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Narration as attraction. *Mind-game films* and postclassical spectacles

The map of contemporary digital cinema has two main axes: narration and attraction. Indicating various relations between these two aspects may reframe theoretical approaches towards postclassical cinema and explain the complex way we experience it. One non-obvious type of these relations is analogies between *mind-game films* (Elsaesser 2009) and so-called *post-plot cinema* (Zeitchik); in other words, between narratively complex “thought experiments” (Elsaesser 2017) and astonishing spectacles of visual attractions. It may seem that both phenomena are radically opposite – how can we compare *Memento* (2000, dir. Ch. Nolan) to *Avatar* (2009, dir. J. Cameron), *Arrival* (2016, dir. D. Villeneuve) to *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, dir. G. Miller), *The Sixth Sense* (1999, dir. M. Night Shyamalan) to *Avengers* (2012, dir. J. Whedon) or Christopher Nolan to Michel Bay and David Fincher to J.J. Abrams? Yet, what I suggest in this article is to consider this problem differently by treating mind-game and post-plot films as two sides of the same coin.

I argue that there is visible feedback between mind-game films and the cinema of digital attractions, which I see as complementary processes of making “spectacular mind games” and “mind-gaming the spectacles”. The narrative *estrangements* (Shklovskij) specific to so-called *puzzle films* (Buckland) are in fact a type of attraction that is characteristic of the postclassical cinematic experience. On the other hand, the most recent spectacles of attractions employ narrative techniques which used to be specific to mind-game films. Thanks to this feedback, the recent epic *Avengers: Endgame* (2019, dir. A. Russo, J. Russo) is in fact a mind game, and *Inception* (2011, dir. Ch. Nolan) appears to be a *mise en abyme* of attractions. The aim of this article is, therefore, to establish various re-

lations between mind-game films and postclassical attractions: from examining the similar types of cinematic experiences they deliver to indicating the mutual influences between these two phenomena.

1. Narration/attraction exchange and extensive storyworlds

1.1. The “mind-game” turn in film studies

Thomas Elsaesser considers mind-game films as those which play games with both the characters and the viewers, while Warren Buckland defines puzzle films in narratological categories, underlining their complex or complicated storytelling structure. These films, according to Elsaesser, “put the emphasis on «mind»: they feature central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological; yet instead of being examples of case studies, their ways of seeing, their interaction with other characters, and their «being in the world» are presented as normal” (Elsaesser 2009, p. 14). Even more disturbingly, mind-game films feel a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators, and the same “perverse” delight is returned by the viewers, who enjoy being misled and challenged by unfamiliar storyworlds. On the other hand, Buckland characterizes puzzle films as those which “embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatiotemporal reality. These films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences” (Buckland, p. 6). From today’s perspective, the phenomenon of puzzle films resonates not only within academic film studies but has also been identified by regular filmgoers as “mind-fuck movies”. Mind-game and puzzle films have already been a well-established phenomenon for over two decades. *Memento*, *eXistenz* (1999, dir. D. Cronenberg), *Lost Highway* (1997, dir. D. Lynch), *Donne Darko* (2001, dir. R. Kelly) and *Fight Club* (1998, dir. D. Fincher), are titles which represent ‘ideal’ mind-game / puzzle structures, along with other titles that explore some of their distinctive narrative and ideological aspects, such as *The Game* (1997, dir. D. Fincher), *Usual Suspects* (1995, dir. B. Singer), *Beautiful Mind* (2001, dir. R. Howard) and *Dunkirk* (2017, dir. Ch. Nolan).

Moreover, film scholars have established other terms that are relatively similar to the ideas presented in Elsaesser’s and Buckland’s founding essays: *modular narratives* (Cameron), *database narratives* (Kinder), and *forking path narratives* (Bordwell 2002). What is more, the mind-game / puzzle pattern has been enriched with new ideas quite recently. Patricia Pisters introduced the *neuro-image*: films with characters “caught up in the vortex of the contemporary urban city-

scape full of networked electronic and digital screens – screens that are themselves always already connected to assemblages of power, capital, and transnational movements of peoples, goods, and information” (Pisters, p. 2). Steffen Hven develops the idea of *embodied fabula*, according to which the “complexity of contemporary cinema does not primarily rest in a complex, entangled, or complicated *syuzhet* or dramaturgy but owes to a «will to complexity» – understood as an insistence on the mutual dependence of cinematic dimensions that have traditionally been kept apart” (Hven, p. 9). Miklós Kiss and Willemssen Steven extended Warren Buckland’s idea and presented the term *impossible puzzle films*, which “are characterized by pervasive paradoxes, uncertainties, incongruities and ambiguities in the narration, and which, as a consequence, tend to elicit a state of ongoing cognitive confusion throughout the viewing experience” (Kiss, Willemssen, p. 6). Last but not least, Seth Friedman introduces the term *misdirecting films*, which “encourage viewers to reinterpret them retrospectively” and “provoke spectators to understand narrative information initially in one manner and subsequently comprehend it in drastically new ways” (Friedman 2017, p. 1–2). All these approaches stress not only discontinuation of classical linearity, but also ontological and epistemological changes in the audiovisual narrative paradigm. It will not be an exaggeration to say that we are witnessing a “mind-game shift” in contemporary film narratology.

