Postclassical Narratology

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Cinematic narration figures prominently in the work of several narratologists. Basically, three schools of thought exist. The first, represented by David Bordwell, argues that film has narration but no narrator (1985: 61). According to Bordwell, cinematic narration is created by the viewer, who uses cognitive schemata to transform the film’s visual images and sounds into a series of perceptible configurations, which he or she then interprets as a story. In contrast to Bordwell’s approach, the second school, represented by Seymour Chatman, argues that films are narrated by a cinematic narrator. Chatman defines this narrator in terms of “the organizational and sending agency” (1990: 127) behind the film. In his view, films “are always presented—mostly and often exclusively shown, but sometimes partially told—by a narrator or narrators.” The overall agent that does the showing is “the ‘cinematic narrator’” (133–34). The third school, represented by theoreticians such


2. Other terms for the same concept are “image-maker” (Kozloff 1988: 44), “grand Imagier” (Gaudreault 1999: 107; 2000: 56), “narrateur filmique” (Burgoyne 1991: 272), “external narrator” (Stam et al. 1992: 103), “perceptual enabler” (Levinson 1996a: 252), “film narrator” (Lothe 2000: 30), and “implied narrator” (Laass 2008: 22). Diehl argues that he is “a firm defender of the conceptual claim that any narrative of necessity requires a narrator” and puts the matter as follows: “Regardless of the medium in which a narrative is presented, I claim that we are prescribed to imagine a fictional narrator for a narrative work N if and only if we are prescribed to imagine de re of the text of N that it occurs within the world of the fiction generated by N” (2009: 23, 15).
as George Wilson (1986: 135), Michaela Bach (1999: 245–46), and Berys Gaut (2004: 248) argues that it is the implied filmmaker who mediates the film as a whole, guides us through it, and directs our attention to important issues. Similarly, Katherine Thomson-Jones argues that “the narrator guide is sometimes just the filmmaker as manifest in the film” (2007: 82), while Manfred Jahn de-anthropomorphizes the source of the discourse and speaks of a “filmic composition device (FCD),” which he defines as “the theoretical agency behind a film’s organization and arrangement.” According to Jahn, the FCD “need not be associated with any concrete person or character, particularly neither the director nor a filmic narrator” (Jahn 2003: F4.1.2–F4.1.3).

Up until now, the discussion has been dominated by analyses that focus on the conceptual foundations of film narration, rather than on how concepts of cinematic narration might be developed in ways that are productive for the business of interpreting films. For instance, some theoreticians try to verify their claims concerning the cinematic narrator on the basis of the so-called A Priori Argument (“narration without narrator does not exist because the former is conceptually dependent on the other”)\(^3\) or the so-called Argument for Means of Access (“only the fictional persona of the narrator can give us access to the fictional world of a narrative”),\(^4\) while others—such as Currie (1995: 266), Gaut (2004: 235–37), and Thomson-Jones (2007: 82–89)—attempt to refute these arguments on logical grounds.\(^5\) Although these attempts to develop a “philosophy of the movies” (Gaut 2004: 230) constitute a valuable and important contribution to the understanding of movies, my focus is elsewhere. The most pressing question for me is whether the concept of a cinematic narrator helps us come up with better readings or interpretations of movies.

To address this practical, interpretive issue, I begin by exploring the way viewers rely on folk psychology\(^6\) to make sense of films. In doing so, I will try to both synthesize and transcend the three approaches mentioned above. Second, I want to reconsider analytical tools such as the implied filmmaker and

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3. Chatman argues that both “a communication with no communicator” and “a creation with no creator” (1990: 127) are impossible, and hence, cinematic narratives need to have a narrator.

4. For Levinson, “the presenter in a film [ . . . ] gives perceptual access to the story’s sights and sounds; the presenter in a film is thus, in part, a sort of perceptual enabler. Such perceptual enabling is what we must implicitly posit to explain how it is we are, even imaginarily, perceiving what we are perceiving of the story [ . . . ]” (1996: 252).

5. Also, theoreticians exist who try to refute the prior refutations of others. See, for example, Diehl (2009: 16, 19).

6. The term “folk psychology” denotes “our standard, everyday, unthinking, ‘commonsense’ assumptions about how our minds and the minds of others work” (Palmer 2004: 244).
the cinematic narrator from the perspective of their usefulness for actual film analysis and cinematic criticism. Third, I develop a new model of cinematic narration and I show that this model may serve as a frame of reading that helps us to make strange and incomprehensible experimental films such as David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997) more readable.

**HYPOTHETICAL INTENTIONALISM AND THE READING OF FILMS**

In our everyday interaction, we try to understand others by attributing mental states and dispositions to them. Alan Palmer argues that “consciousness allows us to adapt intelligently to our environment” (2004: 89). Similarly, Lisa Zunshine points out that we continuously engage in processes of mind-reading and try “to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, beliefs, and desires” (2006: 6). If we did not speculate about or try to interpret the intentions of our fellow human beings, most, if not all, types of interaction (such as human communication) would become impossible.

Numerous critics have argued that the way in which we try to make sense of other people is similar to the way in which we attempt to make sense of fictional narratives (Palmer 2004, Zunshine 2006, and Herman 2007). I would like to propose that when viewing a film, most viewers try to find out what the film means or “is trying to say.” Indeed, Daniel O. Nathan argues that “interpretation is in general and essentially a matter of asking ‘why,’” of seeking an explanation of whatever it is that we have before us” (1992: 196).

