt anew as digital reconstructions, indiscernible to the naked eye from their flesh and blood prototypes. The job of the director would then become steering the simulated performance. As

⁵³ *The Congress*. "Interview With Ari Folman." Accessed June 10, 2014. <http://thecongress-movie.com/press.htm?lng=en>.

Folman put it, “*The Congress* is primarily a futuristic fantasy, but it is also a cry for help and a profound cry of nostalgia for the old-time cinema we know and love.”⁵⁴

3.2 A digital performer

In his article ‘The Uncanny Valley’ published in 1970’s Masahiro Mori argued that interaction with technology that is close to, but not quite human looking, may have unexpected consequences. Being a robotics engineer he speculated on a possible outcome of human interaction with a humanoid robot. In his hypothesis he introduced the term *uncanny valley* to describe an experience of the encounter with misleadingly human technology. In his prediction that future innovations will allow robots to resemble humans (and I would like to extend this comparison to computer generated imagery), up to a point that it will no longer be possible to tell one from the other, he also recognized the fact that people seem to have more affinity and empathy for human-looking robots than to those whose appearance is based exclusively on their functionality. However, upon being confronted with that which seems human, but is actually not and when the resemblance becomes almost, but not quite impeccable, people experience an “eerie sensation” and even revulsion. Such response is what Mori calls the uncanny valley.⁵⁵ The term has recently been popularized and largely employed in robotics, but has also received recognition in digital imaging. In ‘Pixel Perfect’ Margaret Talbot explains that while we may identify with caricature humans in cartoons, pseudo-humans produce the opposite response: “In recent years, one lavish Hollywood film after another has tried to cross the Uncanny Valley—*Beowulf*, *The Adventures of Tintin*—but their digital characters have struck most viewers as dead-eyed and stiff.”⁵⁶ Paul Debevec, a researcher in computer graphics and the inventor of the elaborate 3-D digital scanning process referred to in *The Congress*, was the one who to this day came closest to crossing the uncanny valley. He explains that the difficulty in animating a digitally constructed human face lies in the fact that humans are so attuned to facial recognition that the subtlest misrepresentation in computer rendering immediately strikes us as artificial.⁵⁷ The inventor of the light stage technology that scans people and produces hyper-realistic computer generated avatars will in the next few years and with

⁵⁴ The Congress. “Director’s Note.” Accessed June 10, 2014. <http://thecongress-movie.com/press.htm?lng=en>

⁵⁵ Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley”, *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* (June 2012), 98-100, accessed June 9, 2014.

⁵⁶ Margaret Talbot, “Pixel Perfect,” *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, 33.

⁵⁷ “Animating a Photo-real Digital Face,” accessed June 15, 2014, https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_debevec_animates_a_photo_real_digital_face/transcript.

some final refinement make the fabrication of fully realistic people a possibility. His virtual doppelgängers have been used not only in film and video games, but also in virtual-reality simulations employed in military training. The scanning dome Folman imagined, upon searching for a shooting location turned out to be an actual existing location at the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies, where actors have already been scanned for almost a decade. Unlike Folman's dark vision of the impending possibility of complete substitution of real actors by their digital doubles, Debevec's vision of his contribution to synthesizing humans is, according to him, a democratic one: one day the means of media production may be available to general public. Compiling a library of synthetic actors and making the technology available to all film enthusiasts, including amateur filmmakers would allow anyone to manufacture a film with a cast of his liking.⁵⁸

The increasing use of digital actors has its impact not only on film economy but also on the narrative forms. There is no easy way of deriving an absolute formula of what this shift may constitute because of the greatly varying usage of such characters. It is perhaps only viable to assess those contextually, especially since the fabricated qualities of digital actors may not always be visible to the naked eye. However, it may be argued that the rise of CG characters is related to the current call for grander, more fantastic narratives marching into movie theaters under the banner of the spectacular. CG characters are usually represented by (super) heroes with abilities unrestrained by human physicality, fantastic beasts and creatures, anthropomorphic animals or digital extras in scenes that require an extensive number of performers on the background. In *Digital Storytelling* Shilo McClean argues, "The synthesis of recording and representational arts offers new means by which to transmit straightforward narrative material as well as complex thematic and conceptual materials."⁵⁹ Creative freedom brought about by digital imaging and use of digital performers in particular is advantageous not only in terms of production costs and efficiency, but also in expanding the narrative possibilities that do not need to be restrained by physical capabilities of live performers. This has also ensured the uncontested rule of attraction in contemporary cinema. CG imagery measures itself to state-of-the-art, spectacular, and even futuristic, thoroughly accommodating marketing strategies. The concept of attraction in cinema is generally understood as an exhibitionistic demonstration. According to Shilo T. McClean, the presence of a digital performer suspends the classical

⁵⁸ Margaret Talbot, "Pixel Perfect," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, 38.