1.2. Post-plot astonishment and the carnival of attractions

“Attraction”, on the other hand, is a less obvious term whose roots reach back to the very beginning of cinema – decades before it became digital. According to Sergey Eisenstein, attraction is “any aggressive aspect of the theatre; that is, any element of it which subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact” (Eisenstein, p. 34). This approach was later developed by the prominent “cinema of attractions” theory established by Tom Gunning, who argued that the spectatorship experience common to early cinema was both shock and amusement. Therefore, the artistic frame of the very first cinematic spectacles was the “aesthetic of astonishment”: “rather than being an involvement with narrative action or empathy with characters’ psychology, the cinema of attractions solicits a highly conscious awareness of the film image engaging the viewer’s curiosity. The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment” (Gunning 2009, p. 743).

Postclassical cinema seems fascinated by its own technological potential and visual illusion. The similarities between the early cinema of attractions and con-

temporary digital cinematic spectacles are often used to describe attraction-driven postclassical blockbusters, which seem to have intensified their visual impact since the early 21st century, when the rise of the franchise and re-make era began. The similarity of corporal reactions and the relevance of “omnipotent” film technology allows us to apply the category of attraction to contemporary postclassical cinema. As Thomas Elsaesser argues, “The assertion that early cinema is closer to post-classical cinema than it is to classical cinema also reverses the relation of norm and deviance. Now early cinema appears – flanked by the powerful, event-driven and spectacle-oriented blockbuster cinema – as the norm, making the classical Hollywood cinema seem the exception (or *intermezzo*)” (Elsaesser 2004, p. 84).

The analogies between early and digital cinema often stress the fact that contemporary cinema is driven by feedback between narrative complexity and the spectacle of attraction. How can we frame the relations between narration and attraction? Both narration and attraction are designed to appeal to viewers and both narration and attraction create a certain reaction and an “answer” within the cultural communication process provided by the institution of cinema. I suggest going beyond the well-established oppositional thinking that juxtaposes story vs. visuals, tellability vs. spectacle, *narration vs. monstration* (Gaudreault 2009)¹. Instead, I propose considering narration and attraction as complementary elements of the multidirectional economy of postclassical films – an economy which includes various ties, flows, margins, encounters, contradictions and interdependencies.

The prominent idea of contemporary narrative was introduced by David Bordwell. In his view, action and blockbuster film narration is not disturbed by visual attractions but are even more fluent. His concept of *intensified continuity* indicates four shifts in the narration/spectacle economy: rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements. Thanks to these changes, contemporary film narration is coherent and movement-driven; therefore, according to Bordwell there is no “postclassical” cinema, just a continuation of the well-established classical mode of narration. “Far from rejecting traditional continuity in the name of fragmentation and incoherence, the new style amounts to an intensification of established techniques” (Bordwell 2002, p. 16), therefore the emergence of hyperkinetic editing does not contradict classical cinema but rather confirms it as a dominant paradigm. This is an approach which has been opposed by Stephen Shaviro’s idea of *post-*

¹ The tradition of framing “narration” and “attraction” as opposite and complementary categories in film theory was described in this volume by Filip Cieślak in the article

continuity editing: “continuity itself has been fractured, devalued, fragmented, and reduced to incoherence. That is to say, the very techniques that were developed in order to *intensify* cinematic continuity have ended up undermining it” (Shaviro 2016, p. 55). My intent is not to indicate the winner of an intensified/post-continuity duel: I believe that both approaches can be used in a non-contradictory manner as different elements of a theoretical spectrum, where – depending on the phenomena, genres, and films – both intensified and post-continuity ideas can find a use. This creates an opportunity for a bottom-up film analysis where a single theory does not determine the outcome of analysis but is a handy research tool. I therefore assume that we may consider the existence of intensified continuity and post-continuity not only in one cinematic universe (*Marvel*) or franchise (*Avengers*), but also within a single film (*Avengers: Infinity War* [2018, A. Russo, J. Russo]) – or maybe even a scene (battle on Titan).

There are also several interesting theoretical propositions which combine narration and monstration qualities. Geoff King introduced the term “spectacular narratives” in order to characterize the specificity of the blockbuster movie. In this view, Hollywood nowadays emphasizes the visual impact but remains rooted in narrative progression even though the storytelling may seem less complex (King). Moreover, King sees special effects as auto-reflexivity – not a “regression” of a narrative but an emphasis: “Sitting back and simply ‘taking in’ the spectacle, the impact of ‘big’ special effects seems to be as important a source of pleasure in these films as the joys of narrative”, and special effects are “over-insistent narrative rhetoric” (King, p. 29). That is why “watching a movie” has become “riding a movie” (King, p. 176) – a film experience simulates theme-park amusement, with camera rides as a rollercoaster perspective and film narration as “track direction” that connects all the modules of attraction. In this case, as Scott Bukatman argues, there has been a narration/attraction feedback: films became more spectacular and theme parks became narrated (Bukatman, p. 266). The inspiring term *post-plot film* was introduced by “Los Angeles Times” film critic, Steven Zeitchik, according to whom “The way the film is structured, coherence of any kind – why people are literally doing what they’re doing, or what the plausible psychological explanations are for what they’re doing – seem beside the point” (Zeitchik). Post-plot films of course have a story and narration, yet they are generic and designed not to disturb the very idea of the contemporary blockbuster – a joyful and a carnival-like feast of digital attractions which simply does not need narrative support.