Films are directed by individuals such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Fritz Lang, or David Lynch, and they are typically very influential with regard to the end product that we as viewers get to see. However, it is of course ultimately impossible to determine the filmmaker’s intentions. To begin with, in film analysis it does not even make sense to speak of a single author or filmmaker. While writing a novel is typically something done by an individual, a film is usually so expensive and technically so complicated that it can only be realized through a complex production process in which many professionals work together: the author of the script, the producer, the director, the editor, actors and actresses, photographers, sound directors, etc. (Lothe 2000: 31). For these reasons, it is impossible for us to know whether

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7. This is obviously not true of films that were designed for “pure” entertainment such as action movies or porn films.
8. At the same time, it is worth noting that the producer and the director typically exercise more power over the final product than all the others.
our interpretations reveal the intentions of this multitude of professionals who produced the film. Arguably, however, it would be equally impossible if there were only one professional such as the director.9

Some critics speak of an “implied author” (Booth 2002) or an “implied filmmaker” (Gaut 2004: 248) rather than the real filmmaker. However, I would also like to avoid these terms because they suggest that certain critics are able to transcend the mere forming of hypotheses about a narrative’s purpose or “point,” and that they are somehow right about the intentions that a narrative evokes. For example, according to Wayne C. Booth, the implied author is the real author’s “second self,” and as such satisfies “the reader’s need to know where, in the world of values, he stands, that is, to know where the author wants him to stand” (1983: 73). Booth believes that analyses along the lines of the concept of the implied author enable us “to come as close as possible to sitting in the author’s chair and making this text, becoming able to remake it, employing the author’s ‘reason-of-art’” (1982: 21).

Since we can never be sure that we have formed correct hypotheses about the implied author or filmmaker’s intentions, I want to follow instead David Herman’s slightly more modest proposal to move beyond the “compartmentalized intentionality” of the implied author or filmmaker—that is, beyond an approach that is grounded in a view of intentions as inner, mental objects (cf. Hutto 2000)—and toward “an approach of narrative understanding that more fully and more openly grounds stories in intentional systems, that acknowledges the extent to which the process of interpretation hinges on making defeasible (= possibly wrong) inferences about communicative intentions” (2008: 244). This proposal closely correlates with the idea that intentions are not located in one particular and/or fixed area (such as the real or implied filmmaker). Rather, they are distributed across the inventers and interpreters of narratives, narrative designs, and the communicative context in which narratives are produced and interpreted (Herman 2006).

More specifically, I propose to look at the way in which we make sense of films from the perspective of hypothetical intentionalism, a cognitive approach in which “a narrative’s meaning is established by hypothesizing intentions authors might have had, given the context of creation, rather than relying on, or trying to seek out, the author’s subjective intentions” (Gibbs 2005: 248; my italics; see also Kindt and Müller 2006: 170–76). More to the point, I use what Daniel C. Dennett calls “the intentional stance” (1996: 27) and Alan Palmer’s “continuing-consciousness frame” (2004: 175) to shed

9. On the intentional fallacy in literary studies, see Wimsatt and Beardsley (2001) and Barthes (2002).
new light on cinematic narration. My basic assumption is that we all attribute intentions and motivations to films in order to find out what they might mean. Dennett defines the intentional stance as “the strategy of interpreting the behavior of an entity (person, animal, artifact, whatever) by treating it as if it were a rational agent who governed its ‘choice’ of ‘action’ by a ‘consideration’ of its ‘beliefs’ and ‘desires’” (1996: 27). Similarly, according to Alan Palmer, “the working hypothesis that visibly coherent behavior is caused by a directing consciousness in the actual world is used by extension in the application of the continuing-consciousness frame to the storyworld” (2004: 178).

When we view a film, we treat it as “a rational agent who governed its ‘choice’ of ‘action’ by a ‘consideration’ of its ‘beliefs’ and ‘desires’” (Dennett 1996: 27). We do not merely engage in processes of mind-reading to understand the minds of the characters; rather, we also apply the continuing-consciousness frame to the film as a whole and construct some kind of mind or consciousness behind the film. In a second step, we then form hypotheses about this mind’s intentions or what one might call the film’s potential “point.” However, since we can never be sure that we have interpreted a film correctly, it does not make sense to ascribe our hypotheses about the intentions and motivations behind the film to the real or implied filmmaker.

Jerrold Levinson, one of the major supporters of hypothetical intention-alism, in reconsidering Booth’s concept of the implied author, argues that “instead of speaking of beliefs and attitudes that would be reasonably attributed to the actual author on the basis of the work contextually grasped, we can speak of the beliefs or attitudes that just straightforwardly belong to the implied author—he or she is being a construction tailor-made to bear them” (Levinson 1996b: 229). While Booth thinks that the concept of the implied author ultimately enables us to “employ [ . . . ] the author’s ‘reason-of-art’” (1982: 21), Levinson redefines the implied author as a more or less fictional construct created in the reader’s mind on the basis of signals or cues in the narrative text. Since, as Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller point out, the term “implied author” has been used so differently in the past, one might want to dispense with the implied author: “it would hardly be sensible to continue using the old name to refer to the new, refined concept” (2006: 176).  

Hence, with regard to the medium film, I propose to ascribe our hypotheses about the intentions underlying a movie to what I would like to call the “hypothetical filmmaker,” a term which denotes the single entity to which

10. To put this slightly differently, the term “implied author” has by now acquired so much baggage that it makes sense to use new terminology.
the viewer ascribes conscious or unconscious motivations that actuated the professionals who were responsible for the making of the film in question. In this model, the intentions and motivations that played a role in the production of a film are distributed across the film’s inventers, the film’s interpreters, and the film’s narrative designs (which viewers use as the basis of their hypotheses).

