Identity Crisis: Film and The Fractured Self

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Abstract

In this project I examine how we, as film spectators, build an understanding of characters in fiction film narratives and how this could be said to relate to the way in which we build a sense of selfhood in the real world. I conduct detailed case studies of six films, which in different ways engage with issues of self-identity in a way that can be said to highlight the inherent fragility of our sense of self. I bring together contributions from theoretical film studies, cognitive psychology, and philosophy in order to both link ideas from these different areas of research as well as linking seemingly disparate films through their respective approaches to character portrayal. My aim is to build on the existing discourse that predominantly falls under the banner of cognitive film theory, with particular emphasis on audience affect and character portrayal. I offer alternative readings and approaches to certain films which feature unconventional character development and which, to varying degrees, deviate from established cinematic storytelling norms.

The idea I wish to advance is that there is an inherent aversion to imagery and / or cinematic storytelling styles which highlight (either implicitly or explicitly) the artificiality of what we are seeing, particularly if the example involves a breakdown in the clarity of character identity. The view I offer is that an aversion to or frustration with such instances is not solely restricted to our sense of confusion stemming from a perceived lack of clear storytelling. Behind this lies the potentially discomfiting sense that the fabricated nature of characters points towards something similarly fragile about our own 'real world' identities, which can be the case particularly if the subject matter complements the avant-garde style of the film in question. When character identity dissolves it may impair our ability to comprehend a film narrative, but a negative viewer response may also be generated by the suggestion that our sense of self might be more vulnerable that we care to admit. I argue that our appreciation of certain kinds of 'difficult' films require a revision of not only how we approach films more generally but how we understand selfhood itself.

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Introduction

Works of fiction offer seemingly infinite freedom to construct, mould, and alter character identities within a given narrative, and this capacity provides a rich source of material for those in the business of creating fiction films. In this project I will consider the following question: what is the nature of the relationship between how we relate to fictional characters in film and how we define and understand our own identities? If we pause to consider the fundamentals of constructing characters and assembling a film narrative, the process and end product is, on a certain level, a violation of assumptions that surround us in our daily lives. However, because we are immensely familiar with film narratives of a certain style we do not tend to routinely question or reflect upon the basic act of rearranging space and time in the way that filmmakers do; our understanding of the capabilities of the moving image is ingrained. However, when films work against or break entirely from the conventions of narrative storytelling, it can often make us pause and reconsider the basic processes we employ when comprehending films and the narrative conventions – of editing, continuity, sound, plot development - that we have essentially internalised. From this consideration comes a second question; what can unconventional portrayals of characters in film tell us about both our viewing tendencies as well as the broader assumptions we make about our own sense of self in the real world? Viewers respond in a multitude of ways to narratives which choose to manipulate character identities in one way or another, but, as with all works of fiction, it is the creative decisions and diegetic content in conjunction with our real world experiences and knowledge that will, for the most part, guide and influence our responses. Depending on what someone has read, experienced, or perhaps been raised to believe, personal identity may seem to some as something dependable, clearly defined and distinct while to others it may appear to be a fractured and ill-defined phenomenon. I will explore the various ways a film can frustrate our expectations of how characters should develop during a narrative as means of highlighting the fragility of one's own personal identity, and the associated fear or fascination that this idea holds.

It is imperative at this point that I establish what I am referring to when I use the term 'identity,' since the word can be used to describe a huge variety of phenomena. Even if we reduce the scope to 'self-identity' or 'personal identity,' which are the areas I am most concerned with, we are still confronted with

a wide and varied array of definitions and meanings, and as such greater specificity is required. As I will be referring to real selves as well as cinematic ones, a major part of my efforts will involve defining these two types of identity and highlighting the similarities and differences between them. Existential debates about self-identity are as old as humanity itself so it is with a mixture of caution and enthusiasm that I have chosen to wade into what is a long-established and contentious topic, albeit from the perspective of theoretical film studies. There are areas of crossover between how we define and understand characters and how we form a sense of our own personal identity, and equally there are many areas in which this crossover does not occur. Traditional debates about personal identity gravitate towards the mind-body question in which much of the discussion attempts to determine which part(s) of a person could be said to constitute one's self. I have laid out my project in line with this dichotomy so that sections I and II consider portrayals of physical and psychological identity respectively, though I should emphasise that this is primarily for practical and organisational reasons rather than an endorsement of taking a dualistic approach to theories of self-identity. I will in fact fall in line with more recent theories from the philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology to show that the mind-body distinction is helpful simply for the purpose of opening up the initial discussion, but only in order to show how the identity of individuals is much more complex than a dualistic approach allows. As regards characters, there is obviously common ground between real selves and fictional ones in terms of physical and psychological identity and the crossover in these areas will form the backbone of my analyses. As such, when using terms like 'self-identity' or 'personal identity' I will for the most part be referring to the bodily and psychological aspects of selfhood, be it real or fictional. In this respect I am distinguishing from other 'types' of self-identity, such as gender, race, nationality and so on. That is not to say that these aspects of a person or character's identity do not contribute to their psychological or physical makeup or distinctiveness (gender, for example, has a hugely significant bearing on both), but for my purposes they are better regarded as sub-categories under the broader headings of physical or psychological identity. Whenever a sub-category of this sort becomes relevant - the gender of a character; the national identity of a director; the racial background of an actor, for example – then I will focus in on that aspect of identity as applicable.

As my title suggests, I will be exploring character identity and self-identity with a particular focus on the fault lines that exist within our understanding of how and why an individual can be

considered a cohesive, discrete entity who is wholly distinct from other phenomena. But what do I mean by terms like 'fracturing' or 'fault lines'? It is a simple enough exercise to consider how a human body is formed, where its physical limits are, what it is comprised of, and then to consider the multitude of ways in which it can be damaged, destroyed, or undergo change and degradation of one sort or another. We can also appreciate the fluid and vulnerable nature of our subjective self with its rapidly changing moods and tastes, and the way in which non-physical trauma can shape our psychology. It is easy to imagine certain kinds frailties in our identity; the contest between a human body and the blades of a combine harvester can have only one winner, just as witnessing a murder will inevitably inflict deep psychological damage of some sort. Fracturing of one's identity in these ways form part of my analysis when I look at storylines depicting physical and mental damage, but beyond this are more existential ways of regarding fault lines in our self of self. Consider the exchange of dialogue below, which is taken from a scene in Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993) in which the protagonist, Johnny (David Thewlis), is having a bizarre existential argument with a security guard:

> Brian: But the present does exist. We're in it now.
>
> Johnny: You were just then when you said it. But you're not in it now! You're not in it now! You're not in it now! You're forever being kicked up the arse by the future!

Johnny's words articulate what certain schools of thought would highlight as another kind of fault line; a tendency to get lost in one's memories of the past and plans for the future at the expense of having a real sense one's self in the present moment. Johnny's point is that the person we think we are is not necessarily who we *actually* are because we cannot prevent out minds drifting forwards or backwards in time for long enough to be truly aware of our existence in the present moment. The inability to 'catch oneself' in the present moment represents a temporal fracturing in the sense that our self-awareness is out of synch with the actual flow of time. There is a disconnect between the moment of experience and the moment we are focusing on, which can be construed as a less empirical and more experiential, existential fault line in our self-identity.

This example represents the nature of the debate that will follow when I look at a selection of film narratives which, in different ways, highlight and engage with the complex issues common to debates about self-identity. In particular, I will consider how films which foreground the inherent artificiality of fictional characters can reveal our tendencies and expectations as viewers while also highlighting certain physical and psychological frailties in our own personal identity. In mainstream film narratives there is a tendency to mask rather than highlight the fictionality of what we are watching so that the emphasis on storytelling can be maximised. Conversely, in arthouse or avant-garde works we sometimes have our role as viewers addressed more directly and this is often achieved in tandem with the filmmakers drawing attention to the film's constructed nature and the artificiality of the story being told. In this project I will be investigating the parallels that can be drawn between the cognitive dissonance that sometimes accompanies a jarring representation of fictional characters and the broader debates about personal identity.

This study is made up of six chapters gathered into three sections with each chapter devoted to the close analysis of a relevant work of film supplemented by pertinent secondary examples. The existing discourse on films that engage with personal identity in one way or another tends to focus heavily on narrative content and storylines with considerably less attention afforded to the significance of narrative structure and film style, particularly when it comes to examples outside the mainstream. With this in mind, it is my intention here to adopt a different approach which will highlight how films drawn from a variety of genres and historical periods can be linked to one another thematically despite contrasting sharply from one another in terms of style, tone, and overall delivery. It is quite easy to find films that are explicitly 'about' identity but my aim here is to draw links and parallels between seemingly disparate examples. I will draw a distinction between films which engage with issues of personal identity primarily through their storylines and those whose styles and structures behave demonstratively or illustratively. The latter group employ formal devices in order to complement the narrative content and create an immersive experience that takes the film beyond what it has to say about personal identity solely on the level of its diegetic content. Furthermore, I will look at how this group of films 'tug away' at the question of how relatively solid or fluid personal identity can be, particularly in cases where this is not necessarily explored solely through the explicit use of diegetic content, as is often the case in mainstream narratives.

My specific aim is not only to highlight a commonality between seemingly disparate films but also to bring together arguments from film studies, traditional philosophy, and cognitive psychology which in my view share some common ground within the self-identity discussion. The film-as-philosophy debate is an area of theoretical film studies that considers issues such as those I will be looking at and I will of course draw on works in this field while adding to the existing arguments. Much of the recent work in this area has focused on the question of whether or not films can be considered capable of advancing philosophical arguments in their own right, as distinct from merely articulating or enacting existing ideas or arguments through their storylines. The scope of my project prevents me from delving into the finer details of the debate but where necessary I will refer to key theoretical positions and contributors whose work is applicable to my analysis.

The phenomenon of altering or problematising characters by portraying them with unstable or malleable identities is present in numerous storylines and has been used to achieve a broad range of responses. Some recognise and exploit the potential for inducing terror or revulsion, such as *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986) in which the protagonist fears his very existence is under threat from a genetic mutation growing within him, and which may very well erase his subjective self after the physical transformation is complete. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) isolates a similar fear of the loss of individuality but in this case the self is in danger of being consumed by and incorporated into a collective whole or group consciousness. Like horror, the science-fiction genre very often explores the similar themes and storylines featuring mutation of identity, with films like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) blurring the distinction between artificial and organic in order to engage with existentialist questions about what it means to be human. Elsewhere, films like *Vice-Versa* (Brian Gilbert, 1988), *Freaky Friday* (Gary Nelson, 1976), and *All of Me* (Carl Reiner, 1984) exploit the body/mind swap premise for comedic effect, while others focus on identity in a purely psychological sense through characters whose own self-awareness is in some way fractured. This may involve a crisis of gender-identity, such as in *Ma Vie En Rose* (Alain Berliner, 1997), and *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberley Peirce, 1999) or it may be in the form of psychosis or schizophrenia as in *Raising Cain* (Brian de Palma, 1992) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). However, despite featuring characters whose identities are split or confused in some way, these examples are fairly conventional in their style and

narrative structures and do not exhibit a corresponding disruption or 'fracturing' on a narrative level; this is a key aspect that distinguishes them from some of the films that will be the main focus of this project.

Section I features detailed analyses of *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) and *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), narratives whose storylines foreground the human body and physical identity and explore how an individual exists and endures through space and time. Much of my analysis will be framed by a number of salient arguments and theories put forward by Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror; Or Paradoxes of the Heart.* By dissecting the diegetic and stylistic elements of these films in the context of Carroll's theory of horror, I will illustrate how texts which have much in common as regards theme and subject matter can contrast sharply in terms of their delivery and formal approach. The storylines of both films engage with issues of physical mutation, interstitial identity, and monstrousness, and share affective similarities through their pervading moods of uncanniness and paranoia. However, in terms of style, genre, and narrative resolution they diverge very noticeably from one another. My analysis of *The Thing* will be used to explore how, through situating the diegetic events within a mainstream narrative framework, horror and science-fiction tropes can be used to raise salient issues about bodily identity. Carroll's analysis of viewer responses to horror films and his ideas on repulsion generated by interstitial monsters provide the ideal opportunity to consider whether certain types of imagery pertain to an inherent discomfort surrounding the fragility of human identity and a fear of infection and physical violation. Carroll considers potential audience responses to horror narratives and in the context of how he defines this affect, I will look at how mutation and assimilation are portrayed in *The Thing.* From this point I will mount a broader consideration of the potential link between self-identity, self-preservation and how we respond to horror films. Specifically, I will look at interstitiality in relation to Carroll's definition of monstrousness and the link between an entity which straddles and confuses boundaries across distinct physical entities and the way in which we view and organise our perception of the world.

Carroll's focus is almost entirely on viewer responses to narratives in the horror genre, a reaction he calls 'art-horror'; a response which is distinct from reactions to actual or natural horror, such as genocide or nuclear war. My analysis takes Carroll's points beyond this genre by way of science-fiction and art cinema examples in order to consider his points about 'interstitiality' in the context of

philosophical theories of self-identity; particularly those put forward by Murray Smith and Deborah Knight, amongst others, who see film narratives as a viable vehicle for mobilising existential discussions. I will open the discussion through a brief analysis of Cronenberg's 1986 remake of *The Fly* in order to show how the distress and repulsion associated with Carroll's 'art-horror' response has affective similarities with narratives outside the horror genre. Carroll makes a distinction between horror and what he calls 'tales of dread,[1]'and suggests a related term, 'art-dread,' as an area of film theory which needs to be developed. He writes that '[a]rt-dread probably deserves a theory of its own, though I do not have one ready-to-hand,'[2] and this invitation is taken up by Cynthia Freeland[3] who introduces the phrase 'uncanny horror,'[4] to explain a nuanced sense of unease combining aspects of Freud's well-known concept with Carroll's art-horror response. Within the context of these ideas and arguments I will expand my analysis beyond horror and science-fiction and embark on a close analysis of *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) to try and arrive at a clearer understanding of where Lynch's film could be positioned or categorised in relation to a film like Carpenter's.

Lost Highway displays tropes from different genres and contains moments of uncanniness and grotesqueness in order to create a more challenging, unconventional portrayal of characters who undergo apparent physical alterations. My analysis will be further refined to consider not simply the strategies employed by Lynch to generate a mood or atmosphere that may be classed as 'art-dread' or 'uncanny horror', but the extent to which such effects are directly linked to the way in which of individual character are portrayed. *Lost Highway* is notable for the way in which it establishes characters whose physical continuity is problematised at least as far as mainstream cinematic conventions are concerned. In a variety of ways the film frustrates viewer understanding of how fictional characters are expected to operate and develop within a narrative, and by highlighting the likely effects on narrative comprehension I will examine the extent to which establishing 'stable' characters within a narrative is inextricably linked to our ability to access films more generally. My analysis will in turn show how similar issues and ideas to those raised in films like *The Thing* can be explored in a very different way through a vastly different style, tone, setting, genre, and structure. *Lost Highway*, for example, shares common ground with Carpenter's film in terms of its portrayal of disturbing, unsettling events centred around mutation, uncanniness and monstrosity. However, unlike *The Thing*, *Lost Highway* delves deeply into the

subjectivity of its protagonist in order to generate a degree of ambiguity about the precise nature of the character changes and mutations we are shown. Although there is a lack of closure at the end of each film, *The Thing* simply leaves the viewer wondering which of the remaining characters is still human but it is unambiguous about the fact that certain characters have undergone literal transformations. *Lost Highway*, on the other hand, raises questions over whether or not the central character has indeed been altered in a literal, physical sense or has merely suffered from a type of psychological rift or breakdown. Lynch states how part of his inspiration for the storyline for *Lost Highway* came from learning about a psychological condition called a 'psychogenic fugue,'[5] a form of trauma-induced memory suppression, and my analysis will serve as an opportunity to introduce certain scientific theories and arguments by way of Lynch's own writing. Looking at the film from this perspective will open up Section II in which I will focus on a selection of films whose themes and storylines highlight and foreground the psychological dimension of characters and the relationship between memory and self-identity.

My principal case studies in Section II are *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), and I will explore how their respective narrative styles and structures are tightly bound to the subject matter of their respective storylines. *Marienbad* is the more avant-garde of the two and is highly experimental in its formal design, while *Memento* belongs more obviously to the mainstream but contains significant deviations from a classic paradigm. Although the two films contrast in terms of style and genre they both combine structure with storyline as a means of creating a degree of subjective congruence for the viewer with what the characters are experiencing and / or describing. Both films place great emphasis on memory, recollection, and the construction of self-identity based on psychological theories of 'autobiographical memory', and I will consider key theories from philosophy and neuropsychology to look at how their narratives engage with the representation of memory on both thematic and structural levels. In addition, I will consider how unconventional narrative structures, such as the reverse chronology in *Memento*, also help foreground typical viewing strategies for consuming and comprehending film narratives. We rely on our memories to build our sense of our narrative past, our documented history, in much the same way as we do when observing scenes in a film narrative to form conclusions and ideas about the nature of fictional characters. We continually bring these witnessed events to bear on whatever the current scene depicts in order to further shore up or perhaps help us revise

our current understanding about a character's identity. The narrative past of the fiction film accrues significance as it progresses, and we bring certain expectations to bear about the laws governing the diegetic world of the film. Key signifiers and stylistic tropes, in addition to actual events in the narrative, help guide our understanding of what rules are in operation in a particular film. However, if there is a deficit in this area then we may be required to revise our comprehension, make an educated guess or, at other times, accept the existence of ambiguity and the fact that the narrative will not supply us with plausible answers to all of our questions. The collection of essays in Andrew Kania's companion[6] to Nolan's film considers the narrative from a variety of philosophical perspectives, and I will consider these alongside selected chapters from *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film.*[7] I will also draw on relevant findings on the storage and recall of memory from cognitive psychology and neuropsychology in order to put forward variations on established interpretations of each film. In particular, theories and findings surrounding reconstructive memory theory will provide a number of insights as well as serving as the bridge to the final section, which will consider the significance and function of central or leading characters within film narratives.

Section III considers the saliency of the protagonist in film narratives and I will look at whether or not it is a narrative ingredient upon which fiction films must be established, with a principal focus on *Mirror* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975) and *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006) as examples which eschew traditional portrayals of central characters. I will consider the potential impact on viewer comprehension as well as the likely motivations the filmmakers had for structuring their respective narratives in the way they did. I will examine how the identity of a protagonist can be corrupted and confused through a combination of psychological and physical identifiers, with reference to what has been laid out in the first two sections of the thesis. By bringing these elements together I will assess how the role of the protagonist, who tends to lead the diegesis by acting as the narrative's internal 'guide', can be manipulated to reveal viewer expectations about how a protagonist should develop within a narrative. A key consideration will be whether or not a protagonist is a fundamental narrative component or simply a habitual preference born out of the unavoidable fact that we can only ever experience the world from a self-oriented perspective. I will consider alternatives examples which suggest that there is perhaps simply a need for a continual organising centre or focal point throughout the narrative but not necessarily one

that takes the form of a traditional protagonist. Films such as *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991) and *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003), for instance, feature clearly established characters while also ensuring that no single one stands out as a leading, central figure.

Mirror omits any clear protagonist save for the implied author whose death-bed recollections guide the narrative through a meandering collection of episodes, while the film also features the use of single actors in more than one role. On one reading, the guiding character in Tarkovsky's film is all but absent and exists purely in the form of a narrator; a figure who only appears once in a brief shot with only his hand and forearm visible. Furthermore, additional layers of meaning are conveyed through the fact that the narrator's words alternate between moments drawn from the director's own life experiences and poetry written by his father, Arsenii Tarkovsky. This raises the question about whether or not we are watching a work of fiction or simply a re-enactment of childhood events, in which case one may argue that Tarkovsky sets himself up as the protagonist with the actors simply behaving as conduits through which his recollections are told. The film uses single actors for multiple roles as a means of conflating character identities to represent the way in which the narrator's recollections of certain family members have become compounded over time. The similarities he sees between his mother and his wife, or himself and his son, are rendered in a literal way by using the same actors to play these separate characters. Overriding these details is the clear and direct link to Tarkovsky's life, and the personal inspiration for the way in which the narrator looks back on certain moments in his life. The semi-autobiographical subject matter is presented through an episodic, dream-logic structure and my analysis will consider the relative distinctions one can draw between the identity of the unseen narrator, Tarkovsky as the director, and Tarkovsky the individual himself. I will look at how the competing voices and perspectives, which reside both within and outside the diegesis, pull the narrative in unusual ways and raise salient questions about how accustomed we are to having storylines carried by a protagonist of some kind.

In contrast, *Inland Empire* skews the identity of its principal character to such an extent that the resulting narrative defies any straightforward or unambiguous explanation. The events of the film are ostensibly set in modern-day Los Angeles but in truth there are a number of narrative realms – some realist, others purely magical and fantastical – and the physical and temporal links between them is

unclear. There is little evidence in the narrative to suggest the existence of typical causes of or explanations for supernatural events; nevertheless, characters mutating, appearing to switch identities, being transported through time and appearing to exist in more than one place are all in evidence. *Inland Empire* features a film-within-a-film storyline but this only serves to clarify a certain amount of the film's spatio-temporal paradoxes and ambiguities. Furthermore, although Laura Dern dominates the running time, a fact which would seemingly qualify her as the protagonist, the film paradoxically manages to make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the different roles that she is playing in any given scene. A lack of reliable reference points as regards the depiction of real, imagined, or filmed events is a key feature of the narrative, with a significant proportion of the unreliability connected to how characters are established and developed. As a result, the film foregrounds the extent to which viewers normally rely upon unambiguous character identities for engaging with a narrative and elucidating its events.

Daniel C. Dennett's essay 'Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity'[8] provides a useful starting point for considering these issues and I will use his essay to open up my analysis into the nature of the relationship between fictional protagonists, characters in general and how the consumption of fiction film narratives relates to our sense of self beyond the context of cinema. The essay introduces a number of salient points and puts forward a particular theoretical perspective combining aesthetics, philosophy of the self, and scientific findings on autobiographical memory. Dennett sketches a theory which combines analyses of how we use protagonists to consume and comprehend narratives with neuroscientific discoveries involving split-brain patients. He equates the ways in which we form a sense of self with the cognitive strategies and processes we use to follow storylines. In the case of *Mirror*, one may find its narrative challenging due to the fact that it does not establish or distinguish its characters in a traditional, mainstream way. Its ambiguity in this respect, however, clearly pertains more to the art-cinema's tendency for communicating subjective states such as memory, and in this instance can account for fluidity of identity once characters are accepted as being more removed from real world individuals. I will therefore consider the film in the context of some of Dennett's ideas to evaluate its phenomenological properties, with a particular focus on self-narrativizing and storytelling.

Across all three sections I will continue to keep sight of and make reference to the wider philosophical debates on self-identity, such as the issue of whether an individual's identity can be said to reside predominantly in the body, the mind, some combination of the two, or none of these. Within the critical discourse in this area, it is difficult to find complete agreement on a set of criteria detailing exactly what constitutes an individual self, although there is sufficient overlap among theorists' models and ideas to provide a useful enough starting point. In *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Murray Smith provides model for approaching film narratives that draws on the work of anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Clifford Geertz. Smith outlines the 'person schema', which he describes as the narrowest category of the human agent. Its component parts are:

1. a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
2. perceptual activity, including self-awareness;
3. intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
4. emotions;
5. the ability to use and understand a natural language;
6. the capacity for self-impelled actions and self-interpretation;
7. the potential for traits, or persisting attributes. [9]

Taking this as our working definition, to what extent are these criteria applicable to the individuals we encounter in fiction films? Smith argues that we use the person schema not only to relate to people in the real world but also to evaluate and understand fictional characters. Since we are restricted to interacting with the world from the perspective of our own subjective self we necessarily engage with narratives through our 'fictive counterparts'[10], since we recognise in them a more or less identical person schema to the one to which we are bound. In his essay 'Understanding Characters' Jens Eder asks us to consider the following questions:

> What are characters and how do they originate? What kinds of features and structures do they possess? In what relations do they stand with other elements and structures of films? How are they grasped and experienced by the viewers? What are their relationships with culture and society? And what types of characters can be distinguished?[11]

To this list we might add the one which constitutes the aim of this project; what is the nature of the relationship between how we relate to fictional characters and how we define and understand ourselves? Although the individuals that inhabit film narratives are, for the most part, simplified versions of the individuals we encounter in real life, this does not necessarily mean that such characters are lacking in depth. In the context of the seminal work of David Bordwell on film history and style, the majority of the narratives I have chosen to look at deviate from classical Hollywood norms in a multitude of ways. Against the backdrop of Bordwell's account of narrative forms, I will consider philosophical debates around the continuity of personal identity through time and how this relates to the way in which we respond to narratives with unstable character identities. For instance, if we accept that a spectator has a certain need for a character that he or she can relate to as a human subject, and who is capable of sustaining a storyline, it is reasonable to suggest that a viewer may struggle to comprehend a narrative which lacks such a vital component, and thus reject it. This would go some way to explaining the dominance of storylines which contain protagonists whose identities are mostly stable and consistently recognisable. It may also go some way to explaining some of the negative responses to films like *Inland Empire* since ambiguity of any sort, not simply that which relates to character identities, can often be a divisive narrative element. When examining the connection between character identity and viewer comprehension of film narratives, however, it is of limited value to focus solely on texts where character identities remain continuous and unproblematic throughout. Rather, it is storylines in which the perceived unity of character identity is deliberately 'problematised' and fractured where one can perhaps isolate and study this relationship more fully. The level of emotional response that fictional narratives can evoke - a phenomenon giving rise to the so-called *paradox of fiction* [12] - is in the majority of cases due to the presence of characters within a given narrative. Furthermore, while such pared-down representations of people might on one level appear to reveal a lack of congruence with real people, less conventional and more challenging portrayals can in fact reflect and reveal corresponding 'problems' in their real world

counterparts. I will illustrate how unconventional character portrayals are useful for revealing the more established means of creating and developing 'ordinary' characters, while also showing how characters in general can help us reflect on the nature of selfhood.

In the wider context of philosophical debates over self-identity, the contributions of John Locke and David Hume are of particular relevance to my project as they each built successively on the arguments and theories that had previously been put forward on this particular issue. Locke took up the position that the mind, and specifically memory, provided continuity through time and as such there was no need to reach for an immaterial entity such as the soul, by way of explanation:

> as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that Person[13]

Hume in turn posited the theory that the search for a truly unchanging self-identity is an erroneous exercise as there are no elements of a person that endure through time; everything is subject to flux or decay and our experience of selfhood is a by-product of our ever-changing thoughts and sensations:

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.[14]

Notable thought experiments often arise within this area of debate, such as Locke's cobbler and prince body-swap scenario (or mind-swap, depending on your viewpoint), and the ensuing questions over whether one's self resides (primarily) in the body or in the mind have repeatedly provided inspiration for fiction film storylines. As we will see in the analyses that follow, these historic debates and the complex and engaging issues that they raise about one of the things we hold most dear – our sense of self – have lost none of their potency when it comes to telling stories through the medium of the moving image.

I
Body Issues

Althea Flynt: *I want him alive! I don't care if his head's in a fishbowl!*

(*The People vs. Larry Flynt*, Milos Forman, 1996.)

What is revealing about these lines, as screamed by Courtney Love, is that they demonstrate not just a desire that a loved-one survive in any condition rather than not at all, but also the preference or assumption that that survival will take a physical form of some sort. In a medium such as film, more often than not we rely on a physical representation to establish character identities, onto which the filmmakers can ascribe details such as a name, subjective and objective history, personality, occupation, family details, and so on. There are exceptions of course, such as films in which characters are embodied but never seen (*Rebecca*, 1940, Alfred Hitchcock) or in which the character is invisible or formless and we see only the effects of their actions (*The Haunting*, 1963, Robert Wise). However, even in examples like these we are able to determine or infer the existence of a character from the narrative context and by virtue of the behaviour of other (embodied) characters. Even though the malevolent spirit in *The Haunting* does not possess a physical form, it nevertheless interacts with the physical reality of the diegesis, while Rebecca never appears in Hitchcock's film but her presence is manifest in the narrative through her belongings, and through the memories and anecdotes of the other characters.

Recognition, as defined by Murray Smith, is the act of identifying the physical form of a person through 'individuation' and 're-identification.'[15] The former denotes the moment when the viewer identifies a character as distinct from others and not simply a background blur or an indistinguishable member of a larger group. The latter refers to any moment in a narrative which 'allows us to say that a certain figure is continuous with a figure apprehended at an earlier or later point in the narrative, by virtue of certain bonds of similarity and causality, whether these be psychological or physical'.[16] The crucial

aspects we use to individuate and recognise characters in a film are 'dependent upon exterior, perceptible traits - the body, the face, and the voice'.[17]

As outlined in my introduction, the potential for manipulating physical identity has been exploited across a wide range of film genres to provoke a multitude of responses. Furthermore, the shock or surprise that can be generated by a sudden alteration of an individual's appearance has an immediacy in film that is comparable to real life, as we experience the unfolding of a narrative and the depiction of new events in something resembling real time. The jarring effect achieved through a sudden and unmotivated change of actor in a single role, such as in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (Luis Buñuel, 1977), could not be replicated in prose, painting, sculpture, or even photography. The visual immediacy combined with the temporal character of moving images, however, gives the filmmaker this option.

In the two chapters that make up this section I will be looking at how storylines involving physical mutation, and often featuring gruesome depictions and visceral imagery, can help raise salient issues and questions within discussions of character portrayal and self-identity. Quite naturally, we attach significance to our physical self, the tangible, material element of who we are. As Smith points out in his definition of 'recognition,' we place a corresponding level of importance on our ability to discern physical properties of characters when watching films so that we can identify them with enough precision to recognise them at a later stage.[18] It therefore follows that as part of the viewing experience we will be sensitive to alterations to a character's physical distinctiveness and will direct the requisite mental energy towards ensuring we are able to keep track of who is who in a given narrative. By the same token, filmmakers are sensitive to the creative potential afforded to them by the fact that viewers will try and keep track of characters in this way, just as a magician toys with his audience using the ball and cups trick. In these chapters I will look in detail at a number of films which help raise and engage with salient issues relating to self-identity and physicality, with close analyses of *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) and *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) forming the principal studies for chapters one and two respectively. The types of characters we might encounter in fiction are almost unlimited in terms of how their appearance and traits can be conceptualised, but Smith points out that there is an obvious preference for a familiar physical entity, even in examples where characters are considered to be allegorical symbols

conveying a more abstract meaning. He argues that even if one were to reduce every action of a character within a narrative to the level of allegory and symbolic higher meaning, these meanings would still need to come together at a single location, which in the majority of cases is a physically discrete human body. Smith emphasizes the almost unavoidable tendency to gravitate towards a physical self, a human body, as an organizing centre of agency, and the way in which this convention can be used to motivate subversive storylines which work against this assumption.[19] This observation is particularly relevant to the analysis I will present in the two chapters that make up this section since, as we will see, *The Thing* and *Lost Highway* present characters in a way that forces us to question the very essence of their physical identities. On the idea of challenging the 'one body: one person' assumption that we routinely make about characters Smith writes that:

> Philosophers are fond of defamiliarizing this assumption with bizarre cases of multiple personality and brain division…but these cases can only be as troubling as they are because they assumption they challenge is so firm and taken for granted.[20]

As we will see in the two chapters that follow, *The Thing* and *Lost Highway*, in different ways, present just such a challenge to the assumption outlined by Smith. Although the tone and style of each film contrast considerably, both narratives draw on the way in which surface appearances (like a human body) can be potentially misleading and can provide an ideal route to challenging viewer expectations and generating fear and unease.