What is more, in contemporary film culture these relations have to expand beyond a single film. World-building is a basic form of expansion of franchises

and seriality in contemporary production culture. Since postclassical cinema dynamics are driven by various types of narration/ attraction exchange, we cannot detach them from the technological changes brought by cinematic digitalization. Postclassical films modify, change or dismiss the conventions of “classical cinema” (Bordwell 1985) or “zero style cinema” (Przylipiak) and are located in a dynamic, transfictional (Ryan 2013) and transmedial (Jenkins 2006) environment. Also the seriality of contemporary culture causes changes in the narration of films. In an era when most superheroes and fantastic protagonists are re-acting the same “rescue-the-world story” and Disney is re-making, re-booting and re-writing its own classics, we no longer wonder “what will happen?” but instead ask ourselves “how will it be shown?”.

Since the digital cinematic (r)evolution began three decades ago, one may ask what is so “special” in the omnipresent digital effects? How to create the sensation of novelty within a culture of seriality and repetition? Nowadays, all “special” digital effects have become normal devices and are used in various narrative functions, as indicated by Shilo T. McClean: documentary, invisible, seamless, exaggerated, fantastical, surrealist and hyperrealist (McClean, p. 73–102). In order to fabricate more creative and “attractive” effects, contemporary film spectacles have been becoming more designed/rendered than filmed/recorded. This is the crucial element of the “exhibitionist” nature of contemporary cinema – the “cinema designed” and “engineered spectacle” (Gurevitch) which is driven by “post-cinematic cameras” that “seem not to know their place with respect to the separation of diegetic and non-diegetic planes of reality; these cameras therefore fail to situate viewers in a consistently and coherently designated spectating position” (Denson, p. 196). Steven Shaviro describes contemporary film attraction in a similar way: “the sequence becomes a jagged collage of fragments of explosions, crashes, physical lunges, and violently accelerated motions. There is no sense of spatiotemporal continuity; all that matters is delivering a continual series of shocks to the audience” (Shaviro 2016: 51). A radical critique of such an aggressive film spectacle was carried out by Matthias Stork in his video essay called *Chaos Cinema*. Compared to the action films of the 80s and 90s, *chaos cinema* has intensified its movement and became hyperactive. Post-Millennial cinema “trades visual intelligibility for sensual overload”, and in consequence “the new action films are fast, florid, volatile audiovisual war zones” (Stork). In this view, attraction becomes distraction – narration becomes disorientation. Viewers’ experiences related to disorientation, distraction or discomfort (perverse pleasures of film) lead us towards *mind-game films* (Elsaesser 2009) or *puzzle films* (Buckland 2009). This is why I would like to consider attraction not only as a digitally designed element of the cinematic spectacle, but also as a narrative *defamiliarization* (Shklovskij).

1.3 Postclassical cinema and its unfinished definition

In her book *Post-Classical Cinema: An International Poetics of Film Narration*, Eleftheria Thanouli indicates significant shifts in contemporary film storytelling. Not only narrative structure is (de)constructed, but also the philosophy and anthropology of the film experience, both of which are influenced by production technology (digitalization) and changes in the sociological landscape (globalization, post-industrial society, new media omnipresence). Thanouli compares the characteristic aspects of classical and postclassical cinema both as opposition and as revisionist continuity. She notes that post-classical storytelling is no longer strongly focused on a storyline driven by the main protagonist. What is more, narrative fluency based on linearity and casual chronology drifts towards the proliferation of narrative lines and the disturbance of space-time unity. “The filmmakers appear to be freed from the tyranny of linearity, as they handle narrative time with the flexibility and omni-directionality that is embodied in digital technology” (Thanouli, p. 129). “Common sense” causality no longer remains a dogmatic strategy for plot structuring. A protagonist turns out to be less credible, less active and less consequent; what is more, the story-world (s) he inhabits becomes resistant to familiarizing; the narration is porous, episodic, complicated, and often auto-reflexive, and editing departs from fluency and traditional continuity. Digital production and post-production processes (including digital special effects) make it easier to manipulate with editing. Moreover, the combination of shots and scenes appears more dynamic and sudden, definitely more disturbing and – most importantly – nontransparent. The storytelling includes less goal-oriented motivation of characters, less proliferated characters and plots, increased fragmentation, complex syuzhet, parallel actions, disturbed editing, digital effects, “hypermediated realism” (increased awareness of the screen culture of our times [Thanouli, p. 45]), and hybrid genres. Postclassical cinema narrates more quickly and less coherently.

Another interesting concept of the latest switch in the postclassical narration/attraction economy is often called “post-cinema”. “Post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema. Thus, post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical *transition*” (Denson, Leyda, p. 2). What is more, “contemporary films – from blockbusters to independents and the auteurist avant-garde – use digital cameras and editing technologies, incorporating the aesthetics of gaming, webcams, surveillance video, social media, and smartphones, to name a few” (Denson, Leyda, p. 4). Therefore, postclassical cinema’s attraction

can often be the presence of technology which is no longer “transparent” or “seamless” but is openly mediated and exposed, including “spectacular” CGI and FX technologies, as well as “intimate” and everyday devices like smartphone cameras, desktop interfaces (via the emerging sub-genre of *desktop movies*) or CCTV. Postclassical cinema incorporates various technologies which may seem both a source of attraction and a driver of narration, with all the (dis)advantages of technophobia (fear of ideology, surveillance, ontological and epistemological doubts) and technophilia (advantages of progress, facility and empowerment).