THE CINEMATIC NARRATOR RECONSIDERED

Let us for a second assume that films are narrated by a cinematic narrator in Chatman’s sense (1990: 127). Would it, then, somehow be possible to discern the presence of this narrator or to get a sense of how the film narrator mediates a film as a whole? At first glance, one might feel that in film, no deictic or expressive markers exist that would warrant the existence of a film narrator. In particular, in films that follow the classical paradigm of transparency (such as Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once* [1937]) and avoid intertitles, non-diegetic inserts, non-diegetic music, and so forth, nothing really suggests the presence of a cinematic narrator; indeed, we have a sense of the immediacy of presentation: the film seems to merely show a fictional world without any narratorial inflection or commentary. Hence, one may feel that it is unnecessary to introduce a narrator for film and that what we are observing in theorists needing such a persona is an illicit transfer of real-world frames of storytelling onto the (much more complex) communicational process of cinematic narration. In films using non-diegetic music or sound effects, intertitles, captions, non-diegetic inserts, voice-over- or character-narrators, however, some sort of mediacy does indeed make itself felt. This is also true of such filmic peculiarities as slow-motion sequences or speed-ups, garish colors, surprising cuts, and wipes.

If we posit the existence of a cinematic narrator, it is clear that this “overall agent that does the showing” (Chatman 1990: 134) has to be both extradiadic and heterodiegetic. Furthermore, the film narrator is typically covert and only occasionally slightly more overt, though never as overt as the first-person or authorial narrator of a novel. Hence, David A. Black (2001: 301) argues that the cinematic narrator differs from the prototypical narrators

11. Similarly, Nathan argues that “given the weaknesses of ordinary intentionalism, appeal to a hypothetical author is the only adequate response” (1992: 200) to the demands of literary interpretation.

12. Non-diegetic inserts and sound effects are not part of the fictional world and cannot be seen or heard by the characters in the film.
of novels or short stories. Indeed, the film narrator is typically covert like the narrative medium in reflector-mode narratives (such as Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* [1925]) or third-person narratives of external focalization (such as Ernest Hemingway’s short story “The Killers” [1927]).

According to Seymour Chatman, it is of utmost importance to discriminate between “the inventor” of a film (what he calls the implied filmmaker) on the one hand, and its “presenter” (what he calls the cinematic narrator) on the other (1990: 133). However, from the perspective of actual film criticism, this distinction does not really matter because the functions of these two entities or constructs clearly converge. Interestingly, the functions that critics ascribe to the cinematic narrator are virtually identical with the functions that others attribute to what they call the implied filmmaker: both are rather neutral or covert shower or arranger functions.13

Since everything for which the cinematic narrator is said to be responsible (the mediating, presenting, showing, arranging, or organizing of the film) can in fact be attributed to what I call the hypothetical filmmaker, we can do away with the concept of the film narrator.14 From the perspective of hypothetical intentionalism, the only really important thing is that we formulate hypotheses about the intentions and motivations that played a role in the production of the film. I would therefore like to redefine cinematic narration as the interaction between the film’s inventers, its viewers, and the film’s narrative designs. As I see it, cinematic narration correlates with the idea that the viewer uses Dennett’s intentional stance and Palmer’s continuing-consciousness frame to speculate about the film’s intentions. And I want to argue that he or she formulates these hypotheses on the basis of the narrative designs used in the film.

13. For instance, Seymour Chatman uses the term “cinematic narrator” to denote “the organizational and sending agency” (1990: 127) behind the film; Jerrold Levinson speaks of a “perceptual enabler” who “gives perceptual access to the story’s sights and sounds” (1996a: 252); Jakob Lothe defines the “film narrator” as “the superordinate ‘instance’ that presents all the means of communication that film has at its disposal” (2000: 30); and Kozloff speaks of an “image-maker” who is responsible for “all the selecting, organizing, shading, and even passive recording processes that go into the creation of a narrative sequence of images and sounds” (1988: 44). Similarly, Booth defines the “implied author” of films as “a creative voice uniting all the choices” (2002: 125); Manfred Jahn (2003: F4.1) speaks of a “filmic composition device (FCD)” which denotes “the theoretical agency behind a film’s organization and arrangement”; and Gaut simply argues that “the implied filmmaker” mediates the film as a whole (2004: 248).

14. Similarly, Richard Walsh suggests eradicating extra- and heterodiegetic narrators in narrative fiction: “Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, ‘impersonal’ and ‘authorial’ narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors.” He therefore concludes that “the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author” (2007: 84; 78).
THE HYPOTHETICAL FILMMAKER AS THE FILM’S HIGHEST AUTHORITY

The concept of the hypothetical filmmaker (seen as the “agent” projected by the viewer) offers us an organizational hierarchy that helps us describe the functioning of film narratives. From the perspective of hypothetical intentionalism, it makes sense to attribute the totality of a film’s stimuli (including non-diegetic music or sound, garish colors, non-diegetic inserts, surprising cuts, as well as paratextual elements, i.e. intertitles, captions, and the film’s opening and final credits) to some kind of agency and to then ponder their potential “point.” Some viewers will (not without reason) maintain that such choices ultimately issue from the director of the film. However, since we can never be entirely sure of the director’s true intentions (and since his or her intentions are not the only ones that play a role), I suggest attributing these choices and the motivations behind them to the hypothetical filmmaker or, in a different manner of speaking, simply to the film as a whole. From my perspective, the only important thing here is that we speculate about the potential purpose of the movie, scene, or shot under discussion; it does not matter whether we attribute these choices to the filmmaker or to the film as a whole. Let me present a couple of examples that illustrate how viewers typically impute intentions to cinematic stimuli.

