

The Modernist Roots of the Mind-Game Film: The Example of an Italian Puzzle

Angela Bianca Saponari, Università degli Studi di Bari 'Aldo Moro'

Abstract

This essay contributes to the analysis of a phenomenon that became diffused between the 1990s and the 2000s: the mind-game film. It focuses on the destabilization of the classic story in the light of new digital technologies, providing original strategies of production and new possibilities of fruition. There are several studies of the different typologies of mind-game films, of the nature of narrative developments introduced by various directors, and of the technical aspects relating to the psychological dynamics in the image-narrator-spectator relationship. However, there are fewer studies of the modernist roots of this phenomenon. Elsaesser locates the mind-game film within the same category of European subjective cinema during the 1960s. In other words, it constitutes a meta-cinematographic phenomenon, whose origins lie in the European vanguard modalities of experimentation. Following Elsaesser's theories, I suggest that it is possible to study the parallelisms and elements of disruption between that subjective cinema and these new forms of experimentation, which appear to conciliate commercial needs and authorial perspectives. In particular, I seek to reveal the traces of this relationship in the cinema of Elio Petri, using Lev Manovich's category of the 'narrative database'.

Mind-Game Film: A Theoretical Framework

A new film typology captured the attention of both the public and critics between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, within a Hollywood system that was actively seeking to innovate, and find stories that would meet the needs of a modern, changed audience. In this period, the majors appeared increasingly favourable towards narrative experimentation, having perceived a growing audience that was interested in non-conventional approaches to narration. In order to capture this new interest, the industry took influence from television, science fiction, comics and videogames.¹

¹ See David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 74.

At the same time, several auteurs sought to establish a coherent visual language that matched this moment, and specifically the innovative digital technologies that were emergent.

This tendency led to the production of what Thomas Elsaesser labels ‘mind-game films’.² With this definition, he refers to a heterogeneous group of movies characterized by a similar tendency to carry the characters of the story (and the spectators too) through the twists and turns of complex, enigmatic, and labyrinthine narrations. In view of their radical approaches to narrative, these movies cannot be included within the traditional artistic, production and genre categories, instead belonging to a sort of ‘border zone’, where auteur, independent and mainstream cinema converge.

In most instances, the specificity of the mind-game film consists of a precise distinction between this kind of movie and traditional cinematographic storytelling, especially as many of the films demonstrate complex and unstructured narrative. This approach was influenced by two factors: on the one hand, auteur cinema of the 1960s, whose experimental tendency was reinterpreted and made systematic in mind-game films; on the other, the social and cultural context in which the mind-game films developed, between the 1990s and the 2000s.

Referring to the category of narrative database introduced by Lev Manovich, Allan Cameron discusses modular narratives when categorizing the typical plot complexity of puzzle movies.³ Indeed, their main features include the tendency to dismantle narratives into separate segments that are presented in complex combinations which, according to Cameron’s analysis — and, as will be illustrated later, as per Marsha Kinder’s trans-formalist theories — recall ‘the cinematic experimentation of European art cinema’.⁴ From this perspective, ‘modular narrative goes beyond the classical deployment of flashback, offering a series of disarticulated narrative pieces, often arranged in radically non-chronological ways via flash-forwards, overt repetition or a destabilization of the relationship between present and past’.⁵

² See Thomas Elsaesser, ‘The Mind-Game Film’, in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. by Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 13–41. See also the definition of the ‘psychological puzzle film’ by Elliot Panek in ‘The Poet and the Detective: Defining the Psychological Puzzle Film’, *Film Criticism*, 31.1-2 (2006), 62–88.

³ Among the features of mind-game movies is the introduction of the ‘puzzle plot’, that is, a plot in which ‘the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*’. Warren Buckland, ‘Introduction: Puzzle Plots’, in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. by Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 1–12 (p. 3) [emphasis in the original].