Postclassical film narration seems to frame *change* (the main storytelling category and a factor of narrative progress) not as an immanent part of plot structure, but rather as an output of the comprehension of the narration process by the viewer; a viewer who can recognize the film genre and the “mythical” structure of the plot also experiences certain emotions and affects in reaction to the fictional storyworld that (s)he has already inhabited. Contemporary film narration and diegesis are indeed story-worlds (Ryan 2013) which are both narration driven and attraction based. This approach allows us to go beyond the simple narration/attraction opposition towards framing a movie as a spacetime opened to expansion in the contemporary culture of seriality. The concept of a *transmedial world* – a story-world which disseminates its presence (rules, narratives, characters) via various medias (Thon 2015) – frames attraction/narration relations outside a single film towards merchandising, marketing strategies and other cinematic paratexts. I consider world-building elements (settings, characters, costumes, props, production design, *mise-en-scène*, specific storyworld rules, etc.) to be an important source of attractions, but only in correlation with storytelling dynamics: movement, camera trajectory, and dramatic tension.

2. Cinematic experience: affect and embodiment

2.1. Estrangements and the excess of narration

Mind-game films have already been described in the context of both art and classical narration (Kiss, Willemsen 2017). Another theoretical idea that interferes with *mind-game films* is the so-called “cinema of attraction” (Gunning 1990). This is a less obvious framework, yet it does not seem totally inappropriate considering the fact that *mind-game films* evoke not only an urge to rationalize, but also a notion of astonishment and sensory overstimulation; in other words, they combine the process of *sense-making* and the effect of *mind-blowing*, a specific fusion of amusement and cinematic excess which is reflected in puzzle films’ vernacular synonym: *mind-fuck movies*. This means that we have to examine

various modes of experience within the horizon of comprehending film narration (as cognitive processes, sense-making, emotional engagement) and attraction, which brings more effective, diffused, incoherent and illusive sensations. As Tom Gunning noted regarding early cinematic spectacles, “The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment” (Gunning 2009, p. 743). “Attraction” gives rise to a complex cinematic sensation which remains difficult to verbalize. It includes visual pleasure, astonishment, and awareness of cinematic illusion, yet it remains an aggressive moment which evokes corporal reactions (tension, eye movement, thrill, gasps of amazement, etc.). This kind of disorientation or affective discomfort (the perverse pleasures of a film and the notion of being moved by it) is also present in *mind-game films*, with their complicated, non-chronological or subjective narration, spatiotemporal paradoxes and psychopathological focalizers.

Postclassical films tend to be exhibitionist and over-visible, while employing a storytelling structure that becomes an attractive cognitive challenge. This is an example of an interesting relation in postclassical cinema: narration becomes a series of spectacular attractions (ex. in *post-plot films*: *Guardians of The Galaxy* [2014, J. Gunn], *Mad Max: Fury Road* [2015, G. Martin]), *The Hobbit* [2012–14, P. Jackson]), while attraction may be seen as manipulation in narration. In this case, the “narrative movement” is contemporarily perplexed with “the movement of attractions”, which – as I argue – indicates the multidirectional vector of film dynamics. In this view, attraction appears not only as a digitally designed element of a spectacle, but also as a narrative *defamiliarization*.

In *mind-game* and puzzle films, aspects of narration that appear as cognitive bait include anachrony (especially retrospection), event sequencing and compositional frame. Intensified manipulation dominates the narrative structure and results in *achrony*, which according to Mieke Bal is a “deviation of time” (Bal, p. 97) that cannot be chronologically ordered. The narration aspects listed above are visible in the history of art cinema, and some of these elements can also be seen in film noir or post-classical films which are not considered to be puzzle films. Yet, the very idea of contemporary narrative games focuses not only on introducing some narrative challenges, but also on multiplying them in order to create a pyramid of structural complications. Some *mind-game films* are in fact a labyrinth of storytelling estrangements. The fragmentation, unreliability, chronological and linear disorder, metalepsis, retrospections and futurospecions, and the ontological ambiguity of the diegesis are perplexing and overwhelming. The multiplication or cumulation of narrative defamiliarization – which I call

“narrative excess” – may create an experience similar to the cinema of attractions: affective tension and the notion of disruption and disorientation.