⁵⁹ Shilo T. McClean, *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 64.

position of a spectator as a voyeur or a witness to something that is not meant to be looked at: "In the case of digitally created performances, everything is designed for the onlooker, absolutely every nuance is created with the express purpose of being seen and being believed."⁶⁰ Attraction sacrifices narrative integration, putting the story on hold for the sole purpose of entertainment, amazement and unrestrained visual pleasure. Often the use of the digital is so smooth it does not betray its digital origins and artificiality, inexplicable in terms of narrative motivation but completely believable as a photorealistic reproduction. A digital actor can perform amazing humanly impossible stunts (*Spider-man*), a CG beast can unobstructively enter any diegetic world (*the Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Star Wars episodes I, II and III*), CG environment enhances the experience and allows creating previously unseen imaginative worlds than bend physics any way they like (*Inception*, *Upside Down*). Such elements may sometimes appear irrelevant, a visual decoration; however they are usually embedded in the main narrative and not an end in themselves. The rule of the attraction should not be considered detractive from the narrative, but rather an intermezzo. Verstraten argues, "The plot mainly functions as an excuse for, or an introduction to, these scenes. Eventually, however, these intermezzos are integrated into the plot, no matter how rudimentary it may be."⁶¹ *The Congress* takes a stab at such excess. We are briefly introduced to the work of the virtual Robin through glimpses into the sci-fi films where she "performed". At one instance we see a fragment of the virtual character Rebel Robot Robin riding a bomb. This is reference to Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), where Major Kong similarly performed the same act. However the scene is also an attempt to ridicule the digital extravaganza that is pointless, no matter how masterfully generated.

3.3 Virtual identity

The Congress takes the idea of a digital actor to the next level. Having been first replaced by virtual simulations and forever disembodied and derelict, the actors or rather their avatars are developed into a chemical formula available for consumption. Now anyone if he so wishes can take on a role of his favorite character and live out his fantasies in a drug induced oblivion. In reality people disconcerted, helpless and glass-eyed wonder aimlessly, unaware of the world. They live out their favorite movies, mentally staging

⁶⁰ Shilo T. McClean, *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 59.

⁶¹ Peter Verstraten, "Between Attraction and Story: Rethinking Narrativity in Cinema," in *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, eds. Sandra Heinen, Roy Sommer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 161.

any possible plot twists, any imaginable outcomes of the familiar scenes. The frenzy of believing to be someone else, of being able to live any conceivable life leaves them forever trapped in an escapist dreamland. Folman's film is a meditation on what cinema may become, beginning with the substitution of live actors with virtual copies to complete overtake by the digital, which he makes an allusion to through the chemical formula that makes any conceivable transgression from narrative cinema as we know possible, substituting it with unprecedented rule of the interactive. When Robin's contract with the studio that scanned her is about to expire, she is invited as a guest of honor to the Futurist Congress. As she is passing the tollgate on her way to the congress, she is warned that Abrahama city, where the congress is held is a restricted animated zone. Robin inhales an ampoule of the special chemical formula. It allows experiencing reality as if mediated by augmented reality: while you physically enter and navigate through an environment, its visual representation is amplified through the use of digitally generated graphics.⁶² In case of *The Congress* the computer generated sensory data is substituted by the self mediated hallucinatory modification of perception. The live-action film gradually morphs into animation⁶³, since the film later explains that the perception of animated reality is only restrained by individual imagination, we are to understand that it is Robin's point of view that we experience. From now on the film is completely animated except for brief instances when we see a projection of an ad for Robin's (or rather her avatar's) new blockbuster "Rebel Robot Robin". Once animated Robin arrives at the congress she enters the lobby of a hotel filled with people in various "disguises", they switch their appearance by consuming various formulas instantly morphing into a different persona, including Robin's own virtual double Rebel Robot Robin.