⁴ See Allan Cameron, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1 and following. Marsha Kinder has developed an interesting stylistic legacy and narrative analysis of Luis Buñuel’s films and their relationship with contemporary cinema. See Marsha Kinder, ‘Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever: Buñuel’s Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative’, *Film Quarterly*, 55.4 (2002), 2–15. See also Marsha Kinder, ‘Narrative Equivocations between Movies and Games’, in *The New Media Book*, ed. by Dan Harries (London: BFI, 2002), pp. 119–32 (p. 119). On the theorization of database narrative, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁵ Cameron, p. 1.

The Modernist Roots of the Mind-Game Film

A Perspective of Analysis: Paradigmatic Roots of 'Mind Cinema'

Two main features emerge in mind-game films, which are deeply interconnected. The first is the tendency to situate the film in the 'border zone' that divides auteur and commercial cinema. The second is complex and unstructured forms of narration, whose purpose is to carry the spectators through the twists and turns of labyrinthine and complex stories.⁶

The first feature is perhaps the most interesting, as well as the least studied by scholars. In other words, it is important to trace the paradigmatic roots of the mind-game film, here considered not as a separate entity but rather as a phenomenon linked to the evolution of a shared practice of cinema that crosses different areas (genre, auteur, etc.) and seeks to awaken spectators from the torpidity of the conventional movie. I would like to propose the mind-game film as the most recent landing place of the aesthetic modality called 'mind-cinema'.

Elsaesser and Hagener frame mind-game films in the meta-cinematographic typology of the mental image, where the mind, cinema and conscience converge. As a consequence the spectator becomes aware of the very act of watching, and of the processes of their own conscience. This occurs similarly in several films released during the 1960s — from Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*, 1963) to Federico Fellini's *8½* (*Otto e mezzo*, 1963) — where 'a given scene suggests there may be an additional level of reflexivity, and this can be deduced not from the presence of mirrors or *mise-en-abîme* because they are pure cerebral activity, a "virtuality" in a Deleuzian sense'.⁷

Alain Resnais's and Godard's formal experiments represent the most eminent instances of *cinéma désordonné*. The majority of their films address a completely different kind of spectator. However, while Resnais and Godard counted on culturally-aware spectators — 'for whom experimentation was almost a norm, or at least something expected'⁸ — instances of non-linear narrative in recent American cinema seek ultimately to shock a *mass* public, leading it outside of the conventional and reassuring logic of Hollywood narration. This way, formal experimentation that was once restricted to a small, elite audience 'has moved out into the more volatile region of popular culture'.⁹

Matthew Campora's reflections may be useful to understand this phenomenon. Campora states that the merging of auteur cinema and commercial necessities is nothing new; even in the 1930s and 1940s, when German directors came to Hollywood, they ended up incorporating elements from the expressionist

⁶ A clear example is David Fincher's cinema, quite familiar with that 'grey zone' between commercial and artistic and which may represent the most suitable environment for the mind-game film at the beginning of the millennium.

⁷ See Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York, London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 168–76.

⁸ See David Denby, 'The New Disorder: Adventures in Film Narrative', *New Yorker*, 5 March 2007, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/05/the-new-disorder>> [accessed 17 June 2017].

⁹ *Ibidem*.

aesthetic into studio productions. Moreover, in the 1960s and in the 1970s, several young Hollywood directors adopted and adapted the expressive experimentations of various international new waves. However, the innovation of such appropriations in more recent years lies in the fact that manifold narrative structures are found in films that are unusually challenging for a mass audience. This element shows how in cinema, as in other mass culture media, the line between experimental aesthetic and commercial genres has become increasingly blurred.¹⁰ Campora's analysis starts with the study of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). Using Janet Murray's definition, Campora situates the film within the *multiform narratives* model. Multiform narrative cinema is generally characterized by the presence of different diegetic levels. This multiplicity not only affects the structural part of the plot, but also its ontological side. In other words, in this cinema not only do the plotlines of several characters cross and different spatial-temporal levels alternate, but it also offers a story which develops while crossing alternative and parallel realities. This narrative model, explored in genres like science-fiction, horror and fantasy, recurs quite frequently in auteur cinema, where it is utilized to represent the inner world of a character, and is often opposed to their phenomenal reality. Some examples are: Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920), Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1959) and Federico Fellini's *8½*.