So far, the affective and cognitive puzzlement of the cinematic *mind-game* may have found its best realization in *Westworld*. Since it is a television series, the profusion of estrangements refers not only to one episode but has to be extended over one season and eventually the whole series. The narrative seriality exploited by contemporary television indeed serves puzzle structures and seems to reestablish the trend. A mind game can be played within the possibilities offered by the fragmented and open structure that is characteristic of TV series, which may also intensify the ambiguity of a storyworld that reveals a Chinese-box structure of codependent levels of diegesis, which are perplexed or looped. The construction of the interdependent layers of *Westworld*'s multiverse is flexible and based on many temporal relations: repetition, retroactivity, and alternative and circular time. As was shown in the final cliffhanger of the first season, which level of reality is primal or who the god-like figure who governs the mechanics of *Westworld* is can never be finally established. All this creates an opportunity to “vertically” accumulate more layers, and in fact infinitely add layers to the Russian Doll structure of the film. The embodiment of mind-game films may resemble cognitive dizziness and especially characterizes puzzle films whose narration is entangled in an endless loop or an eternal *mise en abyme*. *Inception* serves as a perfect example: the structural vortex is also visualized by “special effects” in scenes in which a character is captured in closed spaces (room, elevator) that are spinning around. Yet this “cognitive dizziness” is also present in *Dunkirk* (2017, dir. Ch. Nolan), in which an overload of audiovisual techniques reflects a war zone's overwhelming onslaught of stimuli. This affective “mind-blowing” aspect “sums up” *Lost Highway*, in which the story repeats itself in a retroactive, vicious circle, or in the “schizophrenic” scene of identity transfer between two characters: Fred (Bill Pullman) and Pete (Balthazar Getty). On the other hand, *Donnie Darko* starts with a “mind-blowing” scene in which a cosmic rabbit visits the protagonists, invites them on a psychedelic trip, and reveals his messianic faith. The notion of a strangely moving disturbance may be experienced in crucial moments of *Fight Club* (1999, dir. D. Fincher), in which the true identity of Brad Pitt/Edward Norton's character is revealed, and in *American Psycho* (2000, dir. M. Harron), in which a macabre crime committed by the yuppie character is *de-narrated* and framed as a subjective perception of him as the unreliable focalizer. Scenes like this have a peculiar affective (“mind-blowing”) potential which proves that “intellectual” interpretation or rational sense-making are not the main or sole strategy of experiencing *mind-game films*. The affective tension and perverse pleasure of cognitive insecurity that strike us during this type of

ambiguous scene are equally important cinematic experiences and should not be marginalized as this is the very moment when mind-game films' "impact really starts as they attach themselves to spectators, taking hold of their minds and entering their fantasies (Elsaesser, Hagener, p. 151).

2.2. Vertigo of narration and spectacle

The *puzzle film* experience is therefore a feedback loop of sense-making processes (Kiss, Willemsen) and mind-blowing affects. Watching a puzzle film does not necessarily mean "solving a puzzle" or completely reducing cognitive dissonance; it also means being dazed or thunderstruck by the narrative dynamics of the film – mind-game also means "mind blown". This affective character of mind-game films brings us again to Tom Gunning's *aesthetic of astonishment* (Gunning 2009). Despite the fact that this theoretical proposition did not regard narrative complexity, it appears useful for characterizing the affective nature of mind-game films, especially in the case of the rhetoric used to describe the concept, which employs elusive and ambiguous words such as shock, daze or astonishment. What is more, the specific experience of being dazzled by a narrative maze reminds one of another category: *ilinx*, a type of game described by Roger Caillois that aims to draw us into a state of kinetic or mental chaos. A participant strives to achieve a "rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder" (Caillois, p. 12) and to gratify "the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience" (Caillois, p. 44). As we see, this mental vertigo is not an undesirable side effect which should be neutralized, but an intentional state that is associated with perverse pleasure. Again, this notion remains hard to rationalize and therefore to verbalize. Cinematic sensations described in this way will instead remain associated with contemporary post-plot cinema, dominated by the amalgam of digital attractions (in particular with 3D cinema) whose editing and movement sought to simulate controlled kinetic sensations. It seems, however, that speaking about this type of bewilderment is also valid in the case of mind-game films, in which the effect of *ilinx* is generated in a variety of ways through both visual attractions and narrative estrangements.

The narrative excess of mind-game films creates the impression of vertigo – a multidirectional journey of thoughts and affects that both seek sense and derive pleasure from momentary astonishment. This dazzlement of the narrative vortex may be found in *eXistenZ*, which presents a fatalistic multilayered VR game, and in *The Prestige*, which gradually adds more levels of narrative as flashbacks and diaries. On the other hand, *Mechanic* dazzles by means of the pro-

tagonist's stream of consciousness encrusted with snapshots of trauma; *Arrival* presents a retroactive time with ambiguous flashbacks and flash-forwards; and *Adaptation* multiplies the levels of fiction by adding new meta-authors. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener write that in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004, dir. M. Gondry) "a never-ending spiral is set in motion and we as spectators are no longer certain of our role in the game a film like this is into, tricked as we, like the characters, are into mistaking 'replay' as play". Are we impartial witnesses, active participants or manipulated pawns?" (Elsaesser, Hagener, p. 149). Mirosław Przyłipiak finds a similar narrative trap in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006): "Lynch exposes the illusion in his own way. He reveals the curtain only to show that there is another behind it, and behind that there is another one, so one cannot be sure of anything; what seemed to be true turns out to be a delusion, and a moment later, it takes on the features of objective reality again. And so *ad infinitum*" (Przyłipiak, p. 258).