For instance, by continuously juxtaposing Alex’s (Malcolm McDowell) violent outbursts with (non-diegetic) Beethoven music, the film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) proposes a connection between violence and art. Indeed, Sobchack argues that in the film, “art and violence spring from the same source; they are both expressions of the individual, egotistic, vital, and non-institutionalized man” (1981: 98). Furthermore, the garish red screen during the opening credits may be a visual hint at the extreme emotions (related to sex and violence) that are at work in *A Clockwork Orange*. Similarly, the film *Fury* (1936) presents us with a surprising cut from gossiping housewives to a (non-diegetic) shot of clucking hens, and thus urges us to look for similarities between these two entities. More specifically, we are invited to (metaphorically) see the women as hens (Bordwell and Thompson 2003: 336). Likewise, the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) suddenly cuts from a bone employed by a primitive ape-man and then thrown up in the air to a spacecraft of the future. This juxtaposition may suggest that the same primitive motives and instincts that drove the ape-man to construct a weapon out of a bone also drive us to manufacture space-age hardware (Whittock 1990: 51–52).15

15. Both cuts urge us to see one entity as a different one and thus involve cinematic meta-
For their part, the films *Metropolis* (1926) and *The Bourne Identity* (2002) use intertitles or captions to inform the audience about the story’s temporal and spatial whereabouts. In this context, it is worth noting that the choices concerning the color and the typographical presentation of the letters do not only convey narrative information but additionally set a particular tone.¹⁶ For example, *The Bourne Identity*, a film about a non-conformist CIA agent called Jason Bourne (Matt Damon), who suffers from amnesia after the CIA has tried to kill him, presents us with white captions that look as if they could have come from a report written on a computer. The film thus suggests objectivity and aloofness—a tone that highlights the cool and merciless way in which the CIA tries to eradicate Bourne, and simultaneously contrasts sharply with the strong emotional attachment we develop for the major protagonist as he desperately tries to find out who he is.

Furthermore, films may occasionally supply voice-over narrators who comment on what we see on the screen or character-narrators who tell stories to other characters. For instance, the film *A Clockwork Orange* confronts us with a homodiegetic voice-over narrator (Alex) who comments on the action on the screen, while the movie *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) uses a character-narrator (Francis) who tells another inmate how he ended up in the lunatic asylum. Since the images continue on the screen regardless of whether such verbal narrators speak (and also regardless of whether non-diegetic sounds, captions, or intertitles are present), the theoretical construct of the hypothetical filmmaker has to be seen as the film’s highest authority: all information is a consequence of its mediation, choice, organization, and arrangement. In other words, voice-over narrators, character-narrators, non-diegetic sounds, and intertitles are all components of the hypothetical filmmaker’s options; they are some of the various devices that can be used in film.

Films sometimes also present us with unreliable character-narrators, and the concept of the hypothetical filmmaker helps us explain and conceptualize cinematic unreliability. In cases of unreliable narration in film, it is always the case that the film as a whole (or, in a different manner of speaking, the hypothetical filmmaker) draws our attention to and simultaneously counteracts a character-narrator’s norms, values, tastes, judgments, or moral sense (Prince 1987: 101), and sometimes even the character-narrator’s “actual and overt misinterpretation or distortion of story facts” (Chatman 1990: 225, n. 21).

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¹⁶ Also, *Metropolis* is a silent film and therefore required intertitles above and beyond “intent.”
Thus, it makes sense to discriminate between cinematic forms of normative unreliability on the one hand, and cinematic forms of factual unreliability on the other (see also Laass 2008: 30–32). In both cases, we are invited to see that the character-narrator’s norms differ significantly from the norms of the film, and our hypotheses about intentions and motivations obviously play a crucial role.

A well-known example of cinematic unreliability is Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright* (1950). In this film, Jonathan Cooper (Richard Todd) tells Eve Gill (Jane Wyman) that he and Charlotte Inwood (Marlene Dietrich) are secret lovers and that he is wanted by the police for killing Charlotte’s husband. Jonathan (or “Johnny”) also tells Eve that Charlotte committed the crime. According to his story, he only helped her to get rid of her blood-stained dress but was seen leaving the scene. The camera enacts Jonathan’s story, which Eve and we as viewers assume to be true. “Only retrospectively, after Johnny admits to Eve his criminal tendency and a previous murder, do we realize that the camera has conspired with Johnny to deceive us, that Johnny’s flashback was a lie” (Chatman 1990: 131).

Another example of cinematic unreliability can be found in the film *The Usual Suspects* (1995), in which Roger “Verbal” Kint (Kevin Spacey), apparently a disabled low-profile criminal, tries to get immunity for his involvement in a drug deal by testifying to US Customs Special Agent Dave Kujan (Chazz Palminteri). As in *Stage Fright*, the camera enacts Kint’s story, which Kujan and we as viewers assume to be true. However, as we learn at the end of the film, Kint only made up this story in order to mislead Kujan about his true identity. That is to say, the images we saw only conformed to Kint’s fabricated story but not to what actually happened.17 Toward the end of the film, Kint receives his immunity and leaves the investigation room, while Kujan realizes that important details and names from Kint’s story are actually words appearing on objects in the room, and that Kint is actually Keyser Söze, the criminal mastermind Kujan had been looking for.