In many mind-game films, as in European auteur cinema, there are different levels to the stories and the meta-diegetic dimension is accentuated: secondary narrations proliferate.¹¹ Here any *narrative in the narrative* must be reconnected to the meta-diegetic level, which can be characterized by different strategies that transcend significantly the mere representation of characters' memories, dreams or hallucinations.¹²

The idea is to overcome the contraposition between modernist and postmodernist paradigm; in light of the reflections made here, it is evidently possible to identify similar processes to those of the mind-game film in other filmographies of the past.

¹⁰ 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), 119–31 (p. 122).

¹¹ The reference here is to Genette's distinctions of the three levels of story — extra-diegetic, intra-diegetic, and meta-diegetic. The centre of the extra-diegetic level is a narration determined by the combination of *mise en scène* and elements of cinematic grammar; central to the intra-diegetic level is the primary narration of the movie; and the meta-diegetic level refers to the secondary narration generated at the intra-diegetic level. Gérard Genette, *Figures III. Discours du récit. Essai méthode* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972).

¹² Campora, p. 124.

An Interpretative Model: The Modernist Experimentation of the Narrative Database

As stated previously, the roots of the image-mind relationship are connected to auteur film, and can also be observed in European experimentation and vanguard movements. In the same way, several films characterized by a complex narrative structure and playful/disturbing dynamics in their relationship with the spectator — produced in countries with deep political and social crises or historical moments defined by the push for change — can be considered as similar ancestors of mind-game films.

Many earlier films reveal how the need to go beyond a mimetic relationship with objective reality has been central in every historical period and not necessarily linked to digital technologies. The aim of these experiments has always been to reflect on the nature of conscience, our approach to the world and the exploration of individual perceptive conditions. Let us turn to one such example.

Marsha Kinder sought to identify several tendencies of contemporary narration in the experiments of the original and complex director that is Luis Buñuel. Kinder outlines her intention as follows: ‘I want to propose a new context — the convergence between cinema and new digital media — to explore Buñuel’s legacy for conceptualizing interactive database narratives and their discreet pleasure.’¹³ She argues that filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, Peter Greenaway and Raúl Ruiz, ‘have already chosen to refigure the lines of their earlier experimentation through this analogy with new digital interactive forms’.¹⁴ However, the modern auteur Buñuel produced a narrative revolution: ‘his radical experimentation provides equally productive strategies for advancing the art of interactive narrative in new digital forms’.¹⁵ She continues, ‘Buñuel’s films are full of surprising ruptures that reveal the radical potential of the underlying database structure that usually lies hidden behind the story.’¹⁶ The radical experience of Surrealism and Freud’s theories are just some of the elements that add to the narrative database Kinder talks about.

In addition, one can observe audio-visual heritages, intertextual contaminations, symbolic objects and a personal vision of society and its values. With this in mind, Kinder refers to ‘interactive database narratives’,¹⁷ which, in the case of Buñuel’s movies, express their potential on different levels:

1. On the level of narrative drive: the reliance on incongruous objects or *hot spots*, rather than montage, as the primary means of navigating from one scene or discursive level to another;

¹³ Kinder, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 7.

¹⁷ See Manovich.

2. On the level of characterization: the use of puppet-like *avatars* who are not restricted by traditional notions of consistency, psychology, or narrative logic, but whom we nonetheless find fascinating, engaging, and illuminating;

3. On the level of plot: the creation of a *narrative field* where story possibilities seem limitless, where randomness, repetition, and interruptions are rampant, and where search engines are motored by desire.¹⁸

These three levels can be reconnected to the playful-narrative strategies of the mind-game film. Thus, bearing Kinder's considerations in mind too, I have identified a group of Italian films — directed by auteurs who opt for complexity, forcing the spectator into a never-ending reconsideration of the narrative element (and not only) — which perfectly fit into the above-mentioned definition of mind-game film, given by Elsaesser.