1

The Thing in its Self

Tawnee: *Are you a bodybuilder or something?*

Brundle: *Yeah, I build bodies. I take them apart and put them back together again.*

(*The Fly*, David Cronenberg, 1986)

On the subject of still photography and the way in which the medium disrupts how physical selves endure through time, André Bazin the following: 'To preserve, artificially, [one's] bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.'[21] These lines are equally applicable to the moving image, and we can conceive of the medium in a way that echoes the dialogue above taken from Cronenberg's *The Fly*. A still image, as Bazin describes, upsets the natural flow of time by preserving an instant in the form of a photograph, just as a series of moments or actions or events are captured when recording a moving image. Furthermore, the process of assembling a film requires - in a non-literal sense of course – that these chunks of time (and the representations of physical elements within, such as human characters) are taken apart and rearranged in a new order. Editing – along with dialogue, acting performance, costume, direction – are the tools filmmakers use to mould and ascribe a character with the fictional equivalents of the 'person schema', which I outlined in my introduction. A character is given a particular appearance, name, mannerisms, characteristics, and so on, and from that point we may see these elements develop in particular ways during the course of the storyline in which they feature. Switching or corrupting an individual's identity in extreme and unnatural ways provides particularly fertile ground for horror and science fiction storylines and concepts, and examples such as the David Cronenberg's 1986 version of *The Fly* isolate and focus on a particular fear associated with threats to an individual's bodily identity. Cronenberg's remake of the original B-movie *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958) helped contribute to the canon of what would come to be known as body horror, a sub-

genre of horror films notable for their emphasis on gruesome, visceral imagery often relating to the infection, destruction or mutation of the human body. Cronenberg, a principal figure in establishing body horror, echoes Murray Smith's earlier point about how an embodied agent is a fundamental expectation viewers have when engaging with film narratives through their characters. He writes:

> For me, the first fact of human existence is the human body. That is the most real fact we have…But if you embrace the reality of the human body, you are embracing your own mortality.[22]

Cronenberg is of course referring to real selves as opposed to fictional ones, but it is self-evident in *The Fly* and other examples of his work that he sees horror as a tool for raising and exploring salient issues regarding mortality, physicality, and our sense of self. The film tells the story of Seth Brundle, a brilliant, reclusive scientist who inadvertently fuses his genetic coding with that of a housefly while working on a teleportation device. As the narrative progresses we see Brundle go through a gradual metamorphosis into a new kind of creature, neither wholly human nor wholly fly, which he calls 'Brundlefly.' The abomination that results from the catastrophic error in his experiment is depicted with an explicit focus on physical mutation, and the gradual metamorphosis of Brundle raises fundamental questions about the relative frailty or solidity of human existence. The film is just one of many such examples found in horror and science fiction scenarios which foreground the physicality of characters by exploring ideas around mutation and assimilation. From this rich vein of storylines I have selected *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) as my principal focus for this chapter and I will start out by analysing the way in which the film establishes the physical capabilities of the alien life-form (The Thing of the title) that features in the narrative. I will contextualise the creature within the framework of Noël Carroll's theory of horror as expounded in *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart*; in particular his definitions of monsters and monstrosity. I will consider how and why a disruption of physical identity within horror narratives can be a particularly potent combination before moving on to look at depictions of the sort of grotesque imagery common to the horror genre alongside Freud's description of the uncanny as it relates to personal identity. I will illustrate how alterations to a character's appearance and bodily

identity can unsettle and disturb the viewer but also how the means of doing so and the source of unease that is generated can contrast in significant ways between superficially similar films.

The wordplay inherent in the use of the word 'bodybuilder' in the quotation above points towards not just an elasticity of language but also to the fact that the storyline of *The Fly* focuses on bodily alterations. *The Thing* shares narrative ground with Cronenberg's version of *The Fly* by engaging with issues of bodily identity through its focus on physical mutation and the fusion of disparate individual life-forms into single entities. Although technically classed as science fiction, *The Thing* straddles the boundary between horror and sci-fi and is particularly notable for its graphic depictions of mutation and physical trauma. The story involves a group of US scientists who are conducting research in the Antarctic and are confined to their base for the winter months. Elsewhere on the continent, scientists from a neighbouring Norwegian base inadvertently revive a frozen alien organism that is capable of imitating and assimilating other life forms, and this creature decimates the Norwegian team before infiltrating the American one. The narrative charts the gradual discovery of what happened at the Norwegian base, the process of understanding the physical makeup and behaviour of the creature, and the depiction of the creature systematically annihilating the group while paranoia and fear simultaneously cause the community's social order to disintegrate. By the end of the film the research base has been destroyed and as far as we can tell only two characters remain alive. The narrative concludes with a degree of ambiguity over whether or not one of the surviving characters may actually be The Thing rather than the person they outwardly appear to be.

As one might expect, a certain amount of screen time and exposition is required for a backstory that establishes the narrative's internal logic. Audience and character knowledge are more or less congruent since the exposition is dependent on and linked to the scientists' own gradual discoveries and theories about the creature they have encountered. In addition to expository dialogue, supplementary information is provided in the form of video footage discovered in the Norwegian camp, which explains how the alien came to be unearthed. A principal focus for the scientists is learning the exact physical and behavioural features of the alien creature, which in turn establishes the diegetic logic for the audience. Models, prosthetics, and other visual effects are used to create some of the film's most memorable and

arresting images and they are essential for illustrating the ways in which the alien creature behaves and survives, particularly regarding its physical makeup. One sequence features a host of protean displays as the creature attempts to assimilate some of the scientists while simultaneously defending itself and trying to flee (Fig. 1). While one of the team is being resuscitated with a defibrillator, his chest suddenly morphs into a set of gaping jaws which gnaws the doctor's arms off at the elbows. As the others try and kill the creature the head detaches itself from the rest of the body and it lands on the floor. It then sprouts insect-like legs and antennae before attempting to shuffle out of the room undetected, while the legs, arms and torso of the assimilated scientist continue writhing on the operating table.

Fig. 1. The alien creature demonstrates a multitude of metamorphic capabilities as it tries to defend itself.

This is a pivotal moment in the story as it vividly illustrates the physical capabilities of the alien. The key discovery the scientists make is that the creature survives by assimilating and imitating other life-forms, a process which both kills the original being and results in an imitation which appears outwardly identical to the assimilated organism. The nature of the creature's assimilation seems to involve moulding an appropriated physical form and combining it with The Thing's own organic matter, rather than simply inhabiting an existing body in the way that narratives about demonic possession suggest. This

method distinguishes the creature from an alien such as that in *Under The Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), or its cartoonish equivalent from *Men In Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), in which a human exterior is nothing more than a hollow shell worn like a suit by the alien. The Thing is also able to mutate and change shape at will as part of its survival mechanism, a process which seems to involve an ability to recall and assume previously assimilated life-forms. Observing how the head was able to separate and survive independently gives the helicopter pilot MacReady (Kurt Russell) the idea of conducting an experiment on blood samples taken from each scientist in order to determine who is still human. His theory, which is proven to be correct, is that the constituent parts of the alien can be as small as an individual particle or as large as an entire person, or even – as is explicitly demonstrated on more than one occasion – an amorphous creature comprised of numerous limbs and other shapeless, assimilated organic matter (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. The Thing is interrupted during the process of assimilating the sleigh dogs.

The portrayal of such a fantastical creature's physical responses is a useful example for analysing how 'monstrousness' is frequently exploited in horror storylines. Fear of infection is intrinsically linked to an individual's survival instinct and the film explores this by developing the idea of an infection that is not only capable of taking over the bodies of individuals but is also able to adopt and assume a person's physical form. A threat of this sort can be distinguished from something like a fatal disease or parasite since the infected individual will continue operating as a living thing, albeit in an assimilated state and more akin to a zombie; dead and yet still animate.

Through a combination of detailed, visceral special effects and prosthetics, deepening paranoia amongst the scientists, and a threat that has the potential to consume and eradicate each character's individual sense of self, the film assembles narrative ingredients that are ideally suited to provoke strong feelings of terror. Carroll unpicks the elements of monsters in horror fiction in order to isolate the specific features of monstrosity that are responsible for evoking feelings of repulsion, dread and fear in the viewer. On a very basic level, he argues that a monster must be threatening and dangerous since without mortal fear of death or injury there can be no fear or negative emotional disturbance – emotional states and reactions that are integral to the genre.[23] While investigating the potential reasons behind our response with what feels like genuine emotions to that which we know is not real, the so-called *paradox of fiction*, Carroll introduces the term 'art-horror'.[24] He uses this term to describe the reaction a viewer has towards horror films as distinct from other things we might find horrifying or horrific, such as the prospect of nuclear war, which he terms 'natural horror'. Art-horror, in contrast to natural horror, can only be evoked by beings or phenomena that exist outside of the natural order established in the fictional world in question. That is to say, according to Carroll's definition, a creature such as the talking wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, although threatening, is not capable of art-horrifying the viewer or reader since the creature, while appearing fantastical to us, is in keeping with the natural order of its own fictional world. Carroll then expands his definition by arguing that in order to 'qualify' as a monster that can provoke an art-horror response, the being must be more than simply threatening or dangerous. Building on the influential work *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas,[25] he argues that '[h]orrific monsters often involve the mixture of what is normally distinct.'[26] Douglas's arguments advance notions of purity and impurity in terms of how human beings regard phenomena in order to function effectively and safely in our surroundings. The ability to differentiate between phenomena that are either clean or dirty, dead or alive, nourishing or poisonous, comforting or threatening have obvious benefits to our safety and survival. Using the same terminology, Carroll argues that, in addition to being physically repellent and threatening, horrific monsters are very often portrayed as 'impure' in some way, where an entity is 'impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless.'[27] His conclusion is that in order for a monster to be capable of provoking the art-horror response it must exhibit a disruption of the diegetic natural order as well as posing a mortal threat of some sort. He writes:

> If the monster were only evaluated as potentially threatening, the emotion would be fear; if only potentially impure the emotion would be disgust. Art-horror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust.[28]

He cites the example of Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), who by Carroll's definition, cannot qualify as art-horrific because his condition of psychosis is a recognised phenomenon in the world of psychology. Although his actions could be considered monstrous he is not outside the natural order of the diegesis (which in this instance is mostly congruent with 'real world' order), therefore he would be regarded as a source of fear only. Conversely, a physically grotesque creature that poses no threat, also does not qualify as a monster since it would only provoke disgust but not fear. Stephen Mulhall puts forward a similar but more nuanced argument in *On Film* when he analyses the physical threat posed by the Xenomorph in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979):

> As well as threatening to inflict a peculiarly intimate, distorting or rending violence upon vulnerable human flesh and blood…these creatures are themselves mutations or distortions of the human.'[29]

Mulhall, by way of Stanley Cavell, argues that the source of terror and revulsion can always be traced back to the human element or aspect that is observable within a horrific storyline or the portrayal of something monstrous. Without a human element or origin that gives rise to something monstrous, the creature is merely fantastical or dangerous but cannot induce horror. As indicated, Carroll argues that a monster must violate the natural order, but for Mulhall and Cavell this violation must be of the sort that specifically relates to human beings in order to horrify us. Clearly the creature in *The Thing* satisfies all these sets of criteria and therefore stands up to Carroll's definition of a monster capable of provoking his 'art-horror' response. If we investigate the precise makeup of The Thing and compare it against the differentiations of monstrosity outlined by Carroll it produces some worthwhile insights.

Carroll groups different types of monsters according to certain traits that they have in common, one of which he calls 'fusion figures'. This category describes fictional beings whose nature and identity are dependent on 'conflating, combining, or condensing distinct and / or opposed categorical elements in

a spatio-temporally continuous monster.[30] Brundlefly from Carpenter's version of *The Fly* would be one such example since the DNA of Brundle and the fly have been literally fused together. Another of his categories he calls 'fission figures', to describe entities whose existence is distributed across two or more beings, within which he proposes two sub-categories: 'spatial fission' and 'temporal fission'. Examples of the former would be doppelgängers, clones, and other kinds of 'multiple characters in space'[31]. The latter would include shapeshifting beings such as werewolves, with a key distinction being that the different identities do not co-exist but rather they manifest at temporally distinct moments. Therefore, apart from the moment of mutation a werewolf is at times a man and at others a wolf, but not a simultaneous fusion of wolf and man.

In the context of these categories, where could we most accurately position the creature in *The Thing*? In direct contrast to Brundle, who emerges from his telepod as a fusion figure in the most literal sense, the creature in Carpenter's film appears to be a single entity capable of inhabiting more than one physical location. As such, the logical choice seems to be to label it, in Carroll's terms, as a fission figure of the spatial variety since its existence is distributed simultaneously across multiple individual objects. On another reading, one could argue that the creature does not suit this label since it is difficult to say if The Thing should be classified as a single entity, albeit one that exists across physically discrete individuals. What is obvious is that the other life-forms it has imitated are physically distinct from one another since they continue to exist within the confines of discrete human (and canine) bodies. However, these discrete units are also linked to one another through shared biological and behavioural traits, such as the ability to mutate and metamorphosize, and an instinct to remain hidden which suggests an ability to differentiate human from non-human based on outward appearance. On this point, one might speculate that there is a telepathic connection, something which is never established in the film but is explicitly laid out in the source material, John W. Campbell Jr.'s novella *Who Goes There?* The experiment that MacReady (the Kurt Russell character) sets up to try and weed out those individuals who are actually imposters involves petrie dishes with blood samples taken from each member of the team. MacReady stabs a hot wire into the sample and gets the predicted response when the blood from one assimilated scientist screams and leaps out of the dish. This allows us to see how each discrete part of the creature (let us call them 'Thing-units'), has an autonomous desire for survival and is capable of acting

independently from the other Thing-units. Additionally, when a member of the team is exposed as an imposter the other Thing-units do not reveal themselves in an attempt to save one of its own constituent parts. If we compare this type of life form to clones or doppelgängers (another example cited by Carroll as belonging to the spatial fission figure group) we might argue that there is a stronger bond between the Thing-units than there would be between one clone or doppelgänger and another. A clone, for instance, is the product of an original entity but is not bound to its source in any literal way, nor would we ordinarily assume it would be capable of rejoining this source through absorption or some other such fantastical process. The Thing, in contrast, demonstrates an ability to separate from and reabsorb its constituent units at will, suggesting it is simultaneously distinct from and connected to its constituent parts. This could be seen as evidence of an 'egoistic' element that exists in each Thing-unit, not necessarily implying selfishness but rather an indication of semi-autonomous entities that keep their own segment hidden for the benefit of the collective.

When The Thing is in the actual process of assimilation it more readily resembles Carroll's fusion figures, since on the literal, physical level it is fusing two or more separate elements into a single mass. In one scene we are shown how the creature operates on a cellular level, and the assimilation involves a form of absorption rather than destruction and imitation. During a scene in which the sleigh dogs are being assimilated, the creature (imitating one of the dogs) attempts to fuse itself with all the others with the intended result being a numerically identical group of dogs as there had been previously, since they are absorbed rather than displaced or discarded. In this sense, the creature at times seems to satisfy the criteria of Carroll's fusion figure, yet at others does not because its process of assimilation has the end result of more than one 'spatio-temporally discrete entity.' It is hard to say for sure, however, as Carroll goes on to argue that 'as long as they are composite beings, locatable in an unbroken spatio-temporal continuum with a single identity, we shall count them as fusion figures.'[32] 'Single identity' seems an appropriate description of the creature but 'unbroken continuum' does not. Perhaps one has to conclude that the creature apparently satisfies conditions from both of Carroll's categories, appearing at times like a 'fusion figure' and at others more like a 'fission figure.' Consideration of a detail such as this also helps to illustrate one of the principles of Carroll's investigation, which is that certain films that may

otherwise be dismissed as formulaic 'genre films' contain formal innovations, different levels of meaning and communicate complex ideas that are worthy of deeper analysis.

More than Gore?

It is worth looking in more detail at the ways in which the sort of monstrous imagery common to horror films contrive to provoke feelings of unease, repulsion and terror in the viewer. Is there perhaps more to it than simply an aversion to imagery of blood, gore, and slime? The philosopher Derek Parfit is of the opinion that fantastical storylines and scenarios common to science fiction can be a useful tool for raising and investigating certain philosophical problems:

> By considering these cases, we discover what we believe to be involved in our own continued existence, or what it is that makes us now and ourselves next year the same people… Though our beliefs are revealed most clearly when we consider imaginary cases, these beliefs also cover actual cases, and our own lives.[33]

In *Reasons and Persons* he ponders questions about the continuity of personal identity by working through increasingly complex thought experiments. Daniel C. Dennett echoes Parfit's point, but from a cognitive psychology perspective, when he writes in *Consciousness Explained* how:

> if we could see what it would be like for two (or more) selves to vie for control of a single body, we could see better what a single self really is.[34]

He states that while it would of course be unethical to experiment on people to try and bring about such a circumstance, the study of tragic and unfortunate sufferers of conditions such as Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) can serve the purpose of 'varying the initial conditions' (i.e. single body, single self) to theorise about how selfhood develops. Although he is referring to the psychological dimension of selfhood, Dennet's observation is that individuals suffering from this condition (and other closely related ones) overturn the basic assumption about one body being equivalent to one self, which sets them up as something akin to a living thought-experiment. In my introduction to this section I referred to a point made by Murray Smith about the corresponding assumption viewers make about characters in

film narratives; and filmmakers, like philosophers, often see potential in challenging the single body : single character convention. One scenario offered by Parfit involves a fictional Teletransporter, much like the devices in 'Star Trek' and *The Fly*, which disintegrates and re-integrates an individual as a way of travelling between Earth and Mars.[35] In his scenario, the transported individual is replicated in every precise detail and the 'original' person on Earth is destroyed. He develops the idea further and imagines a point in the future when the machine malfunctions and begins creating a replica as before but the individual on Earth survives for a few days before dying of cardiac failure caused by the malfunctioning machine. He uses this scenario as a means of considering the extent to which the person on Earth and the person on Mars could or should be considered the same person or, for the duration of the time they co-exist, which could have the stronger claim of being the 'real' person. In 'Personal Identity', Deborah Knight writes that '[t]he "body swap" has become something of a genre in the repertoire of philosophical thought experiments'[36] and one can identify a multitude of films which choose to explore the same scenarios through the use of malleable, unstable character identities as part of their storylines. As part of Knight's analysis she considers the well-known transportation devices in the 'Star Trek' franchise in order to explore the question over whether being disintegrated and reintegrated constitutes a break in one's physical continuity, and therefore an interruption to one's identity. In *The Fly*, Brundle's 'telepods' perform the same function as the transporters in 'Star Trek'; however neither of these narratives focus in any meaningful way on the question of how, or whether, personal identity is affected or interrupted by the process of teleportation. *The Fly* places much more emphasis on the *product* of the teleportation process and the resulting individual that emerges from the destination telepod after the source pod has been contaminated, while in the Star Trek storyworld the transporters are simply another form of travel hardly worthy of deeper consideration. The brief intervening time when teleportation is in process and the person is in transit is not highlighted as a question worth considering, which is in contrast to films like *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, 2006) and *Moon* (Duncan Jones, 2009), which explore ideas about teleportation and replication similar to those that features in the writings of Parfit. What, then, could *The Thing's* premise and its portrayal of such a creature maybe tell us about personal identity and the body? The film's fantastical creature and scenario are well suited to Parfit's criteria of being a useful test case for just these sorts of considerations, and it is helpful if we analyse some of the details I have outlined

earlier so we can consider what they imply or allude to more broadly. When working through his teletransporter thought-experiment, Parfit makes a useful distinction about identity when he writes of 'qualitative' versus 'numerical' sameness:

> There are two kinds of sameness, or identity. I and my Replica are *qualitatively identical*, or exactly alike. But we may not be *numerically identical*, or one and the same person. Similarly, two white billiard balls are not numerically but may be qualitatively identical. If I paint one of these balls red, it will cease to be qualitatively identical with itself as it was. But the red ball that I later see and the white ball that I painted red are numerically identical. They are one and the same ball.[37]

By this description it is tempting to say that the creature in *The Thing* is 'numerically identical' since it absorbs rather than discards the victim, but the resulting individual could also be seen as qualitatively identical on the outside but qualitatively different inside. Since Parfit's example only covers the surface appearance of the ball it is of limited use in this case, so perhaps all that we can reasonably conclude is that there is nothing that can be unequivocally defined as 'the whole' when trying to understand the physical boundaries of the creature. It is both separate from and linked to its other constituent parts simultaneously, with each part capable of operating independently of the others while also maintaining a connection despite any apparent physical separation. Its constituent Thing-units, regardless of their scale, are autonomous and physically discrete while also remaining part of a larger, single organism called The Thing. I have (playfully) corrupted Immanuel Kant's phrase, 'the thing in itself,'[38] for the title of this chapter and, by splitting 'itself' into 'its self', I have of course altered the meaning of the phrase, although the resultant meaning seems quite apt. The creature exists as a literal embodiment of A Thing inhabiting multiple Selves, individuals which it takes over and possesses. At any given moment, therefore, The Thing is in each of Its selves. The creature straddles the boundary of self and non-self and its ability to destroy and duplicate its victims means that the characters' individual identities are under threat of annihilation. In all of these scenarios, the process would seem to equate to death for the being that has been imitated, although strictly speaking the individual could be regarded as

surviving in some sense since their physical and psychological distinctiveness continue to function, albeit as a type of puppet manipulated by the alien creature.

Such a concession would of course be scant consolation for the victim but philosophically-speaking the assimilated scientists in *The Thing* could be regarded as having survived in a very narrow sense of the word. It might appear that *The Thing*, in order to add tension and urgency to the narrative, does not concern itself with this level of inquiry, instead focusing on the everyday, empirical type of survival rather than any abstract variety. However, this raises a key area of discussion in the ongoing film-as-philosophy debate in terms of whether or why certain films should be considered more or less philosophical – or worthy of philosophical analysis – than others. As regards *The Thing*, we might argue that the motivation of the filmmakers was to create a story that would satisfy viewers looking for a fast-paced adventure involving science-fiction tropes and scares and imagery common to body-horror. That being said, even if pertinent questions in the philosophy of self-identity were not of primary importance to the filmmakers, we can still find much in the storyline which can mobilise a discussion in this area. In his summary of the key positions in this debate, Carroll outlines the distinction drawn by those who are sceptical of the possibility of film's capacity for 'doing' philosophy:

> Such skeptics may concede that movies can illustrate philosophical ideas, motivate philosophical problems, suggest philosophical solutions, reframe problems, and possibly even present counterexamples to extant philosophical views…[but reject the possibility] of movies acting as vehicles for the creation and substantiation of original, positive philosophical theses.'[39]

As I indicated previously, it is beyond the scope of my thesis to go into the finer detail of the film-as-philosophy debate, but Carroll's summary is highly pertinent and of great use at this stage so that I can, as a minimum, outline where the films I am focusing on can be placed within the context of this debate and in relation to one another. For instance, let us consider the example I have highlighted here regarding the fate of the scientists in *The Thing* and the extent to which the assimilated members of the group could be considered to be the same person after the creature has absorbed them into its collective whole. We could invoke Parfit's theory of personal identity in which he argues that psychological connectedness and continuity are essential for being able to argue that an individual has endured

(survived) through time and space. For Parfit, the question of whether their personal identity can or even should be considered the same is subordinate to whether or not they can be regarded as having survived in some sense. The scenario we encounter in *The Thing* presents us with an interesting case for consideration in the context of Parfit's theory but this is primarily because it echoes the host of thought experiments about duplication and switched identities found throughout his work. As such, we might conclude that to perceive some relevance of Parfit's theory in the plot of *The Thing* is simply a projection of existing ideas, and would be an example of doing what Carroll describes when he highlights how '[a]nthologies abound in which rank-and-file philosophers attempt to distill the philosophical message to be found in this or that movie.'[40] *The Thing* might be thus categorised, on the sceptical account, as an example of a narrative that is framing or articulating existing philosophical ideas – either explicitly or implicitly – but falls short of mobilising its own philosophical position through cinematic means. In Section II I will return to this area of discussion, and Parfit in particular, when considering film narratives which not only engage with philosophical ideas about self-identity but which also present a challenge to mainstream cinematic conventions. At this point I simply wish to acknowledge the wider debate before considering the broader implications that *The Thing* presents us with, albeit on a strictly diegetic level. Having considered some of the reasons behind emotional responses to horror and the questions that can be raised about self-identity through science-fiction storylines, I will now turn my attention to identifying a particular kind of fear that the creature's behaviour and capabilities tap into, which revolves around physical borders and a sense of separateness.

Threats and Thresholds

As we have seen, Carroll goes into great detail in his analysis of horror films in order to try and isolate a viewer's typical responses and the potential reasons for these. In 'Judge Dread: What We Are Afraid of When We Are Scared at the Movies,' Julian Hanich builds on the work of Carroll as he explores the body of theory surrounding emotional responses to fiction films with the aim of complementing and building on what he terms the 'standard account' of emotional responses to fiction films. He points out the different types of fearful responses we can experience when watching horror films and draws

distinctions such as dread, horror, terror, and shock, and argues that a major factor behind a fearful response comes from our familiarity with certain genres and that '[s]ince we know from our encounter with previous horror films and thrillers…how these scenes usually end.'[41] As such, part of our fearful response stems from our sense of anticipation and the semi-pleasurable experience of a film narrative confirming our expectations about how a scene might play out. In addition to this type of fearfulness, as we have seen through Carroll's analysis, is the essence of the imagery itself and the potential threat it might convey regardless of narrative context and our familiarity with genre tropes.

The prospect of having one's body invaded and / or assimilated by another entity is of course likely to provoke feelings of fear and terror, and the loss of one's individuality into a collective whole is a potentially unsettling concept to consider. It is exactly such a scenario, compounded by the paranoia and claustrophobia experienced by the characters, which *The Thing* has as its underlying source of unease and fear. One of the principal survival strategies for the creature is its ability to remain hidden and undetected by appearing to onlookers as identical to the life-form(s) it has invaded and successfully imitated. Through the discoveries of the scientists, most notably Blair (Wilford Brimley) - who is the first to reach an understanding of how the alien behaves - we learn that the assimilation of other life-forms extends beyond just that of physical likeness. In order for the creature to produce a wholly convincing imitation it needs to effectively kill and apprehend all aspects of its victim. The fact that the characters are unable to identify who in their company is the alien solely through observation of each other's behaviour suggests that the subjective identity of the assimilated life-form, which would include personality traits, behaviour and memories, has been appropriated by the alien. The film does not establish exactly what becomes of the host's subjectivity and therefore leaves open the possibility that the individual may continue to exist as a suppressed and imprisoned passenger in his/her own body, such as with the black characters in *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) or the succession of characters in *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999). The spread of paranoia and distrust throughout the group of scientists is paralleled by the physical spread of the infectious organism, and just as the boundaries between the human and non-human become less distinct, so does the social order and harmony break down and dissolve into chaos. Merging and blending distinctiveness into formlessness can also be observed in other stylistic aspects of the film, such as the whiteout expanse of the Antarctic which reveals little in the way of

distinctive features making it difficult in certain scenes to separate the sky from the land. Furthermore, Carpenter himself commented on how, as a result of his inexperience at this stage in his career, the film ended up with a cast that was perhaps too large for the running time to sufficiently distinguish the scientists from one another (Fig. 3). In Murray Smith's terms, we could say that the narrative shows a slight deficit as regards 'recognition' and 're-identification'[42] of characters, however, a slight blending in how we perceive the scientists and an apparent lack of depth in how their characters are developed is strangely appropriate for the storyline.

Fig. 3. Although clearly distinguishable when placed alongside one another, the large cast means that the narrative cannot devote a great deal of time to 'flesh out' each scientist. As such, on a first viewing particularly, they may blend into each other slightly in the viewer's perception.

The prospect of assimilation on a planetary scale is explicitly dealt with in the film when we see Blair analysing the behaviour of the alien cells under a microscope. Concerned by the potential threat to the human race posed by the alien reaching civilisation beyond the Antarctic continent, Blair quizzes their central computer about the likely outcome of such a scenario. The hypothetical response is that the entire human race would be assimilated in a little over three years, which prompts Blair to sabotage the base vehicles in an attempt to isolate and contain the creature. The conflation of many individuals into a single entity necessitates the loss of that which an individual regards as essential to making them who they are, that is, their distinctiveness. The formlessness and transgression of certain phenomena and representations in film narratives, such as horror monsters, perhaps act on a fundamental dread we all have about the loss

of self, so I would argue that it is not *only* impurity that unsettles us about the interstitial state. Clearly, a prospect such as the total loss of one's individuality is an almost impossible concept to rationalise and understand but it could be equated with death since it theoretically renders one's personal identity obsolete.

Both the original version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) and its first remake (Philip Kaufman, 1978) explore the idea of the group versus the individual and present a pessimistic future which points to humanity's end as a result of annihilation-by-assimilation from a similar type of alien foe as the one in *The Thing*. The premise is variously read as a metaphor for communism (hive mind/negative) versus capitalism (individual freedom/positive) or as a warning about cold war paranoia and McCarthy witch hunts. The threat of collective intelligence and loss of individuality can also be observed in the form of The Borg from the 'Star Trek: The Next Generation' TV series. Tapping into similar fears, The Borg are a near-unstoppable race of semi-organic cybernetic organisms who assimilate individual beings but operate as a hive mind in which the concept of individuality is obsolete. Their makeup represents both a fusion of the organic and the mechanical (impure and repellent according to Carroll's definition), as well as a fusion of distinct individuals into a collective whole. Significantly, however, the second feature film of the 'Next Generation' franchise, *Star Trek: First Contact* (Jonathan Frakes, 1996) contradicts the story-world's established understanding about how The Borg functions by recasting the hive mind along the lines of an ant colony that is subordinate to a queen. The decision to alter The Borg's structure in this way suggests it was perhaps considered unworkable to have a mainstream narrative that had a group rather than an individual as its principal antagonist.

There are other notable storylines which explore concepts and ideas similar to those in *The Thing*, such as *Society* (Brian Yuzna, 1989) whose gory, orgiastic finale depicts the collective upper class swallowing its lower class victims. *Shivers* (David Cronenberg, 1975) provides a variation on the same idea with its portrayal of an impending apocalypse in the guise of parasites which transform their hosts them into sex-crazed zombies. *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), charts a similar narrative arc to *The Fly* as we see the hapless protagonist, Wickus, gradually transform from a human into one of the alien

'prawns' he is responsible for policing. Elsewhere, the Facehugger from the *Alien* franchise acts parasitically and after a brief incubation period and metamorphosis it kills its host by bursting spectacularly through the chest cavity, a process that is an inversion of The Thing's behaviour, which operates covertly and absorbs its host rather than erupting from within it.

In addition to provoking disgust through the high level of gory detail, such as in the resuscitation scene described earlier, the imagery in *The Thing* also unsettles because it defies our assumptions about physical limitations and biological coherence and unity. Carroll writes that 'monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening,' [43] and in *The Thing* we see the creature demonstrate its status as 'formless' and 'interstitial' as part of its survival mechanism. Drawing on its previously assimilated life-forms, it invokes whatever shapes and structures it requires to escape, regardless of how this may violate the natural laws of biology as the characters understand them. By 'cognitively threatening' Carroll is describing the dissonance generated by an entity that deviates from what he calls the 'natural order' of the diegesis, and this natural order may or may not be fully or partially congruent with our own. A common feature in these and many other examples is how their storylines, in Smith's words:

> exploit the distinction between human and non-human by blurring it…The premisses [sic] of such narratives puncture our normal confidence in making such discriminations; that is one reason that they are horrific.[44]

In order to generate tension and fear, *The Thing* draws upon on the everyday understanding that human beings have an inherent sense of their own discrete separateness from other individuals as well as other phenomena in the world generally. Dennett writes that 'the boundaries of a biological self are porous and indefinite,'[45] which is a slightly unsettling idea to consider as it seems to contradict our sense of being unambiguously distinct from other individuals and with a clearly defined limit to our physical self. This idea represents a contrast or conflict between an everyday, 'folk' understanding of our own separateness and a scientific perspective which may emphasise more readily the interconnectedness of seemingly distinct entities. We conduct ourselves by taking numerous facts and details for granted, such as bodily unity and physical and psychological separateness, and it is these sorts of assumptions which the creature

in *The Thing* problematizes through its blurring of fundamental boundaries. If we consider the storyline in the context of theories of personal identity such as Dennett's we can see how the film's premise foregrounds basic assumptions about how human beings establish and understand their sense of individuality. Ian Conrich and David Woods argue that The Thing's 'mimetic horrors arise from its being an undifferentiated body,'[46] and from the inability of the characters to determine the physical limits of an individual entity. In line with this observation, Carroll explores at length the phenomenon of 'interstitiality' as a key ingredient for horror narratives and for monstrosity. Without binary opposites and distinctions between the most fundamental aspects of what we see and experience, such as being able to distinguish between self and other, friend or foe, danger or safety, the ability to thrive and function successfully in the world is greatly impaired. The life-form in *The Thing* operates according to different physical laws, straddling multiple individual entities that are simultaneously distinct from and intrinsically linked to one another - a concept that is alien and threatening. Fig. 4 shows a particular 'segment' of the creature which was killed before it could complete the process of assimilation and imitation. The interrupted process helpfully illustrates the straddling of two separate entities, in this case the creature and its victim, and provides a physical example of an interstitial state. It is both repellent in terms of its disturbing appearance but also because of what it represents; an ability to transgress the boundaries and categories we rely upon to keep ourselves safe. As I outlined earlier, the creature even exhibits an additional and more abstract layer of transgression through how it straddles Carroll's horror categories of 'fusion' and 'fission' monsters.

Fig. 4. The terrifying middle-ground of interstitiality

Intersitiality exists as a key ingredient in *The Thing* and is prevalent in horror narratives more generally, especially those involving monsters or monstrous imagery of some kind. Looking at the image taken from *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) (Fig. 5) we see the villainous Frank occupying the region between life and death (or hell and earth to be more specific) and the visceral images themselves might be seen as repellent in their own right purely through the depiction of blood and severed flesh. Conversely, it is the implication *behind* the imagery that is repellent, namely the destruction of the self's integrity and, it must be said, the fact that the destruction relates to a *human* body. The 'messiness' of bodily rupturing alone is not what causes the sense of disgust; the sight of someone beheading a chicken would most likely provoke less alarm or aversion than the same act being carried out on a human being. As Paul Rozin et al. argue, this is due to a combination of how such imagery both reminds us of human mortality while also reducing our sense of individuality by suggesting a shared makeup with animals:

> Only human animals know they are to die, and only humans need to repress this threat….Anything that reminds us we are animals elicits disgust…humans are like animals in having fragile body envelopes that, when breached, reveal blood and soft viscera that display our commonalities with animals.[47]

Fig. 5. The unscrupulous but doomed Frank, literally suspended in purgatory.