All of these seem to be a strange synthesis of pleasure and discomfort which is similar to Tom Gunning's writing on the early cinema of attractions: "as in the first projections, the very aesthetic of attraction runs counter to an illusionistic absorption, the variety format of the picture-palace program continually reminding the spectator of the act of watching by a succession of sensual assaults" (Gunning 2009, p. 748). Astonishment is not a cognitive process, but rather a sensation or notion – a rapid and momentary experience that can be felt as pleasure entwined with a controlled thrill. Although this type of reception may be characteristic of post-plot "war zone" (Stork) cinema or "post-cinematic affect" (Shaviro) which relies on digital attractions, it seems that it can also be found in mind-game films. As Gunning states, "astonishment and knowledge perform a vertiginous dance, and pleasure derives from the energy released by the play between the shock caused by this illusion of danger and delight in its pure illusion. The jolt experienced becomes a shock of recognition" (Gunning 2009, p. 750). Tom Gunning succeeded in capturing and describing the type of film experience which includes circulation of intellectual aspects as well as elusive and ephemeral affects. Similar affective experiences are part of mind-game films. The emerging aspect of *mind-blowing* and astonishment is a specific mixture of pleasure and discomfort; it is also proof of the coexistence of narration and attractions. Narration and attraction (understood as any reason for astonishment, not only visual enjoyment) in puzzle films are complementary, not contradictory. Narrative estrangements and the entire confounding structure of a film may seem to be the attraction that astonishes or "attracts" us, thereby capturing our attention. This attraction also stimulates us cognitively and evokes a desire to search for meaning among narrative paradoxes and ambiguities.

3. Cognitive attractions and the persistence of mind-game films

3.1. Spectacular mind games

Contemporary mind-game or puzzle films, especially big-budget science-fiction productions, cannot be reduced to an abstract “narrative structure”. They are also (or maybe above all?) cinematographic spectacles which use digital post-production technology. The attractions of mind-game films are based on visual impact and narrative disturbance. An astonishing *ilinx* of this kind, or a mind-blowing experience, may be the result of an accumulation of the various types of paradoxes that are present in the diegesis and in the narrative excess. A director who especially made his personal brand out of this kind of viewer engagement is Christopher Nolan, whose *oeuvre* appears to be an interesting case study of postclassical cinema. Films directed by him are visually amusing spectacles with significant budgets and box office success; on the other hand, their storytelling remains complex and sometimes complicated; what is more – except for *The Dark Knight* trilogy and *Insomnia* – Nolan’s productions are original films.

An interesting exchange of narration and spectacular attraction may be found in *Dunkirk* and its sensorimotor experience. Christopher Nolan’s war spectacle is *moving* thanks to the various types of movement it generates. This type of dynamics is precisely orchestrated with its multidimensionality: within the frame and/or a cut, in editing, camera trajectory, diegetic noises and soundtrack, and last but not least in the proliferated and fragmented narration. The dramatic tension is based on a sinusoid of acceleration and deceleration and causes the viewer to experience emotional jumps and equilibriums. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener wrote, “the movement-image stands for a cinema of perceptions, affects and actions in which the sensory-motor schema of the human body is a functioning unit. A chain links perceptions to feelings, and feelings to sensations and sensations to actions, which in turn gives rise to perceptions, etc., and puts the human being as agent at the center of the motion that is a movie” (Elsaesser, Hagener, p. 159). Here, where Deleuze’s idea of movement-image seems almost corporeal, *Dunkirk* itself illustrates both the etymology and the phenomenon of *kinēma*. In Nolan’s film, the essence of cinema – the kinetics – is understood as the ability of films to simulate movement, and thus to move viewers. To embody *Dunkirk* is equivalent to finding a place in a world of disorder intensified by narrative proliferation and absorbing its “war zone” of audiovisual chaos, all of which correspond to the concept of Sergei Eisenstein’s attraction, that is “any aggressive aspect of the theater, i.e., any element of it that subjects the audience to a emotional or psychological influence” (Eisenstein, p. 34).

Nolan's "spectacular narratives" not only accord extensive attractions with complicated narration, but also seem to position narration *as* attraction and create a specific form of "cognitive visual attractions". Loops, retroactivity, Chinese box structures, de-narration, non-reliability, ambiguity and narrative proliferation are the most popular defamiliarizations in his reservoir, all of which create an interesting mode of distributing attraction/narration elements in postclassical cinema. *Inception* is, of course, the most proper example of this strategy thanks to the way it visualizes spatial and temporal paradoxes. The film's characters often create labyrinths and the illusions of *mise en abyme* multiply elements of space; there is a scene that captures the Penrose stair dilemma and a visual motive of a rolling surface when a character moves inside a rotating room. Scenes like this are both "intellectual" and visual attractions that generate astonishment in audiences. This bewilderment is intensified by a specific, multilevel narrative structure, thanks to which the hypodiegetic storyworld not only has a *mise en abyme* shape, but also seems to loop in an infinite repetition. The clarity of the *matryoshka* framework is disturbed, and the linear experience of the film is drawn into a narrative spiral. The "deepening" of successive levels of reality, within which and between which dynamic changes occur, may resemble a vortex that makes our head spin. It is a kind of affect that Brian Massumi described as a "temporal sink, a hole in time" (Massumi, p. 86). The daze of *Inception* is the result of this kind of world-building abundance. Interconnections between cinematic movement and time are, in fact, main issue of *Tenet* (2020). Its multidirectional narration affects both macro-movement of the whole storyline and micro-movement of the story-world elements within a single cut (characters moving backwards, etc.). The climax sequence of Nolan's blockbuster is a contamination of narrative „brain teaser" and visual celebration of cinematic omnipotence.