The cinematic device is here used as a tool through which mental states can be made visible, rather than merely offer a privileged perspective on the world. In the years of the political crisis of a population shocked by conformism and tragedies, specific Italian movies — though detached from the objective reality — let that perspective be absorbed in playful and complex diegetic processes in which the spectators could lose themselves and all the coordinates.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elio Petri, Francesco Rosi and Marco Ferreri forced spectators to re-organize their mental processes due to the recurrent diegetic deviations in the plots of *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965), *Dillinger Is Dead* (*Dillinger è morto*, 1969), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, 1975), *Todo Modo* (1976) and *Illustrious Corpses* (*Cadaveri eccellenti*, 1976). However, they also invite spectators to review their relationship with media devices (think of the dimension of play in *The 10th Victim*, which perfectly introduces the presence of the videogames in the cinema of convergence), and reconsider the dynamics of power (for example in *Todo Modo*, the mocking of Democrazia Cristiana party and the interference of the Church in the State's affairs is highly symbolic).

On the narrative level, character and plot development in the movies of such directors (just as in Buñuel's cinema) outline a disruptive, expressive potentiality. Discussing Buñuel's films, at a certain point Kinder raises the following question about interactive storytelling: 'How can we create engaging interactive narratives that provide an array of pleasures both emotional and intellectual, that don't have clear-cut beginnings or endings are full of interruptions, and that still offer a satisfying sense of drama and still make us want to return to them again and again?' She answers that some 'films provide compelling answers to these questions, primarily because [Buñuel] enables us to see what's at stake ideologically in his formal ruptures from conventional practices. This is the kind of perception that is sorely lacking in

¹⁸ Kinder, p. 8 [emphasis in the original].

cyberspace, despite all of the utopian rhetoric about self-authoring and its so-called democratic decentering of master narratives and power.¹⁹

It is possible to apply Kinder's strategies of analysis to the expressive potential of narrative databases in other filmographies, too. For instance, in France, Alain Resnais — a director that was particularly interested in the notion of catalogue as an elaboration of historical memory — created a kind of cinema that resembles the tiles of a work-in-progress mosaic built on the impossibility to escape from the oblivion, an 'interactive cinema',²⁰ where the spectator is invited to participate in the construction of the sense of the narration.

What Resnais does with stock images — consider the gigantic labyrinth in the 1956 movie *Toute la mémoire du monde*, the incipit of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), or the extreme experimentation of 1993's *Smoking/No Smoking*²¹ — perfectly exemplifies the idea already developed by the director himself in his early short films, that moreover characterizes many other European films.

A Case Study: Elio Petri's Mediatic Universe

On the basis of the model introduced in this essay, I use two strategies to reinterpret a tendency of Italian cinema during the 1960s and 1970s, studying in particular the political-moral dimension of its messages rather than the originality of its formal solutions, as the locations where the 'narrative database' is developed.

I have chosen the work of Petri mainly for two reasons: first, many of his films found some success in the USA, to the extent that they influenced Hollywood authors; second, his cinema is somewhat extemporaneous and isolated in the broader Italian cinematographic tradition.

In my opinion, this film-maker created provocative narrative constructions by collecting, treating and archiving data available through an unusual fruition procedure — Petri changed the ways through which spectators experienced movies, eliminating clear reference points and replacing them with disorientation, which appears to have become the director's new ideological and aesthetic target. Today, it is possible to approach his films with a new aesthetic sensibility determined by our daily use of computer devices: indeed nowadays we see original systems of visual and narrative organization, thanks to the practice of searching for data.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ This is the concept of 'interactive narrativity', developed in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

²¹ 'The recursion of characters, actions, and times starts from an algorithmic platform and so does the proceeding of time and space, common to Resnais's cinema in general, which here is only turned into mathematics, into a map. [...] the movie may be categorized between Feydeau and electronic elaboration, between the marivaudage and information technology.' Sergio Arecco, *Alain Resnais o la persistenza della memoria* (Recco, GE: Le mani, 1997), p. 163 (my translation).