Beyond this primordial sense of disgust, however, is there something peculiarly unsettling about interstitial states or phenomena that seem to exist on the cusp of boundaries that we use to categorise and understand the world around us? Thresholds of all sorts generate a morbid fascination and curiosity and

can generate a sense of comfort and reassurance as well as one of frustration and insecurity. Even the word itself seems to beautifully enact the very thing that it denotes; the 'h' both standing alone and combining with the 's' to create a threshold within its own pronunciation. In *Consciousness Explained,* Dennett writes the following about the evolution of self-awareness:

> As soon as something gets into the business of self-preservation, boundaries become important, for if you are setting out to preserve yourself, you don't want to squander effort trying to preserve the whole world: you draw the line. You become, in a word, selfish.[48]

We can identify barriers and points of delineation all around us, with huge variations in scale, importance, and makeup; from the fence dividing our garden from our neighbour's to the fortified border on the Korean peninsula, from the perceived genre distinctions between categories of films, to the physical limits of our bodies. As part of his study into body horror and the work of David Cronenberg, Colin McGinn explores the reasons behind our loathing of flies, and writes that 'they are enmeshed in our human lives, surviving on what we reject and then bringing it back to us.'[49] The fact that flies thrive on faecal matter but also habitually land on us and our belongings arouses a fundamental revulsion, something which Dennett also articulates when he considers why certain activities disgust us more than others. He compares the thought of swallowing saliva in our mouths with doing the same after having spat the saliva into a clean glass and asks why the latter probably fills us with more disgust than the former. He suggests that:

> It seems to have to do with our perception that once something is outside of our bodies it is no longer quite part of us anymore – it becomes alien and suspicious – it has renounced its citizenship and becomes something to be rejected.[50]

Such 'border crossings,' as Dennett calls them, 'are either moments of anxiety or…something to be especially enjoyed,'[51] and in the case of flies and their behavioural trait of wallowing in human waste and 'bringing it back to us,' our response would almost certainly be the former. The creature in *The Thing* is also capable of performing such 'border crossings' to the extent that the characters (and at times the viewer) cannot determine if or when a particular transgression has occurred or even whether the

process could ever be said to be complete. The creature can erupt from one individual, enter another, and bridge the physical separation between the two so that it exists in multiple places simultaneously. As such, it epitomises an extreme form of 'border crossing' because of the fact that it can be said to have exited a physically discrete entity while also still remaining part of that same individual. Stephen Prince echoes this argument but also widens his analysis to consider the alien threat of assimilation from a social perspective, arguing that boundaries and distinctions and a clearly-delineated way of ordering the world and its phenomena are what allow us to function successfully as sentient beings. In line with Carroll's approach, Prince cites the research of the anthropologists Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach when he examines the film in the context of how we organise the world using a classifying grid. He refers to this grid as 'the symbolic system,' [52] and is quick to point out one of the inherent drawbacks of this instinctive impulse we all have:

> The symbolic system operates to construct differences [in what we observe in the world], but, inevitably, the process of classifying will generate intermediate categories, items that mediate between binary distinctions to the extent that they exhibit both sets of characteristics.[53]

The 'symbolic system' sets up something of a paradox in the way that our natural tendency to create categories and perceive limits, such as physical boundaries, is also what gives rise to the fascinating and perhaps disturbing occurrences when such boundaries and categories are transgressed or eroded. From a storyteller's point of view, the foregrounding of an interstitial state and the perhaps unwelcome occurrence of beings and phenomena that do not fit neatly into the categories we have assigned provide a rich source of material since. As Prince puts it:

> the categories that arouse the greatest fear, interest, and sense of mystery are the ambiguous ones…Such ambiguous terms are the stuff of horror films...[54]

Like Carroll, Prince highlights the way in which the creature, and horror monsters in general, stands for something impure and indistinct when he makes the following observation about the scene in which the alien corpse is recovered from the Norwegian camp to be analysed:

> The creature is neither human nor non-human, but occupies a disturbing, unclear, intermediate place. As such, it cannot be classified, but can only be identified as a "thing". [55]

Or as the dog handler, Clark, puts it when he discovers the creature attacking the sleigh dogs: "I dunno what the hell's in there but it's weird and pissed off, whatever it is!" Clark's aversion speaks volumes about the way in which we are repelled by otherness, particularly of the sort that appears physically repellent or biologically threatening while also defying our efforts to organise and categorise phenomena in the world around us.

While certainly being 'the stuff of horror films,' ambiguity can be generated and exploited for multiple purposes and I would argue interstitiality as a phenomenon in its own right carries its own source of terror by virtue of its inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy. Such ambiguity and indeterminacy *may* involve grotesque imagery but this is certainly not a prerequisite, and Carroll signals an alternative consideration that stands as an offshoot or flipside to his art-horror concept. He suggests the term 'art-dread' to describe viewer responses to storylines such as those common to certain episodes in *The Twilight Zone* series,[56] which he distinguishes from horror storylines by describing them as 'tales of dread', the emotional response to which he describes in the following way:

> The uncanny event which tops off such stories causes a sense of unease and awe, perhaps of momentary anxiety and foreboding. These events are constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe.[57]

As we can see, in order to expand on his 'art-dread' concept, the alternative term that Carroll reaches for most readily is 'uncanny'. He states that since his concern is with responses to horror fiction he therefore does not have a working theory for such a type of audience affect but suggests that the phenomenon itself probably deserves one. Cynthia Freeland takes up the invitation to fill this apparent gap and turns her attention to certain films that may be likely to evoke Carroll's art-dread response, and introduces the term 'uncanny horror.' She conducts an analysis of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977) in order to illustrate the type of film and accompanying audience

response to which she believes this term could be applied.[58] In a similar fashion, Marie Mulvey-Roberts also makes reference to the uncanny, directly connecting it to *The Thing*:

> The Thing, by voraciously consuming living beings and then imitating them, may be associated with Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny.[59]

The obvious reason for invoking Freud's ideas on uncanniness in the context of *The Thing* stems from how the characters who are successfully assimilated exist in their new form as something familiar and unfamiliar; or 'homely' and 'unhomely' to use Freud's terminology. Freud's description of uncanniness as applied to identity is something that is simultaneously repellent and attractive, which is fundamental to the way the characters in *The Thing* react to each other. The situation of the characters generates paranoia fuelled by a desire to believe that familiar faces are genuine conflicting with a fear that they may not be. Despite the link that can be made with Freud's ideas, as Mulvey-Roberts does, a film like *The Thing* is possibly not the best case study for considering arguments on uncanniness, other than serving as a useful starting point to begin such a consideration. The creature's ability to imitate other life forms, and the fear that this produces, stand as a convenient illustration of Freud's homely / unhomely sensation in the way that I have described, however beyond this superficial detail the overall tone of the film is not especially uncanny. Carroll writes in relation to Douglas's work how a viewer's sense of unease and disgust caused by the impure and / or interstitial nature of a horror monster may arise 'without our necessarily being aware precisely what causes that sense.'[60] While this may be true for certain 'art-horror' responses, the events in *The Thing* are comparatively lucid as regards the characters' (and by extension the viewer's) source of fear and repulsion. Uncanniness in *The Thing* is less pronounced than is its foregrounding of physical danger and a fear of annihilation through assimilation and as such the film is better situated within Carroll's 'art-horror' category than his 'art-dread' response, or Freeland's 'uncanny horror.' In the chapter that follows I will consider an example which in a way stands as an inverted counter-example to the more grotesque, 'art-horrific' imagery that is prevalent in *The Thing*. Freud's uncanny is helpful for considering malleable identities and unconventional character portrayal in films, especially those which aim to provoke feelings of unease, disquiet or aversion, and a key element of uncanniness is in its subtlety and elusiveness. Although 'elusiveness' features prominently in *The*

Thing, it is only on the level of theme and storyline, and however else one could describe the film, 'subtle' would probably not be top of the list of adjectives. Just as Smith refers to fictional characters as a major "entry point" into our engagement with narratives,'[61] *The Thing*, for my purposes, can be seen as the entry point for a deeper discussion of a kind of horror relating to a loss or corruption of identity that is more subtly communicated. As such, I will turn my attention in the next chapter to examples that are perhaps better suited to the 'art-dread' and 'uncannny horror' labels.

2

Ambiguous Identities and Uncanny Selves in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*

Fred: You were in the house, calling my name, but I couldn't find you. Then there you were, lying in bed... but it wasn't you. It looked like you, but it wasn't.

(*Lost Highway*, 1997, David Lynch).

I mentioned in Chapter One how the closing scene of *The Thing* is overshadowed by ambiguity over whether or not one of the two surviving characters may actually be an assimilated imitation of who they appear to be. That scene notwithstanding however, it is fair to say that the film is a mainstream product, which happens to engage with (or at least suggest) intriguing questions about personal identity but does not noticeably deviate from a classical Hollywood paradigm. In the preceding chapter I outlined certain aspects of the film-as-philosophy debate in order to categorise *The Thing* as an example that can be used to read or mobilise certain philosophical ideas but only in terms of its subject matter rather than its cinematic features and narrative design. As we shall see during my analysis in this chapter, *The Thing* is a film with quite different primary goals from *Lost Highway*, and this has consequences for how a film theorist may choose to approach the latter in the context of such a discussion. *The Thing* establishes a clear protagonist / antagonist dichotomy in the form of Kurt Russell's character versus the alien creature, there is a clear goal driving the narrative forwards, and in terms of its formal features the action plays out using established cinematic norms. Although it explores fantastical and thought-provoking ideas, the fact that it does so within the confines of an accessible narrative framework is one point which makes it distinctly unlike *Lost Highway*, the film that will be the main focus of this chapter. While Lynch's film also contains characters whose identities exhibit physical disunity and instances of physical mutation, it displays a relative lack of narrative motivation and diegetic logic behind its identity shifts, which could be regarded as a fundamental barrier to comprehension. A significant amount of the narrative ambiguity

in *Lost Highway* is closely related to the identities of its characters but it is of a profoundly different sort to the kind we are asked to decipher in a film like *The Thing*. This is primarily because of a fundamental difference in the level of diegetic clarity and narrative information regarding alterations to character identities, which in itself highlights the fundamental differences between the underlying aims of each film. *The Thing* strives to keep its events moving forward with a gradually increasing pace and, even though its characters' identities are at times unclear, the narrative maintains the nature of the peril that exists and that survival of the characters and / or destruction of the creature are the ultimate goals. As such, the questions it explores about personal identity are kept at an abstract distance and operate on the level of story only, whereas *Lost Highway* deviates from established conventions of character portrayal and diegetic continuity in order to explore issues of personal identity in an altogether different way. In this chapter I will begin by looking at how *Lost Highway* motivates and depicts character changes before considering how the film's emphasis on defamiliarising everyday events and phenomena allows it to create a more unsettling, uncanny tone. I will develop my analysis in the context of the ideas I considered in Chapter One to show how *Lost Highway* better suits the 'art-dread' or 'uncanny horror' labels put forward respectively by Noël Carroll and Cynthia Freeland. I will finish by looking at how, in the broader considerations of film and self-identity, the recurrent ambiguity in *Lost Highway*'s narrative represents a confluence of salient physical and psychological traits that commonly relate to the development of characters.

Critical responses to the film at the time of its release were mixed, and some of the more negative reviews are worth mentioning as a way of starting my analysis. Edward Guthmann wrote that Lynch's film 'often feels like a stunt -- like an arcane, deliberately perverse game that Lynch knew would never make sense,'[62] while Roger Ebert claimed that the film is:

> made with a certain breezy contempt for audiences…There is no sense to be made of it…Is the joke on us? Is it our error to try to make sense of the film, to try to figure out why protagonists change in midstream?'[63]

It is not insignificant that a film which problematises character identity might evoke a negative response, not simply because it frustrates our expectations of how a film should behave but perhaps also

because it taps into an anxiety about the fragility of one's own personal identity. On one reading, portraying changes to character identities in a way that appears unexplained and unmotivated might serve to highlight that a belief in a permanent, unchanging self, is flawed and that personal identity is actually more dynamic and fluid than physical appearances suggest. As Ebert's review reveals, a principal source of confusion or annoyance stems from the way in which the lead character (if Fred can be considered as such) 'gives way' to another character, Pete, roughly halfway through the film. I use the term 'gives way' rather than 'mutate' or 'transform' because, as we will see, it is precisely the ambiguous portrayal of this identity switch that may create a particular sort of challenge for the viewer.

Lost Highway tells the story of a musician, Fred (Bill Pullman) and his wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette) who have a strained relationship in which Fred suspects his wife of infidelity. On successive days the couple, whose life together seems to consist of tense, vacuous exchanges of sparse conversation, receive three unmarked videotapes. The first is a very brief shot of their home from the outside, while the second shows both the exterior and interior, including a shot of the couple asleep in their bed. This prompts them to call the police but after a cursory inspection the detectives leave after offering some generic advice about securing their home. During the intervening time between the delivery of the second and third tapes, Fred and Renee attend a party where Fred meets the Mystery Man (Robert Blake) who claims to be inside Fred's house even though he is also directly in front of Fred speaking to him. Thinking he is on the end of a prank, Fred calls his house and to his horror the Mystery Man answers, seemingly inhabiting two different places at once.

When the third video arrives, Fred puts it on and calls to Renee to come and watch it with him, but he is shocked at the footage which apparently shows him having murdered and dismembered his wife. The footage is grainy and we only get a brief glimpse of what Fred sees (Fig. 6) but the shot is long enough for us to witness a horrifically bloody scene involving a dismembered corpse, which resembles Renee. Fred's reaction to what he sees is one of disbelief and he calls to Renee in a desperate, panicked voice before we abruptly cut to a scene of Fred being punched in the face by one of the detectives from the earlier scene, screaming "Sit down, killer!"

Fig. 6. We see a brief glimpse of Fred, seemingly following the act of murdering Renee and sobbing amongst her strewn remains.

The implication seems to be that Fred does not remember the scene in the tape but is nonetheless promptly convicted of murder and sentenced to death. When in prison, Fred complains of headaches before he apparently transforms into a different person Pete (Balthazar Getty) who has no memory of how he came to be in Fred's cell. The prison officers have no idea how he came to be there either and since he can no longer be identified by the authorities as Fred but can be positively identified as Pete, he is returned to his parents' care. The storyline then takes a tangential turn as we learn about Pete's life as a mechanic who also does work for a local gangster, Mr Eddy/Dick Laurent (Robert Loggia). Mr Eddy shows up at Pete's workplace one day with a girl, Alice (also played by Patricia Arquette), and shortly after she and Pete start an affair. Mr Eddy becomes suspicious so Alice and Pete plan to rob Andy, one of Mr Eddy's henchmen, and escape with the loot. During the robbery they accidentally kill Andy, before travelling to a shack in the desert where they wait to meet a potential buyer. After Alice walks off into the shack, Pete seemingly transforms back into Fred who then follows her inside and finds nobody but the Mystery Man, with a video camera aimed at him. Unnerved, Fred drives off to the Lost Highway hotel where he glimpses Renee in one of the rooms, seemingly engaged in an affair with Mr Eddy. Fred kidnaps and kills Mr Eddy in the desert with the assistance of the Mystery Man before driving back to his house and saying "Dick Laurent is dead" into the intercom. The film concludes with him driving into the desert, pursued by police and screaming in pain as his face begins to contort and mutate.

Ambiguous Mutations

If we look more closely at the moments when characters appear to change their identities we can gain some insight into how and why the film presents a very different challenge to that of more mainstream portrayals of mutation, such as those I examined in *The Thing*. The first instance of *apparent* physical transformation occurs during the scene when Fred is in his prison cell complaining of headaches. After requesting and being refused help from the guards, we see him turn to look at his cell door, which dissolves into the image of a shack in the desert exploding in reverse-motion. After the shack has reformed we see the Mystery Man standing outside and then entering it, intercut with shots of Fred in his cell looking scared and confused. The cell is suddenly illuminated with a bright overhead light before cutting to a moving shot travelling along a desert road at night which veers off to the right and focuses in on an unknown man standing by the roadside. Flashing lights and mist accompany intercut close-ups of this man and Fred's eyes. We then see the latter writhing in pain in his cell, clutching his head, while the image and soundtrack become distorted. Hissing and screaming accompany a sound like tearing cloth as we see Fred's head, shrouded in steam, begin to pulsate and change shape, however the scene concludes without clearly establishing the outcome of whatever is happening to him. (Fig. 7). Mist fills the frame and the shot alternates between flashes of light and total darkness before we see a very brief shot of what looks like an open wound, accompanied by a roar of pain, then an abrupt cut to black. There is a brief intervening shot showing what appears to be a human figure rocking backwards and forwards but the image is never brought into focus, so it is not possible to conclusively identify the person we are seeing.

Fig. 7 - Fred in his death row cell, seemingly in the process of a painful, violent and literal transformation.

In the scene that immediately follows, the guards find a different person in Fred's cell, a man who they subsequently identify as Pete Dayton and who the viewer will recognise as the individual seen by the roadside in the previous sequence. He has cuts and swellings on his forehead and has no memory of how he came to be in Fred's cell. Other than one prison guard describing this strange occurrence as "some spooky shit," no narrative explanations for Pete's appearance, or Fred's disappearance, are offered. Pete is subsequently released into his parents' care and is kept under surveillance by the police. The film then enters into what exists as an almost entirely separate narrative thread, during which the viewer is provided with information about Pete's life: where he works, his girlfriend, his parents, and his relationship with the gangster, Mr Eddy, who seems to like Pete for his expertise as a car mechanic. This tangential storyline effectively constitutes the entire middle section of the film before we see the second instance of physical transformation. It takes place towards the end of the film immediately after the sex scene in the desert, when Alice has gone into the shack leaving Pete lying on the ground. This time round the nature of the identity switch is noticeably different to the mutation which took place in Fred's cell, with violent noises and grotesque imagery being replaced by a simple elliptical edit as Pete gets to his feet and is 'replaced' by Fred (Fig. 8). The initial shot is potentially ambiguous due to the use of a long shot and the physical similarity of both actors when seen from behind. However, the cut to a medium shot followed by the subsequent reveal as the individual turns round confirms that Fred is once more present in the narrative and, by that same token, Pete is now absent.

Fig. 8. The portrayal of Pete changing back to Fred is noticeably understated compared to the scene showing the reverse process in Fred's cell.

The third and final transformation takes place during the film's closing sequence when Fred is making his escape by car and is being pursued by the police (Fig. 9.) The images are very similar to those in the prison cell scene and as before the sequence ends before the result is shown, however given what we have seen already it is reasonable to infer that Fred is about to mutate once more, perhaps into Pete, perhaps not.

Fig. 9. The film's closing scene sees Fred seemingly on the verge of another transformation.

Notably, the mutations are violent in nature when the change is from Fred into Pete, while the transformation that occurs in the opposite direction is understated and instantaneous. Quite why this should be the case is unclear, which serves to underline how the diegetic logic relating to physical mutation in *Lost Highway* differs considerably from a film like *The Thing*. Although both narratives

employ grotesque imagery to depict physical mutation, the laws governing how and why such events take place are more clearly established, through dialogue and other forms of exposition, in Carpenter's film. All that one can say with any certainty is that on the occasions Fred mutates (regardless of whether we deem this to be a literal or metaphorical transformation), it seems to be a painful and violent event, which does not seem to be the case when the reverse process occurs. These examples are distinct from the kind of physical rupturing that occurs in *The Thing* insofar as they are understated and are accompanied by a relative paucity of diegetic information that may serve as a plausible explanation for what we see. *Lost Highway* does not display the sort of horror/science-fiction tropes such as those we are presented with in *The Thing*, which Murray Smith points out when he summarises the film's various impediments to viewer comprehension:

> *Lost Highway*…refrains from establishing any explicit supernatural framework…Appearance and reality are dislocated; motivations are obscure; cognitive dissonance disturbs the very foundations of narrative coherence; temporal and causal sequences become paradoxical.[64]

With such a concentration of 'cognitive dissonance' generated by the narrative's unexpected deviations from mainstream norms, numerous questions and challenges are created for the viewer. If we look closely at some of these then we can assess the extent to which we can either draw conclusions from the narrative events or must acknowledge paradoxes and ambiguity as an inherent and deliberate design feature of the film.

Tangled Selves

The events in Fred's prison cell are pivotal and the way in which one interprets Pete's entry into the narrative will determine to a large extent how one classifies and reconciles a multitude of other details in the scenes that follow. The question the film invites is whether to regard Fred's mutation as a literal event within the diegesis or a transformation on an entirely psychological level. In his review of the film Kim Newman articulates one of the key questions the viewer will most likely raise:

> [have] Fred and Pete exchanged bodies, with Pete coming out of some limbo to usurp Fred's place in the world...Or has Fred transformed only into *a physical* likeness of Pete, retaining his own memories and personality? [65]

His question is rhetorical of course since the short answer is: we cannot know for sure. For one thing, we do not actually witness a physical transformation but rather see the beginning of what *might* be a metamorphosis of some sort. It is only through the inexplicable appearance of Pete in the cell, and Fred's corresponding absence, that we are encouraged to draw such a conclusion. The moments when Fred seems to shapeshift point towards an actual physical morphing of some kind that is perhaps on a par with the alteration or absorption of individuals common to the horror and sci-fi examples I looked at previously. However, Lynch really only alludes to generic tropes such as these, seemingly as a means of inviting a similar interpretation only to leave the diegetic explanation incomplete and obscure. The creature in *The Thing* can transcend spatial boundaries by virtue of its ability to live simultaneously as both a single organism and a collection of discrete units. As we saw in Chapter One, Carpenter goes to great lengths to ensure that viewer and character knowledge about the alien's capabilities are closely aligned, which means that even though there may be uncertainty over who has been assimilated, we are at least clear on how the process works. Our knowledge is further bolstered by extended sequences which explicitly demonstrate how the creature operates and survives. By contrast, *Lost Highway* features a similar disruption of what Carroll calls the 'natural order' of the narrative but does not provide accompanying explanatory information. Lynch could be seen as alluding to the horror and science-fiction tropes, and we might venture that the Fred/Pete relationship qualifies him/them as one of Carroll's 'temporal fission' characters, alongside other shapeshifting beings like werewolves. However, *Lost Highway* does not deliver an explicit portrayal like the agonising (and fully-lit) metamorphosis in *An American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, 1981). David Bordwell puts forward the concept of *redundancy* to describe the way in which filmmakers rely on salient narrative details being repeatedly shown or referenced in order to firmly establish them as pertinent elements for the viewer. In relation to *Lost Highway* he writes:

> If complex storytelling demands high redundancy, Lynch has been derelict in his duty...the absence of definite reference points allows Lynch to rehearse a few obsessive scenarios […] without settling on which are real and which are imagined. [66]

The tangential storyline involving Pete is difficult to reconcile with what we have seen so far since Fred's mutation into Pete apparently declares that unity and continuity of physical selves are unstable elements. The apparent transformation directly conflicts with Smith's 'person schema', since the film overturns the basic assumption that, 'unless otherwise indicated, a character will have one body, individuated by a particular set of physical features, and which will be continuous through space and time.'[67] 'Otherwise indicated' is the key phrase here since as we have seen with *The Thing*, its narration carefully establishes an internal logic presented through a pseudo-scientific lens with a premise and backstory that provides sufficient explanation for mutating characters and malleable identities. With Lynch's film we are forced to query whether Fred has ceased to exist entirely or perhaps now exists in a form different to that which we have so far associated with him. By not providing plausible or wholly satisfactory explanations for what happens to Fred in his cell and what his connection to Pete is raises obvious questions for the viewer. Schuy R. Weisshar notes how our first sight of Pete shows him with a 'protuberance on his forehead'[68] which gradually disappears in the scenes following his release from prison (Fig. 10.) The presence of a detail such this increases ambiguity and exacerbates the lack of narrative clarity by suggesting an actual physical transformation has occurred.

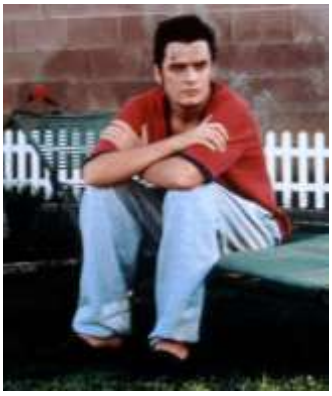

Fig. 10. Pete's face is noticeably misshapen and swollen, suggesting an actual physical mutation has taken place. As his storyline develops, the wound on his forehead can be seen healing in a way that is consistent with recovery from physical trauma.

Walter Benjamin wrote that 'to live is to leave traces'[69] and this notion seems to take on a literal manifestation in the sense that traces of Fred's existence seem to be literally etched into Pete's face, with subsequent scenes showing a gradual erasure by way of his skin healing. Whether or not Pete exists in Fred's psyche or whether the instances of mutation are to be taken literally remains unresolved, which is one way in which the film is distinct from narratives which present straightforward scenarios involving identity confusion framed in mainstream structures.

If we are to interpret this apparently literal transformation as a purely symbolic one, and regard the sequences involving Pete's activities as an escapist fantasy taking place in Fred's psyche, then a detail such as a healing wound creates a discord. Portraying a purely subjective, psychological transformation, such as a fugue state or a form of mental retreat or breakdown, would seem to preclude any suggestion of physical alteration or mutation, unless of course the intention is to create ambiguity. The fact that scarring is evident on Pete's face lends weight to the viewer's hypothesis that a literal transformation has

occurred but this is in conflict with the diegetic laws that seem to have been established earlier in the narrative. The intercut shots of each character's eyes during the transformation scene in the prison cell establish a connection of sorts between the two figures although the exact nature of this connection is never unequivocally established.

One reading of the film that may allow these apparent paradoxes to be reconciled would be to regard Fred and Pete as distinct from one another only in terms of their representation. We could regard them (him) as a single character who appears in two different guises or manifestations at certain points in the narrative and hypothesise that the changes in appearance are tied to or guided by Fred's emotional and mental states. Just as Bruce Banner transforms into The Hulk whenever he feels angry, perhaps Fred's feelings of jealousy or inadequacy towards his wife 'transform' him into Pete. If this transformation is psychological rather than physical then of course the healing wound on Pete's face will appear jarring to the viewer. However, regarding Pete's existence as an escapist fantasy in which Fred is convinced that he has made an actual physical transformation then it is easier to accept a detail such as this, provided that we regard the moment of mutation as a descent into Fred's subjectivity and not a literal transformation. If Fred's fantasy is total then it may quite readily include a detail such as a healing wound following a metamorphosis into a different individual, such is the freedom of dream states and fantasies. A point that goes further to support this interpretation is that Pete certainly displays the features one might associate with an alter ego in that he is popular and virile in ways that Fred is not. Upon discovering that Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) in *Fight Club* is actually the same person as Edward Norton's character, Durden declares that "I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable…I am free in all the ways that you are not."[70] A narrative explanation such as this could also be applied here, since Pete's life is in many respects superior and more fulfilling than Fred's, therefore regarding him as an alter-ego makes sense. A key difference, however, is the clarity with which *Fight Club*'s narrative cues work to distinguish moments of delusion from moments of diegetic objectivity. Details such as Pete's healing wound make it less easy (but not impossible) for the viewer to make such a distinction and as the film progresses this level of ambiguity is compounded by similar examples. In addition to the identity confusion that surrounds Fred and Pete are the collection of supporting characters who are similarly tinged

with ambiguity; the principal one being the dual roles of Renee and Alice played by Patricia Arquette (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11. Patricia Arquette in the dual roles of Alice and Renee

In Pete's storyline the brunette Renee reappears as the blonde Alice. Despite cosmetic alterations such as a different name and a change in hairstyle and colour the viewer will be in no doubt that it is the same actress, although whether or not these are indeed two separate characters is never satisfactorily established. The ambiguity over whether Renee and Alice are indeed two distinct people is compounded during the botched robbery at Andy's home when Pete notices a photograph in which both Alice and Renee are present. In a later scene, however, the investigators look at the same photograph and only Renee is present (Figs. 12 and 13). Perhaps echoing the viewer's own thoughts, Pete asks Alice 'Is that you? Are both of them you?' to which she replies 'That's me' and points to the blonde. Her answer does little to clarify the matter and her behaviour does not suggest that her (apparent) double appearance in the same photograph is in any way remarkable. Pete essentially vocalises a question that will undoubtedly arise in the mind of the viewer, however the answer and subsequent shots of the photograph clarifies little and could even be considered as a source of greater confusion. An example such as this shows how the film toys with the Bordwellian idea of redundancy, inverting it almost, since the repetition of certain pieces of information actually obscures more than it reveals.

Fig.12. The photograph as viewed by Pete during the robbery at Andy's.

Fig.13. The 'same' photograph as seen by the detectives in a later scene.

The lack of clarity surrounding character identities and the various realms they inhabit effectively constructs a series of unsolvable riddles and ironically it is the intrusion of characters, or at least fragments of them, from one seemingly distinct narrative strand into the other that helps to bind them together. Our attempts at reconciliation are made all the more tempting and frustrating by the appearance of details which are recognisable from earlier scenes but appear ultimately to evade definitive categorisation or explanation. As was mentioned earlier, the viewer will most likely feel compelled to retain each detail in the hope that vigilance will result in narrative clarity. Certain details and characters from apparently distinct narrative threads intrude upon and refer back to one another, making it difficult for the viewer to reconcile inconsistencies and paradoxes since categorisation and identification of apparently distinct threads cannot be achieved. In addition to the wound on Pete's forehead we also hear the sound of Fred's saxophone solo from an earlier scene playing on the radio in Pete's garage. Elsewhere, Mr Eddy/Dick Laurent creates a bridge between the two sections of the film as we hear the detectives

refer to him as 'Laurent', which links him to the intercom message heard by Fred at the start of the film. Quite why he is known by two different names is never explained although relative to some the film's other unexplained features it is perhaps reasonable to infer that as a gangster he may use aliases in his line of work. Being reminded of characters as they had been intensifies the viewer's challenge to try and make sense of the details and provide an explanation; to try in some way to re-orientate their understanding to the point where it was at the outset of the narrative. By pulling our interpretive instincts in seemingly contradictory directions the viewer is forced to consider alternative interpretations or simply accept the inconsistencies as an integral part of the viewing experience. *Lost Highway* could be regarded as projecting the type of bewilderment and uncertainty experienced by the characters in *The Thing* onto the viewer, and rather than exploring themes of identity in an expository way its narrative works demonstratively in order to raise questions about the nature of self-identity.