I agree with Volker Ferenz’s argument that all unreliable narration in film emerges from an unreliable character-narrator (like Jonathan Cooper in *Stage Fright* or Kint in *The Usual Suspects*).

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17. One might argue that in such cases, a film narrator translates the narration visually to the audience and that this cinematic narrator is unreliable. However, I would argue that since what we see is identical with what we hear, most viewers attribute both the spoken words and the resulting images to the character-narrator. From my perspective, there is no need for the concept of the film narrator in these cases either. The character-narrator is unreliable and this is clearly what we are supposed to realize.
In film, only in the case of [ . . . ] the character-narrator who “takes over,” and thus appears to be the driving seat of, the narration, [ . . . ] do we deal with narrators whom we treat like “real persons” and “new acquaintances” and whom we can hold “responsible” for being unreliable about the facts of the fictional world. Only then do we have a clearly identifiable fictional scapegoat with sufficient “authority” over the narrative as a whole whom we can blame for textual contradictions and referential difficulties. (Ferenz 2005: 135)

At first glance, one might feel that a film like *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) also presents us with a form of unreliable narration because it uses a lying camera as well (Helbig 2005, Lahde 2006, Laass 2008: 28). However, upon closer inspection we realize that in this case, the camera presents us with the deranged perception of John Forbes Nash (Russell Crowe), a mathematical genius, who begins to endure delusional and paranoid episodes, and Nash does not relate his life through a narrative; rather, he is a focalizer who simply misperceives the world. For example, at one point in the film, Nash begins to work for a secret Defense Department facility in the Pentagon, and it takes us quite some time to realize that he has never done so and that we have shared Nash’s deranged perception all along. Toward the end of the film, we learn that the people from the Defense Department (such as William Parcher [Ed Harris]) do not exist outside Nash’s mind (even though we see him interacting and dealing with them). According to Ferenz, focalizers like Nash cannot be unreliable: they “cannot be held accountable for distorting the fictional world simply because they do not narrate it” (2005: 140). Nash cannot misrepresent the world of *A Beautiful Mind* because he does not even try to narrate or represent it; rather, he inhabits it.

18. Greta Olson argues along the same lines, when she claims that “the less personalized the narrative voice is, [ . . . ] the more inappropriate it is to infer unreliability” (2003: 106, n14). To put this slightly differently, the more personalized the narrative voice is, the more appropriate it is to infer unreliability.

19. Similarly, it would also be odd to speak of the unreliability of Septimus Warren-Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Septimus is a reflecror-character who suffers from schizophrenia following World War I. For instance, he frequently sees Evans, his commanding officer during the war, who is dead: “There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (2000: 21). Since Septimus misperceives the world but does not try to convince us of his deranged worldview, it does not really make sense to speak of unreliability here. Eva Laass mentions a number of films such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), which, in her view, “encourage the attribution of unreliable narration [ . . . ] in spite of their non-personalised narrative mediation” (2008: 28). She sees these cases as forms of unreliable narration because for her, they are presented by the cinematic narrator (whom she rechristens as “the implied narrator”
Inferences about intention also come into play in connection with other forms of focalization. Generally speaking, films can use images that are internally focalized (such as point-of-view shots or memory sequences) or images that are externally focalized. In the latter case (which is far more common in film), the perspective “corresponds to that place where a hypothetical observer of the scene, present at the scene, would have to stand in order to give us the space as pictured” (Branigan 1984: 6). Numerous recent films confront us with images that seem to be externally focalized but then turn out to represent a character’s worldview or misperception. For instance, Christine Edzard’s two-part film adaptation of Charles Dickens’s novel *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) (*Nobody’s Fault* and *Little Dorrit’s Story* [1987]) presents us with sequences in which the images of Amy Dorrit (Sarah Pickering) and Arthur Clennam (Derek Jacobi) are shaped by their respective worldviews. *Nobody’s Fault* confronts us with the worldview of Arthur, while *Little Dorrit’s Story* focuses on Amy’s worldview. For instance, the room at the Marshalsea debtors’ prison in *Little Dorrit’s Story* is bigger and brighter than the room we see in *Nobody’s Fault*. According to March, “the walls of the set have been bodily moved out by several feet; the set has been repainted, redressed in slightly brighter colors; potted plants blossom [. . . ]; Dorrit’s bare chair grows a cover, and his dressing gown sprouts tendrils of embroidery” (1993: 255). These two perspectives on the prison and William Dorrit (Alec Guinness) reflect Arthur’s and Amy’s perception. While Arthur has a pessimistic worldview and feels oppressed in the room, Amy has become accustomed to the prison and has a more optimistic worldview. The “point” of this technique is presumably to suggest that both Amy and Arthur live in their own worlds, and that it is difficult (or impossible) for one to understand the other (Alber 2007: 48). Since no narrator misleads us in this case, and since the filmic images here clearly relate to focalization, i.e. a character’s worldview, rather than narration, I think that such scenarios cannot be described as cinematic forms of unreliable narration. I would like to argue that they are better understood as forms of internal focalization.

To summarize: it makes sense to attribute a film’s various stimuli to an agent like the hypothetical filmmaker because their presence follows a

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[ibid.: 22]). Since I have done away with this concept, I would suggest categorizing all of these cases as forms of internal focalization: in each case the images we see are dominated by the distorted worldview of one of the characters, and they are focalizers who do not represent (or even try to represent) what we see.