Petri and his collaborators developed these processes by rejecting realism and creating stories that are supported by narrative databases. The latter consists of quotes and reconstructed works of art, stock political images, objects representing the society of consumption, and the stable presence of the media universe.

I identify two narrative strategies within Petri's cinema that make the interactive dimension of the narrative databases emerge:

1. On the level of narrative drive: the scenography as the primary means of navigating from a discursive level to another;
2. On the level of plot: the creation of a narrative field where story possibilities seem limitless, where randomness, repetition and interruptions are rampant, and where search engines are motored by *political* desire.

The first aspect is the most apparent in Petri's oeuvre. The levels of the story contaminate one another by means of editing, and at times also through the structure of the film's set. Petri's scenography allows him to value the relationship between different visual levels and the characters, in iconic projects. In *The 10th Victim*, Petri adapts a futuristic tale based on a short story by Robert Sheckley. The film depicts 'The Big Hunt', a game in which a computer selects a hunter and a victim, who must try to track and kill the other first. It is important to note that they do not know each other. In the film, the chosen ones are Marcello Mastroianni (Marcello, the victim) and Ursula Andress (Caroline, the hunter) who ultimately choose marriage over murder. The game slogan in the movie is: 'In a world where there will be no wars, people will keep on creating games to have a chance to kill.'

In this movie, which is moreover stylized like a videogame, the intrusiveness of pop art (from makeup to costumes and scenography) allows the setting to be transposed from reality to a science fiction dimension — a near future in which technology and social control have prevailed over people's freedom. This never-ending shift from the present to the future blends the narrative levels into a seductive aesthetic game. The vision of the future proposed by the film, however, proved to be successful in a transmedia perspective, rather than influencing contemporary film production: while Italian cinema did not develop a specific tradition of science-fiction cinema, Petri nevertheless received several offers from Milanese advertisers, along with huge financial resources to make a series of commercials for Shell entitled *Al di là della mente* [Beyond the mind] and another one for Salvarani furniture factories, with great success.

The film inspires comparison with one of the latest reinterpretation of Sheckley's short story, in the *Hunger Games* franchise,²² where the idea of the future and reality itself have ironically a more realistic connotation than in Petri's movies.

²² The *Hunger Games* film series consists of four science fiction dystopian adventure films based on the eponymous trilogy of novels, by the American author Suzanne Collins, and directed by Gary Ross (*The Hunger Games*, 2012) and Francis Lawrence (*The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, 2013);

Contrary to common interpretations, by chasing pop art — or rather the most experimental tendencies of the 1960s American neo-avant garde, and specifically optical art — Petri chooses a new language, and one which is generally not employed for political criticism or condemnation of mass society. The director therefore observes the changes that society is undergoing and makes an analysis of the new expressive languages of mass-communication, using them for solely artistic purposes.²³

The scenography, chromatic photography and the framing composition itself are used consciously, as a precise citation or 're-use' that leads to a 'disorientating point of view, capable of unveiling the real',²⁴ leading the spectators to become gradually disappointed in reality, which is depicted as misleading and vacuous.

In the repossession sequence, in Marcello's house, a singular panel stands out on a wall: a painting with a huge moving eye, whose eyelid opens and closes and whose fixed sight turns into a metaphor of the constant control imposed on people (fig. 1). This is a reference to the contemporary investigations of sight, the eye and the moving image in the work of the British artist Joe Tilson, and specifically a quotation of the work *Look!* (1964) (fig. 2). In the same house 'lives' Tommaso, whom the protagonist considers his best friend: in reality, the object is a New Dada assemblage, doll legs and a wire body, microchips and electric circuits, a sort of 'pop Frankenstein' that recalls contemporary experiments in Kinetic Art and becomes a fetish, an avatar, a comforting machine (fig. 3).