The uncanny and self-estrangement

In one notable scene, which I touched on earlier, Fred encounters the Mystery Man at Andy's party and during the course of their exchange the Mystery Man hands Fred his phone and tells him to call home. When the Mystery Man answers at the other end while still standing in front of Fred, incredulity turns to fear as Fred realises this is no cheap trick. As with the moments of physical mutation, the narrative offers little evidence to account for what has transpired and the scene, with its eerie and unsettling tone, serves simply to generate hypotheses about a supernatural or magical element that may emerge within the storyline. Details such as these illustrate how *Lost Highway* shares some common ground with *The Thing* but also how it contrasts greatly in terms of tone, imagery, and narrative clarity. In some respects they are an inversion of one another in terms of their respective proportions of grotesque horror versus unsettling uncanniness. The scenario therefore is intended to generate a mood of dread and uncanniness as opposed to what Carroll would call 'art-horror'. Cynthia Freeland writes how films that she would categorise as 'uncanny horror':

> are not enjoyable for their presentation of interesting monsters…[T]he horror goes beyond, or lies behind, the men who seem to be monsters in them, so we cannot invoke Noël Carroll's views to explain their appeal.[71]

Carroll of course concedes as much himself when he uses Norman Bates from *Psycho* as an example of a monstrous individual who is not of the 'art-horror' variety, and there is certainly evidence in *Lost Highway* to suggest that Fred is similarly unhinged and guilty of a brutal murder. However, Fred's arrest and incarceration does not develop into an investigation examining the details of Renee's murder since, as we have seen, the narrative departs along a much more unconventional route following Fred's transformation into Pete. As is evident from the large volume of psychoanalytic writing, there are a number of theorists who believe that Lacanian and Freudian theories can satisfactorily answer these apparent inconsistencies, and several of these authors provide illuminating interpretations and hypotheses.[72] If we return to Freud and uncanniness there are a number of observations that can be made that could perhaps guide our interpretative efforts while also holding back from offering up any form of definitive interpretation of *Lost Highway*'s myriad riddles and paradoxes. Although the film contains narrative inconsistencies, physical discontinuity and a disregard for spatio-temporal logic, I would argue that the ability to comprehend the narrative requires neither greater familiarity with non-mainstream narratives, nor the adoption of psychoanalytic approaches, but rather a reassessment of how we understand and define subjective identity and selfhood. In this respect my approach could be closely aligned with that of Gregory Currie who argues against the dominance of certain psychoanalytic schools of thought in favour of a cognitive approach. He writes that 'the most a cognitivist need hold is that psychoanalysis is not the central or...exclusive means by which we understand the psychology of film'.[73] Freud's writing on the uncanny and selfhood, for instance, can provide useful insights regarding *Lost Highway* but this does not constitute a wholesale adoption of a Freudian approach. While I do not intend to adopt a psychoanalytic approach, for my purposes it is still of value to draw on Freud's landmark theory of the uncanny, particularly in the context of Carroll, Freeland and Smith's work. In his seminal essay 'The Uncanny,' Freud writes of an experience he had whilst riding on a train and mistook his own reflection for another passenger:

> I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door. I can still recollect that I found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant.[74]

What is encapsulated in this extract is one of the central features of Freud's description of uncanniness, which is the sensation that a particular perception or phenomenon feels simultaneously familiar and unhomely, both attractive and repellent. The quotation at the opening of this chapter includes a phrase spoken by Fred - "it looked like you, but it wasn't" - which could almost have been drawn directly from Freud's description of how uncanniness relates to personal identity. Fred's words point towards the fact that the film contains individuals whose physical representations both confirm and deny our ability to recognise definitively who they are. They way in which this is achieved, however, is markedly different to the sort of identity confusion associated with a film like *The Thing* and many of the other examples I have looked at so far. In *The Thing*, it is difficult or almost impossible for those who are still human to differentiate between those who are alien imitations and those who are genuinely the person they appear to be. The desire to see the person for who they are is in direct conflict with the paranoid impulse to mistrust the individual who may actually be an imitation. The horrific interstitial sight of the alien and the issue of identity confusion provoke the attraction / repulsion response common to both the uncanny and the grotesque, even though the pervading mood of the film itself is not one of uncanniness. According to Freud's account, doubling and repetition can serve as major sources of uncanniness and in this respect uncanniness abounds in *Lost Highway*. There is the obvious doubling of characters through Fred changing into Pete and Arquette playing a dual role, and although there is ambiguity surrounding the exact nature of the Fred/Pete relationship, the film clearly emphasises a link of some sort, such as the intercut close-ups of their eyes during the mutation and similarities of framing (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Shot composition contributes to the film's many instances of doubling and repetition.

As well as through his alarming, ghostly appearance, the Mystery Man also evokes the uncanny through a different form of doubling, namely his capacity to exist in more than one place, as evidenced in the scene at Andy's party. His apparent ability to transcend normal spatial boundaries is deepened further when Fred seems to see his face superimposed over Renee's one night when they are in bed (Fig. 15), a sight which is subsequently dispelled when Fred hurriedly turns on his bedside light in fear. We see Fred waking in distress, presumably because of a nightmare, making it tempting to dismiss the image as a hallucination resulting from Fred being somewhere between dreaming and waking. However, against this interpretation is the destabilising element of how the lead up to this moment is framed. We see what appears to be a retrospective dream sequence as it is being recounted by Fred to Renee as they both lie in bed, which runs counter to the fact that the sequence concludes with Fred waking rather than a cut to something like Renee listening to Fred's description of the dream he had. This generates a discord both in terms of our expectations of narrative progression but also in terms of our efforts to delineate dream / fantasy from diegetic reality. Since we cannot draw a firm conclusion about what Fred actually saw, this instance of conflating discrete entities into a single individual is of a different nature to the 'fusion figures' present in *The Thing*, which frames its events in a folk-scientific context. As a result, *Lost Highway* has a capacity for generating uncanniness that is absent in *The Thing* due to the fact that the latter's ambiguity about character identity operates only on the diegetic level and not at the level of narrative design.

Fig. 15. The alarming appearance of the Mystery Man's face superimposed on Renee's exemplifies a different method of fusing or conflating character identities.

In addition, this moment follows on directly from a sex scene which is portrayed in such a deeply uncanny way that it could be regarded as the polar opposite of the celebrated sequence in *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973). The couple's flesh is defamiliarised through the use of slow motion while a

swirling, throbbing hum on the soundtrack instead of music and / or diegetic sound creates an eerie, distant mood. The atmosphere is rendered dark and unsettling, something which is at odds with the physical intimacy of the characters but communicates the emotional distance in their relationship. Moments like these build cumulatively as the narrative progresses to create a pervading air of uncanniness, over which hangs a nagging ambiguity surrounding character identities.

Earlier I looked at how uncanniness could be regarded as an inversion of the imagery and atmosphere common to mainstream horror, with the former displaying subtle dread in place of the latter's reliance on emphatically grotesque visuals. Overall *Lost Highway* generates an uncanny atmosphere relying on a sense of dread, with moments of horror and shock periodically punctuating the narrative. The appearance of the Mystery Man in Fig. 17, representing horrific impurity in Carroll's sense through a blending of young and old, male and female, would be one such example. Freeland draws a similar comparison but compares uncanniness with what it feels to experience the sublime (in the Romantic sense of the word). Witnessing terrible and impressive natural phenomena like ocean waves or tornadoes create a type of self-affirming outcome by virtue of how they make one feel tiny and awestruck and yet not directly threatened and therefore glad to be alive. The uncanny however generates a feeling of losing oneself, not in the hackneyed sense of becoming deeply absorbed in a storyline but rather something akin to having a comforting rug of individuality pulled from under our feet:

> By contrast, the forces of the uncanny dwarf us in a way that simply threatens a dissolution of the self, meaning, and morality…we lose our sense of self, we are frightened by something unexplained.[75]

It is quite fitting that Freeland's notion of uncanniness as a kind of 'antisublime' creates yet another example of doubling, only this time it is the very concept of the uncanny itself which finds its inverted double in the form of the sublime. In the context of *Lost Highway*, two things in Freeland's description stand out as being particularly applicable and significant. 'A dissolution of the self' and being 'frightened by something unexplained' to my mind resonate on both the diegetic and thematic levels. On one reading we might consider that Fred has literally 'lost himself' and been replaced by Pete, while Freeland's mention of a 'dissolution of the self' takes on a literal manifestation similar to the fate of the

scientists in *The Thing*. Freeland also makes the point that 'we are frightened by something unexplained' and this resonates deeply with the vagueness and ambiguity running through *Lost Highway*'s narrative. As Carroll examines in great detail, horror monsters are repulsive and threatening but more often than not the threat is clear and visceral. Not so with *Lost Highway* since it is the uncertainty and vagueness of the narrative itself which carries much of the threat, making it unlike 'art-horror' as Carroll defines it. Both he and Freeland regard 'dread' as the most suitable term to describe this emotional response, which Freeland describes as 'a sense of something evil, something out there as a threat in a distinctive and stronger sense, different from the threat of sheer power.'[76] Freud and Freeland both identify an aversion to and / or loss of familiarity with one's own self as an aspect of uncanniness, and that normally the source of the unsettling sensation is a vagueness about what is causing us to feel disturbed. The term 'autophobia' denotes a fear of oneself and like many phobias they often appear peculiar to non-sufferers, however unlike a fear of heights, which could be seen as rooted in a desire for self-preservation, one might query what we have to fear from ourselves. To regard one's self with a sense of 'otherness' would certainly be an unfamiliar sensation and could very well provoke an autophobic response, something we might call a sense of 'self-aversion.' A central feature of uncanniness is the sensation that a particular perception or phenomenon feels simultaneously familiar and unhomely, both attractive and repellent. It is hard to imagine something more familiar and homely than one's self, therefore it is perhaps equally difficult to consider oneself as an unfamiliar person, let alone a person to fear. In her analysis of horror and monstrosity Marie Mulvey-Roberts isolates this very notion:

> As a manifestation of both the uncanny and the abject, the monstrous body represents a horror of the indifferentiation of the now defamiliarised human. Monstrosity is also a fear of oneself, particularly of the alienation within the self.[77]

There are of course numerous ways of imagining, portraying and interpreting a fear of the self, or an alienation within the self. A psychoanalytic approach might argue that what we have to fear from ourselves is a return of the repressed, an alter-ego or double lurking within; 'someone' who is the very essence of our most base and destructive desires. Such an idea has been explored at length in many art forms and has produced characters like Frankenstein's Monster; an individual who represents a literal,

physical manifestation of a threatening alter-ego. Similarly, the theme of an aversion to one's self can be seen in examples such as Dostoevsky's *The Double* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* by Robert Louis Stevenson. The same idea is employed for comedy effect in *Multiplicity* (Harold Ramis, 1996), in which the main character, Doug, clones himself so that he can manage his work/life balance better, but ends up squabbling endlessly about priorities with his multiple selves. Similarly, when the vain and self-indulgent character Rimmer, from the TV sci-fi comedy series *Red Dwarf,* is accidentally cloned in the episode 'Me^2', he moves in with his double only to see their cohabitation descend into a series of petty arguments. Similarly, Doug in *Multiplicity* does not see his life enriched by his clones nor does he even recognise an affinity with them. Rather, just like Rimmer finds in *Red Dwarf*, he becomes alienated from his new selves as they grow progressively distinct from their source, albeit in a farcical way that is played overwhelmingly for laughs. *Moon* (Duncan Jones, 2009) explores similar ideas by way of a storyline involving an astronaut who is cyclically cloned to allow him to continue to carry out lunar mining, effectively a form of slave labour involving clones that are designed to die every three years. The tone of the film is tragic rather than farcical but it nonetheless exhibits a character who seems repelled, or at least discomfited by, another version of himself.

Looking in more detail at one more example, in Chapter One I mentioned Christopher Nolan's film *The Prestige* in the context of Derek Parfit's thought experiments involving teletransporters and doppelgängers, something which Rupert Read discusses in much greater detail in his essay 'The Tale Parfit Tells.' Read regards *The Prestige* as something close to a dramatistion of Parfit's thought experiment, and with good reason since it engages with duplication of an individual by way of a teleportation device. Read objects to what he sees as Parfit's oversimplification of a (fictional) scenario that would involve killing another person and he credits *The Prestige* as being 'far more finely attuned, physically, than Parfit's…[because it] expertly explores the horror, the terrible turn in events, that may follow from duplication *of human beings*.'[78] For Read, precisely why the film is 'more finely attuned' than Parfit's thought experiment is because of the extent to which *The Prestige* considers the moral implications and outright horror of killing one's doppelgänger. While it is true that Parfit's scenario seems to gloss over the murderous aspect of his thought experiment, it might also be said that *The Prestige* is able to mobilise a philosophical idea in a different way due to its medium. As I mentioned in Chapter

One, there is much debate over whether or not film can be considered capable of advancing a philosophical argument purely through cinematic means. I highlighted how the visual immediacy and temporal character of film provides filmmakers with a unique set of choices when trying to put their ideas across, and Carroll argues that, through the medium of film, there are times when '[t]he context may be so pregnant and the thought experiment so deft that everyone gets it on contact.'[79] Perhaps there is an element of this at work in *The Prestige* which allows it to explore a similar scenario to the one Parfits envisages but with a nuance and impact that is specific to moving images.

Nolan's film is primarily a warning about obsessive competition and jealousy between rival magicians but the technological component in the storyline provides a very literal example of autophobia. An extended flashback near the film's conclusion explains how the protagonist Angier (Hugh Jackman) managed to improve on his rival's 'transported man' illusion after coming into possession of an actual teleporter. The machine operates in the same way as in Parfit's scenario in that it produces a duplicate person rather than simply transporting the 'original' individual. We also learn that, in order to keep his method a secret, Angier kills the source individual but his life carries on without interruption in the form of the transported / duplicated version of himself. The alien life-form in *The Thing* generates a source of fear and horror because it represents annihilation and a loss of one's individuality that is equivalent to 'normal' death. Parfit's teleportation scenario carries with it a variation on this kind of threat, and this is manifest in examples like *The Prestige* wherein a character sees a threat to his self-identity by way of a reduced sense of individuality and uniqueness. Running alongside this threatening element is the complex and horrific sight of an individual who manages, in a sense, to commit murder and suicide through one and the same act – and survive.

In the context of *Lost Highway,* one can identify elements of all these types of self-aversion, albeit with greater ambiguity and a difference in tone and that is once more comparable to Freeland and Carroll's 'uncanny horror' and 'art-dread' labels. For the viewer, we must accept that Fred 'breaks' from himself but there is an emotional disconnect created by the ambiguity over whether this fracturing is physical or psychological. As such, 'self-estrangement' rather than 'self-aversion' would perhaps be a more suitable term, particularly since Fred displays no apparent knowledge of who or what Pete is (or in

fact any awareness of Pete's existence), and therefore cannot show any direct animosity or fearfulness towards him. By contrast, in the opening scene, Fred hears an unidentified voice on his intercom telling him "Dick Laurent is dead", and although Fred has no frame of reference for this message nor is he able to see from his window who is at his door speaking into the intercom, his expression is one of apprehension. By virtue of the narrative's Moebius strip design we learn by the end of the film that the person leaving the message is actually Fred himself. He is visibly agitated by the buzzing of the intercom and then noticeably anxious after hearing the (his) voice at the other end but there is insufficient narrative evidence to account for his behaviour. Are we to assume that he recognises his own voice, which is partially distorted through the crackling speaker? If so then that would surely influence his subsequent actions and behaviour but in the scenes that follow there is no further reference to the message. The vagueness of this sequence generates a lack of clarity surrounding Fred's motivations and conspires to create an eerie and slightly menacing tone. In addition to the paradox created by Fred's co-existence with himself at either end of the intercom, consideration of a condition like autophobia or feeling of self-estrangement also makes a second viewing of *Lost Highway* particularly poignant.

We can also extend an assessment of 'estrangement' beyond the confines of the narrative events to consider what effect the games *Lost Highway* plays with character identities has on the viewer / filmmaker relationship. Roger Ebert wrote that 'David Lynch's *Lost Highway* is like kissing a mirror: You like what you see, but it's not much fun, and kind of cold,'[80] which in traditional or folk terminology suggests that he sees a lack of a character with whom he can 'identify.' We generally understand that this term is meant to denote our capacity for enjoying a narrative because the narrative contains a character(s) with whom the viewer is likely to express a sense of emotional attachment or affinity. Writers like Smith and Currie have argued that the notion of 'identification' is insufficient for critical analysis due to the vagueness of what it describes. Smith proposes a more developed model, the 'structure of sympathy',[81] which breaks down the concept of 'identification' into more specific component parts: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. 'Recognition', as we have seen, breaks down into 'individuation' and 're-identification,' which covers the process of being able to discern a discrete individual as separate from other characters and surroundings and subsequently identify them as the same person later in the narrative. 'Alignment' denotes the level of viewer knowledge about the actions, thoughts, and emotions of particular

characters, and the extent to which viewers share information with characters, which is governed by the formal decisions made by the filmmaker. Lastly, 'allegiance' is the component which most closely resembles the traditional notion of 'identifying' with a particular character. It describes the way in which one morally evaluates particular characters, something that is of course tempered and informed by a spectator's extra-diegetic values and beliefs.

In this context, by equating watching *Lost Highway* to kissing a mirror Ebert seems to be suggesting that the film is lacking an emotional reference point that would give rise to a strong sense of *allegiance*. Such an effect is no doubt aggravated by the way in which the film challenges our ability to trace the trajectory of certain characters by going against what Smith terms *recognition*. We might again use the term 'estrangement' to describe an absence of 'allegiance,' as the implication is that an emotional void exists where there might otherwise be an affinity with or sympathy towards a particular character. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Bordwell and Smith see characters as the obvious candidates through which viewers engage with narratives. It would follow therefore that creating a discord in the portrayal of our 'fictive counterparts'[82] of the sort that *Lost Highway* demonstrates could evoke a corresponding cognitive dissonance in the viewer. For example, in *Lost Highway* we have individuated and been aligned with Fred through the opening sequences in which he is continuously present and during which we see his actions as well as having access to his subjective states in the form of a dream sequence. Viewer knowledge closely matches Fred's as we are predominantly shown things that Fred sees, does and thinks. However, the narrative sees him break the laws of physical continuity and we must individuate and re-identify a new character, Pete, who may or may not in some way retain the memories and characteristics of Fred.

As we have seen, the lack of narrative clarity about how Fred and Pete are connected presents viewers with a situation that they must try to reconcile in some way. In addition to the term 'redundancy,' Bordwell also introduces the term *retardation* [83] to describe the way in which exposition of narrative information can be suppressed or delayed in order to create dramatic tension, arouse interest, and invite hypotheses about how a storyline will develop. The pace and manner in which key pieces of information are revealed is fundamental to dictating a film's overall tone, style, and intelligibility. What is particularly

jarring about *Lost Highway* is that it appears to be *retarding comprehension* since extended sections of the film, although by no means closely resembling a classical narrative paradigm, do contain causal links and adhere to principles of spatio-temporal continuity. As such, the viewer may assume that any narrative inconsistences or paradoxes, like the dual roles played by Patricia Arquette or Fred's transformation into Pete, will be explained at some point later in the film. If a narrative does not fully deliver on such an expectation then it may arguably estrange the viewer from the experience, although conversely we may also be primed with the expectation that Lynch very often sets up questions and paradoxes that cannot be resolved or fully understood. What is perhaps discomfiting is the fact that the narrative upsets our grasp of character identities in a seemingly uncued, unpredictable and unmotivated way. However a feeling of estrangement, if that is what one indeed experiences, could equally be regarded as an appropriate reaction since it reflects Fred's emotional and psychological disconnect from both his failing marriage and arguably from himself.

Smith uses the term 'estrangement' (unconnected to the Brechtian technique of 'alienation') to describe the process whereby the level of engagement a spectator can have with a particular character is limited by an increased level of abstraction. That is to say, the more allegorical or symbolic a character's function appears, the less we as viewers are able to engage with that character, at least in the conventional sense of emotional engagement. It could be argued that by corrupting character identities in the way *Lost Highway* does the spectator becomes estranged from the characters for the reason that they no longer resemble a person as we understand them in the non-filmic world but start to resemble something metaphoric or symbolic. If logical answers to the questions around shifting identities are quite elusive a viewer may be inclined to interpret these events as symbolic and metaphorical rather than literal occurrences within the diegesis. [84] Smith puts this argument forward as a potential strategy for film viewing when he deals specifically with the phenomenon of actors playing multiple roles[85] and notes how characters can be used to embody particular themes, emotions, and moral values or represent abstract concepts. An accessible, mainstream example of 'character-as-concept' can be found in *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003) in which the cast of what appears to be a murder mystery turn out to be multiple personalities housed inside the psyche of a murderer. In the context of *Lost Highway* we might choose to borrow this line of interpretation by attempting to understand characters as symbolic of wider or less

literal meanings. As I mentioned earlier, a common example is one that regards Pete as merely the product of his Fred's fugue state brought on by the latter's guilt and psychological trauma.

As many critics have observed, temporal, spatial and narrative logic, in the conventional cinematic sense, are not of primary importance for Lynch, which as we have seen has led to some writers dismissing the narrative as impossible to penetrate and almost unwatchable.[86] The events of *Lost Highway* cannot be easily reconciled in the way that a film like *Identity* can, however, if we adjust our general interpretative approach the former's ambiguities and inconsistencies appear enriching and in one sense entirely justified. For instance, after the 'arrival' of Pete, we must rapidly re-evaluate our understanding of the narrative and form new hypotheses in light of new information, and after accepting this unexpected event the task of the spectator then becomes a search for supporting or explanatory information to provide a context within which this character transformation can be understood. However, in *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, James Peterson sees the exercise of appreciating 'difficult' films as something to be learned and developed through repeated exposure. Peterson's argument is that a viewer's capacity to reconcile or tolerate certain kinds of narrative paradoxes and inconsistencies is simply an issue of familiarity with avant-garde or, at the very least, non-mainstream stylistic features.[87] As such, in this context, familiarity with other David Lynch films means that a viewer will anticipate and tolerate uncued tangents and narrative obscurity, a significant amount of which may revolve around character identity. If we are aware that many of his films set up intricate and frequently unsolvable puzzles then we may be ready and willing to embrace paradoxes, ambiguities and inconsistencies, or may perhaps even actively anticipate them. *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch's 2001 follow-up film explores and builds on similar themes and ideas and is something of a companion piece to *Lost Highway* which can provide a useful counter-example. There is a difference between how estrangement is manifest in each of these films, which I term a 'localised disruption' and a 'global disruption'. In *Lost Highway*, after Fred's transformation, the prison guards react with fear and disbelief at what has happened, thereby aligning the spectator with the guards since we know approximately as much as they do and are equally confused by Pete's appearance. The fact that Fred/Pete is the only character who is subject to any particular distortion of identity is what I mean by 'localised'. In *Mulholland Drive*, a multitude of character transformations occur simultaneously and appear to affect almost every character, therefore the disruption is 'global'. In contrast with the

reaction of the prison guards in *Lost Highway*, there is no character or perspective within the diegesis of *Mulholland Drive* unaffected by these transformations and as such characters themselves do not display the same level of alarm or confusion. Connected to this is the way in which we can regard the characters in *Mulholland Drive* as belonging to distinct 'sets' who can be arranged as inversions of one another more readily than *Lost Highway* allows. Although both make use of narratives governed in part by dream logic, it is arguably possible to discern greater coherence in *Mulholland Drive* at least in terms of interpretation if not diegetic causality and continuity. Furthermore, contextualised within Peterson's arguments one would perhaps be less perplexed by unexplained shifts in identity of any sort, be they 'local' or 'global', if one has witnessed a similar trope in earlier examples even if the exact details vary slightly. That is to say, watching *Mulholland Drive* immediately after *Lost Highway* would be a quite different experience to watching either directly after *The Thing*.

Justifiably Inscrutable

Where Peterson's theory cannot be applied, however, is in the fact that Lynch is operating (just about) within the realm of mainstream cinema, while Peterson's focus is solely on the *avant-garde* and looks at the work of filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, and Andy Warhol. Casting recognisable actors against type is another of Lynch's hallmarks and may go some way to explaining some negative responses to a film like *Lost Highway*. Familiar faces in lead roles give the film the superficial appearance of a mainstream film, which could raise a certain level of viewer expectation and make the thwarting of such an expectation more difficult to tolerate. The fact that *Lost Highway* could be seen as communicating simultaneously on both literal and symbolic levels illustrates the depth and complexity of its narrative. While the film may not seem to be an obvious example of realist fiction, by providing the viewer with no easy answers when it comes to the questions about character identities is actually quite appropriate as it acknowledges and does justice to the complexity of the question of what constitutes personhood. In his analysis of the personality traits of characters, Gregory Curries writes that:

> Within a narrative, we may expect to do much better [than we can manage in real life]; getting ourselves, within a space of hours, into the position of making confident evaluative judgements about a person's deepest motives.[88]

Currie makes the point that we make huge leaps of inference about fictional characters of the sort we would never consider when drawing conclusions about other people's intentions and motivations in real life. This gives rise to the opportunity of complicating and acting against audience expectation about how a character might be expected to behave in order to generate, for instance, a twist in a tale or unexpected deviations from an established pattern or storyline. *Lost Highway* certainly exhibits many of these elements but adds a layer of complexity by tempering its ambiguous, fantastical moments with extended sequences that follow a more conventional structure with reliable continuity between action and characters. In the context of Parfit's arguments about certain phenomena being qualitatively and / or quantitatively identical, it is not possible to say unequivocally how Fred and Pete measure up to this type of evaluation. Rather than trying to resolve this perhaps the viewing strategy that is most useful is that suggested by Peterson, which Graça P. Corrêa also favours when she writes how in much of Lynch's work personal identity is significant only insofar as it can be shown to be something unstable. Instead of advancing a narrative that builds ever clearer and increasingly 'rounded' characters, Lynch's aim is to highlight a conflict between misleading surface appearances and 'infinite reduplication' of multiple selves beneath.[89] Corrêa's point about 'multiple selves' may on one reading refer to psychological trauma such as a fugue state but it may equally point towards a more introspective, philosophical view of selfhood such as W. Somerset Maugham's when he wrote:

> There are times when I look over the various parts of my character with perplexity. I recognize that I am made up of several persons and that the person that at the moment has the upper hand will inevitably give place to another. But which is the real one? All of them or none? [90]

In this sense, character portrayal in *Lost Highway* goes against the narrative tendency of constructing characters about whom one can 'make confident evaluative judgements', which arguably makes them comparable to real people, albeit in this very strict sense. Nevertheless, the point still stands that the portrayal of characters whose identities appear unstable and inscrutable generates a complexity

which is at times in line with real selves, and not simply ones which are traumatised in one way or another. Speaking generally, we can say that, *Lost Highway* explores issues and themes also evident in *The Thing* by raising questions over who is who within the narrative and foregrounding the physical aspects of personal identity so that character identities are rendered vague and appear malleable. The method of Lynch's film and the overall narrative principles governing the storyline, however, are vastly different from those in *The Thing*. As we saw in Chapter One, *The Thing* uses grotesque imagery at the heart of some of its most important sequences and these scenes frequently involve a violent, visceral intertwining of mutated physical features and unidentifiable masses of organic matter. Ambiguity and a mixing of tropes and features is also a defining feature of uncanniness, even though it is manifest in ways that are distinctly different to grotesqueness. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the fantastical and unambiguously other-worldly nature of the threat in *The Thing* could be seen as more comforting than the events in *Lost Highway*. Although the creature in *The Thing* is horrific to behold and dangerous in its behaviour, the film sets out its diegetic logic early on and clearly establishes the invasiveness of the creature and the fact that it represents a disruption of the film's 'natural order.' Carpenter's creature generates ambiguity over character identities but the film is unambiguous about how this situation comes about; the cause is clearly established as something monstrous and unnatural. As such, one can enjoy the thrill of being 'art-horrified' because of the fact that it establishes an us-and-it situation thereby conforming to a standard protagonist/antagonist dynamic common to most mainstream narratives. *Lost Highway*, on the other hand, is riddled with ambiguities that go beyond the mere question of whether or not a given character is the person they appear to be. For instance, by providing no definitive account of whether Fred's transformation into Pete literally took place the viewer is forced to question a multitude of other factors that appear to be caught up in the wake of this significant narrative detail. By never clearly establishing the nature of such a crucial element of the film's diegetic logic, the film positions itself firmly within Freeland's 'uncanny horror' category.

The discords in the narrative as regards character portrayal generate a cognitive dissonance both within the storyline (the prison guards for instance share the viewer's surprise) but also in the viewer's perception and affective response (a conventional narrative explanation never arrives). On Peterson's reading *Lost Highway* does not present a puzzle that has an answer but rather it presents an alternative

way of understanding fictional characters and, by extension, the physics and metaphysics of personal identity. Parfit's billiard ball illustration, which I looked at in Chapter One, cannot help us adequately reconcile the Pete/Fred relationship since the film does not abide by the one body: one person norm. The diegetic world of *Lost Highway* operates by a different set of rules, and while the concept of mutable identities may seem supernatural and magical, on another reading it only reflects the psychological transformations we undergo in real life during the course of an ordinary day or a single lifetime. Of course, *Lost Highway* goes far beyond a mere dramatization of shifts in understanding and daily changes to our mental states or moods; the film displays fractured selves in a number of guises and the narrative can be interpreted in different and perhaps contradictory ways. If we subscribe to the psychogenic fugue interpretation then the film is a portrayal of a significant mental breakdown that is very different from the everyday mental behaviour of a human being. The film's approach to character portrayal effectively erodes a binary way of regarding personal identity and perhaps highlights that a self is more fragmentary and composite in nature than is immediately apparent. Portraying fictional character identities as arbitrary and unstable can generate feelings of disorientation and perhaps frustration due to the negative effect it has on narrative clarity and viewer comprehension. Critical responses like Ebert's might simply stem from frustration at not being able to follow a story in the conventional sense, but there might equally be more to it than that. A negative reaction may also suggest that the literal portrayal of something that is more subtle yet potentially more accurate, such as an arbitrariness or lack of stability inherent to our own sense of self, is what truly unsettles the viewer.

In the broader context of this debate, ambiguity over subjective states and the blurring of distinctions between the physical and the psychological provides an opportunity to consider the complexity of self-identity. Despite the multitude of reviews and commentaries proclaiming what appear to be definitive interpretations, it seems only fair to conclude that there is no single conclusion to be found for *Lost Highway*. The film doubles up its ambiguity by not only making the distinctions between characters less clear but also keeps the precise nature of the identity shifts themselves deliberately vague. We cannot conclude with certainty whether or not Pete is an actual person within the diegesis because we cannot say for sure if the changes we witness are physical or psychological. If it is undoubtedly the latter then we can identify Pete as an alter-ego and the mutations a product of Fred's damaged mind. In other

words, his selfhood is fractured on the psychological level only. If it is the former then we must acknowledge Fred as possessing some type of shapeshifting ability with very little information to reconcile such an ability within the 'natural order' of the diegesis. The way in which the film delves into the psychology of its characters and blurs the line between mental and physical phenomena provides the ideal opportunity for my discussion to move on and consider in more detail the subjective and psychological elements of personal identity. In the next section I will look at how memory is variously dealt with and portrayed in films which grapple with the self-identity debate from this perspective.

II
Mind Games

As I outlined in the main introduction, this project has been structured according to the body-mind dichotomy that tends to emerge within discussions of selfhood and personal identity. While the discussion itself is clearly much more complex than such a simplified distinction allows, it is convenient for the purposes of arranging the first two sections of my project. In the opening chapters I looked at examples of film narratives which draw attention to physicality and character identity through devices and storylines involving mutation, physical trauma, and transformation. From the more straightforward handling of bodily transformation as portrayed in *The Thing* and other examples from the science-fiction and body horror canon, I moved on to consider a more ambiguous offering in the form of *Lost Highway*. Carpenter's film served the function of showing how fantastical storylines can mobilise debate along the same lines as philosophical thought experiments, while *Lost Highway* walks a more indeterminate line both regarding its genre categorisation as well as its narrative closure. Lynch's film hints at physical and mental fracturing but does not definitively settle on either, making it the ideal point from which to shift the discussion to examples which are more exclusively engaged with the psychological elements of character identity.

Attempts at portraying subjective states and experiences through moving images have been closely intertwined with cinema since the medium's inception, and memory in particular holds a rich fascination for viewers and filmmakers alike. The latter can be seen as striving to find new and innovative ways of telling stories about memory and portraying how memory functions, and the fact that there is much that we do not know about how the brain stores and retrieves memories almost serves as the perfect invitation for storytellers to speculate and imagine. The ways in which memory function has been portrayed in film is vast and varied, at times drawing heavily on and trying to remain faithful to established scientific facts and at other times wildly fantasist and unashamedly far-fetched. The psychologist Charles Fernyhough picks up on this fact in order to highlight the habitual (and mistaken)

tendency of regarding memories as being stored and retrieved intact like an archive of the mind. He writes:

> Metaphors of memory are overwhelmingly physical: we talk of filing cabinets, labyrinths and photographic plates, and we use verbs such as *impress*, *burn* and *imprint* to describe the processes by which memories are formed. This view of memories as physical things is guaranteed to mislead. The truth is that autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have. They are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present.[91]

Whether scientifically accurate or not, there is undoubtedly an appetite amongst certain filmmakers to build storylines around concepts of the psyche as an environment which one can physically enter and explore; two notable examples being *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) and *Inside Out* (Peter Docter and Ronnie del Carmen, 2015), as shown in Fig. 16.

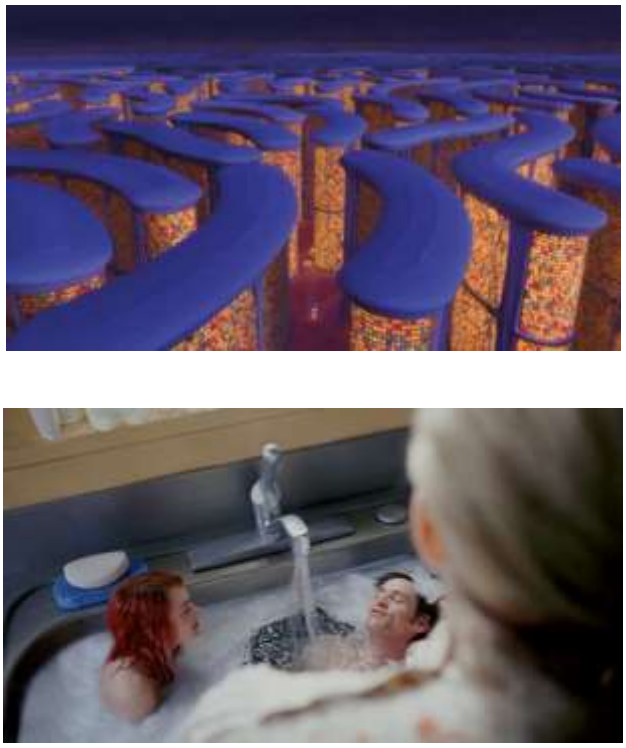

Fig. 16. The psyche conceived as a physical space in which memories are stored in an archive (Inside Out) *or portrayed as a domain in which experiences can be re-lived like live action* (Eternal Sunshine).