She is later approached by the studio to extend her contract and include the possibility of turning her into a chemical formula for consumption. They rationalize this explaining that the system has collapsed and cinema is just a remnant of the last millennium, there is no more need for such people as "a scriptwriter, who needs his anti-depressants, an

⁶² I find the comparison of the hallucinatory experience of the characters to augmented reality most appropriate, since unlike virtual reality, which completely substitutes reality with a simulation (allowing the user to enter it without actually going anywhere), the technology of augmented reality is conventionally employed in physical environments and in real-time. The physical world therefore remains intact, only its visual and auditive representation is modified, often incorporating interactive features.

⁶³ Folman explained that *The Congress* may be considered a compilation of allusions to cinematic and otherwise significant referents in history: "The animated part is a tribute to the great Fleischer Brothers' work from the 30's. It's hand drawn, made in 8 different countries and took two and a half years to create 55 minutes of animation." (The Congress. "Interview With Ari Folman." Accessed August 10, 2014. <http://thecongress-movie.com/press.htm?lng=en>.)

ex-Russian storyboard writer with a drinking problem, an animator who's always behind his deadline, those idiots who fall in love with their computer characters or special effects people." Cinema has been substituted by an immersive experience of reality, living out films by assuming identities of favorite characters. In reality it leads to complete absorption of one's identity by that of an avatar. All of the people wonder aimlessly, so absorbed by their hallucinatory fantasy, they do not remember who they are. They walk around glass-eyed, through infested areas of a desolate city unaware of the actual state of affairs. Mirramount pharmaceutical company promises the fulfillment of the ultimate dream: to be whoever you want to be at the cost of complete control over the population.

The past decade has noticeably proliferated with films addressing the problem of virtual identities inspired by the idea of avatars Internet users employ. In a way the animated part of *The Congress* may be seen as a cinematographic analogue of the internet, but instead of assuming a different identity online, the characters consume them as a chemical formula, experimenting, changing, and continuously taking a step closer towards obliterating the original persona caught up in the act of impersonation. Even though Ari Folman's vision is a grave one, Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* argues that adopted identities (in her analysis she of course refers to online identities) are helpful in a sense that they encompass what is considered a postmodern approach towards self-identification: "We are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process."⁶⁴ Our identities are therefore under continuous renovation and reconstruction. Turkle suggests that the realization of the adjustability of an online persona under various circumstances may also help accept that one's offline identity too is not a stable set of parameters, but is highly flexible and susceptible to change. As I mentioned before in relation to *The Fall* replaying the same traumatic scenario in a virtual setting by applying different parameters and trying out various solutions may help overcome a traumatic experience. A cyberspace is an escape from the real and what fears and challenges reality holds. In *The Congress* the population gradually succumbs to the virtual reality provided by chemical formulas finding it impossible to deal with the ever worsening economic situation and their withering bodies. Instead they live out their ultimate fantasies and fulfill all of their drives. As one of the characters puts it: "A year ago when I was consuming Greek mythology, I woke up half-man half-God. I impregnated one of Zeus's daughters, I burned an entire city and then I fucked the city and I burned it and I punished it. It's all about feeling. You just

⁶⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 263-264.

make a choice and you feel whatever you want.” The virtual reality the characters construct may seem like the ultimate freedom of choice and a perfect defense mechanism against the horrors of reality.⁶⁵ Whether seen as an escape or a healing opportunity, virtual encounter with the self through acting out a traumatic scenario or living a life of an avatar, the ubiquity of the theme is also reflected in the emerging film narratives that imitate new media forms often toying with the idea of transitional spaces for unstable identities. It is reflective of a bigger cultural shift that demands narratives capable of approaching the cases of unstable identities and repositioning the same event from multiple perspectives, highlighting the fluidity of oppositions and interchangeability of identities. Jan Simons argued that in the current state of affairs, when identities are as flexible as online avatars, “Those unable or willing to see the contingent, alterable nature of identity, of who try to protect an ‘inner personality’ against the changes that participation in the world always brings about, invariably come to grief.”⁶⁶ At first Robin resists the “temptation”, she takes a stand against the emerging dictatorship of the pharmaceutical companies turning people into avatars oblivious of the real situation in the world, trapped in their dream worlds consuming identities of other people. She publicly voices her concerns to the great dislike of the congress organizers. When the congress is attacked by a group of rebels, Robin’s mind goes on a rollercoaster ride because of the severe hallucinogenic contamination. She is constantly shifting from the animated “reality” to hallucinatory reliving of past, present and possible future events, that all merge into a horrific vision. This finally drives her into a coma after she envisions her own execution. When she is revived many years later having been frozen in liquid nitrogen until the cure for her illness could be found, the world is not as she used to know it. Mirramount has won the chemical revolution, everyone is trapped in a virtual world where time and space are subjective and numeric calendar is forever lost. The diffusion of the self in *The Congress* is similar to what Rodowick has expressed concerning what future might hold for the increasingly digitalized personas with our intentions of control and new techniques of expression: “this may involve a retreat from the sensuous exploration of the physical world and the