The same scene provides an occasion to focus our attention on another recurring element in the movie, that is essential to pop language: comic books, which are strongly present in one of the next scenes, in particular through a scenographic reference to Roy Lichtenstein (figs 4–5). In some scenes, the frame composition is even inspired by the language of comics: a recurring use of the frame within the frame, and elements that divide the images into sections (figs 6–7–8).

The strong feeling of dehumanization is perceived in another setting of the movie, Lidia's house. Here, both the garden and the interiors are rich with human figures in different positions (figs 9–10). This is a reference to George Segal's chalk moulds, and in fact one of the figures is an accurate copy. What emerges is a very strong sense of alienation, solitude and anxiety, reflecting the human response to a depersonalizing society.

Within this existentialist imagery, it is possible to identify references to the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Jannis Kounellis, and many other artists. A huge amount of data, pieces of information, and messages cross the images of the

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 1, 2014; *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 2*, 2015).

²³ His subsequent film, *A Place in the Country* (*Un tranquillo posto di campagna*, 1968) is also visually influenced by the pop artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine, who fascinated the Venice Art Biennale in 1964.

²⁴ Lucia Cardone, *Elio Petri, impolitico. La decima vittima* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2005), p. 55 (my translation).

film, and communicate to us the sense of a narrative operation that is built on accumulating and archiving the visual experiences of a unique director.

Petri continued to create narrative databases in his Oscar-winning *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*, 1970). Here Petri reinterprets a taste for the surreal. As many critics have observed, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* is not only a powerful social condemnation and a forerunner of Italian detective films, but the story also has a metaphoric dimension: the plot is constructed through hallucinations and distorted visual apparatuses. Aside from its social component, one can thus observe a significant process of narrative construction, supported by great visionary talent and by the decision to relay actions and characters through a 'deforming' lens.

The same happens in *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in paradiso*, 1971), where Petri underlines the contrast between a domestic setting, the middle-class victim of exasperated consumerism, and that of the working class, characterized by class struggle. The first emerges in the interiors of a house that is full of questionable objects that have been bought and hoarded over the years. At the end, the protagonist makes a list of the useless objects, and for each one he recalls its price and the hours of piece work necessary to buy it: inflatable animals, prizes gained from collecting points, stuffed animals, small statues, paintings, electrical appliances which have never been used, sofas covered with cellophane, all chosen by Petri to represent the contemporary commercial context (figs 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d, 11e). The protagonist then releases his rage by destroying an inflatable animal (Scrooge McDuck) that was framed from the beginning of the movie and stands as a symbol of capitalism in Disney comic strips.

The factory where the movie was shot (the Falconi factory in Novara) is a place of work, order and of the mechanic passing of time. The scenographer Dante Ferretti renders it as a cold space, whose protagonist is a huge pop hand, a symbol of the boss's oppression of the workmen.

The fight between these two narrative universes produces the visionary madness of the protagonist's dream, which he screams aloud but it goes unheard over the deafening, rhythmic noise of the factory.

From the narrative point of view, Petri's films, like those of Marco Ferreri's, are labyrinthine paths that are structured over the conflict between randomness and order, where the characters are led by hallucinations, nightmares, and wishes that are far from reality.

In this distorted behaviour, there is often a strong psychological element determined by the need for the political affirmation of the ego in mass-society.

In *The 10th Victim*, a film that is built on a videogame narrative model, the characters pass each level according to the strength of the media that pushes them ahead. Thanks to exaggeration and paradox, coherent with the pop art aesthetic principles, the film's narrative structure is organized in aesthetically recognizable frames, organized groups of TV commercials, and advertising shoots.

Prophetically, the film narrates the spectacularization of crime; moreover, the plot seems to develop according to the needs expressed by the TV commercials, rather than to the individual choices of the protagonists.