20 Most of the alleged examples of cinematic unreliability discussed by Jörg Helbig also involve internal focalization, i.e., reflector-characters (or focalizers) that perceive but do not narrate (2005: 134–36; 140). The only exception is *Fight Club* (1999), where we can attribute unreliability to Jack (Edward Norton), the film’s voice-over narrator (ibid.: 136–39).
particular purpose. In other words, they are interpretive clues and we are invited to ponder their implications. The concept of the hypothetical film-maker allows us to speculate about the “point” of the film’s various stimuli and its overall design without suggesting that we can definitely know the real or implied filmmaker’s intentions. It is also worth noting that we assume that the hypothetical filmmaker follows the Gricean Cooperative Principle. That is to say, we approach the filmic data on the assumption of encountering a well-informed composition guided by the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner (1989: 22–40). Indeed, Marie-Louise Pratt has shown that no matter how odd the textual structure of a narrative is, we will always try to read it as a purposeful and meaningful communicative act by utilizing the Gricean Cooperative Principle (Pratt 1977: 170–71). And, as I will show in what follows, we can use this (very basic) assumption to make filmic oddities more readable.

THE HYPOTHETICAL FILMMAKER AS A FRAME OF READING: The Strange Case of Lost Highway

In this section, I show that the concept of the hypothetical filmmaker may serve as a frame of interpretation that helps us to make strange and incomprehensible experimental films such as David Lynch’s Lost Highway (1997) more readable. Lost Highway is a particularly strange and disconcerting film because it is full of unnatural, i.e., physically and logically impossible, scenarios or events (Alber 2009a: 80, 2009b). In this film, some of the characters are inexplicably transformed into other characters. Also, characters exist who can be at two different locations at the same time.21 In the words of Murray Smith, “appearance and reality are dislocated; motivations are obscure, cognitive dissonance disturbs the very foundations of narrative coherence; temporal and causal sequences become paradoxical” (2003: 159). As I show in what follows, the application of Alan Palmer’s continuing-consciousness frame to the characters but also to the film as a whole helps us to (at least partly) explain this odd narrative.

Lost Highway opens with a sequence in which we see Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) in his house. Somebody rings the bell and, through the intercom, delivers the (apparently meaningless) message that “Dick Laurent is dead.” The film then introduces us to the tense atmosphere in the marriage

21. Inexplicable transformations of characters are physically impossible, while violations of the principle of non-contradiction are logically impossible (see also Doležel 1998: 165).
between Fred, who works as a saxophone player, and his wife, Renée (Patricia Arquette). Among other things, she does not want to go to his concert at the Luna Lounge. After the concert, he tries to call her but she does not answer the phone (either because she does not want to or because she is not there). In another scene, they have sex but he is obviously unable to satisfy her. Fred’s and Renée’s body language and their conversations (which are full of long and awkward pauses) also give us a clear sense of their alienation. “Renée’s desire is a source of unbearable agony for Fred, precisely because he has no idea what she wants, let alone how to give it to her” (McGowan 2000: 54). The film underlines this feeling of discomfort by using a minimalist décor, low-key illumination, and non-diegetic lugubrious string sounds.

At one point, we witness a flashback in which Fred remembers that Renée left another concert by Fred together with a character called Andy (Michael Massee). When Fred then asks her how she got to know Andy, she remains extremely vague and tells him that Andy has offered her an unspecified “job.” Fred suspects Renée of having an affair, and he becomes so jealous that he eventually kills her.

In his prison cell, Fred is mysteriously transformed into the car mechanic Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty) who has an affair with Alice Wakefield. Interestingly, Alice is played by Patricia Arquette, the actress who also plays Renée. One way of explaining Fred’s transformation and the existence of Pete’s parallel universe would be to argue that Fred re-experiences the tragedy of his marriage with Renée from a different perspective, and in his fantasy assumes the identity of Pete, who is in many senses diametrically opposed to him: Fred is a melancholy and lonely musician who does not seem to have any friends. Pete, on the other hand, is a promiscuous car mechanic (and also a small-time criminal) who has numerous buddies. Also, Pete goes out with Sheila (Natasha Gregson Wagner) and at the same time, he begins an affair with Alice who seems to be the fantasy version of Renée since both are played by the same actress, Patricia Arquette. In the second part of the film, Fred tries to achieve something he did not achieve in the first part, namely to gain power and control over (or solve the mystery of) Renée (who is “reincarnated” as Alice).

The hypothetical filmmaker presents us with various clues that corroborate my hypothesis that the second part of the film enacts Fred’s fantasies. First of all, before the transformation, we see an opening curtain which conveys the idea that we are about to witness something staged, theatrical, or

22. “Low-key” illumination primarily correlates with a lack of lighting and is frequently used in horror films to create suspense (see Bordwell/Thompson 2003: 196).
invented. Second, it is worth noting that the curtain opens to a shot of an exploding hut in the desert that runs backward: we see the exploding hut turning into a complete one. By using this backward-running shot, the film seems to tell us that we will learn how the hut came to explode, i.e., how the marriage between Fred and Renée came to be so unworkable that Fred finally killed his wife. Third, although the film contrasts the worlds of Fred and Pete through the use of lighting, colors, depth, and music, it remains very clear to us that the two worlds are related; the film establishes a connection between these worlds by having Patricia Arquette play both Renée and Alice, and by having Pete and Alice often speak the same dialog as Fred and Renée. Fourth, when Fred realizes that, even in his role as Pete, he cannot understand, “have,” or control Renée/Alice, the fantasy world begins to crumble and we return to the primary level of the film, i.e. Fred’s world. We can make sense of the film by applying Alan Palmer’s continuing-consciousness frame to the characters Fred/Pete and Renée/Alice (Pete and Alice are fantasy versions of Fred and Renée created in Fred’s mind), and we can also assume a continuing consciousness (the frame of the hypothetical filmmaker) that tries to communicate a meaningful message behind the film as a whole.