My main focus in this section will be on *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), two films which in very different ways serve to highlight the complex interplay between one's memory and one's sense of self. With regard to the cinematic portrayal of memory function, my concern is not so much to evaluate the scientific accuracy of *Memento* and *Marienbad* but rather to investigate the extent to which they reflect what might be called an 'everyday' understanding of how memory operates despite exhibiting significant differences in style, tone, and narrative structure. Both narratives work 'demonstratively' to illustrate certain theories about how memory storage and recall function in the human mind, and in various ways could be seen as both adhering to and deviating from what one might call a scientifically accurate portrayal. By demonstratively I mean that their challenging *avant-garde* styles and structures combine with their respective storylines to go beyond the act of merely telling tales about memory and instead create immersive viewing experiences that challenge viewer comprehension and foreground the viewer-filmmaker relationship. Each film exerts a form of cognitive pressure on the viewer and their respective deviations from established narrative norms and paradigms help reveal the habitual expectations and tendencies we have when consuming film narratives.

A significant proportion of the mental activities we employ when functioning in the world is bound to our ability to recall earlier events and anticipate future outcomes. Similarly, the way in which we engage with narrative structures such as these can reveal much about how reliant we are on memory for building up a picture of fictional characters and the world(s) they inhabit. Furthermore, the debate surrounding autobiographical memory and 'self-narrativising' is evoked by each of these narratives, and in this way the films provide a useful entry point for considering theories about how our sense of personal identity and personal history may or may not resemble a form of (linear) storytelling. In the wider context of the philosophy of the self and identity, the natural starting point in any discussion involving memory is John Locke since he was a key critic of the prevailing theory that a human being's true personal identity resides in an immaterial soul; a main proponent of this theory being René Descartes.[92] In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued against the existence of a soul claiming that it is a person's consciousness, and particularly their memory, which should be considered the essence of one's personal identity.[93] In my introduction I cited Locke's assertion that personal identity could be described

in the following way: 'as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that Person[94]'; and by which token it followed that if we cannot access or retrieve a particular memory or experience then it ceases to be part of that individual's identity anymore. This point was disputed and argued against by philosophers such as Joseph Butler and Thomas Reid, because of significant issues it raises such as accountability for one's actions, and the way in which it seems to imply that when we can no longer remember our childhood we cease to be continuous with our younger self. I introduce these arguments here for the reason that, over the next two chapters, I will be looking at films which, in a variety of ways, represent a fusion of cinematic expressiveness and this particular branch of philosophical debate. I will be considering the cinematic portrayal of memory retrieval in the dual context of philosophical theories of self-identity and the ways in which we form an understanding of characters in fiction films. *Memento* and *Marienbad* are examples of fictional narratives which manage to mobilise these sorts of philosophical discussions while also raising salient questions about the nature of film viewing and audience expectations of character development. I will also introduce findings from cognitive psychology to offer an additional angle from which we can approach each film, particularly in terms of how their diegetic content combines with their notably unconventional styles.

3

Hold That Thought: *Memento*, memory and Self-identity

Fred: *I like to remember things my own way*.

Detective Ed: *What do you mean by that?*

Fred: *How I remembered them. Not necessarily the way they happened.*

Lost Highway provided us with pertinent examples of how a narrative can blend subjective and objective perspectives in order to create ambiguity over whether or not particular characters have gone through a literal, physical transformation or not. The lines above, taken from an exchange between Fred and the detectives who visit his home, can help open my analysis of how certain psychological aspects of selfhood are portrayed in film, with a particular emphasis on memory. What is the significance of memory in relation to our own sense of self and how does this compare to the ways in which we build an understanding of fictional characters and narratives? The dialogue above exemplifies the common-sense or 'folk' notion that memories are entirely subjective and are therefore very prone to inaccuracy as well as revision through the natural passage of time. In this chapter, through a close analysis of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), I will expand upon this notion and assess how the relative dependency and reliability of memory compares to the ways in which we process and build an understanding of fictional characters and fiction film narratives. Beyond this, I will look at the relationship between memory and personal identity – a fundamental theme in *Memento* – and consider the extent to which its narrative content and style illustrate some of the ways in which memory storage and recall operate. I will examine the way in which the narrative structure and the protagonist's memory impairment are closely intertwined

and, more broadly, the philosophical implications and moral dilemmas which are highlighted by the film's premise.

Memento tells the story of Leonard Shelby, a one-time insurance investigator turned would-be private eye on the hunt for a man who he believes raped and murdered his wife, along with an accomplice, during a break-in at their home. The film implies that one man was brought to justice for the crime but it is Leonard's belief that a second man was involved but ultimately evaded capture. Complicating the situation is the fact that as a result of being assaulted during the break-in, Leonard now suffers from anterograde amnesia, a neurological condition which means that he cannot consolidate any short-term memories formed after the incident; or, as Leonard explains it, "I can't make new memories. Everything fades."[95] Stylistically *Memento* draws on the film noir and detective genres but certain *avant-garde* tropes and features help distinguish it, as David Bordwell puts it, as at once 'one of the most novel and most conformist films of recent years.'[96] Even though this assessment may seem paradoxical, a close analysis of the film's formal elements reveals the aptness of such a description.

"It's all backwards!"[97]

The single most striking feature of *Memento*'s narrative structure is the fact that its chronology is for the most part played out in reverse, or at least appears to upon a first viewing. The opening scene of the film represents the chronological end of the story, and the final scene shows the action directly following the film's opening sequence. With one notable exception, the action itself plays forwards but the events are divided into sections roughly ten-minutes in length, shot in colour and arranged with slight overlaps meaning that each sequence begins with repeated action we have just seen at the conclusion of the preceding one. Intercut with these sections are two black-and-white sequences, which are distinguished from one another through respective variations in contrast and lighting schemes. One takes place almost entirely in a motel room, apparently in the diegetic present, while the other is an extended flashback to Leonard's life before the incident when he worked as an investigator for an insurance firm. The former frames the latter as Leonard recounts his pre-injury experiences over the phone in his motel room to an unidentified caller while a selection of the events he describes are shown in an embedded

flashback. For example, the third segment chronologically shows Leonard at the motel front desk when Teddy, another of the film's principal characters, arrives and takes Leonard to an abandoned building. The fourth segment is in black and white and shows Leonard in a motel room and we can hear his thoughts in voiceover. The fifth segment begins with Leonard in his motel room and concludes with the earlier shot of Teddy arriving at the motel front desk. The film has been designed using a 'hairpin' structure, which we can only appreciate when at the end of the film when the black-and-white sequences fade to colour and reveal the turning point at which these previously distinct sequences intersect.[98]

The significance of the black-and-white flashback scenes is reinforced by the words 'Remember Sammy Jankis' which Leonard has tattooed on his left hand. We learn that Sammy was an insurance claimant whose case was referred to (pre-incident) Leonard for investigation to determine its validity. Bizarrely, Sammy suffered from the same memory disorder, in his case following a car accident, which Leonard would later develop. Leonard's investigation, based on medical assessments, leads him to conclude that Sammy should be capable of making new memories and recovering from his trauma. By concluding that Sammy's condition is psychological rather than physical, his insurance claim is turned down. Sammy is barely able to function due to his condition and he and his wife become burdened by mounting medical costs; however Sammy can still carry out certain tasks provided he learned them before his accident. One such task is administering insulin shots to his wife – a duty which ultimately leads to tragedy. Sammy's wife, convinced by Leonard's assessment that Sammy should be able to generate new memories through repetition and routine, 'tests' her husband by asking him to give her repeated shots of insulin in quick succession to see if his memory is genuinely resetting every couple of minutes. Sammy does not register that he has already provided multiple shots and his wife dies of an overdose as a result. The tale concludes with Sammy apparently seeing out his days in an institution, unaware that he has killed his wife.

The notable exception to the forward-motion reverse-chronology structure is the film's opening scene, which depicts Teddy being shot in the face by Leonard who subsequently takes a Polaroid photo of his corpse. What is exceptional is that here the *action itself* is shown in reverse, so we begin with the sight of a Polaroid 'un-exposing', followed by Leonard 'un-taking' the photograph, the bullet exiting and

'repairing' Teddy's skull, going backwards into Leonard's pistol, and so on. Presenting the opening sequence in this way enables salient thematic features to be communicated in a concentrated burst whilst also foregrounding the narrative's *avant-garde* credentials. The backwards action highlights Time as a central and highly-salient narrative feature, while the fading Polaroid stands as a visual metaphor for Leonard's memory impairment. In addition, Teddy's violent death serves the more conventional purpose of setting up what Noël Carroll refers to as the narrative's 'macro-questions'[99], which in this case are: "Who was killed, and why?"

By the film's conclusion we are provided with answers to these questions, albeit with a significant number of loose ends, inconsistencies and ambiguous details remaining. During the course of the narrative we see Leonard carrying out his investigative work in all its clumsy, perilous, and ultimately flawed glory. One clue he follows is that the assailant is called John or James G, and Teddy, ostensibly the film's antagonist, appears to be helping Leonard although his capacity, motivations, and role in the investigation are unclear. The concluding sequence presents us with a twist in which it is suggested that Leonard has already carried out his revenge but is unable to accept, or perhaps simply cannot recall, the fact that he already killed his assailant some time ago. By his own admission he is only living for revenge but since he will never be able to remember if he has achieved his goal then this impetus will never wane. We see him burn a Polaroid which Teddy claims shows Leonard, smiling and victorious, moments after he and Teddy had supposedly tracked down and killed John G. He also burns a Polaroid of Jimmy, a local drug dealer who Leonard has just killed and then photographed. Teddy apparently convinced Leonard that Jimmy was the man he was looking for, however the subsequent suggestion is that Teddy simply had a vendetta against Jimmy and used Leonard to execute him. After destroying this evidence without Teddy's knowledge, Leonard then leaves himself false clues intended to lead him to the conclusion that Teddy is John G, safe in the knowledge that he will soon forget having done so and most likely kill Teddy as a result; which, as we have already seen in the film's opening sequence, is precisely what Leonard will end up doing. This is a hugely significant detail as it suggests a greater level of volition on Leonard's part regarding what he does or does not remember, but it also creates ambiguity over his motivations and moral convictions which will affect the level of sympathy a viewer may feel towards his situation.

My aim here is to highlight the ways in which *Memento* can reveal salient points about how we build up an understanding of fictional characters, particularly since the film explores social and moral themes in the context of personal identity. Moreover, the focal point of the narrative is an individual with a damaged psychology, which represents another variation on the kind of fractured selves I have examined in the preceding chapters. In a similar fashion, therefore, I will consider the way in which the film develops its protagonist's condition and circumstances in order to broaden the consideration once more to the relationship between fictional and real-world selves. A close look at how the narrative content combines with the film's structure is an essential starting point; the film's reverse chronology has been well documented and discussed at length by a number of theorists, with the most common observation being that denying the viewer access to events in the immediate past places us in a position comparable to Leonard's. We learn that his memory 'refreshes' or 'resets' every five to ten minutes and, according to Leonard, "it's like you just woke up!"[100] By dividing the reverse chronology into segments which are roughly the same length of time as Leonard's short-term memory capacity, the film *aligns* us closely with Leonard's situation, to use Murray Smith's terminology. Smith's term denotes 'the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel,' which he breaks down into 'two interlocking functions, *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access.*'[101]According to this model we are very closely *aligned* with Leonard since he is present in every scene and because we also have access to his thoughts (voiceover) and recollections (flashbacks). Crucially, however, unlike the viewer striving to process the narrative elements, Leonard 'will never be able to reconstruct the big picture [whereas] we will be able, by the end of the film, to assemble a coherent story out of the pieces.'[102] In effect, although we are placed in an epistemically similar position to Leonard, the gap between Leonard's knowledge and our own widens as the film proceeds. What, then, are the effects of combining this style of narration with a storyline which is heavily engaged with how memory enables us to function properly in the world and helps us to construct and recognise who we and other people are?

Bordwell's assessment is that on one level we are dealing with a straightforward noir-esque plot while on another we have a self-referential text which foregrounds viewer expectation and draws attention to the ways in which film narratives are constructed.[103] Similarly, Carroll argues that *Memento*'s

backwards narration creates a heightened awareness of the techniques we normally employ for comprehending film narratives. By making the process of film viewing 'difficult' the viewer is made more conscious of the thought processes and techniques normally employed when engaged in such activities;[104] an effect perhaps comparable to asking someone to use their non-dominant hand to complete a simple everyday task.

The theorist William Little is of a different opinion to Bordwell as regards the film's accessibility when he writes how an initial viewing of *Memento* might evoke a 'profound disruption of expectation' as it goes against 'Hollywood cinema's commitment to linear narrative.'[105] While not essentially incorrect in his assessment, Little's description is somewhat ironic given that *Memento* is actually, by the director's own admission, '"very, very linear,"' so much so that '"[y]ou can't remove a single scene, or the whole thing comes to a grinding halt. Each scene follows very tightly after the next, more closely than they would in a conventional movie."'[106] It is really only the reverse chronology which is likely to cause comprehension difficulties since, despite being familiar with reordered time in the form of flashbacks and the multitude of other ways film editing can manipulate time and space, viewers are accustomed to diegetic time moving forwards. It would seem that Little is using the term "linear" to denote an unproblematic sequence of events that, temporal digressions aside, moves forwards in time, while Nolan on the other hand is referring to the sum total of events when arranged in chronological order; in other words, plot vs. story.

However, the adjustment we are required to make is not a simple switch to backwards thinking instead of forwards since, like many noir / detective tales, the narrative is tightly bound to the protagonist's experiences with viewer knowledge similarly restricted. In addition, even though each colour sequence takes us further back in diegetic time, it is only the opening sequence in which the flow of time is wholly reversed. Viewer comprehension is adversely affected by the fact that Leonard, the film's 'filtering consciousness,'[107] cannot retain his short-term memory which, as we shall see, has significant implications for the intelligibility of the storyline and the reliability of what we see and hear. The combination of the reverse structure with Leonard's predicament immerses the viewer more deeply in the narrative events and compounds their overall impact. The use of an unreliable narrator is a well-

established storytelling technique and its potency in film narratives is complemented by a corresponding body of film theory which looks at this particular device.[108] Running counter to having a narrative with an unreliable narrator/protagonist is the fact that the filmmakers go to great lengths to ensure that general clarity does not suffer, as this is often a vital component for maximising the effect of any twists that the filmmaker has put in place. Bordwell's concept of 'redundancy,' which I outlined in relation to *Lost Highway*, refers to the way in which narrative details such as specific objects, motifs, musical signatures, symbols and so on are shown repeatedly in order to increase clarity and reduce ambiguity.[109] Bordwell argues that 'the more complex the devices, the more redundant the storytelling needs to be. Unusual techniques need to be situated in an especially stable frame.'[110] Regarding *Memento* he points out how key details are repeated and reinforced beyond the point one would normally think necessary, such as having 'virtually every piece of writing we see…read aloud to us by Leonard, and an extensive inner monologue [providing] a flow of commentary reiterating the key motifs.'[111] Indeed, Nolan himself points out how the narrative was meticulously organised so that the overlaps of repeated action would minimise any disorienting effects and prevent them from overwhelming the storyline. With this in mind we can appreciate the accuracy of Bordwell's assertion that the film is both 'novel' and 'conformist,' which he reaffirms by concluding that '[s]eldom has an American film been so daring and so obvious at the same time'.[112]

The narrative is highly concentrated in terms of locations and characters with viewer knowledge restricted to Leonard's perspective. The opening scene sets up a question over why the shooting took place rather the standard trope of an investigator trying to discover who was responsible. We slowly learn about how Leonard came to have his memory impairment and the way in which it led him to his quest for vengeance. Covered with tattoos of 'facts' and useful reminders, and armed with pockets full of Polaroids depicting his car, where he is staying, people he has met, and other essential data, we are shown how Leonard is able to navigate his way through daily life. Each image he keeps and refers to has explanatory notes in his handwriting either beneath or on the reverse which supposedly verifies their authenticity. On one occasion Leonard disagrees with Teddy about which car is his until Leonard produces a photograph with the caption 'My car' written underneath. He collates other important details in a notebook and even seems to have been provided with the police file relating to his wife's murder,

which he perpetually analyses in the hope of finding a crucial detail that may have been overlooked during the original investigation. According to Leonard, the police did not believe there was a second attacker and so broke off the investigation once the sole person they deemed responsible was apprehended.

As we see Leonard's detective work in action, it becomes apparent that he is being manipulated by at least two other characters, Teddy and Natalie, with the suggestion that the former has been exploiting Leonard's condition for his own ends for some time. We gradually learn how, despite his assertions to the contrary, Leonard's 'system' for compensating for his memory impairment is flawed and prone to abuse. This becomes all too apparent in the film's closing scene when we learn that Leonard has in fact set himself up to kill Teddy by leaving a note that was deliberately misleading, a note which he knew he would feel compelled to act upon as soon as his memory of writing it had faded. Before reaching this point we are led to believe that Leonard is on a crusade of vengeance, a fact that may evoke a degree of sympathy given the supposed events that led to his condition and the wretched situation he now finds himself in. The narrative's destabilising element, however, is Leonard's unreliable memory, with the deceptive, duplicitous behaviour of the supporting characters acting as a further complicating factor. The latter could be seen as fairly typical within this type of storyline and, on its own, could be reconciled through being consistent with genre expectations. For instance, even though we know that Teddy will be killed by Leonard, finding out the reasons why positions the narrative on territory similar to a film like *Sunset Blvd.* (Billy Wilder, 1950) where almost the entire narrative is conveyed in flashback.

Dramatic tension is generated through anticipation of how the storyline reaches its point of climax, and whether that point is reached by looking backwards or moving forwards arguably makes less difference than one might think. The narrative is driven by questions raised in the opening scene / culmination of the story, namely "How did Leonard get there?" which is a question that perfectly mirrors the way Leonard feels every time his memory 'resets.' Bordwell writes that Hollywood narrative norms 'posit a hierarchy of importance, with narrative gist at the top and local stylistic manipulations subordinated to that.'[113] In other words, in the classical Hollywood tradition, it is the story and not its telling that is given greater importance. The emphasis is on constructing a coherent storyline which allows viewers to extract meaning and maximise comprehension, while also concealing formal features that may

draw attention to the filmmaker's decisions and interventions and therefore distract from the story. *Memento*, however, straddles generic and stylistic boundaries and attempts to tell a story which is aimed at the mass market but which also promotes its 'local stylistic manipulations' beyond the level normally associated with mainstream films. Style and narrative content are intertwined and inform one another to a significant degree, so we need to examine the way the story is conveyed as much as the story itself in order to appreciate the way in which it challenges our ability to draw a clear understanding of the characters who inhabit the narrative. The film is able to highlight the relationship between memory and self-identity through its themes and diegetic events, but it is also able to foreground our habitual viewing strategies and reveal our reliance on remembering depicted events in order to follow a storyline. In Section I, we saw how altering the physicality of characters can be used to unsettle a viewer's capacity for distinguishing one character from another. *Memento* poses a similar challenge and raises equally discomfiting ideas about personal identity to those in Section I, but the emphasis is placed more squarely on psychological fracturing and disunity.

A proportion of screen time is necessarily devoted to establishing the details of Leonard's condition, which in essence operates as the basis of the film's diegetic logic and governing principle. The filmmakers map out their own interpretation and hypothesis about how memory storage and recall function and translate this into pro-filmic ideas and portrayals, opting also to remain as scientifically accurate as their position as creators of a work of mass art/entertainment will allow. The coherence of the film and the plausibility of its storyline ultimately hinges on establishing and remaining faithful to a set of ideas and principles which are laid out in the film itself. *Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), which I will look at in the next chapter, is a contrasting example in which the narrative's governing principle is far less clearly established or codified. While *Memento* strives to carefully define the nature of Leonard's condition, *Marienbad* perpetually deflects our efforts to glean meaning since there are insufficient reference points or footholds with which we can contextualise individual scenes and sequences. A major reason for this is the lack of any definitive boundary between subjective and objective viewpoints, which results in a blurring of past and present events as well as competing versions of recollected experiences. For all its ambiguity, *Memento* by contrast for the most part distinguishes

flashbacks from present events while also clearly framing those narrative elements that are a product of Leonard's subjectivity.

Nonetheless, by *Memento*'s conclusion a host of narrative uncertainties and contentious, ambiguous details remain. In the lead up to the scene when Leonard writes the fateful note to his future self, an exchange of dialogue between Leonard and Teddy casts significant doubt over much of what we may have hitherto come to accept as diegetic fact, a great deal of which relates to the extended flashback concerning Sammy Jankis. Teddy claims that Leonard's wife actually survived the attack during the break-in and that she did not believe Leonard about his condition. He also claims that Sammy didn't have a wife and that it was actually Leonard's wife who was diabetic, with the implication being that Leonard actually killed his wife by giving her an overdose of insulin. Leonard defiantly responds by saying "That was Sammy, not me. My wife wasn't diabetic," before Teddy taunts him by asking: "Are you sure?" He stops short of claiming that Sammy never really existed but the possibility is certainly suggested through the combined weight of other contradictions and inconsistencies in the narrative. During this exchange we cut to a revised version of an earlier scene which showed Sammy preparing his wife's insulin injection, only this time with Leonard and his wife in their place (Fig. 17). This is followed by a flashback which almost exactly matches one we saw earlier in which Leonard pinches his wife's thigh; this time round, however, he is injecting her with an insulin shot (Fig. 18). Further doubt is cast as Leonard asserts once again that his wife wasn't diabetic, which prompts the original shot once more: a revision of Teddy's revision. Amendments to details such as these are of particular significance because they involve pre-incident memories, and up until this point in the story the established truth of Leonard's impairment is that his memories from before he was assaulted are all intact. Furthermore, the reactions of the characters and the competing versions of events do not indicate any indisputable conviction or definitive account; doubt and ambiguity permeate a significant portion of the narrative and this remains the case until the end. Significantly, though, Leonard's internal monologue as he prepares the misleading clues for himself at the conclusion of the scene is noticeably unequivocal:

> Can I just let myself forget what you've told me? Can I just let myself forget what you've made me do? You think I just want another puzzle to solve? Another John G. to look for? You're John G. So you can be my John G... Will I lie to myself to be happy? In your case Teddy...yes I will.[114]

The revelation that Leonard has set himself up complicates his moral positioning within the narrative and diminishes viewer sympathy by laying bare his callous motive. Whatever else is tinged with ambiguity, this moment acts as a reliable reference point for evaluating Leonard's actions at that point in the narrative.

Fig.17. Two very brief shots seem to show Leonard preparing an insulin injection for his wife.

Fig.18. The alternate 'versions' of Leonard's recollection. Original, revised, then back to the original.

As part of his analysis, Bordwell looks at a number of other puzzle / experimentation films which are notable for their surprise endings and the fact that they engage heavily with character subjectivity and the passage of time. He points to a number of examples, released around the same period, which present us with a twist, or a partial twist, forcing us to reassess much of the earlier narrative. *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997) are given as examples of films where the viewer is required 'to think back over what has been shown, or to rewatch the film in the search for clues to the key revelations.'[115] Common to these sorts of narrative is the fact that any 'revelation is as much of a surprise to the protagonist as it is to us,'[116] which is a staple feature of the detective genre. He also notes how certain of these films may replay earlier scenes to put a different spin on them or alter the context in which we now view them; or even, as with *Fight Club*, repeat earlier scenes but now with noticeable alterations or omissions (see Fig. 19).


Fig. 19. In Fight Club, certain scenes near the film's conclusion are replayed with Brad Pitt's character now absent.

When the images above are presented together one can easily observe the discontinuity between them. However, it matters little since the amount of intervening screen time between each scene will most likely mean that a viewer will not notice the fine detail such as the positioning of Edward Norton's head in the frame. Furthermore, the viewer's attention will be focused on the more significant dramatic revelations that a sequence such as this brings into play. Indeed, Bordwell himself picks up on this type of discontinuity when he examines replayed scenes from *Mildred Pierce*, and he explores how a key element of the viewer-filmmaker interplay is an inability to notice (or perhaps a willing acceptance of) apparent inconsistencies.[117] Part of the enjoyment of watching these films comes from one's own consideration of how feasible such a twist could be and how successful (or otherwise) the filmmakers have been in executing it. *Memento*, however, presents us with more than a twist which simply inverts or overturns our understanding of preceding events. Rather, it casts doubt on some of the film's central reference points without providing an irrefutably unambiguous set of alternative diegetic truths. Narrative closure is ultimately elusive, particularly after the slew of 'revisions' with which Teddy confronts Leonard are raised and then left hanging. Teddy even casts doubt on himself by telling Leonard that 'Teddy' is a name that only his mother uses and that he is actually called John Gammell - another John G. It's not clear whether this is a coincidence or whether there ever was an original John G in the police file.

Memento can be further distinguished from Bordwell's other examples, such as *Mildred Pierce*, in which it is the fallibility of our own ability to recall certain details which is exploited. *Memento* goes further than this by not simply exploiting the viewer's fallible memory but also foregrounding the fragility

of memory in general through its flawed and vulnerable protagonist's amnesia. Consider the sleight-of-hand trick involving Sammy being 'replaced' by Leonard in the asylum flashback (Fig. 20), another moment which helps to muddy the narrative water. According to Leonard's testimony as he tells it over the motel phone, Sammy saw out his days in a psychiatric institution after accidentally killing his wife. The scene we cut to apparently depicts Sammy in said institution, where he spent the remainder of his life unsure of where he was and ignorant of his wife's death. As the camera slowly tracks towards Sammy a figure passes very closely in front of the frame, disguising an edit, and for a brief moment we glimpse Leonard in Sammy's place.

Fig. 20. Using a concealed cut, Sammy in the institution is momentarily replaced by Leonard before we cut back to the main thread.

This brief moment stands as an example of how the limits of our perception, or at times inattentiveness, can be exploited by filmmakers with relative ease. If the substitution of Leonard for Sammy does pass us by and we are told about it after the event then that is perhaps all the more fascinating since it is housed in a narrative which foregrounds the importance of vigilance and attention to detail.

Processing *Memento*

As we have seen, Nolan's film challenges stylistic and narrative norms in a number of ways while also remaining indebted to established genres and mainstream storytelling conventions. At this point I will consider how the act of consuming or processing the film helps to foreground certain viewing practices and audience expectations, a proportion of which will necessarily relate to how characters are established and developed. The role of memory is directly highlighted in *Memento* by way of Leonard's amnesia but also indirectly through the cognitive challenges presented by its narrative structure. As a result, some of the issues it raises about the role of memory in self-identity operate beyond the diegetic level; Leonard's attempts to gain an understanding of past events mirror our own efforts at piecing together the storyline, while the portrayal of his condition encourages deep reflection on memory and self-identity.

As is often the case, anomalous, atypical and extreme examples are useful for highlighting conventions and established norms; or, more succinctly, the exceptions often help prove the rules. This principle calls to mind the celebrated case of Patient H.M, whose real-life condition supposedly inspired the character of Leonard, and whose brain was posthumously dissected to determine if its anatomical structure could shed further light on how memory functions.[118] The hope was that analysing a brain with a dysfunctional memory would illuminate how a healthy brain should operate. If one accepts that *Memento* is an exceptional film which deviates from narrative norms then what are the narrative conventions and 'rules' it could be said to highlight or prove?

Despite their inherent capacity for depicting various shifts in time, film narratives traditionally advance rather than regress, and as viewers we are accustomed to stories being told forwards rather than backwards. This is the case with *Memento* insofar as the colour segments are self-contained vignettes which are forward-moving. Additionally, once we have reached the end of the film we can also appreciate the way in which the black-and-white scenes in the motel room form a loop with the colour sequences. One need hardly acknowledge that viewers can reconcile and process any number of temporal leaps or digressions during the course of a film, as long as the framing is clear and the necessary cues are provided

to allow us to map temporal elements in relation to one another. Devices such as flashbacks move forwards through narrative time in order to bring the story back to the point from which the temporal shift was motivated. Despite any number of deviations or tangents, narratives generally rely heavily on cause and effect, with past and future events referencing and informing each other throughout the story. Furthermore, in most cases the diegesis retains a forward-moving trajectory, therefore to say that a story is being told forwards does not necessarily describe the way in which the narrative events are temporally arranged.

Watching and processing *Memento*, however, forces viewers to perform an activity similar to walking backwards without being able to turn one's head, and this foregrounds how we generally expect a narrative to have a forward thrust. Furthermore, the reverse chronology is combined with a lack of perspective above and beyond Leonard's experiences which denies the viewer any real objective overview, while a lack of temporal markers make it difficult to contextualise the events we are shown. In John Sutton's analysis of the film he brings to bear on Leonard's situation the work of philosopher Christoph Hoerl and introduces the idea of 'temporal disorientation':[119]

> Leonard is acutely aware of his temporal disorientation, on this view, just because he can still recall particular past events and experiences from his own past, however imperfectly. He still knows how time works, in other words, but can't reliably place himself and his actions or experiences within it…Our narrative dislocation within the film thus gives us not just insight into his loss but an experience that echoes it...[120]

At one point, when questioning the credibility of Leonard's investigation, Teddy quite rightly points out to him that he (Leonard) has no idea how long it has been since the incident, while there is equally scarce narrative evidence for the viewer to draw upon to indicate how much time has elapsed. Sutton declares that being unable to accurately orientate oneself in a temporal location and an awareness of an indeterminate period of time both 'fascinates and frightens.'[121] The film concludes with Leonard aptly uttering the lines, "Now, where was I?" - but since his knowledge about his temporal location is no more precise than that of his spatial one he might just as well ask himself what year it is.

According to Sutton, Leonard 'qualifies' as an individual who is temporally disoriented due to the fact that he can still appreciate the concept and flow of time, despite being significantly disadvantaged when trying to act in a way that anticipates future outcomes. Leonard is returned to a perpetual present but he is, crucially, also aware that this experience is not normal; his knowledge and instincts tell him that the feeling "like you just woke up"[122] is inconsistent with his experience of how time passes, or at least how he used to experience it in the period of his life before his injury. Leonard has an impaired memory and he knows it, whereas an individual in a similar situation who did not sense that anything was amiss could not be classified as temporally disoriented.

We too are aware how time 'works', both in relation to daily life and in terms of how stories are told, and it is evident from the outset that time in *Memento* is operating in a way that goes against the grain of how we normally process film narratives. Significantly, we are not presented with a clear origin or starting point other than the film's end, back from which we must regress in order to build up an understanding of when and where Leonard is located. By omitting details such as the exact length of time that has passed since Leonard's wife was killed, the narrative forces a sense of temporal disorientation upon the viewer, thereby narrowing the experiential gap between viewer and protagonist. This narrowing, of course, does not close entirely and even at the beginning of the film, when we are in the situation which is closest to Leonard epistemically, our experience is not wholly congruent with his. We are aware that our memory is functioning normally and we also anticipate that we will be able to use the information we are shown to gradually learn more about what is happening. Although the reverse chronology appears unusual as far as cinematic conventions are concerned, the diegetic world itself is governed by what we recognise as a normal temporal order. It is fair to say that we are dealing with a storyworld that is reasonably congruent with our own reality, something which is borne out by the efforts made by the filmmakers to portray an anterograde amnesic in a scientifically accurate way.[123] As Jo Alyson Parker writes:

> [W]e must assume cause-effect still works normally in the world that the film depicts; there is no *Star Trek*-like "space-time anomaly" that makes future causes impact on past events.[124]

The practical and social hurdles Leonard encounters and the ways in which he deals with them are presented as feasible scenarios in their own right, such as using notes and photographs in order to compensate for his fading memories. In contrast to narratives such as *Lost Highway*, the characters in *Memento* are reasonably stable in terms of how we are able to individuate them, recognise them from one scene to another, understand potential motivations, and identify the consequences of actions. Characters and their activities in this storyworld appear consistent with our own understanding of reality and there is no evidence of other-worldly, magical, or supernatural occurrence or influences. Of course, we are also dealing with an entertainment product intended for mass-market appeal and not a documentary about memory impairment. Leonard's situation therefore requires framing in a wider scenario that will enable the film to operate successfully as cultural product intended to be sold as entertainment; in this case a noir tale of vengeance and mystery. However, its subject matter and complex structure arguably allow it to achieve much more than the minimum requirement of simply attracting and entertaining an audience.

In addition to highlighting viewer expectations of how film narratives should behave temporally, *Memento* also foregrounds the way in which we scour narratives for details that will potentially aid our understanding of depicted events. Leonard initially appears organised, meticulous and careful, such as in an early scene where we see him pin Polaroids onto his 'map', the layout of which is reminiscent of an incident room in a police station (Fig. 21). Even the language that Leonard uses – "I got a lead on a place"[125] - resembles that of a screen detective.