The movie *A Quiet Place in the Country* (*Un tranquillo posto di campagna*, 1968) alternates between different narrative levels, which coincide with the protagonist's hallucinations and nightmares. He is a painter suffering from a creative crisis, who overlaps reality with his grotesque deformations: it thus becomes a real mind-game film, a visual labyrinth in which the protagonist moves in a condition of confusion determined by dissatisfaction and by reflection on the need to express himself through creative action (figs 12a and 12b). This is revealed in the explicit reference to René Magritte's two *Perspectives* (figs 13a and 13b), creating a feeling of death (of the arts) within a film about desperation and schizophrenia.

Petri reached the highest peak of experimentation with the so-called 'political trilogy' that included his next three movies, in chronological order. First, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* is the story of a man who challenges reality, creating a second narrative level in order to narrate himself and the crime he has committed: on the one hand, this provides an illusion of reality — nobody thinks that he could break the law, considering his professional position; on the other hand, there is the truth of his narration — as he continues to declare that he is guilty. The open conclusion, which is connected to the beginning of the story, amplifies the narrative ambiguity of the movie and complicates even more the meaning of the story, which in turn is built on flashbacks within the illusion of a structured narrative. The fact that none of the other characters accept his account means that it fails in its primary function.

In *Todo Modo*, Petri created perhaps his most fascinating narrative labyrinth. Through the metaphor of the mysterious messages in spiritual exercises, that are carried out in an enclosed place at the end of the world (Zafer's refuge), Petri dares to construct a story with no plot, where the characters obsessively follow the rules of a spiritual father. Each narrative level corresponds to a different step of the Rosary prayer, each one leading to a new discursive dimension. As though drowning in the circles of Hell, the characters step down into gloomier and gloomier dimensions in a never-ending reiteration (fig. 14), enacting a repetition compulsion that resembles Buñuel's obsessive circularity, as recalled by Kinder.

Though the characters in the figurative dimension pray and appear confused by the methodic activity of taking care of the soul, in reality — which is only evoked — they continue to intermingle their illegal traffic and their power plays. This produces two discursive dimensions which confuse the spectator: each narrative level corresponds to a character's destiny. Nobody, apart perhaps from Don Gaetano, knows the meaning of what happens. He seems to have the power in his hands, but only in view of his comprehension that there is no more power, nor State, nor God. Within the narrative, he owns the tools that cause this collapse. However, the real instigator is another character, M., the politician who is thirsty for power and salvation, for sin and forgiveness,

for glory and death. His exaggerated desire leads him to push Don Gaetano towards a higher narrative level, triggering the collapse of the entire system.

Petri's films provide an interesting example of narrative structures that are overloaded with information, thus disrupting artistic operations. They are effective cultural products even for the contemporary spectator, who can find in those narrative databases a profound operation of cultural politics.

Conclusion

In these examples, as in many other related films, it is possible to trace an interactive dimension of modern cinema whose narrative levels are upset by the expressive urgency of directors who want to recount reality in a new way. In these films, the irregular and non-conventional discursive dimension is the real protagonist, building in turn a new and more stimulating relationship with the audience. As Kristen Daly states:

This type of community, complexity, and multimedia intertextuality was available before digital and computer technologies. The French New Wave and its community in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and other journals and cineclubs of the time was a networked and intertextual form of cinema experience. But this took place solely in a handful of urban centers and required great effort and an almost cultlike commitment. Henry Jenkins has traced the history of fan communities before the Internet, focusing on science fiction fan communities who interacted via letters, conventions, and fanzines; as he notes, the fans have moved from the boundaries to become increasingly powerful communities. Indeed, the fan mode of interactive and intertextual engagement with the text has become, I would argue, a more prevalent viewing mode as it has become easier and almost unavoidable, particularly in respect to big-budget movies advertised in every medium.²⁵

Probably, the difference between the mind-game film and Petri's movies — like other auteur movies from those years — can be seen in the socio-cultural dynamics that are underway, which progressively transformed the approach to a logic-narrative knowledge into new forms of connectivity, ruled by the irregularity of the database and by the model through which one surfs the net. However, according to what emerges in Daly's analysis, the main difference lies in the transformation of the spectators and their habits.