⁶⁵ Žižek, however, argues that virtual reality is an ultimate realm of perversion: “Reduced to its elementary skeleton, perversion can be seen as a defense against the Real of death and sexuality, against the threat of mortality as well as contingent exposition of sexual difference, (...) a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game.” (“The Cyberspace Real,” Slavoj Žižek, accessed July 31, 2014. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-cyberspace-real/>.)

⁶⁶ Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Triers’s Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2007), 93.

material structure of everyday life to probe imaginative life and a new kind of sociality.”⁶⁷

3.4 Adjustability of form and narrative

The Congress is reminiscent of the “digital paranoia” films such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), or *eXistenZ* (1999), all of which fiddled with the notion of a digital simulation inconspicuously replacing the ever-degrading “analogue” world. In all those films illusion efficiently substituted matter, concealing the complexities and disorder of reality with a simulated experience of life, inevitably subjecting people to complete social control. Rodowick argued that at the heart of the narrative conflict in all those films lies the tension between the analogue and the digital, which threaten to obliterate the existence of film, as we know it: “The replacement of the analogue world by a digital simulation functions here as an allegorical conflict wherein cinema struggles to reassert or redefine its identity in the face of a new representational technology that threatens to overwhelm it. The implicit and explicit references to computer gaming in these films are also significant and premonitory.”⁶⁸ The drug-induced state the characters populating *The Congress* dwell in may be interpreted as a metaphor for the experience in the world of cyberspace interaction. Having consumed a special formula and walking in the skin of their favorite characters, people create their virtual avatars. Gradually they get so caught up in role-playing that they are not capable to discern virtual from real. The pharmaceutical company having installed its dictatorship over the population sinks it in a psychotic experience of a world devoid of any rules or regulations. Paradoxically, this leads to complete deprivation of choice or ability to act of one’s own accord; since everyone is caught up in his or her frenzied drives. This gloomy foreboding of future cyberspace immersive narratives is in accordance with what Žižek warned against: “one should thus discern in today’s often clumsy and ambiguous improvisations about “cyberspace rules” precisely the effort to establish clearly the contours of a new space of symbolic fictions in which we fully participate in the mode disavowal, i.e. being aware that “this is not real life.””⁶⁹ Robin keeps questioning whether what she experiences and sees is a dream. At the point when the rebels attack the congress and she is saved by the person who was responsible

⁶⁷ David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 174.

⁶⁸ David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

⁶⁹ “The Cyberspace Real,” Slavoj Žižek, accessed July 31, 2014.

for animating her virtual double in the movies, the narrative of the film becomes frustratingly chaotic. One illusion morphs into another, as Robin shifts back and forth from “reality”. *The Congress* presents an interesting case study in that it is both a multiform narrative (featuring alternate universes, or rather imaginations of reality) and a multi-strand narrative (featuring alternative paths the story takes). While the ontological breaks are clearly marked by the shift from live action to animation, separate strands or possibilities of narrative development are presented ambiguously. Since the animated part in itself is so saturated with implausibilities and various double takes, the transgression of linearity is only made evident when the narrative loops back to the starting point of Robin’s hallucination. After the rebels attack the congress the actress finds herself in the basement sewage hiding from explosions. In the first stranding out of the story she envisions being kidnaped by the Mirramount police, and dying in a helicopter crash because one of her son’s kites gets tangled in the blades. However, the viewer is instantly pulled back to the scene where she is unconscious but safe, floating in a sewer under the hotel held by Dylan the animator. Whether another hallucination or Dylan’s flashback we are presented with a digitally constructed scene from “Rebel Robot Robin”, after which Robin wakes up alone only to be picked up by her former agent. The story strands out again as she hallucinates her execution for her misdemeanors at the congress. After the first stranding out the viewer can no longer discern whether what is happening is real or not only to be encouraged to believe that it is by her executioner saying: “After all these years, it’s time you knew this is not a hallucination. These are our lives, Robin.” However we are fooled again as we come to realize that Robin’s mind has been severely damaged and this was just another hallucination. In reality she finds herself in the hospital where doctors decide that for now medicine is helpless and she must be frozen until the time that she can be helped. The multi-stranding in *The Congress* seems to be symptomatic of a bigger tendency in contemporary cinema, which allows for possibilities of adjustment of the storyline for remedial operations, sometimes returning to the starting point to make a different decision or simply erasing the whole experience to suggest a completely new development (as we have seen in *The Fall*).⁷⁰ This strategy is reminiscent of computer