"Cognitive attractions" may be found in other mind-game films: in *Arrival*, in which a retroactive way of perceiving the timeline is visualized in the circular description of the alien's language, or in *Interstellar* when, at the end, the father visits his daughter's room "from the past" and "from behind" the four-dimensional reality, which is presented as a cross-cut of elongated book shelves. This is of course a mind-game strategy, but also a source of, as Thomas Elsaesser calls it, a "thought experiment" which brings "the hypothetical tense and the gesture of *what if* – both stances that apply to many of the ways we approach reality itself. 'Let's assume that...' has become almost a default modus operandi thanks to the technologies of probability, statistics and the extraordinary advances made in mathematically modeling the physical world in the real time" (Elsaesser 2017, p. 62).

3.2. Mind-gaming the spectacle

This kind of “thought experiment” and “what if” logic are visibly present in the latest blockbusters, especially in the superhero sub-genre. In effect, postclassical cinema not only explores mind-game films by transferring them from independent cinema to the mainstream, but it also “mindgames” the visual spectacles by encrusting them with visual and narrative “thought experiments”.

It is particularly interesting that the *Avengers* crossovers change their narrative pattern from a frenetic post-plot to a *mind-game*-inspired spectacle with time travel paradoxes. First, Marvel’s superhero ensemble movie *Avengers* had a rather simple story: a group of heroes with outstanding abilities had to stop a grand cosmic villain whose aim was to annihilate Earth with an omnipotent stone. The straightforwardness of the plot generated a perfect background for some aspects that were later capitalized on by Marvel’s aesthetics: character development and interactions between heroes, rapid (often ironical) dialogues or punchlines, extensive world-building, and – above all – stunning visual attractions which were a joyful celebration of cinematic movement. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015, dir. J. Whedon) also employed a post-plot pattern with a *deus ex machina* intervention in the climax. While this narrative construction was stable enough to support six characters and two films, it did not seem sufficient to ensure bolder productions like *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, which engaged more than a dozen superheroes from the Marvel Universe. As a result, the two final *Avengers* films used narrative patterns that are recognized in postclassical cinema yet are not popular for blockbusters: *network narratives* (Bordwell 2006) and *mind-game estrangements*. *Infinity War* proliferates on three main plotlines which are an opportunity not only for additional dynamic action, but also for a specific “fan service” which allows viewers to see unpredictable team-ups of well-known characters. This is a blockbuster ensemble movie in which, according to David Bordwell, “several protagonists are given equal emphasis, based on screen time, star wattage, control over events, or other spotlighting maneuvers” (Bordwell 2006, p. 96). Thanks to this solution, *Infinity War* – the “ambitious crossover”, as fans used to call it – was able to maintain coherency and intensify the action at the same time (to the point at which its fluent editing and digital dynamic seemed to be proof of Bordwell’s idea of intensified continuity).

What is even more interesting is the film’s finale, in which we may observe two mind-game defamiliarizations, or “thought experiments”: one narratological, the other visual. At this point of the film, the megavillain Thanos, who wants to kill half of the universe’s population, is on his final mission to find the last Infinity Stone; after collecting all six of them he will be able to fulfill his

annihilation masterplan. The Mind Stone is, however, “organically” attached to the superhero Vision’s forehead. In order to stop Thanos, Scarlet Witch (one of the Avengers) kills Vision and consequently destroys the Mind Stone. Yet, Thanos, who has already possessed the Time Stone and is able to reverse this very moment, brings Vision back to life, collects the Mind Stone itself, and rapidly erases half of the lives in the universe. Shortly after snapping his fingers (a gesture which starts the annihilation process), we see people turning into ashes blown by the wind. The first of these “attractions” (or anti-attractions?) is an example of denarration – a form of re-telling or canceling the story – when the action runs backwards, almost as if we were watching a VHS cassette or video footage in fast rewind mode. The second one appears as an original and visionary variation of visualizing the mass death with all its pathos and fatalistic course. It is interesting that both “attractions” are not only shocking, moving and astonishing, but also deeply rooted in the ontology of digital cinema. The denarration reminds us about the omnipotence, flexibility, and multidirectional vector of the film medium itself, whereas the dematerialization (or “vanishing people”) remains not only the *vanitas* of turning bodies into ashes, but also a visualization of a “digital body” that is decomposed into single disconnected pixels. While “creating” or world-building in postclassical digital cinema is actually an element of postproduction which consists of rigging, match-moving, rotoscoping, animating, rendering and compositing, “annihilating” or “world-destructing” would be the very opposite, namely turning supernatural characters into the smallest parts of their being – their digital atoms, *ergo* pixels. This kind of auto-reflexivity that indicates the nature of contemporary cinema is another yet more subtle 21st-century “thought experiment” which is based on information and digital data. In this reality, as Thomas Elsaesser points out, “history is increasingly understood as data to be extracted from the past and projected along a linear trajectory into a future we inadvertently empty of possibility, of contingency, and radical change (and therefore preempt and prevent” (Elsaesser 2017, p. 62). De-narration and “digital vanishing” indeed seem to be something unpredictable and unpreventable.