As noted earlier, modern cinema addressed an exclusive branch of spectators who allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by the visual experience, which they nevertheless found shocking even for political reasons when compared to the

²⁵ Kristen Daly, 'Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-Image', *Cinema Journal*, 50.1 (2010), 81–98 (p. 85). See also Henry Jenkins, 'Interactive Audiences? The "Collective Intelligence" of Media Fans', in *The New Media Book*, ed. by Dan Harries (London: BFI, 2002), pp. 157–70.

imposition of mainstream culture; in other words, a branch of spectators that were often influenced ideologically, and hence capable of abandoning themselves to directors who they recognized for their values and poetics. Conversely, today the mind-game film addresses a mass public that is influenced and characterized by a huge amount of uncertainty.

The predominant mood in the society of control²⁶ stems from collapsing boundaries around, and between, institutions, which is furthermore defined by ‘epistemological problems [...] and ontological doubts’.²⁷ In other words, the concepts of who we are and what constitutes knowledge of ourselves and our environments have become blurred.

In the case of the mind-game film, the spectator begins from a different condition: it is not *only* a matter of uncertainty. Thomas Elsaesser claims that social change has brought about a sort of madness which has become an ‘appropriate’ state of mind for living in a society of control. ‘Paranoia [...] is [...] the appropriate — or even “productive” pathology of our contemporary network society.’²⁸

These movies are not only defined by the presence of characters who are living in a deep crisis, and are victims of some sort of trauma. They are also defined by the epistemological problems (how do we know what we know?) and ontological doubts (which other worlds? Which other minds?) that are among the main touchpoints of philosophical investigations of conscience, mind, multiple realities and possible worlds.²⁹

They represent a disturbing and paranoid dimension, yet it is one to which humanity has always been sentenced.

²⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, ‘Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle’, *L'autre journal*, 1 (May 1990) (repr. in Deleuze, *Pourparlers (1972-1990)* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1990), pp. 240–47.

²⁷ Elsaesser, p. 15.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 26.

²⁹ See Andrea Minuz, ‘Guardare i film (e le cose) da capo: come imparammo qualcosa di profondamente cinematografico sulla filosofia’, *IMAGO. Studi di cinema e media*, 1.2 (special issue *Cinematofilosofia*, ed. by Paolo Bertetto and Minuz, 2010), pp. 163–76.



Fig. 1. *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965).
A painting with a huge moving eye in Marcello's house.



Fig. 2. *Look!* (1964) by Joe Tilson.



Fig. 3. *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965).
Tommaso, Marcello's inorganic best friend.

The Modernist Roots of the Mind-Game Film



Figs 4–5. *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965).
Scenographic reference to Roy Lichtenstein.



Figs 6–7–8. *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965).
Composition of scenes inspired by the language of comics.

The Modernist Roots of the Mind-Game Film



Figs 9–10. *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965). Human figures in different positions in Lidia's house.

Angela Bianca Saponari



Figs 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d, 11e. *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in paradiso*, 1971), contemporary commercial context.

The Modernist Roots of the Mind-Game Film



Figs 12a-12b. *A Quiet Place in the Country* (*Un tranquillo posto di campagna*, 1968). Leonardo's hallucination.



Fig. 13a. *A Quiet Place in the Country* (*Un tranquillo posto di campagna*, 1968). Leonardo visits his mother's house.

Angela Bianca Saponari

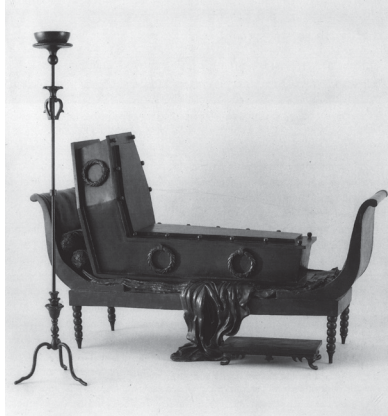


Fig. 13b. René Magritte, *Perspective I: Madame Récamier de David*, 1950.



Fig. 14. *Todo Modo* (Id., 1976). Scene.