⁷⁰ Perhaps the most prominent examples of the adjustment tendency and allowing for different outcomes are films like *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) or *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackey Gruber, 2004). In *Run Lola Run* the protagonist has 20 minutes to collect 100,000 marks for her boyfriend who had lost the money he was supposed to deliver to his boss. The film strands out into three runs (or attempts to collect the money), each time with varying circumstances and different outcomes, the first two ending with Lola or her boyfriend dying and restarting from the very phone call that lead to all the commotion in the first place. In *The Butterfly Effect* the protagonist is endowed with special powers to reverse time to fix several

gaming where once you fail, you only need to go back to the start of the level to redeem your character. Furthermore such strategy complies with the database logic that defies spatial or temporal continuity as described by Manovich: rather than telling stories database objects form exponential collections, a list of miscellaneous items.⁷¹ As the user navigates the interface jumping from one link to the other he may either proceed to the next item or return to the previous one, in contrast to narrative such method is not bound by the cause and effect logic.

I would like to extend my comparison of *The Congress* to the logic of the digital media in how the film presents the animated reality. We are made aware that what we see is a mental construct of the protagonist. The drug-facilitated perception is in fact her mind drawing from the library of forms, sounds and persons she had previously encountered. Likewise the criterion of creativity usually affiliated with digital media is not that of ingenuity or differentness but recombination and resequencing. This approach is hardwired to the logic of the digital: recombining images, sounds and other sources to produce boundless sets of new data. Furthermore, digital logic implies a different method of expression: taking control of wielding the world according to a desired layout. The emerging sensibility calls for dismantling of classic narrative forms in favor of flexibility and adjustability. Rodowick argues: "The experience of duration has lost its preciousness; causal links to physical reality have become weakened. But more important, the unidirectional temporality of cinematic narrative – what is most strongly perpetuated in classic narrative form – comes into conflict with the most original and powerful automatisms of digitality – namely, interactivity, control, modularity, and programmability."⁷² *The Congress* complies with the logic of cinema of morphing, where form, plot and identity alike are fluid and subject to adjustment.

3.5 Transmedial metalepsis

As discussed in the previous chapter, metalepsis can refer to a fully-fledged jump from one ontological world to another and transgression of diegetic unity that it implies, but

traumatic experiences that occurred in his childhood. His various attempts at making things right inevitably result in unforeseen circumstances that seem to make things even worse in the present. At the cost of his relationship with his girlfriend he reverses the past one last time to erase his acquaintance with her, which seems to put things back in order. Even though *The Butterfly Effect* employs the common science fiction trope of time travel, such films as *Run Lola Run* show that the multi-stranding tendency is neither confined to nor has to resort to the science fiction genre.

⁷¹ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 225.

⁷² David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 179.

can just as well be represented by a quick glance into a lower or higher level. The later is usually represented by a brief interference by a narrator or narratee and leaves the border intact. In the previous chapter I have discussed the concept of metalepsis in relation to *The Fall*, arguing that even though transgressing ontological boundaries is a fairly common postmodern cinematic trope, *The Fall* takes on a fairly unorthodox approach by letting the listener navigate the course of the narrative, morphing it into a series of impossibilities including leaps in time and space and cases of altering identities. It may be argued that *The Congress* represents an even more exaggerated case of the cinema of morphing. An ontological metalepsis constituted by the shift from two realities, or rather states of mind (sober and hallucinatory) is signaled by a medial shift from live action to animation.