Fig. 21. Leonard gives the initial impression of being organised and methodical

As the film progresses, however, we see the inadequacy of his methods and realise that the challenges he faces are in fact insurmountable. His apparently rigorous detective methodology is fragmented and incomplete, his 'incident room' no more than a tragic mockery of the real thing. As we build an increasingly clear picture of Leonard's character, we appreciate how limited and miserable his existence truly is and how starkly it contrasts with how he sees himself. Indeed, his self-perception begins to look more like self-deception, a point which Teddy explicitly articulates when he says to Leonard: "So you lie to yourself to be happy. There's nothing wrong with that. We all do it."[126]

Not unlike the Replicants in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), Leonard must supplement his experiences through 'off-site storage' in the form of photographs, notes, and tattoos, while also being unusually dependent on information given to him by others. In contrast to Leonard, the Replicants' have

had their memories implanted and the photographs are faked in order to add another layer of realism to their sense of personal history and keep them from realizing the artificial nature of their existence. The Replicants are duped by their creators and ultimately come to discover that the photographs which correspond to the memories in their heads are the work of pure fiction, designed to bolster a falsified history and sense of self-identity. In Leonard's situation we see him exploit his own condition so that he may deceive himself and unwittingly carry out an act of misplaced vengeance. Although the events he records with his photographs and notes pertain to an empirical reality within the diegesis (unlike in *Blade Runner*), the potential for misinterpretation and outright deception is plain to see.

The search for narrative clarity and reliable information about characters and events are fundamental processes which we employ constantly when attempting to comprehend film narratives, whether or not we are conscious of this mental activity. *Memento* to a certain extent thwarts our efforts, or at least makes our task more difficult, through devices such as an unreliable narrator located within a reverse narrative. One result of this, according to Carroll, is that the film draws attention to the viewer's role in 'co-constructing' the story:

> The audience is always involved in constructing what happened in the storyworld from the movie narration…[but *Memento* makes]…this process difficult, thereby forcing us to take a close look at it…The meta-narrative function of the backwards storytelling in *Memento* is, in other words, to afford the opportunity for the thoughtful spectator to gain certain insights regarding narrative – both in terms of its structure and its comprehension.[127]

He concedes that such a theory is 'one of those things that "everybody knows"' but that it is 'easily forgotten, and, therefore, always worthy of a vivid reminder;'[128] and *Memento*, it would seem, provides just such a reminder. As Bordwell also argues, spectators participate in a complex process of actively elaborating what a film sets forth – they "go beyond the information given,"[129] in Jerome Bruner's phrase – although this does not imply that each spectator's understanding of the film is unique since several patterns of elaboration are shared by spectators.[130] Rather, the point being made by Bordwell (and Bruner) is that inference is an essential process in viewer comprehension, and it is one that is relied upon greatly by filmmakers as they will use hypothesis forming and viewers' assumptions to provoke

and guide specific emotional and intellectual responses. In order for a film to have a wide appeal, of course, there must be a broad level of agreement about certain elements within the narrative, if only to grant the film's storyline a degree of intelligibility and tell the story economically. Beyond that, however, there can be varying amounts of ambiguity or details which are open to interpretation, with the level of variance depending greatly on the overarching goal(s) of the filmmakers in question. Although *Memento* draws upon a recognisable genre and, through its use of limited characters and locations and very immediate cause-effect sequencing, appears unusually linear, its style of narration combined with an unreliable guiding character creates numerous obstacles for the viewer. These factors make *Memento* 'difficult to cognize, and that provocation compels the viewer to reconstruct the story self-consciously, thereby, in the process, acquiring phenomenological access to one's response to the vast majority of movie narratives.' [131] We can see this in action if we take the delimited case of cause and effect and continuity across different scenes. The note that Leonard writes, at Teddy's behest, on the back of his photograph of Natalie is obscured for the first half of the narrative, and all we can see initially is that something had been written but was then scored out (Fig. 22).

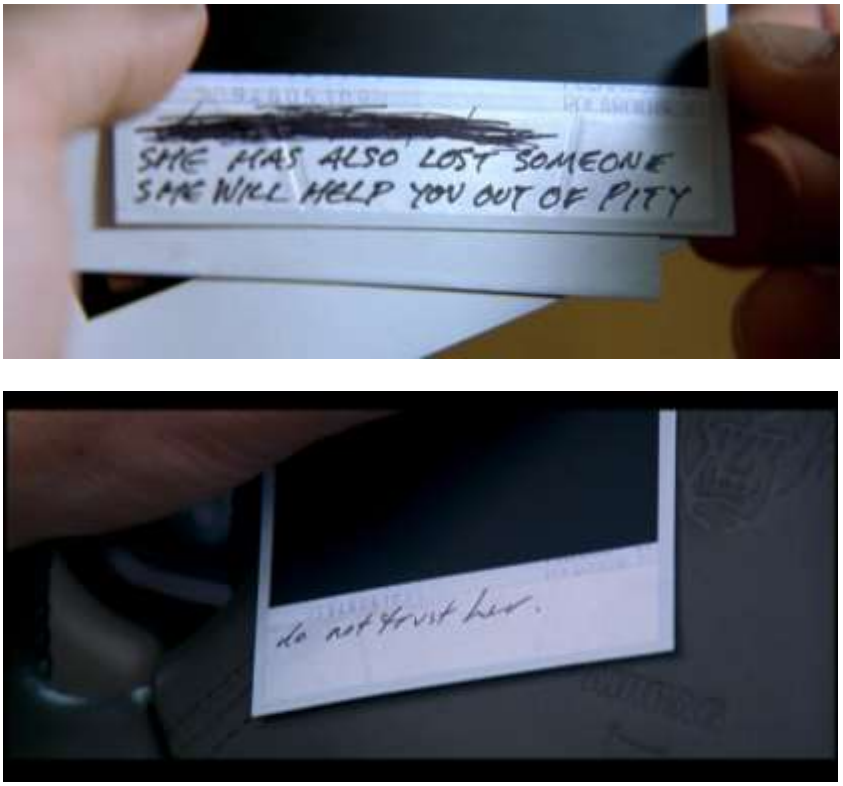

Fig. 22. The mysterious note beneath the scribble is eventually revealed

Once the film has hit its stride and established the reverse chronology, it is likely that a viewer will begin to make mental notes of key details, especially those highlighted through repetition such as the scribbled out note. Curiosity builds as each time we see Leonard refer to the back of the photo of Natalie we can't help but notice that something must have been written there but was scored out an earlier point in time, but which we expect to see at a later point in the narrative. What this helps to highlight is the way in which certain narratives build up a story through adding layers of details upon existing ones. *Memento* draws attention to this process by reversing it. We watch as successive layers are peeled back, in this example almost literally, to reveal vital details underneath. Our understanding of the history of successive details, such as the broken car window or the scratches on Leonard's face, requires that the effects of time are rolled back, which ironically deepens our knowledge of Leonard's situation. In other words, the more details that disappear and the more actions that are undone, the more we understand; we already know the outcome but are gradually forming a complete picture through the accumulation of these cause-and-effect 'units'.

The extent of our comprehension does have its limits, however. Consider once again the final sequence in which Teddy confronts Leonard and attempts to confuse and/or contradict the film's established truths. Should we regard his account as the definitive version of events? Bordwell proposes that at a basic level 'in any narrative in any medium, characters are built up by the perceiver by virtue of two sorts of agent-based schemas.' [132] These are the *person* elements of a character (human body, thoughts, perceptual activity) and the institutional *role* that a character occupies or holds. With Teddy, as with the other characters in the film, his *person* elements are unproblematic and straightforward. His *role* in the storyworld is, however, far less clear. Is Teddy a cop? A bad cop? A snitch? He could be all, some, or none of the things he claims to be, which makes it difficult for the viewer to situate him in the narrative according Bordwell's criteria. He goes on to point out how genre conventions normally imply audience familiarity and as such there will be a certain degree of expectation:

> [W]e're expecting to be misled [by puzzle films]… Many invite re-viewing, teasing the spectator to discover the hows and whys of their construction. At the same time, these strategies exploit the redundancy built into the classical norms and often mobilize some underused resources of studio-era moviemaking. And although the innovations look fresh on the movie screen, many rely on our acquaintance with story schemas circulating in popular culture at large.[133]

As the film plays out, evidence accumulates which casts doubt on Teddy as a trustworthy character. Narrative closure is ultimately elusive since the slew of 'revisions' of crucial details with which Teddy confronts Leonard at the film's conclusion are left unresolved and an abiding ambiguity remains. A prevailing interpretation is that Sammy is simply a projection of Leonard's own personal history and his anterograde amnesia is partly a psychological refuge from the guilt he feels at having killed his own wife. This calls to mind the situation we encountered with Fred in *Lost Highway*, since many commentators regard the character switch in Lynch's film as representing a psychological refuge taken by Fred to escape *his* guilty conscience.

Another way of considering the film's many loose ends is to regard it in the wider canon of the "art film" as defined by Bordwell. In his analysis, Bordwell argues that the prevalence of unresolved or partially resolved narratives containing multiple ambiguous details is a key feature of films in this

category. He writes: 'Put crudely, the slogan of the art cinema might be, "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity"'[134] He also highlights the emphasis on character subjectivity as a prevalent feature of many art film narratives, and this can often be used as a way of reconciling seemingly unresolved diegetic elements. Andrew Klein embraces this kind of explanation by concluding that 'the only way to reconcile everything is to assume huge inconsistencies in the nature of Leonard's disorder.'[135] I take Klein's conclusion to mean that inconsistency of recollection is an inherent feature of Leonard's condition and not that the filmmakers have presented the story in a way that is inconsistent. Even so, such a conclusion is a little simplistic and is something of a catch-all theory, although there are certainly specific instances in the film when character subjectivity seems to be the only way of accounting for what we see.

One such moment takes place in the film's final sequence, which comes after Leonard has set the clues for himself and is driving to a tattoo parlour. In the photograph which Teddy claims shows Leonard in the moments after he killed John G (Fig. 23), he is pointing to an area on his chest which has no tattoos. As he drives we hear his inner monologue and a series of images are intercut with a close-up of his face, one of which shows his wife lying on his bare chest with a new tattoo that reads 'I've done it' (Fig. 24), the location of which directly corresponds to the area on his chest that he is pointing to in Teddy's photograph. This image of course presents an impossible combination of details that can only really be regarded as the product of Leonard's imagination, since he could not be trying to avenge his wife's death if she was still alive. Furthermore, marrying his inner monologue to an image such as this strongly indicates that what we see is Leonard's subjective state. However, blending a character's imaginings with details from an artefact such as the photograph, which we must regard as empirically real within the diegesis, further challenges viewers to reflect on what they have seen and try to separate one from the other.

Fig. 23. Leonard after having allegedly avenged his wife.

Fig. 24. A paradoxical combination of narrative details.

Is the narrative simply using well-established techniques to exploit the limits of a viewer's working memory in order to wrong-foot its audience and thereby demonstrate the ease with which a viewer can be duped? Perhaps so, and in light of Bordwell's analysis about pleasure derived from the noir and mystery genres, as well as those in the art film category, viewers may glean a certain degree of enjoyment from unsolved mysteries. Or, as Klein puts it: "what's the point of a good movie about memory if you don't leave a few things up for grabs?"[136]

Hold That Thought

Teddy: *You don't know who you are!*

Leonard: *I'm Leonard Shelby, I'm from San Francisco…*

Teddy: *Nah, that's who you were. That's not what you've become.* [137]

Teddy's accusation in the lines above resonates with the deeper themes inherent in *Memento*. In his analysis of the film, Little highlights how Leonard's hunt for the alleged assailant who evaded capture is subordinate to the film's 'real' missing person investigation. He argues that Leonard 'is a missing person of sorts, a figure lacking memory of, and guilt for, actions he takes throughout the film'[138] and that 'missing' or 'incompleteness' is a key theme of the film - incomplete information, unknown persons, lost memories, a deceased wife - and he regards Leonard, whose personal identity is fractured and incomplete due to his memory impairment, as chief amongst these.

Given the context and plight of its protagonist it is clear that the narrative is highlighting the fragility and fallibility of memory in general, not just Leonard's, while also entertaining viewers by way of a genre and storyline which owes much of its appeal to ambiguity, deception and mystery. Arguably the narrative achieves even more than this, particularly according to those theorists who are engaged in the 'film-as-philosophy' debate. Carroll regards *Memento* as belonging to 'a tradition of motion-picture production that attempts to meld popular genres with philosophical meditations,'[139] and for my purposes, the 'philosophical meditation' of most significance is the link between memory and self-identity. When describing the real life case of Jimmie G, a patient who suffered from a debilitating memory impairment similar to Leonard's, Oliver Sacks was prompted to ask:

> what sort of a life (if any), what sort of a world, what sort of a self, can be preserved in a man who has lost the greater part of his memory and, with this, his past, and his moorings in time?[140]

A question like this is central to *Memento*'s storyline and the film not only draws attention to how we comprehend film narratives but also highlights salient issues and theories about the role of memory in how we construct our own sense of self and individuality. In the wider context of cinematic

output, it is important to distinguish *Memento* from offerings like *Still Alice* (Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2014) in which the effects of memory loss on personal identity are told in a much more conventional way. In addition to its very obviously unconventional narrative structure, *Memento* 'quite explicitly raises [the] philosophical [discussion about] what makes us who we are, both at any given moment in time and across time, with an emphasis on the role of memory.'[141] Significantly, though, the structure of the film serves as a means of communicating its philosophical considerations in a way that a film like *Still Alice* does not; considerations which are most apparent during scenes in which Leonard articulates existential conundrums he encounters as a result of his condition. In one scene, while Natalie sleeps on Leonard's chest, we hear him ask (ostensibly to Natalie but in reality only to himself) "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?"[142] while during a later conversation he maintains that "just because there are things I don't remember, it doesn't make my actions meaningless."[143] Curiously, at one point we can glimpse a tattoo on Leonard's upper left arm which reads "She is Gone. Time Still Passes," which suggests he may have already tried to anticipate a period in the future when his condition may have impaired his ability to experience the passing of time. It also stands as a painfully inadequate attempt to force himself to recover from his wife's death. As Klein observes, one of the film's 'brilliant tangential themes [is] that *relief* from grief is dependent on memory as well — and [such relief] is one of the chief hells our unfathomable hero is subjected to.'[144] Leonard's utterances foreground the film's aim of engaging with wider existential and philosophical considerations, ones which are of relevance to all of us but have particular significance for someone with Leonard's condition. This point is perhaps most evident during the voiceover which concludes the film in which Leonard alludes to concepts such as solipsism and moral worth:

> I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning…even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed the world's still here.[145]

A monologue such as this suggests that debating these sorts of philosophical ideas is part of the filmmakers' agenda and that they regard the narrative as being a vehicle for more than just a character trying to solve a murder mystery, and indeed more than just a study of how someone with Leonard's

condition may try and cope with daily life. One might argue that *Memento* lacks the profundity which others have attributed to it because the questions it raises are quite obvious and spring from academic, abstract scenarios. In addition, as Carroll points out, those skeptical of whether films can 'do' philosophy might particularly refute films with philosophical pretensions if they are perceived as belonging to mainstream, commercial cinema.[146] The counterargument to this, however, is that a film like *Memento*, which displays tropes from both *avant-garde* and mainstream cinema, arguably manages to take an abstract philosophical argument and frame it in a fictional narrative premise. As a result the film is imbued with the capacity for mobilising an emotional as well as an intellectual response in the viewer. A key tool in philosophy is the thought experiment which, as Thomas Wartenberg writes:

> functions in a philosophical argument by presenting readers with a hypothetical case. They are then asked to endorse a general conclusion on the basis of their reaction to this case. The thought experiment mobilizes people's intuitions about certain ideas or concepts so that they can see why a general claim is true. **[147]**

Wartenberg is one of many theorists involved in the general debate over whether or not certain films can be regarded as functioning works of philosophy in their own right. George Bragues regards *Memento* as a thought experiment in film form as it manages to 'advance a coherent and plausible picture of how the human mind works' as well as 'serve the aesthetic imperative of crafting a compelling plot.'[148] In relation to *Memento*, the argument put forward by Bragues is that the film's stylistic devices combine with its subject matter to create an absorbing experience and ask the viewer to consider a life without short-term memory. Wartenberg argues that:

> Even though a thought experiment tells a particular story, the truth that it establishes is general, for it does not rely on the specific details of its story. Instead, the story is used to illustrate a general truth that the reader is supposed to be able to accept by means of his or her reflection on the thought experiment's narrative**.[149]**

A distinction must be made here between narratives which simply frame engaging questions in an orthodox paradigm and those which try to combine a thought experiment-style storyline with a less-

than-mainstream narrative structure. *Memento* could perhaps be regarded as occupying a midpoint between narratives which simply communicate ideas like a fable, and those which attempt to communicate an idea in a more experiential or phenomenological way. Since the structure itself plays an active part in adding an extra level to the issues raised in the narrative, the film is able to do more than simply consider the relationship between memory and identity and have them played out via the words and actions of its characters. That is to say, devices such as the reverse chronology deepen and intensify the impact of the storyline because, as Kania writes, it 'serves the…purpose of putting us in Leonard's epistemic shoes.'[150] This is not to say, however, that *Still Alice* fails to connect empathetically or sympathetically with the lead character's experience, and the title of the film itself points towards an awareness on the part of the filmmakers about the existential consideration of the storyline. Rather, the key distinction between *Memento* and *Still Alice* (and others like it) is the way in which the former elevates its stylistic features to give them a prominent, expressive function that deviates from more conventional cinematic methods.

Whether or not this constitutes a film 'doing' philosophy is the question which Carroll and others consider. [151] A number of theorists have considered *Memento* against the backdrop of these philosophical standpoints to argue how the film helps illuminate key issues around character portrayal and self-identity. Although the scope of this study will not allow me to explore the finer detail of the film-as-philosophy debate, it is evident that *Memento* is sufficiently thought-provoking to be included in this kind of debate in the first place, with Richard Hanley's assessment being that 'we shouldn't get too carried away thinking that a movie like *Memento* has anything special or new to say. What *Memento* does is *get you thinking*.'[152] Thinking about what, though? Certainly the narrative raises a number of issues, not least the question of Leonard's personal identity and the extent to which he can claim to be the same person over time.

Historically, much of the philosophical debate over personal identity has focused on trying to determine which part(s) of a person could be said to constitute The Self. The discussion has for the most part revolved around whether one's self can be said to reside predominantly in the body, the mind, some combination of the two, or none of these. Locke and Hume were key contributors to this debate and their arguments are of relevance to my analysis of *Memento*. As detailed in the introduction to this section,

Locke took up the position that the mind, and specifically memory, provided continuity over time and as such there was no need to reach for an immaterial soul by way of explanation. Hume[153] in turn argued that the search for self-identity (whether in our body or in our consciousness) is an erroneous one as there is no element(s) of a person that endured untouched by time, flux or decay.

The film does not present the viewer with problematic character identities of the sort we encounter in a film like *Lost Highway*, a fact which further underlines the filmmakers' aim of ensuring the unconventional narrative structure does not impair narrative comprehension. In Smith's terms, Leonard can be individuated, identified and re-identified[154] consistently throughout the narrative, while cosmetic changes such as physical injuries, changes of clothing and so forth can be reconciled with depicted events and adhere to recognisable laws of causality and temporality (albeit in presented in reverse). As such, one can assert that a character named Leonard Shelby is present throughout the narrative and, physically at least, his condition remains more or less unchanged. In which case, what lies behind the accusation uttered by Teddy in the epigraph when he says that Leonard Shelby from San Francisco is who Leonard *was* but is not what he has since *become*? There are obviously different levels of meaning one could attribute to Teddy's words but it would be safe to assume that he isn't referring to a literal, physical transformation of the sort we are presented with in *The Thing*. If we want to consider a more symbolic or metaphorical interpretation, a useful starting point is the moment the viewer learns how Leonard has effectively deluded himself into believing Teddy is "his John G" so that he can have a new mystery to solve and can continue his search for vengeance. Notwithstanding the moral implications and issues of accountability, this turn of narrative events also raises significant questions about personal identity and the persistence of selfhood through time. Consider the use of everyday phrases like "the Me of two years ago would've been grateful for that knowledge," or "this time next week I'll be glad I did X ahead of time." This curious distancing of oneself from, well, one's self, is rendered literal in Leonard's case since his condition, and his awareness of it, allow him to exploit the perpetual interruptions to his personal continuity. Leonard correctly assumes that even if his memory will fade his desire for vengeance will persist, and that his future self will feel compelled to act on the false clue he has deliberately left. He is also simultaneously counting on the fact that he won't remember doing so which, on one reading,

allows him to both instruct a future Leonard to carry out an act while absolving the same future self of any culpability.

Sutton argues that *Memento* foregrounds the complexity of memory site storage in the brain and highlights how different types of memory are generated and how they interact. Quoting Nolan: 'I wanted to not make it as simple as Leonard describes the condition…You can't reduce the human mind to this incredibly simple separation of different functions, different brain parts.'[155] Citing examples from the film, Sutton tries to highlight how emotional and experiential memories can and do 'seep' into present experience even if the personal, historical recollections are not intact. For example, the fact that Leonard retains the instinct to look in specific pockets for specific items, such as Polaroids, his motel key and so on, suggests that his procedural memory is unaffected by his impairment even if his declarative memory is. That is to say, even though he cannot remember developing the routine of using his pockets in this way, he has internalized the habit and instinct to do so. A key moment which reinforces this point emerges when Natalie attempts to tear up the incriminating Polaroid of Dodd, and without hesitation Leonard tells her that they have to be burnt to be destroyed. We learn the significance of this moment at the end of the film when we see that Leonard probably knows this fact about Polaroids since he burnt the image which allegedly confirmed that he has already avenged his wife's death. Another example which permeates the entire narrative is the question over how Leonard can actually know he has a memory impairment since any diagnosis would have been made *after* the incident. Other than accepting this was a deliberate oversight to make the storytelling feasible, one must assume that he has somehow assimilated the knowledge of his condition even if he has no recollection of being told that he suffers from amnesia.

On this evidence one could regard Leonard's existence as a combination of both continuous and discontinuous elements; certain aspects endure while others are lost to history. In the context of Sacks' quote we might respond that the sort of life that one can have when suffering from a condition such as Leonard's is quite a miserable, challenging and limited one. However, it is still a life that carries durable enough links to strengthen the connectedness of pre- and post-incident Leonard. The organic evolution of one's personality over time may not seem a valid reason for claiming someone has become a different person, however the spectrum of philosophical opinion on this point is broad and varied. In Hanley's

study of the film he examines how a character like Leonard can be positioned within certain philosophical models and frameworks which grapple with the issue of how personal identity persists through time.

With Leonard there appears to have been a twofold evolution which renders him distinct from his earlier, pre-incident self. Firstly, the self-deception constitutes a potential break from his moral standards which we may have assumed were more wholesome in the life he lived before the assault. Admittedly, his moral fibre is called into question by virtue of the way in which he handled Sammy Jankis's insurance claim, however there is little or no narrative evidence to suggest he was in the habit of committing murder. The film does not equate aggressive and discriminatory insurance investigations with homicide but it does appear to use this aspect of Leonard's life to open up the possibility that he was perhaps a less savoury individual in his pre-incident life than he appears at the outset of the narrative. Secondly, the apparent state of Leonard's personal identity, and the way in which he only partially persists through time, points to the idea that with every memory reset he is once more a new person springing into existence. The person who emerges after each reset shares the pre-incident memories with pre-incident Leonard, but any new short-term memories will be unique to that ten-minute period – to that 'ten-minute Leonard' – and this process is replicated each subsequent period when his memories fade and he 're-awakens'. This is of course a more existential assessment of Teddy's statement and one would probably assume that he is referring to the way in which Leonard has lost his moral compass when he ominously tells him that he has "become" someone other than Leonard Shelby from San Francisco. The revelation that Leonard has set himself up to kill Teddy complicates his moral positioning within the narrative while also potentially diminishing viewer sympathy for him, and there is little ambiguity over his motivation given the confessional nature of the internal monologue which accompanies the scene. As such, one could take Teddy's words as meaning a shift has occurred in Leonard's moral values which is severe enough to render him distinct from the pre-incident Leonard insofar as his personality and character are concerned. Such an interpretation might seem fairly mundane, however, since most people will undergo a certain amount of change in their lifetime, aspects of which may often manifest in their value systems or character traits. As Hanley puts it: 'Any individual psychology – even an abnormal one like Leonard's – undergoes intrinsic change over time,'[156] and it is not difficult to reconcile certain 'intrinsic changes' with our continued recognition of individual persons. Unless, of course, the changes are particularly sudden or

extreme, such as in Leonard's case, where it could be argued with more conviction that he has 'become' someone else.

As part of his analysis of *Memento,* Basil Smith looks in detail at certain ideas about memory and self-identity put forward by John Locke, who argued that when a person's consciousness cannot access or retrieve a memory or experience then it ceases to be part of that person anymore.[157] This point has been argued against by successive philosophers for placing too great an emphasis on the mind and memory, especially when considering moral accountability. In Leonard's case, although his memory deficit appears genuine one would be hard pushed to defend his decision to prime himself to murder Teddy for reasons that amount to little more than personal satisfaction. Ignorance is no defence and the fact that Leonard cannot recall how he manipulated himself does not absolve him of blame and is an example of one of the main objections to Locke's theory. If we accept that his memory impairment cannot exonerate him of past crimes, or to put it differently, that blame traverses successive memory lapse periods, can it be argued that there are genuine interruptions to his continuity of self? Certainly his condition produces unbridgeable gaps in his autobiographical memory, therefore his own sense of self and understanding of his past actions is adversely affected. However, one cannot necessarily draw the conclusion that an inability to remember one's past means that one is no longer the same person one was at an earlier point in time. Several of those who have written on *Memento* make the step from Locke to Hume when considering the philosophical issues around self-identity which are highlighted by the narrative. Hume famously wrote:

> What was life without connection [of memories across time]? I may venture to affirm, that we are nothing but a bundle or collection of different sensations, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.[158]

When Natalie asks Leonard to remember his wife with his eyes closed we see a succession of shots - very much like Hume's description of sensations 'which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity' - depicting Leonard's wife in a variety of circumstances: seated at the kitchen table; exiting her house into the garden; lying in bed; looking out of the kitchen window; a close-up of her hands as she rinses them under the kitchen tap; a close-up of Leonard's hand caressing her shoulder. These shots are

cross-cut with Leonard and Natalie in the diner, and Leonard can be heard in voiceover as his reminiscences are shown:

> You can just feel the details. The bits and pieces you never bothered to put into words. And you can feel these extreme moments, even if you don't want to. You put these together and you get the feel of a person.[159]

The unnameable details Leonard describes give depth and emotional substance to the way we visualise people we encounter by virtue of how they add to existing memory impressions we have of them. In addition, they also help contribute to the substance of individuals in a way that coalesces around the more obvious identifying factors such as body, actions, behaviours, tendencies, and voice. Such impressions are fleeting and transient, and Leonard's descriptions and the accompanying flashbacks chime with Hume's "bundle theory" of self-identity; Leonard's description of getting 'the feel of a person' communicates something nebulous and perhaps intangible but equally undeniable, at least from an individual's subjective perspective. 'The bits and pieces you never bothered to put into words' are at once an addition to the more obvious physical elements of a person, while also residing in no single one of them. While reflecting on the patient mentioned at the opening of this section, Oliver Sacks writes how:

> In some sense, [the patient] had been reduced to a 'Humean' being— I could not help thinking how fascinated Hume would have been at seeing in Jimmie his own philosophical 'chimaera' incarnate, a gruesome reduction of a man to mere disconnected, incoherent flux and change.[160]

While in relation to another of his memory-impaired patients he writes:

> Abysses of amnesia continually opened beneath him, but he would bridge them, nimbly, by fluent confabulations and fictions of all kinds. For him they were not fictions, but how he suddenly saw, or interpreted, the world.[161]

A properly functioning memory provides an individual with the necessary autobiographical reference points – or 'moorings in time' to use Sacks' phrase - to draw on past events and plan for the future. The 'flux and change' which Sacks refers to is perhaps closer to the reality of self-identity than we are comfortable with, and perhaps Leonard's frantic processes of fabricating an identity for himself

are no more than a magnification of what underlies one's apparently ordinary and dependable personhood. The film, however, seems to propose that one's ability to function and sustain one's selfhood can be achieved without full continuity of memory. Through a combination of his mementos, information provided by those around him, conditioned responses, and plain old guesswork and inference, Leonard manages to traverse similar abysses in his own life and psyche much as the viewer confabulates and hypothesises as each successive shot is presented during the course of a film. Just as a viewer learns to "go beyond the information given" [162] and infer meaning from a sequence of shots which may only hint at certain details, so too does Leonard form an aggregate or partial understanding of himself and the world around him; an understanding which is continually revised and reformed according to what he experiences. A bitter irony of Leonard's situation is the fact that it is those around him who have a clearer understanding of who he is and what he has become since they are able to witness his actions and remember them. This is paralleled by how the viewer will build an increasingly clear picture of the film's narrative and Leonard's place within it.

Parker argues that 'Leonard's memory loss seems to constitute…a loss of what it means to be human'[163] since by her assessment, it is one's capacity to achieve continuity of memory which elevates an individual from someone who merely survives to a person living a life in which self-identity actually means something. Echoing Parker and Sacks, Basil Smith also considers 'whether such personhood is worth having'[164] and it would be fair to say that few viewers would regard Leonard's predicament in *Memento* as an enviable one. As Leonard's condition is based on medical fact, viewers are thus being asked to treat the storyline as a scenario drawn from real life. Leonard confesses to Teddy that he is only living for revenge, and since he will not be able to remember whether he has fulfilled his desire, or perhaps cannot remember already having done so, this single-minded purpose for his existence will endure. A contrasting but no less painful effect of his condition is that he cannot move on from his wife's death. The flipside of his desire for revenge is his inability to move on from his grief, since grief is a process that requires the ability to both remember and forget. In one scene we see him trying to achieve some sort of closure by orchestrating a role play scenario with a prostitute, which ends with him burning some of his wife's possessions. As he watches the fire devour various objects that belonged to or were associated with his wife, Leonard's voiceover delivers one of the film's most potent lines:

> I've probably tried this before. Probably burned truckloads of your stuff. Can't remember to forget you. [165]

The expression 'hold that thought' takes on new significance when applied to Leonard as he cannot achieve the continuity of memory necessary for full selfhood; he cannot 'hold' any thought long enough for it to evolve from impression to consolidation. Or, as Teddy puts it when lamenting the 'fact' that Leonard does not remember that he has already killed the second assailant:

> When you killed him, I was so convinced that you'd remember. But it didn't stick. Like nothing ever sticks. Like this won't stick.[166]

If indeed Leonard has killed John G. and has therefore completed his mission, he can only move forwards if he can retain and consolidate the memory of having done so. Similarly, in direct contrast, the memory he is desperate to forget is that of his wife's murder since it is the barrier to his ability to grieve and is the memory which gives rise to his desire for vengeance. These factors combine to effectively reduce his complexity as a human being and his capacity for agency since the limitations of his memory mean that he has lost his capacity for deep reasoning and reflection. He has become increasingly reliant on instinctual responses and reactive behavior and the fact that he is dependent on others to prop up his sense of self means his identity more closely resembles Sacks' "Humean being". As part of his analysis of the film, Hanley summarises the philosophical standpoint of Derek Parfit, which is framed in the context of his teletransportation thought experiment. As outlined in section I, Parfit's scenario involves a device that can replicate an individual on Mars but which also destroys the 'source' individual back on Earth. He develops this idea further to consider alternative outcomes, such as the source individual surviving for a few days before dying, or the device creating two replicas while still destroying the source. Hanley picks up on Robert Nozick's concept of the 'closest continuer' in order to explain how, in this situation:

> we have a tie for closest continuer. They cannot *both* be [the same as the source individual], since that would require them to be each other. So neither of them is…Parfit's diagnosis of

> Double Replication is that psychological continuity is, like psychological connectedness, non-transitive.[167]

Each scenario is presented as a conundrum to try and tease out an answer to the question about which individual (if any) could be said to be the 'real' one. Psychological *continuity*, in the context *Memento*, would refer to the link Leonard has with his pre-incident self: he remembers who he is/was and, apparently, what has happened to his memory. Psychological *connectedness* is distinguished from *continuity* to refer to the link and the sense of time passing by virtue of memories that can account for past experiences; this is the area in which post-incident Leonard has a deficit. In Parfit's scenario, the two replicated individuals would be continuous with the source but not each other, which is why, for Parfit, psychological continuity and identity must be considered *non-transitive* i.e. incapable of bridging the gap between distinct individuals in a way that could be considered as an unbroken continuum. Whether or not that is that same as saying the *identity* of an individual in scenarios like the one he presents, or the one that we encounter with Leonard is, in Parfit's view, less of a concern since it is *survival* that is more important:

> [Parfit] argues further that Double Replication is about as good as ordinary survival, and much better than ordinary death…So your survival is *not* your persistence – rather it is having someone in the future psychologically continuous with you now, whether or not they *are* you! [168]

In Parfit's terms Leonard is *numerically* identical with his pre-incident self but is *qualitatively* different given the extensive psychological damage he has incurred. As far as Nozick's argument is concerned, post-incident Leonard emerges as the only candidate for 'closest continuer' since we are not dealing with anything like cloning or duplication. Although he is qualitatively altered there is no other individual who has any form of continuity with the person known as Leonard Shelby, and even though the ties may be weak they do still exist. Beyond the question of whether or not an individual like Leonard could be regarded as the same person post-trauma as the person they were pre-trauma, is a second and perhaps more pressing, discomfiting one, which I touched on earlier by way of Sacks consideration of whether a life without short-term memory could even be considered worth living. Rupert Read explores this issue in relation to *The Prestige* and argues that Parfit's abstract scenario does not take the moral and

ethical implications of his teletransportation thought experiment sufficiently into account.[169] For Read, the usefulness of Parfit's scenario is devalued because it treats the death of the source individual too lightly and dismissively when in fact this aspect should be central to the debate. That is to say, in both *Memento* and *The Prestige* the emotional states of characters and the moral choices they make are foregrounded by Nolan and it would appear that an emotional investment on the part of the viewer is crucial to one's engagement and enjoyment of the narratives. To reduce the individuals in the stories from human beings to something resembling units on a production line for the sake of debating an abstract scenario, Read argues, prevents the discussion from ever being anything other than academic. This point is central to the ongoing discussion about whether film narratives can be rightly thought of as suitable vehicles for advancing philosophical ideas which are both novel and achieved purely through cinematic means. In 'Film Art, Argument, and Ambiguity,' Murray Smith concludes that films can engage with philosophical arguments in a variety of ways but ultimately a fictional narrative cannot put forward a logical argument in the same way a philosophical essay can. This, he argues, is partly because the primary function of a narrative is not to put forward a particular epistemic point, therefore:

> [the] subordination of the epistemic to the artistic is surely the main reason why narrative films based on philosophical themes…will often compromise the "logic" of the philosophical problem that they dramatize.[170]

In response to this point, Carroll raises the objection that what Smith is describing is a matter of 'tendencies [that] most philosophy in a certain tradition goes in for clarity [but at times] one like Nietzsche…may have a motive for shrouding their thought experiments in ambiguity.'[171] For Smith, however, ambiguity is one of the factors that most definitively separates the functions of art and philosophy since, in the case of the former it is something to be praised whereas for the latter is symptomatic of a weak argument. This is a distinction rather than a critical evaluation since, as Smith points out, it stems from the fact that philosophy and film narratives serve fundamentally different purposes; philosophical thought experiments do not strive to render the experience of types of individual in certain sorts of situation. Rather, this is the function of many types of mainstream film narratives and,

as we have seen, a feature such as ambiguity is exploited to great effect by *Memento* in terms of how it is put together, and it serves us well in terms of how we appraise it as viewers.