At this point, one may wonder about the differences between the concept of the implied filmmaker and the concept of the hypothetical filmmaker. I think the advantage of my concept is an ethical or moral one, namely a higher degree of honesty, modesty, and cautiousness. In contrast to Booth, I do not know for sure whether my reading correlates with the place “where the author wants [me] to stand” (1983: 73) and I do not know whether I have approximated the position of the authorial audience. I would like to suggest my reading as a hypothesis or speculation, and (as in everyday interaction) I want to allow for the possibility that I might be wrong. Nevertheless, I wish

23. “The first part (reality deprived of fantasy) is ‘depthless,’ dark, almost surreal, strangely abstract, colorless, lacking substantial density, and as enigmatic as a Magritte painting, with the actors acting almost as in a Beckett or Ionesco play, moving around as alienated automata. Paradoxically, it is in the second part, the staged fantasy, that we get a much stronger and fuller ‘sense of reality,’ of depth of sounds and smells, of people moving around in a ‘real world’” (Žižek 2000: 21).

24. According to Smith, “the first half is dominated by a mixture of ‘dark ambient’ or ‘illbient’ atmospheres, and ‘industrial’ music—recalling the soundtracks of Eraserhead and The Elephant Man. The second half shifts the emphasis to, on the one hand, a kind of lite jazz (best exemplified by Antonio Carlos Jobim’s bossa nova composition ‘Insensatez’), and on the other hand those gaudy cousins, ‘black’ metal, ‘death’ metal, and shock rock (in the form of tracks by Rammstein and Marilyn Manson)” (2003: 160).

25. Since a seemingly supernatural event (Fred’s transformation into Pete) gets explained as a dream or fantasy, Lost Highway bears certain structural similarities to what Todorov calls “the uncanny” (1973: 41).
to stress that the process of interpretation closely correlates with speculations about intentions.

I would now like to speculate about the potential purpose or “point” of the parallel universe that *Lost Highway* projects. First of all, it is worth noting that in Fred’s fantasy world, Fred’s alter ego Pete has an affair with Alice. Alice, some kind of *femme fatale*, is the girlfriend of Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia), a pornographer, and she also plays roles in his porn films. At one point, Alice tells Pete that Andy offered her a “job,” which consisted of taking her clothes off in front of Mr. Eddy while one of his gangsters put a gun to her head. Pete asks her why she did not decline and speculates that she actually “liked it.” Since we witnessed exactly the same dialog between Fred and Renée earlier on, the film here informs us that in its primary world, it was actually Fred’s wife Renée who accepted Andy’s job offer. Indeed, toward the end of the film, when we return to Fred’s world, we learn that Renée had an affair with the pornographer Dick Laurent, the equivalent of Mr. Eddy in Fred’s world (also played by Robert Loggia), and starred in his porn films. More specifically, we see Renée having sex with Dick Laurent in a room at the so-called Lost Highway hotel. Once Renée has left the hotel, Fred overpowers Dick Laurent, throws him into the boot of his car, and then shoots him in the desert. This scene is followed by a sequence in which Fred rings the bell of his own house to speak the sentence “Dick Laurent is dead” into the intercom. That is to say, at the beginning of the film, Fred must have (at least unconsciously) known that “Dick Laurent is dead” because he had already killed him. I think that one can explain this logically impossibly scenario (in which Fred tells himself through the intercom that “Dick Laurent is dead”) as the visualization of an unconscious process. In other words, the images tell us that Fred knows that he killed Dick Laurent but represses this knowledge so that he is no longer consciously aware of it.

As Fred begins to realize that, even in his role as Pete, he cannot “have” or control Renée/Alice,26 the fantasy world gradually dissolves. All the characters disappear or are retransformed. At first, Pete’s girlfriend Sheila disappears, and she is followed by Pete’s parents. Later on, when Pete and Alice have sexual intercourse in the desert, he tells her, “I want you, I want you,” to which she coldly responds, “You’ll never have me.” It is notably at this

26. As I have shown in Alber (forthcoming), Pete’s obsession with Alice borders on self-destruction. At one point, she tells him that she will not be able to see him. Pete is full of despair, and the film cuts from a close-up of Pete’s face to a shot of moths inside a ceiling light, where they die in their attempt to fly into a light bulb. This juxtaposition involves cinematic metaphor and allows us to see Alice as the light and Pete as a moth in so far as he destroys himself in his desperate attempts to reach or possess her.
point that Pete turns into Fred again. Fred’s second attempt to gain control over Renée did not work either, and as a consequence Pete is retransformed into Fred. Alice, on the other hand, walks into the hut and disappears like all the other characters. *Lost Highway* thus seems to argue that Fred should learn to let go and to accept things as they are because he will not be able to control Renée anyway. One potential message of the film might be that our desperate attempts to control others by understanding every aspect of them will not work out, and that we should thus refrain from trying to do so.