The paradoxical amalgamation of two categorically different realities (that of physical presence in the world and drug induced mental projection) creates an interesting relation, which I earlier compared to augmented reality experience. Robin physically enters a virtual reality leading the viewer into confusion as to the hierarchy of diegetic levels. Werner Wolf elaborating on Genette's original definition of metalepsis offered the following definition, that according to him encompasses a more extensive plethora of media: "a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels that exist, or are referred to, within representations of possible worlds."⁷³ A metalepsis therefore can be seen as a merger of mutually exclusive systems. The film employs two particular modes of representation in contrast to each other to emphasize the shift from one particular mode of perception to the other, however it is never clear to what extent physical environment influences that of the drug-facilitated fantasy and vice versa. Erwin Feyersinger argues, "Many films rely on radical stylistic contrasts to represent two mutually exclusive worlds, emphasizing their distinctness. As a metalepsis is often used for stunning effects, its constituent elements (exclusive worlds, their border, and the process of transgression) are usually foregrounded."⁷⁴ The exclusivity of worlds in *The Congress* is however hard to decipher other than the obvious shift from live-action to animation. Animation somehow contaminates reality, they are in the constant feedback loop, coexisting side by side and simultaneously present. Metalepsis itself often relies on explicit divergence and stylization, the same features are abundant in and even characteristic of animation.

⁷³ Werner Wolf, "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon," in *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 91.

⁷⁴ Erwin Feyersinger, "Diegetic Short Circuits: Metalepsis in Animation," *Animation*, 5 (2010): 282.

Animation commonly absorbs elements from various referents non-discriminately mixing contradictory worlds. For instance, when Robin arrives at the congress the viewer enjoys the parade of characters from other films mingling amongst each other, in reality those are people consuming various formulas (and personas). *The Congress* presents an almanac of film and cultural references all morphed into a frenzied celebration of “freedom” bestowed upon people by the chemical revolution.

The character does not necessarily need to move from one diegetic level to the other to exercise metaleptic impact. Even though Robin appears to be a mere character in the animated reality, she can autonomously modify the environment she is placed in. When the concierge enters her room, she asks: “Is it dark in here or is it only in my mind?” He replies: “Everything is in our mind, if you see the dark, then you chose the dark.” We come to realize that everything we see in the animated part of the film is focalized by Robin, every element is her mental projection, but somehow at the same time real, as she interacts with objects and people. Feyersinger proposed that when a character is capable of altering the representation of her world, it leads to “(con)fusion of the creation of a world with the projection of its representation. While the animated film is pre-produced, its events seem to emerge while we watch it. Cause and effect are reversed.”⁷⁵ We are constantly reminded that it is not a space that we enter when Robin enters the animated zone, but rather a state, which is at odds with the narrative development of the story, that suggests the possibility of physical impact from the environment and other people. The metalepsis in *The Congress* may be considered ontological, there does exist a pronounced difference in, for instance, laws of physics the two realities obey, however one must consider that the two are parallel and simultaneous and therefore all the objects are affiliated with both levels at once. The metalepsis in the film is therefore not unlike the augmented reality experience, which one may enter in the guise of an avatar, however the constant feedback loop ensures the complete dismantling of ontological borders.

3.6 Open-endedness

The Congress may be seen as an allegory to the digital versus the analogue “debate”. In the conclusion of *The Congress* we face the apotheoses of the pharmaceutical companies camouflaging the hopeless reality and downfall of humanity in the face of the “digital”, however we are also introduced to Naturalists, the last community to resist the chemical

⁷⁵ Erwin Feyersinger, “Diegetic Short Circuits: Metalepsis in Animation,” *Animation*, 5 (2010): 285.

dictatorship, the last few who still bring children to this world living by the laws of the “analogue.”