The short denarration that summed up *Infinity War* was in fact a foreshadowing of the story arch in *Endgame*. In order to reverse Thanos’ actions, the Avengers team has to turn back time, thus opening the film’s narration to time-travel paradoxes and looped or retroactive temporality. The final Avengers movie delivers its own time-traveling theory, slightly different from the one presented in popular film narrations of this kind (which are literally mocked in the character’s dialogues). In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, time manipulations do not affect the past but create another timeline with its own linear flow which avoids

“the grandpa paradox”; namely, an intervention in the past cannot change the present because our present precedes these interventions and therefore remains in the past itself. This is another interesting case of “mindgaming” a spectacle in which viewers are not only challenged by unconventional temporality, but also by its fictional alternative version.

Interestingly, the latest Avengers productions are not the only case of “mindgaming the spectacle” trend in contemporary blockbusters. Another Marvel production, *Doctor Strange* (2016, dir. S. Derrickson), introduces retroactive causality, a looped timeline and “cognitive attractions” like bent time and surfaces (similar to *Inception*’s tricks). The interference between different parallel universes was the idea of the teen-movie animation *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* (2018, dir. P. Ramsey, B. Persichetti, R. Rothman). On the other hand, *Captain Marvel* includes a scene that is an interesting example of a “neuro-image” in which, as Patricia Pisters points out, “we no longer see through characters’ eyes, as in the movement-image and the time-image; we are most often instead in their mental worlds” (Pisters 2012, p. 14). The main character, Carol Danvers – one of the most powerful fighters in the universe – is brainwashed by the imperial Kree forces and serves them in colonizing cosmic territories. In the crucial scene we “enter” Carol’s mentalscape to experience the process of her gaining awareness of her own origins and liberation from the influence of the Krees, who have been manipulating her for a long time. Her inability to break free is presented in a very “plastic” way: Captain Marvel is immersed in a liquid wall that imprisons her powers and consciousness and suddenly becomes a screen of her memories and fears. Carol is fighting her most important battle within her private mentalscape, winning a mind game of her own. Another, even more radical „neuro-image” has been introduced as a world-building base in MCU TV series *Wanda Vision* (2021). Its protagonist, powerful super heroine with telekinetic abilities created post-traumatic reality, where she and her late partner, Vision, can live happily ever after. In this Chinese-box story, each episode is stylized as it was made in different decade of television history. However this postmodern-alike “thought experiment” eventually gives room to a standard magical resolution typical of superhero genre. Mind-game and fantastical spectacle have been blended again.

Moreover, the visible strategy of complicating the narration and abandoning post-plot structure appears to be an “access for all” strategy, as described by Thomas Elsaesser: “*access for all* in this sense does not necessarily imply going for the lowest common denominator, or providing “something for everybody”, but can aim at trying to achieve a textually coherent ambiguity, the way that poetry is said to aim at maximizing the levels of meaning that specific words or works

can carry, thus extending interpretation while retaining control over the codes that make interpretation possible” (Elsaesser 2011, p. 248). The blockbusters I have already listed are not “universal” or “transparent” stories for an everyman filmgoer, but rather puzzling and challenging storyworlds (“coherent ambiguity”) that may be perceived in various, even contradictory ways, depending on one’s mindset, cultural capital or worldview, and which allow various forms of reception and embodiment. This kind of reading is also enabled by the ambiguous ties between narration and attraction.

As we can see, postclassical cinema variously reshapes the distribution of narration and attraction. Mind-game films – once indie or *auteur* productions – are becoming cinematic spectacles. On the other hand, visually stunning blockbusters seem to go beyond post-plot structure towards “mind-gaming the spectacle” and engaging not only visual, but also narrative and “cognitive” attractions. What is more, both narration and attraction may bring similar, affective sensations: the notion of shock and dissonance, discomfort, astonishment, kineshetic impulse or cognitive stimulation. Modifications of contemporary cinema are therefore shaped by this fusion of narrative and visual excess. The relation between narration and attraction in 21st-century cinema should not be perceived as opposition, but as feedback which incarnates the very idea of the cinema – its unstoppable dynamics.

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Abstract

The article is a theoretical proposal which aims to create an alternative framework for mapping postclassical cinema. This framework is based on establishing various modes of relations between narration and spectacle, especially those represented by mind-game films and post-plot films. Instead of considering narration and spectacle as opposition, I suggest redescribing their complementary dynamics. I argue that there is visible feedback between mind-game films and the cinema of digital attractions, which I see as complementary processes of making “spectacular mind games” and “mind-gaming the spectacles”. The article contains an analysis of similar types of cinematic experiences delivered by “narration” and “attractions” and indicates the mutual influences between these two phenomena. Both narration and attraction may bring similar, affective sensations: the notion of shock and dissonance, discomfort, astonishment, kinesthetic impulse or cognitive stimulation.

As for the article’s conclusion: postclassical cinema variously reshapes the distribution of narration and attraction. Mind-game films are becoming cinematic spectacles. On the other hand, more and more “post-plot” blockbusters are introducing the “mind-gaming the spectacle” strategy, and are engaging viewers with “cognitive” attractions as well.

Key words: mind-game films, postclassical cinema, “post-plot” blockbusters