4

Organised Chaos in *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*

Leonard: *Memory is unreliable; [it] can change the shape of a room, it can change the colour of a car.* [172]

Leonard utters the lines above in *Memento* when arguing with Teddy about the reliability of eyewitness testimony in police investigations. The point he is making is of course meant to describe the way in which our recollections can be easily misremembered, however his description finds something like a literal manifestation during a scene in *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad (Last Year in Marienbad,* Alain Resnais, 1961*),* a notoriously challenging *avant-garde* narrative from the French New Wave movement. In the scene (Fig. 25) we see two characters, a male and a female, in a hotel lobby with a reception desk visible in the background. A jump cut results in the male character suddenly vanishing and the background changing to a ballroom populated by chairs and a handful of different individuals. As the woman begins to turn her head, perhaps struck by these sudden changes, the background alters once again and she appears back in the lobby with the reception desk behind her; the action of her head turning is matched across each edit. I use this example not just because it neatly matches Leonard's words about memory changing the shape of a room but also because it typifies the unconventional style of the film. The potentially jarring effect of a sudden, unmotivated change of location, or the unexplained disappearance of a character within the frame is wholly consistent with the narrative's style and structure.

Fig. 25. A typically jarring sequence in which the mise-en-scène is altered with no obvious diegetic motivation or explanation.

Like *Memento, Marienbad* is a film which has at its thematic core the fallibility of memory and recollection, however in terms of tone, style and structure it is vastly different to Nolan's film. Imagine a spectrum with the broad title 'Films About Memory', on which the extremes denote a film's relative mainstream or avant-garde characteristics. If we placed a film such as *Still Alice* towards the mainstream / accessible end then *Memento* and *Marienbad* could be plotted near the centre and at the opposite extreme respectively. In this chapter I will explore the multitude of ways in which *Marienbad* blurs the boundary between subjective and objective perspectives, and in doing so helps highlight the connection between memory and selfhood and the relationship between viewers and fictional characters. I will take a detailed look at *Marienbad* in order to see how its depiction of memory, and its potential failings and limitations, compares to *Memento*'s handling of the same issues. In the wider context of my analysis, the film's strong emphasis on memory combined with the challenges we face in trying to triangulate characters in a spatio-

temporal sense, raises salient questions regarding personal identity. From a philosophical perspective, a key contributor in this area of discussion is John Locke who advanced the argument that it is a person's memory that constitutes a continuity of selfhood. An individual's psychological connectedness, and memory in particular, was what Locke regarded as the principal means of assessing whether one could be considered to be the same individual over time. As I discussed in relation to *Memento*, Locke's argument is especially problematic in terms of how it allows scope for guilt to be assuaged purely because an individual cannot remember committing a harmful act. This objection resonates with *Memento*'s storyline and, depending on one's interpretation, it is of particular relevance to *Marienbad* as well. I will draw in a number of key ideas and theories from cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind in order to bolster certain arguments and also to offer up alternative ways of considering the stylistic choices which define *Marienbad* and the likely reactions these may provoke in the viewer. I will put forward an alternative way of reading the film when I look again at the work of Charles Fernyhough and consider how our memory patterns and mental recall functions could offer another way of regarding personal identity.

The film takes place in an opulent hotel inhabited by a dozen or so guests dressed in formal attire and engaged in a variety of leisure activities; ballroom dancing, watching performances of drama and live music, card games, a firing range, and so on. The film's opening ten minutes disseminate information about settings and characters at a slow pace but then gradually focus in on three characters who are not named within the narrative but are credited as A, M, and X in the screenplay. Timeframes and locations remain ambiguous and fluid throughout the film; however the storyline revolves around a perpetual conversation between A (Delphine Seyrig) and X (Giorgio Albertazzi) about whether or not they met last year in the same hotel they are in now, a hotel variously referred to as Marienbad, Frederiksbad, Karlstadt, and Baden-Salsa. The conversation about whether they have met before is conducted through a combination of dialogue and voiceover. The voiceover we hear alternates between X's monologue and his dialogue with A. The other principal character is the man credited as M (Sacha Pitoëff) who appears periodically throughout the narrative and whose exact relationship to A is unclear, although it is clearly of a romantic nature and they may be husband and wife. Although the premise appears straightforward on paper, the film's ambiguities and inconsistencies are legion and the (apparent) lack of diegetic clarity

is something which defines the film and polarises viewers. I want to assess how this ambiguity is generated and consider potential viewer responses in the context of salient arguments surrounding character portrayal that I have looked at in earlier chapters. From there I will consider whether or not certain stylistic and structural patterns can be discerned and then discuss these in the wider context of memory and personal identity.

In the previous chapter I looked at a scene in *Memento* which appears to shows a double revision of one of Leonard's memories, brought on by Teddy's goading about whether or not Leonard's wife was diabetic (Fig. 20). This technique, used sparingly in *Memento*, could be seen as an example of *Marienbad*'s narrative style in microcosm, since the repetition and alteration of action and dialogue that we have seen before is one of the film's defining features and a central stylistic principle. The first ten minutes of the film set the tone and pattern which the narrative will follow throughout, and from the outset *Marienbad* signals the unconventional way in which its story and characters will be developed. The film opens with a vertical shot looking directly upwards at an ornate ceiling and pillars with the camera meandering between the columns and under the vaulted roof accompanied by an all-encompassing score of discordant organ-playing. A distant voiceover, which we later learn belongs to X, gradually becomes audible and we hear the monologue reciting the following lines:

> I made my way once again along these corridors and through these rooms, in this building that belongs to the past, this huge, luxurious, and baroque hotel, where endless corridors…

The audio trails off and fades out but there is sufficient detail in X's words to suggest some correlation between sound and image – 'corridors, building, baroque hotel,' – with the natural assumption being that we are hearing a description of the interior we are being shown. However, as the voiceover fades and the organ continues, successive shots cut to different angles with a slow editing pace matching the tracking motion of the camera as it picks up details like chandeliers and enormous mirrored walls and doors. In contrast to a (in some respects) similar opening like the long tracking shot which opens Andrzej Wajda's *Kanał* (1957), we cannot use facial expressions of characters to guide our expectations about narrative events or to provide an understanding of offscreen space. *Marienbad*'s opening minutes provide no meaningful establishing shot, has a complete absence of characters, and the camera is not obviously

heading towards a particular focal point. It is not until more than five minutes have passed that we see the first characters, and they are merely two butlers standing motionless in the middle distance on either side of a lavishly decorated corridor. Although the voiceover fades back in and we can hear repetition of certain lines heard earlier, this clarifies very little; exposition is generally very gradual. When we see characters for the second time, they all appear motionless and unblinking (Fig. 26) and their rigid appearance is suggestive of an audience watching a performance, but they could equally be frozen in time since we have very little contextualising information about what is taking place and no real sense of spatial relations or setting. The tracking shots are all close-ups and the soundtrack continues as a combination of X's monologue and organ music before a wider framing, functioning as an establishing shot, appears shortly before the ten-minute mark. In this shot, we are able to see a group of individuals gathered in a ballroom facing a stage on which a play is being performed, and as the characters sit motionless we hear one of the actors recite his line; the camera cuts to the expressionless faces of the audience. The framing then becomes increasingly wider and we intercut between the actors performing on stage and the assembled audience watching the performance; there are also alternate static and tracking shots, the latter primarily used to glide past the rows of audience members. The lines we hear – "this very hotel, filled with emptiness, these static silent characters, long since dead,' 'rows of frozen faces,' – resonate deeply as they could be describing the audience and surroundings as much as they are connected to whatever scene is being performed. In addition, the words 'frozen' and 'freeze' are heard numerous times throughout the film and are just one of the narrative's litany of motifs that recur on the soundtrack and in the mise-en-scène. The repetition of certain details in what we see and hear suggests that we should be building a clear picture of the storyline, but the overall significance of these motifs is kept tantalisingly out of reach.

Fig. 26. The film's opening sequence reveals the faces of characters but it is a relatively long time before a clear establishing shot is used.

By this point in a film we might reasonably expect narrative details to emerge such as a protagonist being established or additional information about the location and characters to be provided. However, the style of the opening moments of *Marienbad* continues in much the same way for the duration of the film and therefore the way in which we approach and analyse it requires a strategy different to that which we would normally apply to a mainstream narrative. By working through some examples, I will illustrate how the film's formal design, particularly its editing, costumes, and soundtrack, builds a narrative landscape in which space, time, and character identities are rendered malleable, fluid, and unstable. I will look at how patterns emerge within what can be a disorientating viewing experience and consider how the film's themes of trauma and repressed memory are communicated as much through the narrative's stylistic features as they are through its diegetic events and dialogue.

Mapping *Marienbad*'s Narrative Landscape

One of *Marienbad*'s most iconic images is a high-angle shot of the immaculately tended hotel garden inhabited by the characters standing motionless in an odd geometric arrangement, with a touch of the surreal added by the fact that the characters cast shadows but the trees lining the avenue do not (Fig. 27). It is an establishing shot which shows much but tells us very little, and the clarity with which we can see the assembled characters and their relative position to each other stands in stark contrast to the challenges the viewer faces in understanding the spatio-temporal and interpersonal relationships within the film.

Fig. 27. As a visual metaphor, the film's enduring image of motionless characters in the hotel grounds contrasts greatly with the dizzying shifts in time and space that we witness.

As viewers we digest and remember narrative details and reflect on what has been shown based on the understanding that these things may be, indeed probably should and normally would be, integral to our ability to follow the storyline. In Chapter Three we saw how Leonard's detective work in *Memento* is mirrored by our own efforts to stay ahead of the narrative twists, and the narrative arguably rewards the careful, discerning viewer. Can the same be said of *Marienbad*? Certainly on a first viewing one will most likely pay close attention to particular lines in the dialogue and narration, trying to decipher their meaning by making mental notes of details in the expectation that their significance will ultimately become clear as the film progresses. The absence of clearly signalled narrative cues or framing which would normally help the viewer reconcile the film's ambiguities is compounded by the way in which certain details and motifs are repeated. The voiceover as well as dialogue between all characters, including those who are not identified even in the screenplay, create tenuous links through repetition of certain descriptions and recollections. At times these are reinforced with images that appear consistent with earlier descriptions but at others we only hear a description or an anecdote about events that happened sometime in the past but which are never elaborated upon. Our efforts to glean meaning and achieve a narrative foothold are challenged by the way in which details that we might justifiably assume are relevant for plot development actually lead nowhere or are left under-developed. One of the key reasons why we might struggle to apply significance to such details is the film's evasiveness when it comes to how its spatio-temporal context, or 'narrative landscape,' is established.

The film's title provides its overarching temporal consideration and references to 'last year' permeate all aspects of the story and supply the context for many of the challenges that the viewer encounters. The film is essentially a verbal tug-of-war between X and A's competing accounts, opinions, and recollections about 'last year', and the core detail being disputed is whether or not the two have ever met before. Gregory Currie describes *Marienbad* as 'infuriatingly unspecific about crucial elements of timing'[173] and the temporal landscape is uncertain because it is difficult to determine if the scenes we are witnessing are flashbacks or if they are taking place in the diegetic present. The film deflects our efforts to group or categorise specific time periods alongside corresponding locations or surface appearances in a number of ways. As we saw in *Memento*, the narrative establishes different time periods by contrasting black and white and colour sequences, and variations in lighting schemes within the former. Clothing also plays an important part in how we differentiate sequences from one another, such as the checked shirt Leonard is wearing in the scenes before he changes into Dodd's suit. Noticeable changes in clothing are also used in *Marienbad* but there is not the same system of coding that we can draw upon to help categorise time periods. M's clothing alternates between a suit and tie (one light in colour, one dark), and a tuxedo, while A is seen in a variety of formal dresses of different styles, shades and materials. However, the changes in clothing do not correspond to straightforward groupings such as 'tuxedo = diegetic past', 'light suit = diegetic present,' but the temptation to discern an organising pattern of this sort is one way in which *Marienbad* repels our habitual viewing strategies.

In addition, alterations to clothing are mirrored by changes in location and décor and these too defy any attempt at clear categorisation, and the ambiguity of the film's spatial environment is further complicated by M and A's disagreement over the name of the hotel where they allegedly met, or indeed where they are currently situated. Very often the spatio-temporal shifts are unmotivated and a variety of formal techniques are used to set up narrative cues that are ambiguous and misleading. In one instance, shortly after A and M first encounter each other, they have an exchange in which M enigmatically tells A that the hotel is full of secrets and offers to tell her more. The scene cuts from M extending his offer to a scene in which they are dancing and both individuals are dressed differently, and the soundtrack bridges the two scenes as we hear A accept M's offer to 'show her more.' (Fig. 28). In a more conventional narrative we might assume that the change in clothing indicates an intervening period that we have not

been shown but one that has required a change of outfit. We might also infer that M and A are becoming more acquainted with each other and that this scene is a subsequent step in some sort of romance that will develop as the narrative continues. By looking at several examples of this type of sequence, however, we can see how the editing pattern and narrative structure ensure that such an expectation on the part of the viewer is very rarely met.

Fig. 28. The editing pattern displays an awareness of conventional plot development but only to work against it in favour of one that breaks established norms of continuity and causality.

There are frequent changes in location of the sort outlined in Fig. 25 at the beginning of this chapter, and these unexplained shifts in space and time occur spontaneously and, crucially, with no obvious effect on the characters. One example shows X and A engaged in their continual assertion and denial about what they each remember and as they talk they advance towards the camera while it tracks backwards. (Fig. 29). X describes what A was wearing when they last met and talks about how she was reacting while she denies everything he says. Without breaking the flow of their conversation or their respective strides, an edit relocates them to a different corridor before another edit a few steps later takes them to a third location. There is nothing in the characters' words or expressions to indicate that these shifts in space have affected them in any way, it is simply jarring and arresting for the viewer.

Fig. 29. Jump cuts to different locations are not met with any surprise or obvious effect on the characters, in contrast to the jarring effect it may have on the viewer

Fig. 30 illustrates a slight variation on the same technique, omitting in this case any movement within the frame but retaining the continuity of dialogue across several edits which bring with them noticeable changes to location as well as costume. Similarly, Fig. 31 exhibits a clear change of location and costume but links two shots by matching A's action across the edit as she reaches her hand up across her shoulder.

Fig. 30. A similar technique uses unbroken dialogue to create a bridge across the jump cuts, as we see the characters remain static within the frame but their position within the frame with each subsequent shot changes.

Fig. 31. Continuity of action as well as dialogue is used in some instances to bridge the gap between successive shots that are noticeably altered, both in terms of location and costume.

These examples are typical the of film's narrative style and there is no point at which a more conventional editing style begins to emerge, with one of the most disorienting and challenging effects being the fact that the alterations of time, space, and character appearance are not met with any visible sign of surprise or disorientation by the characters themselves. In sharp contrast to a scene like the one in *Sherlock Jr.*(Buster Keaton, 1924), in which Keaton's dreaming self is comically bounced around as the background of the film he has 'entered' changes, X and A move smoothly and seamlessly between jumps in time and space and give no outward sign of awareness or alarm. Indeed, the example in Fig. 25 in which the female character shows a hint of surprise is in fact an *atypical* reaction to these recurring shifts in location. Since these jumps in space and time do not appear to affect the characters it makes sense to consider that the formal elements of the film have been elevated to an expressive role designed not simply to complement the narrative events but also to communicate ideas or themes inherent in the storyline. Furthermore, as far as character identity is concerned, we can once again use Murray Smith's definitions of 'recognition' and 're-identification' to conclude that the characters who appear in *Marienbad* are physically consistent throughout, notwithstanding the cosmetic changes to clothing and hairstyles. Spatio-temporal jumps are disorienting for the viewer, but in terms of recognising the characters, the changes do not involve anything like a physical mutation or a heavily-altered version of the same character so as to render them unrecognisable from characters we have previously encountered. Rather, it is the film's fluid and malleable narrative landscape that challenges our efforts at categorising and understanding the nature of the characters who inhabit it and as such we need to approach the film with a sensitivity to the potential function(s) of its stylistic choices.

Shifting Sands or Organised Chaos?

The apparent randomness of changes to spatio-temporal locations is undoubtedly a factor which could alienate certain viewers, but it would be remiss to regard *Marienbad*'s structure as haphazard. The film's narrative patterns exhibit stylistic variations in the way it alters and revises details within the frame, and its use of repetition reveals a meticulous design within the structure. One method involves X's voiceover seemingly controlling and dictating the action and content within particular scenes. In one

example we cut to a shot of X standing before A as she sits on a bench, laughing, before we hear X say "No! You weren't laughing" at which point the scene is revised and we cut to a tighter angle of A on the same bench but no longer laughing and now wearing a different dress. (Fig. 32). More recent examples of the same technique can be seen in the films *Don Juan de Marco* (Jeremy Leven, 1995) and *Reconstruction* (Christopher Boe, 2003), which also bind their voiceover narration to depicted action and arbitrarily interrupt certain scenes based on the narrator changing his mind about what he remembers.

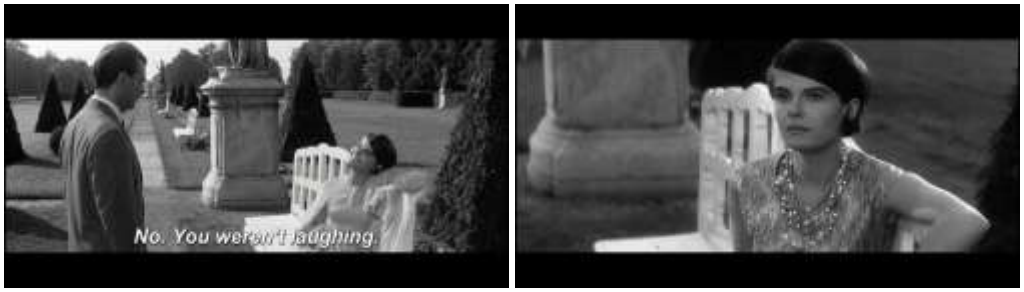

Fig. 32. At some points X's voiceover seems to exert control over particular scenes and details are altered in line with how he revises his own recollection.

As the sequence continues however there is a further variation on the pattern since X contradicts himself one more time with an assertive "No", which relocates the scene to the edge of the fountains. Before this alternate version can progress for very long, he changes his mind a third time but on this occasion his assertion is not matched by a corresponding change in location (Fig. 33). A mismatch such as this perhaps weakens the hypothesis that X's voiceover is tied to the depicted action and that what we are seeing is entirely a portrayal of his subjective experiences. Furthermore, his voice rises with anger and he repeats the word "No" as the scene continues, suggesting a reduced level of control over what is being depicted, or perhaps frustration and denial about what he remembers compared to how he would like to remember a particular moment.

Fig. 33. Within a single sequence we see the mise-en-scène seemingly change in line with X's words, however his second assertion is thwarted as the setting remains the same and does not alter according to what he describes.

A third version of this stylistic pattern can be observed when the action follows X's words (Fig. 34), almost like a response to a piece of directorial instruction rather than a description of something recalled from memory. In one instance we hear his voiceover say: "It was in the gardens in Frederiksbad. You were standing alone. You were leaning on a stone balustrade" and as the description continues the action mirrors what we are hearing. Rather than using jarring cuts with breaks in continuity, these instances are more suggestive of a memory being built and formed as it goes along as opposed to some intact element of conscious memory being recalled. The words appear to control, construct and influence the depicted events rather than merely describe them.

Fig. 34. A variation on the technique in Fig. 33. As X speaks the movements and actions of A correspond to what we hear, almost like a director working with an actor on a particular scene.

Quite why the narrative varies the way in which these unmotivated changes manifest themselves is unclear, and there is seemingly no obvious pattern to the different ways in which causal links and continuity are broken or interrupted. You could say that there is no consistency to the film's inconsistencies, or that the film is exploring variations on a particular stylistic effect elevating style to a level of significance in line with what Bordwell calls 'parametric' narration. The result, Bordwell argues, is that the film suggests 'a coherent fabula world while again and again denying that any such entity can be constructed.'[174] In addition, there are littered throughout the film a number of scenes which display a hint of spectatorship as the characters are positioned side by side and appear to be 'watching' the scene they are discussing (Fig. 35).

Fig. 35. As X and A's differing versions of events are spoken aloud they are at times shown looking offscreen as though witnessing the very moments and details they are each describing.

What should we make of this? Are X and A experiencing a joint recollection that is being played out before their eyes in the same way the events are shown to the viewer? As part of my analysis of *Memento* I suggested that key lines of Leonard's monologue indicate that communicating philosophical ideas about personal identity are of importance to the filmmakers. Currie makes a similar observation about *Marienbad* and time when he writes how, paradoxically:

> the very lack of temporal detail puts time high on the agenda…time has low status so far as story content goes… but a high expressive status… lack of specificity about time in the story is compensatable by features expressive of a concern for time.[175]

While time may appear disordered and chaotic as it relates to the characters and storyline, the narrative strategy shifts its method for communicating ideas about temporality to the structural, authorial level and away from the purely diegetic level. Frank P. Tomasulo describes *Marienbad* as a 'genuinely *phenomenological* film' because of the fact that its 'aesthetic choices are precisely how [the film] conveys

its existential themes about time, memory, identity, death, and human consciousness.'[176] As Smith points out, the area of avant-garde filmmaking has long been regarded as being particularly well-suited to analysing and illustrating aspects of consciousness and subjective states, by acting as a 'metaphor for consciousness' through its tendency to place 'an emphasis on the rendering of subjective experience.'[177] *Marienbad* contains scenes which render the subjective experience in a jarringly literal way, with scenes being reimagined so that backgrounds, lighting, and costumes can change within a single shot in order to demonstrate the pliable and often unreliable nature of memory. Tomasulo's description articulates the breadth of thematic import many critics feel *Marienbad* generates, and in the context of this chapter the issues of memory and identity are particularly salient. If we accept that the film is indeed 'phenomenological' in its approach, then what can we reasonably venture about the ideas it is trying to communicate and the reasoning behind its narrative structure and stylistic choices? Although my focus here is primarily on memory and subjectivity, a useful starting point is Currie's analysis of the film's portrayal of time and temporal relations:

> [W]ith its pervasive ambiguities and contradictions in the representations of space, time, and causality, [the film] is often said to represent the breakdown of narrative. I am more inclined to say that the work exhibits the coming apart of the two aspects I have considered are determinants of narrativity: representation of story features and expression of authorial focus. For example, while the work expresses (partly through voiced commentary) an interest in time amounting almost to obsession, there is very little we can identify which represents temporal relations between events in the story.[178]

While Currie is primarily concerned with assessing the film's 'narrativity,' the point he makes about an 'almost obsessive' interest in time being expressed through the voiceover is particularly interesting. He points out the friction between how the film repeatedly emphasises the passing of time through X's voiceover while also providing the viewer with little or no clear markers with which to assemble a coherent temporal landscape. There is a similar, corresponding hollowness or contradiction evident in the narrative's near-obsessive mention of recollections and remembering since there is no resulting version of events that is even partially free from ambiguity or contradiction. The numerous overt

references to memory and recollection appear like a playful taunt or suggestion that the viewer may have missed a crucial detail that will reveal a system behind its mosaic of motifs.

The question of what (if anything) happened last year in Marienbad remains unanswered and the film does not even offer up unequivocal answers about whether or not X and A have indeed met before. The lack of resolution about what happened 'last year' even extends beyond the work itself in the form of responses from the writer and director who each gave contradictory responses to interviewers about whether or not there was a definitive version of X and A's competing recollections. As Neal Oxenhandler points out:

> Resnais wants to analyze character, he wants to make connections; he believes that something really did happen at Marienbad. Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, maintains only that we can perceive a series of "emotional states" that cannot be connected up in any rational way.[179]

A cynical response might regard Robbe-Grillet and Resnais' contrasting interpretations as a useful marketing strategy by feeding into the overall contentiousness of the film's 'meaning' and presenting themselves in a neat parallel with the competing versions of events put forward by X and A. For Oxenhandler, the film is best viewed with a general acceptance of the fact that the film cannot be deciphered and organised in a way that mainstream film texts can. In keeping with the nouveau-roman movement, to which Robbe-Grillet was a key contributor, the film's high-modernist approach to narrative structuring demands a method of interpretation that accepts high levels of ambiguity and a lack of resolution:

> But obviously the literal meanings will be out of phase. The attempt to connect them up is only the vestige of bad habits, a kind of mental literalism, a debris that must be swept away. We must learn instead to take for granted the "de-chronology" of the mind and emotions.[180]

András Bálint Kovács is of a similar opinion and writes that 'the factual status of the past event [in *Marienbad*] is made uncertain…and is subject to mental manipulation by the characters,'[181] and this is a major distinguishing factor between *Memento* and *Marienbad*. David Bordwell's concept of 'redundancy', which I introduced in Chapter Two, is a prominent feature of *Memento* as the narrative

twists rely on unambiguously establishing certain diegetic details so that the shadow of doubt cast at the end of the film will have maximum impact. *Marienbad*, by contrast, is very low on redundancy and ambiguities are present from the outset and continue throughout the narrative, and it is no surprise that a film as riddled with ambiguity as *Marienbad* has invited a multitude of interpretations. One common interpretation is that X and A are a couple stuck in a doomed relationship, and the film's erratic spatio-temporal changes are symbolic of how they keep repeating past mistakes wherever and whenever they find themselves. Alternatively, some see the film as striving to highlight the artificiality of film as a medium by highlighting the erroneous assumption that the fictional world in the narrative even exists. If we consider how the modernist novels of Robbe-Grillet challenged its own medium, this way of regarding *Marienbad* certainly makes sense. In contrast with the way in which we strive to form an overall picture when watching a film like *Memento*, *Marienbad* seems to present us with a realist setting as regards characters and locations, and our temptation to approach it in line with corresponding expectations is one of the film's most effective ploys. As with *Lost Highway*, *Marienbad* presents spatio-temporal impossibilities within what appears to be a real world setting but does not offer any explanations that resemble the tropes common to fantastical, magical or even science-fiction storylines. As such, and given the modernist background of the filmmakers, we can regard *Marienbad* as a challenge to the very concepts of character construction, setting, narrative events and performance; an anti-mimetic strategy which appears – temptingly but superficially - like a realist mystery or romance.

For Tomasulo, the narrative is encased in and is the product of the subjectivity of one or more character: '[the] spacious hotel, elegant rooms, cultivated gardens, and lugubrious, labyrinthine hallways can be said to represent the inner workings of consciousness, the "corridors of the mind," so to speak'.[182] It is certainly tempting to regard the narrative events as entirely the product of X's memories, thoughts, recollections, and desires, particularly since his monologues dominate the soundtrack; however there is a lack of consistency in this respect as well. The structure is not sufficiently uniform to allow such an interpretation since the depicted events appear to waver and alternate between X and A's competing accounts. At times A flatly denies all that X claims to be true, at others she appears to agree, while at others she partially agrees but disputes certain details such as the layout of a room, the weather when they met, the time of day, or other events that were taking place in the hotel. As I outlined previously,

Leonard's perspective acts as the 'filtering consciousness'[183] in *Memento* as evidenced by the ten-minute segmentation within its reverse chronological structure, designed to mimic the sensation Leonard experiences each time his memory resets. However, the diegetic information we are presented with does not throw up consistent contradictions of the sort we encounter in *Marienbad,* particularly since we can observe causal links and consequences between scenes and segments. Despite Leonard's limitations and the fact that the narrative structure seems to be anchored to his condition in order to give the viewer a flavour of how he experiences the world, the narrative also works to create a sense that Leonard exists in an empirical reality that functions in a way that resembles our own. Leonard may be damaged and impaired but the film rests on the understanding that the passage of time is consistent and that there is a world that carries on functioning irrespective of his memory lapses. The same cannot easily be said of *Marienbad* since the narrative seems to be housed entirely within the realm of subjective experiences, although whether that is the subjectivity of X or A or a combination of the two is impossible to say. We might also try to merge or reconcile the interpretation offered by Tomasulo with the anti-mimetic approach, particularly if we recall the post-mutation condition of Pete in *Lost Highway*. In Chapter Two I looked at the detail of a wound appearing to heal on Pete's face, which on one reading is suggestive of actual physical trauma and transformation. However, the alternative reading would be to regard the entire middle segment of the film as Fred's fugue state – encased in subjectivity as Tomasulo argues of *Marienbad* – in which a healing wound could simply be another detail conjured up by a delusional state. In a similar way, we might choose to regard the seemingly anti-mimetic performances and narrative events in *Marienbad* as having the dual intention of drawing attention to the constructed nature of its characters while also representing the product of a character's traumatised subjectivity. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, Bordwell writes how 'the slogan of the art cinema might be, "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity"'[184], and this approach serves us well in relation to *Marienbad.*

Thomas Beltzer offers yet another take on the film and argues that *Marienbad* is a 'high modernist masterpiece' which has been '"outed" as a postmodern, science fiction film'; according to his interpretation, Robbe-Grillet's screenplay used the novella *The Invention of Morel,* by Adolfo Bioy Casares, as its inspiration. The book tells the story of an escaped convict who hides on a desert island only to wake one morning to find it suddenly populated by people from a different era, who repeatedly

perform actions and behave in particular ways in some form of temporal loop. These individuals, the protagonist discovers, are in fact hologram simulations generated by machinery placed on the island by the Morel of the title. On this reading the inhabitants of the hotel are merely echoes or recordings of real individuals playing out the same routine endlessly, a storyline which is similar to that of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) in which the hotel retains ghosts of previous visitors which spring into life repeatedly over the passing years. This in itself could be regarded as another form of memory recall, albeit one that resides like a supernatural echo in the walls of the hotel, just as *Morel* taps into the concept of artificial memory as it relates to computer programming and looped recordings. With these theories in mind, at this point I would like to advance an alternative way of regarding the film, one which acknowledges the subjective perspective of the film and its phenomenological structure, but which also draws in findings on how memories are stored are recalled.