Robin is also torn between reality and the hallucinatory dream world, however her only objective is to find her son Aaron, whom she is willing to follow to whichever side of the chemical barrier. Robin's quest to find her son ends by her escaping the animated reality, and seeking out the doctor who had been treating her son for years only to confirm her fear that he had crossed to the other side a mere half a year ago. The doctor tries to convince Robin to escape into the dream world as well, explaining that nothing had really changed and if before the chemical revolution people merely concealed the truth with anti-depressants, now people are capable to reinvent the truth. The only option left is either to live out your days in real world in its fallen state or hallucinating “on the other side”. Robin's son having waited for her for years finally gave in, as his health was deteriorating at great speed and he was almost completely blind towards the end. There is no way to find him in the hallucinatory fantasy, since there is no way of knowing who he is. The doctor persuades Robin to take the chemical, since there is no place for her in the real world anymore. However, there is also no going back to the exact fantasy she escaped from, where she had left her lover, because there is no such place as a place that she came from. It was just a fickle of her imagination; the mind travels where it wants to, each time playing out a new scenario. Robin finally takes the ampule. The ambiguous ending that we are presented with after she shifts back to the animated reality has become a cause for debate, since the film leaves many questions as to the rules of the game unanswered. As live action switches back to animation, the focalization switches to that of Robin's son Aaron. We experience the world through his eyes, much like in a first person computer game. As we see him being born, handed over to his mother, growing up on film sets watching his mother work, playing with kites, watching Robin leave to go to the congress etc. we come to realize that Robin has assumed the identity of her son and lived out his life to be able to find him in the animated world and understand where he might have ended up. In the last scene we see Aaron (or rather Robin looking like her son) walking towards another Aaron. On the one hand, we may interpret it as Robin finally finding her son, on the other hand, there is no way of knowing how real the imaginary world is, as we have been warned, that there is no such place. Only an open end guarantees redemption of hope in the otherwise hostile and doomed reality of *The Congress*: we realize, but cannot quite admit, that Robin's reunion with her son looks like an unlikely scenario. By denying closure the film defies narrative conventions, leaving the audience questioning if we have perhaps been

mislead and therefore encouraging a subsequent viewing of the film. It may be argued that withholding information prolongs the viewer's engagement with a film.

By defying the convention, the cinema of morphing opens up to possibilities of engagement with the incomprehensible, such films are sometimes compared to experiences, rather than stories. Indeterminate rules of the game, ambiguous plot twists and open ends are all paralleled by the emergence of various new media genres, e.g. computer games that dictate such structures.

It is not surprising that a film that relies so heavily on the database rhizome would employ anything other than an open-ended strategy so common in digital media architecture. The viewer attuned to new media narrative strategies would therefore seek out closure elsewhere. It is not uncommon for contemporary complex narrative films with dubious rules and indeterminate outcomes to manifest their allure in a cult following. Online fan communities often engage in heated debates trying to decipher the unresolved puzzles in the film and speculating about the possible resolutions. This is also the case with *The Congress*, which seems to have posed more questions than it answered. The film seems to overdo the open-end strategy in that unlike not knowing what the outcome may be, the viewer is left wondering whether or not the film has an open-end in the first place. Unlike the earlier phase of the mind-game film, when information would normally be withheld or presented ambiguously, toying with the spectator until finally providing a key to unlocking the puzzle (e.g. *Donnie Darko*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Shutter Island* or *Fight Club*), new films take the game to the next level. In terms of narrative this means that the viewer is not only disoriented or misinformed in the course of a film, but is altogether denied the means to decipher the mystery. Perhaps this shift (to a lesser extent) is already made evident in *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), which closes with the protagonist spinning the top to determine whether he is dreaming or not, but neglecting to find out the answer. The viewer is denied the verdict, but at least he knows that there is none. With films like *The Congress* (and the similarly provocative in terms of beguilement *Enemy* (Denis Villeneuve, 2013) we seem to enter an uncharted territory of cinema that deliberately avoids consistent interpretation.

4. Conclusion

In my research I have addressed the consequences of a shift from analogue to digital filmmaking on storytelling strategies in contemporary cinema. I have argued that the drastic changes in the technology of representation had a pivotal impact not only on the visual style of film, but have also lead to a rupture in the classic narrative tradition. Cause and effect strategies have been substituted by an inversely enthused logic of new media objects; consequently it is only viable to analyze contemporary cinema from this angle, addressing newly emerged complex narratives that have risen to the occasion in response to the ever-growing popularity of video games and the omnipresence of various web-based environments.

The last decades of filmmaking bear a string proliferation of increasingly complex multi-strand and multiform narratives. Such narratives are often polyphonic, instead of character-centered. Furthermore, spatial and temporal fragmentation dismantles linearity resulting in coincidences taking precedence over cause and effect logic. The ubiquity of such forms is arguably dictated by the cultural logic of the digital: reality is perceived as fragmented, unfixed and heterogeneous. Such a modification in existential sensibilities demands narratives ready to encompass contingency, cases of unstable identities and enactment of multiple versions and outcomes of the same event.