There are two final aspects of this film that I would like to discuss in the context of my attempt to develop an interpretation of the film using the idea of hypothetical intentionalism, namely the identity of the spooky and devil-like “Mystery Man” (Robert Blake) and the videotapes that Fred and Renée find on the stairs to their house. Both seem to be closely related to the problems that exist between Fred and Renée. To begin with, it is worth noting that the pasty-faced Mystery Man enters the world of the film through Renée, or, more specifically, through Fred’s vision of Renée. We first see this old man when Fred wakes up during the night, looks at his wife but instead of her face sees the face of the Mystery Man.

Later on, Fred talks to the Mystery Man at Andy’s party. The Mystery Man tells Fred that he is in Fred’s house, and offers to call him there. Strangely enough, the Mystery Man, who stands before Fred, answers the phone in Fred’s house. When Fred asks him how this is possible, the old man replies, “You invited me. It is not my custom to go where I am not wanted.” The Mystery Man thus seems to embody Fred’s desire to be at two places at the same time to be able to gain absolute control over Renée (for instance, when he phones her after the concert and she does not answer the phone). In what follows, the movie (or the hypothetical filmmaker) establishes a close link between Fred and the Mystery Man. For example, both can be at two different locations at the same time: the Mystery Man can simultaneously stand before Fred at Andy’s party and answer the phone in Fred’s house. Similarly, at the end of the film, we see Fred telling himself through the intercom that “Dick Laurent is dead.” Also, the Mystery Man notably helps Fred to kill Dick Laurent. One way of explaining the existence of the Mystery Man would thus be to argue that he exists in Fred’s mind and constitutes some kind of materialization or embodiment of Fred’s desire to understand and control the split within Renée, i.e., her hidden desires and drives. In other

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27. This superimposition involves cinematic metaphor and invites us to see Renée as the Mystery Man with the consequence that the beautiful woman becomes threatening, scary, and ugly. And, indeed, Renée is in a sense quite threatening for Fred: he cannot have a “normal” relationship with her because of her mysterious desires (Alber, forthcoming).
words, we can explain the Mystery Man by attributing his existence to Fred’s unconsciousness. Anne Jerslev, on the other hand, reads the Mystery Man as “a personified, perverse visual principle” (2004: 161). This reading also makes sense if one extends this principle to all the men in the film. Interestingly, both Fred/Pete and Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent follow the desire to master the riddle of femininity through voyeuristic surveillance but ultimately fail.

In the first part of the film, Fred and Renée find three different videotapes on the steps to their house. The first one depicts the exterior of their house; the second one presents a strange shot in which somebody walks into their bedroom and films them as they sleep; the third one shows Fred next to the mutilated corpse of his wife. These videotapes are disconcerting because we never learn where they come from. The most obvious answer is the Mystery Man, who, however, only exists in Fred’s mind. I would therefore like to argue that, like the Mystery Man, the videotapes are actually materializations of the problems that exist between Fred and Renée. And it is worth noting that their problems have got to do with both videotapes and the idea of surveillance. Renée plays roles in Dick Laurent’s porn films, and this is arguably a severe problem for Fred.28 Fred, on the other hand, would like to observe every move that his wife makes in order to gain complete control over her.

In other words, the film Lost Highway depicts psychological processes and problems as existing in the outside world where they can be filmed. Many shots in this film seem to convey the idea that internal processes can have very drastic consequences in the outside world, and that we should pay attention to them. Also, by confronting us with entities such as the Mystery Man and the videotapes, both of which cut across the distinction between “internal” and ”external,” the hypothetical filmmaker illustrates that it can be difficult to clearly separate illusion and reality. And this is particularly true of extreme emotional states like jealousy. One might argue that the film is ultimately about Fred’s feelings of jealousy and his desperate attempts to come to terms with them (through a fantasy of omniscience). The Mystery Man and the videotapes highlight that in extreme emotional states like jealousy, reality and illusion often become indistinguishable. As a matter of fact, the film puts us into a position that is similar to that of a jealous person: we frequently do not know what to believe or which images to trust. And this is another effect that I would like to attribute to the hypothetical filmmaker. The ultimate message of the film might be that like Fred, we should not follow the human urge to create significance; we should rather learn to let go.

28. Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc also argue that the connection between these tapes and Pete’s world is “via video” (2007: 99).
But it is worth noting that if we had not tried to impute intentions, we would not have arrived at this conclusion.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have looked at the process of cinematic narration from the perspective of hypothetical intentionalism. More specifically, I have redefined the process of cinematic narration as a complex process that involves the film’s inventors, the viewer, and the narrative designs used in the film. I argue that viewers try to make sense of films by applying Dennett’s intentional stance or Palmer’s continuing-consciousness frame to characters but also to films as a whole. This redefinition of cinematic narration has the following advantages. First, it does justice to the folk-psychological reasoning viewers typically use to make sense of films. Second, we can avoid the odd suggestion that we can determine the real or implied filmmaker’s intentions and motivations; in contrast to the implied author or filmmaker (Booth 1982: 21; Phelan 2005: 45), the hypothetical filmmaker is an emergent product of the interaction between narrative designs and processes of production and interpretation. Third, the concept of the hypothetical filmmaker can be used to replace the cinematic narrator, and it offers us a hierarchy that makes it possible for us to describe the complex functioning of cinematic narrative (including the phenomenon of cinematic unreliability). Fourth, the hypothetical filmmaker helps us to make experimental films such as David Lynch’s Lost Highway more readable. This particular film might argue that it makes no sense to try to control others, and that we should learn to let go. I would like to hypothesize that these ideas played a role in the production of the film, and attribute them to what I call the hypothetical filmmaker.29

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