Furthermore, the depiction of “productive psychopathologies” in mind game films is also reflective of this syndrome, not only are the characters able to employ their “conditions” to solve the puzzle, the worlds the characters inhabit are consumed as real. Rather than questioning the baseline of normality such films open out to present-day issues of identity, cognition and perception of self and others. Furthermore, complex narratives sustain multiple viewings and are better fitted for the ever-diversifying platforms films have to be adjusted for. Arguably, contemporary cinema benefits from the many perplexing and unresolved details encouraging further engagement with the film. New media forms have not only provided new distribution channels, but also dictated the convergence of new media forms in cinema. In terms of narrative this means that rather than having one predetermined linear development, the story is perceived as a database encompassing an array of data, which one may navigate at will, the story therefore encompasses a number of parallel, equally viable directions and resolutions.

In my research I have addressed the strategies in the newly emerged narrative structures through two case studies (*The Fall* and *The Congress*), both of which do not only present a curious conjunction of various techniques aimed at dismantling

ontological boundaries (a fairly common postmodern cinematic trope), but seem to overlap them taking the game with the spectator to the next level.

The Fall is established in a mise-en-abyme framework, where the two storylines are interwoven by the very act of narration. Even though the film employs many familiar narrative conventions, their use is exaggerated in that the ontologically contradictory worlds do not only resemble or duplicate some aspect of the other level, but also morph together. Furthermore, the hierarchy between the two narrative levels is inverted; the embedded narrative takes precedence (if only in terms of screen time). I have argued that the embedding and the embedded stories are constantly infringing each other through an ontological metalepsis, intertwining reality and fantasy. The auditive narrator appears to be indifferent to his own story only using it as an excuse to manipulate the narratee into helping him steal morphine. The visual representation of the story is seen through a mind's eye of a little girl, who given the clues, draws from a "database" of her knowledge of the world turning the story into an incredible spectacle sewn together from various bits and pieces. Furthermore, Alexandria is also able to wield the story, shifting to a different trajectory, if she so wishes. Thus *The Fall* presents a case of a listener enabled to navigate through a labyrinth of countless possibilities and shaping the story into a desired form. The story becomes a matter of practical impossibilities: the characters effortlessly transgress geographical borders and make temporal jumps. The film, therefore, ensues the logic of cinema of morphing stringing together otherwise unrelated items. The cause and effect principle is substituted by that of contingency, even the characters of the embedded narrative are endowed with accidental identities that are subject to change mid-story.

The Congress similarly presents a case of adjustable narrative. The protagonist having entered the animated reality can no longer discern what is real and what is not, even though the spectator is in on the "trick" on how to distinguish the two, as the film clearly marks the ontological border by shifting from live-action to animation, the rules of the game are presented ambiguously. Therefore, like Robin, the spectator finds it hard to enjoy a disavowal mode and attribute what is happening to a mere figment of imagination. The story strands out several times as the protagonist hallucinates various invariably tragic outcomes, each time encouraged to believe in the pertinence of her psychotic improvisations. The spectator, mindful of the fact that what he witnesses is a mental construct, is still at a loss of how to interpret the events in the film. This is only encouraged by the confusion as to hierarchy of the diegetic levels, animation contaminates reality and vice versa, as we are made aware that Robin can exercise a metaleptic impact. The two worlds are therefore simultaneously present and absorb

each other, as Robin constructs her “reality” navigating through a database of shapes and forms she had previously encountered. In a way Robin’s complete absorption by the fantasy may be seen as a chance of redemption in the otherwise futile attempts at finding her son. The film, however, defies closure for the spectator who is left questioning whether or not he has been misled. Unlike earlier films of the mind-game “genre”, *The Congress* refuses to give the viewer a key to unlocking the puzzle. The film deliberately avoids consistent interpretation leaving out important information. Lastly, *The Congress* being a film about mind control, with a protagonist continuously doubting whether what she experiences is real, is consistent with a spectator hesitant to decide whether or not he is in control of interpreting the film. I would, therefore, like to suggest that with the cinema of morphing we enter an uncharted territory in narrative strategies: such films willfully diverge the spectator into doubt and on the whole aim to defy interpretation.

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