A Normal Sort of Fracturing

There is a scene in *Marienbad* that serves as a good example of spatial impossibility and an apparent fracturing of physical identity (Fig. 38). As the scene begins, an unidentified male character is relating an anecdote of some sort to an assembled group which includes M and A. The camera tracks away from their location and into an adjoining room as the man continues speaking before a cut takes the camera back to its starting location to show the characters laughing, presumably at some part of the anecdote that we did not hear. The tracking motion is repeated and as it moves into the adjoining room we can see M standing with the same group before he reappears at the opposite side of the frame in the next room.

Fig. 36. An example of how laws of causality and physical space are repeatedly broken.

It is a continuous shot with no visible edit making it appear that M is simultaneously listening to the anecdote in one room but also engaged in a conversation with X in the adjoining room. The short duration of the shot all but rules out the possibility that M walked quickly out of shot into next room particularly since he and X appear to be in mid-conversation by the time M enters the frame from the right. This may not appear unusual since the characters are attending a party in a hotel and appear to be mingling and moving freely around the rooms. However, the audio suggests that the anecdote being told in the next room has continued across both instances therefore it is unlikely that X could have taken the other man's place and also become engaged in a conversation with M in such a short space of time. If there had been a clear edit then we would be able to regard these moments as taking place at different

times in the same evening. Therefore, the film depicts events which are wholly inconsistent with spatial and temporal reality and must therefore be assessed using a different set of criteria and/or alternative narrative conventions. One possible interpretation is that we are being shown a flashback through a very subtle and disguised technique, but one that does not set up the temporal shift using conventional cues, something like the technique which features prominently in *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996) in which the present segues into the flashback with no detectable edit. There is little evidence elsewhere in the film to suggest that we should consider a flashback to be the most likely explanation, however; it is not a pattern that is repeated in the film, and the content of the dialogue does not set up such a transition. Apart from the fact that the assembled group are discussing a past event, the content of their dialogue does not link up with the subsequent scene in any way, nor are there any clear indicators of a temporal shift to an earlier time in the story. If we are to reject such a theory then we might opt to equate M's capabilities with the physical fracturing demonstrated by the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway;* an apparently magical (but ultimately unexplained) occurrence. Against this, however, is the fact that *Marienbad* does not display supernatural tropes nor does its tone resemble a film that is concerned with uncanny mysteries so we must therefore consider alternative explanations.

Towards the end of *Fight Club*, when Norton's character is made to realise that he and Durden are the same person, we are shown a variety of flashbacks which alternate between Durden as played by Norton but also by Pitt. We hear the latter say "naturally you're still wrestling with it so sometimes you're still you. Other times you imagine yourself watching me." Cognitive psychology uses the term *autonoetic consciousness* to denote the way in which we are able to place ourselves in a first-person perspective when we recall past events or place ourselves in future scenarios; which allows us, in Charles Fernyhough's words, to 'relive [past] moments from the inside.'[185] Fernyhough's analysis is primarily concerned with the age at which children develop the ability to form memories with a first-person perspective and the findings demonstrate the elasticity of consciousness in terms of how we can place (or displace) ourselves within our personal narratives. Skewing character perspective in this way is also common to the way in which we experience our sense of self in dreams, something which is evoked in the examples outlined in Fig. 35, as well as the character portrayals in films like *Fight Club* and *Lost Highway*.

Currie highlights the temporal ambiguity in the film and it is certainly apt to once again consider Oliver Sacks' phrase "moorings in time" in relation to *Marienbad* just as we did with *Memento*. The narrative shifts without warning from one apparent spatiotemporal location to another. By offering little or nothing for the viewer to latch on to that might serves as a fixed reference point, the narrative deflects our ability to build a gradual understanding of people, places, timespans, and events. This creates a spiralling sense of randomness, what in lay terms one might call 'madness', and the suffocating, all-encompassing subjective perspective might be regarded as something akin to Leonard's condition but seen from the 'inside'. Shifts and jumps in space and time might be seen as consistent with how we revise our own recollections, in the way that Leonard speaks of memory 'changing the shape of a room', but on a different reading this might also be considered consistent with everyday, almost routine neurological behaviour. Fernyhough writes:

> [T]he view that I want to explore…is that memory is more like a *habit*, a process of constructing something from its parts, in similar but subtly changing ways each time, whenever the occasion arises.[186]

Fig. 37. Repetition of similarly composed and framed shots helps reinforce the sense of temporal loops operating within the narrative.

His use of the phrase 'subtly changing ways each time' resonates with *Marienbad*'s repetition of similar shots in which key details are altered, such as in Fig. 39. The two shots are separated by roughly thirty minutes of running time but there is sufficient overlap of details to give the viewer a sense that they have seen this arrangement before, one may even wonder if it is the same scene being repeated. As we saw with the example from *Fight Club* in Chapter Three, it is easy to spot the differences between these shots when they are presented side by side but the filmmakers need only present a mostly congruent duplication of the earlier scene for the trick to be successful. We can see how the positioning within the frame of both X and M is carefully set up to contrast one against the other since they are both the middle individual of five in their respective setups. X is foregrounded through his lack of a tie, which shows how there is a strategy within the narrative to distinguish him from others characters. A key distinction, however, is that unlike in *Fight Club, Marienbad* is not presenting us with a denouement that works to unravel much of what has transpired and contradict certain narrative 'truths'. The repetition here does not constitute a twist, nor even signal a particularly telling moment that clarifies narrative ambiguity.

At the core of both *Memento* and *Marienbad* is a search for some item or detail that the protagonist (and by extension the viewer) can regard as a diegetically empirical truth. Leonard searches for a truth outside his own flawed consciousness and X strives for something similar. They each yearn for corroboration which will in turn validate their own existence by bolstering the spatiotemporal contexts that they each cling to. If the subjective perspective is vulnerable then the instinct may be to look elsewhere, to empirical reality, to find reassurance that one's actions, if not one's actual existence, are real. While *Memento* draws on the detective genre and amasses information in order to build a clear picture (of sorts), *Marienbad*'s central question is something of a red herring. In *Memento* we gradually acclimatise to the reverse chronology structure and get on board with the role of viewer-as-detective, carefully memorising key details just as Leonard does and adjusting to the fact that successive narrative segments are actually moving backwards through diegetic time. Asking the viewer to make such an adjustment is challenging but not too onerous and as I highlighted earlier, the director was at pains to keep 'redundancy' (to use Bordwell's term again) high and plot developments tight and linear. Ambiguity is minimised until the film's conclusion when it casts doubt over much of what has occurred up until that point. *Marienbad* also starts as it means to go on; however its departure from narrative norms and

mainstream techniques is far more extreme than *Memento*'s, and it is debatable whether or not one can adjust to its approach in the same way we are able to with *Memento*. As Currie puts it,

> [t]he problem with *Marienbad* is the degree of trade-off it demands; we can think of it as high in narrativity if we are willing to shift the burden of temporality almost entirely from what is represented concerning the story to what is expressed concerning the intentions behind the story.[187]

Currie's argument is that the viewer's task could be made easier if we accept that temporal relations with the diegesis are subordinate to what he calls 'the expression of authorial focus.'[188] On this reading, attempting to organise the story time into a coherent picture is something of a fool's errand, while focusing on how the film's structure foregrounds the process of manipulating cinematic time could be ultimately more rewarding. Time is not an irrelevance but rather the way in which the film explores questions concerning time - or memory or subjectivity depending on one's interpretation - is achieved as much through the structure as through the storyline. As we saw in the previous chapter, *Memento* achieves something similar in the way that its structure creates an epistemic link with Leonard, which distinguishes it from other films which are 'about memory' but which relate their tales using more conventional methods.

So far I have considered a variety ways in which the self-identity of characters can be regarded as fractured, and we may be inclined to think that a fracturing of personal identity should carry a negative connotation since it suggests trauma, injury, or some form of malfunction. Leonard in *Memento* and Fred in *Lost Highway* exist as damaged individuals whose psychologies are fractured and impaired through physical injury or emotional trauma, or a combination of both. There is scope, however, for an alternative way of regarding a selfhood as something fractured but in a way that does not necessitate a negative or unappealing connotation. If we place any degree of importance on memory as an important component of selfhood, then the concept of reconstructive memory theory provides a different way of regarding our psychological makeup and, by extension, the way in which selfhood can be conceptualised. Challenging what he sees as a folk psychological understanding of how memory operates, Fernyhough writes the following:

> Thinking differently about memory requires us to think differently about some of the 'truths' that are closest to the core of our selves…I want to argue against the view of memories as mental DVDs stored away in some library of the mind.[189]

Reconstructive memory theory posits that recollection involves memories being reassembled on demand from a number of different schema and neurological locations but, crucially, also involves a degree of revision and confabulation each time the memory is recalled. Thinking about memory in the way Fernyhough describes, as something prone to revision rather than a representation which is stored intact then retrieved when required, appears to be a neuropsychological confirmation of what Leonard holds up as the fundamental problem with an over-reliance on memory. In this context, a fractured self would be regarded as a perfectly normal entity, an almost unavoidable condition of personal existence and a way or regarding selfhood that has much in common with Hume's bundle theory. Equally, thinking of memory in this way, we can construe a parallel between the role of inference on the part of the film viewer and the concept of reconstructive memory – each makes use of imagination or suggestion to construct a coherent whole. In Chapter Three I mentioned Jerome Bruner's idea of 'going beyond the information given', which he uses to refer to the way in which we partially confabulate our autobiographical memory in order to build a self-narrative and understand our past; an idea which Bordwell develops to better understand how we bring our own inferences and ideas when watching films. In his essay, "The Viewer's Share"[190] and in Julian Hanich's "Omission, Suggestion, Completion,"[191] they each analyse the role of the viewer has in 'filling in' the various necessary, and at times deliberate, gaps that exist throughout film narratives. If we then extend this idea further to include the role of memory in the construction of self-identity, then we can see how we habitually form an approximation of film narratives and characters despite inherent gaps in our knowledge, just as we do with our own recollections. Daniel C. Dennett draws on scientific findings to put forward a similar argument in his article 'The Self as the Centre of Narrative Gravity':

> According to [Michael] Gazzaniga, the normal mind is *not* beautifully unified, but rather a problematically yoked-together bundle of partly autonomous systems. All parts of the mind are not

> equally accessible to each other at all times. These modules or systems sometimes have internal communication problems which they solve by various ingenious and devious routes.[192]

In *Marienbad* we are presented with a narrative structure that is highly sporadic in terms of how it organises its spatiotemporal environment, which is one aspect that makes it a challenging viewing experience. The way in which the constituent elements of the narrative are arranged resembles a mosaic, a cluster of fractured units which are put together in such an unconventional way that it reveals much about how we expect a film to behave. However, to label the narrative structure as challenging and unconventional does not necessarily mean that the same is true for its portrayal of characters. Reading the film in the context of Fernyhough's argument and Dennett's summary of Gazzaniga's findings, it could be said that what makes the film difficult as a viewing experience is the same thing that makes it an accurate portrayal of memory function. Currie suggests that '[p]erhaps narrative encourages us to think of the mind as more structured, more orderly, more robustly in control of circumstance than it really is.'[193] We need only pause for a few moments to realise how readily our minds leap forwards and backwards in time as we process experiences, retrieve memories, and imagine future scenarios. If one could portray such a mental process in a moving image might it not look frenetic and apparently random in the way that *Marienbad* does, even though it may not feel that way to the individual experiencing it? On the one hand we could regard *Marienbad* as an attempt to portray the erratic recollections of an individual's traumatised psyche in which the experiencer is displaced and replaced in a constant cycle of shifting perspectives and perpetual changes in space, time, and character appearance. As part of my analysis of *Memento* I looked at Oliver Sacks' account of the unfortunate patient he described as a "Humean being," [194], a man whose sense of his own identity seemed to be reborn every few minutes or even seconds. This process of perpetual revision could also be applied to our experience of watching *Marienbad* in the sense that the viewer attempts to find reliable narrative ground only for it to repeatedly fall away. On the other hand, the way in which the film alters the mise-en-scène without obvious narrative cues might also be regarded as an illustration of the standard 'reassemble on-demand' process of recollection that Fernyhough describes. If we subscribe to the interpretation that the entirety of *Marienbad* is X's subjective experiences then it may be wholly consistent to have repetition of certain moments we have already seen but with noticeable alterations. The reassembling of memory 'in similar but subtly changing ways each time'

makes the processing of *Marienbad*'s narrative much more straightforward and makes its host of ambiguities easier to reconcile. While on the one hand Sacks' patient scrambles around for any psychological prop he can use to reinforce his sense of self, the process of reimagining the past from disparate fragments is a mental process being carried out continuously in our daily lives. If we extend that idea to include philosophical discussions about the role of memory in self-identity then in a certain sense this reassembling of memories suggests a type of self with a greater level of fluidity and dynamism than we might ordinarily assume. If we accept that our psychological makeup is at least part of what constitutes our self-identity then of course memory will constitute a large proportion of what makes us who we are. We need not take Locke's position that memory is the essence who we are, but it is hard to deny that our sense of a lived past is at least part of who we are, or how we experience selfhood. That being the case, then flawed or inaccurate recollections as well as more reliable ones will be inseparable from the whole entity we refer to as 'memories', and as such it would follow that a certain proportion of our self-identity is built on inaccuracies and falsehoods. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, and need not denote a malfunction or be applied solely to tragic cases like Leonard in *Memento* or Sacks' patient. As Dennett, Currie, and Fernyhough have argued, the sense of psychological wholeness is perhaps illusory and in reality the mind, and therefore in part the self, is in a greater state of flux and is more piecemeal than we might appreciate. To exist and function 'normally' does not exclude the possibility that we are riddled with fractures, it is just that these are an inherent part of our psychological makeup of which we are not routinely aware. *Marienbad* is perhaps portraying the standard way in which we revisit memories and alter details without realising, but it appears erratic and confusing because of the gulf between the typical form and behaviour of a conventional narrative and that of a complex system like the human brain.

What partially works against this sort of reading is the area of commonality between *Lost Highway*, *Memento* and *Marienbad*: the implication that inconsistencies regarding recalled versions of events is in some way linked to the suppression of psychological trauma. Although Robbe-Grillet's script contains a scene depicting a rape, the film does not make this explicit, opting instead for a subtle implication and suggestion of violence and / or violation. The fact that the film is not direct about this detail allows room for different readings and as such invites the possibility that a structure and style that departs so radically

from mainstream filmmaking conventions may in contrast adhere to a view of memory that might actually be quite conventional. This theory only works as a partial explanation, however, and does not account for the foreboding tone of *Marienbad.* In line with what Tomasulo suggests, we could say that phenomenology acts as an inspiration for the film's structure and stylistic design, but the nature of the back-and-forth exchanges between X and M, verging at times on arguments and physical abuse, suggests otherwise. The tone of the film, as a result of the actors' performances and dialogue combined with the ominous soundtrack, is rarely light and often feels threatening and dark even if the root cause is unclear or uncued. For this reason, we are encouraged to doubt much of what we see and hear – in accordance with the way that X and A contradict one another – however moments such as when X shouts aggressively or when A screams as if seeming to recall something horrific, suggest that there really has been a trauma of some kind. As such, we should perhaps regard the film in its entirety as an attempted rendering of how memory operates shot through with the suggestion of psychological trauma and a damaged psychology; the origin of which is only ever implied and not explicitly illustrated as it is with Leonard in *Memento.*

The search for narrative clarity and reliable information about characters and events are fundamental processes, which we employ constantly when attempting to comprehend film narratives whether or not we are conscious of this mental activity. Carroll makes the same link that I have attempted to forge in this chapter when he compares *Marienbad* to *Memento*:

> *Memento* recalls *Last Year at Marienbad* [through how it] manages to make us aware of the degree to which our comprehension of narratives is organized around formulating tacit questions that we then expect the story to go on to answer. *Marienbad* provokes this insight by generating a plethora of questions…but then referains from answering any of them…Likewise…the narrative structure of *Memento* challenges spectators to make sense of it and, in the process, to observe introspectively the way in which they manage to accomplish this feat.'[195]

Memento to a certain extent thwarts our efforts, or at least makes our task more difficult, through devices such as an unreliable narrator located within a reverse narrative. *Last Year in Marienbad* goes further and its governing principles all but evaporate, with one of the film's defining features being its lack of adherence to any set of rules, even those which the film itself apparently establishes as being in

operation in its own diegetic world. While *Memento* strives to carefully define the nature of its protagonist's memory impairment, *Marienbad* perpetually deflects our efforts to glean meaning since there are insufficient reference points or spectatorial footholds with which we can contextualise individual scenes and sequences. Or, to put it more idiomatically, *Memento* spins a yarn before pulling the rug from under the viewer's feet, while *Marienbad* repeatedly pulls the rug and gives viewers barely enough time to get back to their feet. Just as the insulin injection / thigh pinching shots in *Memento* could be seen as an example of *Marienbad*'s style in microcosm, so too could Teddy's accusation that Leonard 'doesn't know who he is' be regarded as a concept which *Marienbad* extrapolates and explores for the entire film.

In the third and final section of this study, one issue I will be looking at is the phenomenological debate surrounding how we can or should best describe and categorise our sense of personal history. Part of the discourse on this subject revolves around Narrativism, which argues that the way in which autobiographical memory allows us to develop a sense of selfhood is comparable to the way in which a storyteller creates a narrative. The argument is that we as individuals are the protagonists of our own lifelong tales, which are continually being woven through a process of reflection on the life we have lived so far in order to make decisions and plans about the future. In the context of this debate, both *Memento* and *Marienbad* are useful tools for considering how applicable one type of narrative structure might be over another when considering both sides of the narrativist argument. *Memento* more explicitly outlines the damaged psychology of its protagonist, compared to the obliquely implied trauma suffered by A at the hands of X in *Marienbad*, and we have seen how the narrative structure is used as a framing device to try and replicate Leonard's memory impairment. However, perhaps this structure could also be seen as lending itself too readily to the idea that our creation of a self-narrative, our autobiographical memory, is assembled a way that is comparable to a linear story. Admittedly, *Memento* is atypical in terms of its reverse chronology, and it does contain non-linear elements such as flashbacks, but it is nonetheless more uni-directional than *Marienbad.* As we have seen in this chapter *Marienbad* could also be regarded as a less obvious but perhaps more fitting illustration of certain types of subjective processes even though it is not explicitly framed as dealing with trauma-induced memory impairment.

III
Stay with your Guide

Jessica Rabbit: *I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way*.

(*Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Robert Zemeckis, 1988)

In 'The Self as the Centre of Narrative Gravity', Daniel C. Dennett writes that an important difference between fictional selves and real selves is that 'a fictional character is usually encountered as a *fait accompli*.' [196] This idea is encapsulated in Jessica Rabbit's words above when she complains that she is destined to come across in a particular way because the creative and artistic decisions that went into making her existence a reality mean that she is 'locked-in' to her identity. Unlike real world selves, which go through a multitude of changes and evolutions, fictional characters are by their very nature pre-established and fixed entities, at least for the duration of the text we are consuming. Characters can of course evolve over the course of a given narrative, and they can be revisited and revised within subsequent works of fiction, such as sequels, prequels, or 're-imaginings'; but within its given storyline the fictional self needs to have been constructed in its entirety in order for us to consume the story in which the character appears. More often than not, certainly in many mainstream narrative films, a protagonist features as the focal point around which the story revolves, and in a sense this central character acts as the narrative spectator's 'guide.' If we put it in aviation terminology, the roll, pitch, and yaw of a central character's trajectory very often bends the narrative focus in a corresponding way. This very general description that does not account for the myriad nuances and complexities that a protagonist's arc can take during a film, but the analysis that follows in my final two chapters will add some more depth to this rather bare sketch. Like Dennett, I wish to explore the relationship between how we experience a sense of self and the function of characters in fiction narratives; something which is deftly alluded to in a celebrated passage from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* [197]:

> Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted

> candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection.

This passage uses the imagery of a scratched mirror to act as a metaphor for ego-centrism and the way in which we, as sentient individuals, cannot avoid experiencing the world from a first-person perspective and all of the self-interested motivations such a vantage point brings with it. On another level, the metaphor is a commentary on narratives and the characters who inhabit them, which is particularly poignant in the case of *Middlemarch* as it features an array of characters whose interpersonal relationships and inner lives are described in an extremely detailed way. Its relevance to my project will become clear in the two chapters which make up this third and final section of the current study, in which I will be looking at the relationship between a central character in film narratives and philosophical and psychological theories about personal identity. The focus of the chapters in this section will initially look closely at the function and development of fictional characters in general before exploring these questions in relation to central or leading characters in particular. The films that I will analyse across the following two chapters, *Mirror* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975) and *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006), are examples of non-mainstream filmmaking whose narratives are revealing about our attitudes to and expectations of how a lead character should be developed and sustained. The story of each film exhibits features that we have already encountered, such as bodily trauma and physical alteration of characters, fractured psychologies, and the portrayal of memory in all its capriciousness. In addition to these features, the films challenge our assumptions and expectations of how, and even if, a protagonist should be developed, which in turn opens up wider discussions about storytelling and self-identity and the extent to which our sense of self could (or should) be regarded as a narrative in its own right. I will explore how a establishing a clear protagonist is something of an assumption or expectation we bring to consuming fiction films, perhaps because we are limited to experiencing the world from only one perspective or maybe there is an inherent need for human beings to follow leaders rather than groups. Theoretical studies of narrative construction and character development find a close equivalent in certain schools of thought in which philosophy and cognitive psychology overlap. Narrative identity theory argues that we build a sense of

self-identity through being able to recall past experiences and also anticipate the future, and there are those who believe that this way of building a sense of self is comparable to or can be conceived in the same terms as a narrative. As I will illustrate, there is no consensus on this theory and there are others who deny that we understand our own identity through the stories we tell ourselves and each other, and that we act as the protagonists in our own narratives.

Through a detailed analysis of each film I will explore how the narratives upset and challenge the very idea of who or what it is that carries or guides a storyline, and what one can conclude from viewer expectations about the way in which we operate in the world as self-aware individuals. *Mirror* stands as a pertinent counter-example to a film like *Memento* as regards their respective narrative centres. Tarkovsky's film, like *Memento*, is structured in a way that mimics certain elements of its protagonist's psychology, although in the case of *Mirror* there is a noticeable contrast in terms of how its central character is established and portrayed. The film also shares common ground with *Lost Highway* and *Marienbad* through its use of doppelgängers and ambiguity surrounding memories, however the context and function of these techniques in *Mirror* opens an additional area of discussion in which the complexities of authorship and self-narrativising can be examined. In different ways, *Mirror* and *Inland Empire* also point at the artificiality of what we are seeing, and the very *fictionality* of characters is foregrounded and exposed. *Mirror* shares with *Inland Empire* the use of single actors for multiple roles; however it contrasts sharply with Lynch's film in the way that its protagonist is ambiguous or even non-existent, depending on your interpretation. With *Inland Empire*, on the other hand, we are able to see Laura Dern clearly in her various roles, but the narrative does not clearly establish when (or if) a transition from one character to another has taken place.

According to Bordwell's definition, the classical Hollywood narrative favours clear storytelling above all else and as such makes an effort to conceal and suppress the formal features which draw the viewer's attention towards the film's construction.[198] He qualifies this by pointing out that some passages in mainstream films, such as credit sequences, 'present information in highly self-conscious and omniscient fashion.' Although in this example, the classical narrative is perhaps borrowing from the theatre tradition - with the credit sequence representing the cinematic equivalent of a production's

accompanying programme and its conclusion representing the moment in which the curtain has fallen – it can still be perceived as clear moment of self-consciousness and a moment in which there is viewer awareness of artifice. By contrast, in art-cinema and *avant garde* narratives one can more readily find examples of films in which deliberate efforts have been made to highlight from within the diegesis the constructed nature of what is being shown, and even at times to directly involve and invoke the filmmakers themselves. Bordwell identifies the art cinema tradition as a body of work that is identifiable through its contrast with classical narrative norms, such as foregrounding rather than suppressing authorial choices and creative decisions. Some of the examples I have studied up to this point could be situated squarely within Bordwell's definition of art cinema - *Marienbad* in particular but also elements of *Lost Highway* and to a lesser extent *Memento* - and the films which will be the main focus in the next two chapters are no different.

Viewers, then, approach films with certain expectations about how a central character should or is likely to develop during the course a film, and these expectations pertain greatly to whichever particular genre or tradition a given film belongs. Jens Eder's summary of our expectations of character in the context of mainstream on the one hand, and independent realist films on the other, is a good place to start. What Eder terms 'independent realism' is equivalent to what Bordwell refers to as 'art cinema' or the 'art film', and he identifies many of the same key indicators regarding character construction as Bordwell:

> The mainstream film thus conveys an image of humanity that pictures humans as active, reflective, rational, emotional, morally unambiguous, comprehensible, coherent, and autonomous. The characters of independent realism…are by contrast more opaque, more ambivalent, difficult to understand, less dramatic, rather static, more inconsistent and passive than in mainstream film.[199]

Eder sets up clear dichotomies with his choice of adjectives and makes the assertion that the mainstream group will be more accessible and simplified than the characters that are typical of the 'independent realism' group. Naturally there will be examples in each group that do not match precisely Eder's description, but the dichotomy itself is hard to dispute and is clearly observable in films generally. For my purposes, some of Eder's descriptors are particularly useful: 'opaque, inconsistent, ambivalent'

vs. 'unambiguous, coherent, comprehensible.' David Bordwell asserts that films do not present us with '"real people"'[200] but argues that we are instead dealing with representations which resemble real people, and who for the most part provide the viewer with access to narratives by virtue of their status as 'a major "entry point" into our engagement with narratives,'[201] to use Smith's terminology. However, as Smith points out, it is essential that one acknowledges this 'entry point' as just that and no more, since to equate a work of fiction (and our responses to it) with reality would constitute a delusion and negates the narrative's status as a work of fiction outright.[202] Smith refutes the idea that we can at any point lose awareness of the fact that we are watching 'representations' as opposed to actual events taking place before our eyes. Even if the act of 'entering into' the storyline is momentarily forgotten or is perhaps only tacitly acknowledged, our real-world experiences will always be brought to bear on how we consume and respond to fictional narratives and the characters who inhabit them; and one of those experiences is the voluntary act of watching a fiction film.

Experiencing life as an individual dictates a necessarily self-oriented perspective on the world, and our ability to recall who we are enables us to operate successfully in the present, to reflect on the past, and plan for the future. In order to access and comprehend fictional narratives we tend to latch on to individual characters, particularly protagonists, primarily because agents such as these are the "best fit" in relation to how we interpret and operate in the real world. Even when we are presented with a narrative that contains no obvious or easily discernible characters the viewer will most likely project human-like properties onto whatever narrative details or evidence is available. David Bordwell writes how during the process of watching a film:

> [T]he critic scans the text for cues that answer to criteria for "personhood."' [and tends to] rank cues hierarchically, and at the top of the list are human agents performing actions[…]The character-as-person schema seems obvious because it is ours; it is us.[203]

Bordwell, Smith and Eder's positions provide a rationale for why viewers become absorbed in fiction film narratives, and why it is predominantly through the presence of characters that we do so. Their accounts also acknowledge the relative ways in which characters can appear more or less congruent with 'real people', while also continually being aware of the artificial nature of characters. If we broaden

this consideration to narratives in general, and not only fiction films, we can return to the argument with which I opened this introductory section.

The sense of our own individuality weaving its biography through time and space finds a recognisable fictional counterpart in the form of the protagonist, who acts as the viewer's guide through a narrative. This concept, generally referred to as the Narrativist approach in philosophy, compares our experiences and sense of selfhood with the way in which protagonists lead us through works of fiction. Dennett, who is one of many proponents of this approach, argues that real world selves contrast with fictional ones by virtue of the latter's 'pre-written' nature, a *fait accompli* which cannot be equated with the ever-developing changes we experience as we live and grow. However, this position chimes with the points made by Bordwell, Eder and Smith since it draws a similarity between real selves and fictional ones while keeping a healthy distance between the two. One notable dissenting voice arguing against the narrativist approach is Galen Strawson who sets out his counterarguments in his essay 'The Unstoried Life,'[204] and in the next two chapters I will look at how unconventional cinematic portrayals of protagonists are highly pertinent to the narrativist / anti-narrativist debate. I will draw on arguments laid out in the earlier chapters while also building on them by looking at key ideas about storytelling and self-narrativizing such as those put forward by Dennett and Strawson. Another principal theorist in this area of debate is the psychologist Dan P. McAdam. On the subject of selfhood and narrative identity, McAdam writes:

> Narrative identity is a *personal myth*. As such, it provides meaning and verisimilitude, more than it provides objective truth. We humans need meaning, perhaps even more than we need truth.[205]

If we reflect on this passage in relation to some of the points about memory, which I raised in Chapters 3 and 4, we can see the relevance of McAdam's argument. To call one's sense of a lived past a 'myth' clearly puts emphasis on the highly subjective and most likely inaccurate understanding of at least much of what we have said and done in our lives. However, McAdam is not positing that this is necessarily a bad thing, but rather arguing that it is an important part of our humanity and our ability to contextualise and make sense of our place in the world. As we will see in the final two chapters of this study, his mention of humans needing 'meaning' more than 'objective truth' will take on particular

significance in relation to the narratives of *Mirror* and *Inland Empire*. Each film contains imagery and character portrayals which present us with paradoxes of space, time and identity, and from which attempts at gleaning 'objective truth' is perhaps a wasted exercise. 'Objective' is a highly charged term and it suggests a sense of perspective that can be wholly relied upon (perhaps beyond the film content proper) and, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, we may struggle to gain such a vantage point. Furthermore, even if we 'downgrade' our search to merely 'diegetic truth', we encounter difficulties because of the fact that the links between scenes and the respective storylines of both *Mirror* and *Inland Empire* do not rely very substantially on a reliable cause-effect or goal-oriented narrative trajectory. However, with their emphasis on a remembered past and the relative clarity with which we can readily identify and 're-identify' the characters throughout the narratives resonate with the points McAdam makes. As we will see, aiming for 'verisimilitude' and the adoption of deeply subjective perspectives has implications for both the films' structures as well as their intelligibility; and much of our appreciation of what each film is communicating to the viewer might at times come down to whether we are seeking multiple meanings, or seeking literal truth.

5

The Invisible Self in *The Mirror*

Mirror (aka *The Mirror*) (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975) was described by the director as 'the remembrances of a man who recalls the most important moments in his life, a man dying and acquiring a conscience'.[206] This rather simplified description, however, reveals nothing of the complex and highly unconventional narrative style of what is a deeply personal film rooted in the director's own life experiences. In his retrospective essay on Tarkovsky's work, Nick James describes *Mirror* as being 'framed as the recollections of a dying poet, yet presented as quintessential dream logic.'[207] His mention of 'dream logic' refers not only to certain sequences which depict surreal imagery and events but also to the way in which the film is structured according to thematic links using a loose, associative pattern rather than a classical narrative paradigm built around a goal-oriented protagonist. The film ostensibly uses an unseen narrator as its guiding character and, as the quotes from Tarkovsky and James suggest, by framing the film's events through the lens of a remembered and (to a lesser extent) documented past, the film is imbued with significance that resonates strongly with key issues that I have examined up to this point. In this chapter I will examine the way in which narrative progression and character portrayal are inflected with qualities that resemble dreams and memories as a direct result of using personal experiences as the inspiration and framework for the narrative. The framing informs the structure, and events and can be used to reconcile some of the film's paradoxes, but the film is not narrated in a typical, theatrical style of a voiceover which interjects at key points to advance a story. I will consider the way in which the film engages with our expectations of character development, particularly how actors in dual roles and shifting perspectives within the diegeis interact in significant ways with the film's episodic structure and at times dreamlike sequencing. Beyond this I will then look to build on the arguments I have already made about issues concerning fictional characters and our self-identity. I will use my close analysis of *Mirror* to consider the similarities and differences between how we understand selfhood as a distinct entity and the

corresponding way in which we discern separateness of fictional characters and cohesiveness of the narratives they inhabit. I will aim to illustrate how *Mirror* can be seen as a representation of the *interdependence* of individuals and phenomena in the real world, and a vivid illustration of how a sense of separation and distinctiveness could be regarded as a relative concept.

The film is set in Russia and spans the periods before, during, and after World War II, with the only scene set in the diegetic present being that of a dying man whose face is never revealed and who we infer to be the narrator, Aleksey. The film does not explicitly identify the dying man as the disembodied voice we hear but we are able to build a gradual appreciation throughout the narrative that a large proportion of the film is comprised of Aleksey's memories and recollections. These often appear in the form of dreamlike digressions and fantasies and the words we hear him speak on his deathbed allude to the fact that these memories can be attributed to him. The narrative is highly episodic and displays little in the way of cross-cutting and parallel action across different locations, and although each scene is arranged in a linear way, the chronology of the film as a whole is not sequential and the spatio-temporal relationship between each segment is not immediately obvious. There is often no explicit signal to the viewer about when certain events are taking place nor how the events in one segment relate to those in others, and as such the viewer must be attentive to contextual details in order to build up an understanding of the various plot elements. You may say that this is a rudimentary, almost automatic process carried out when watching a conventional film, however in this case the typical narrative reference points we routinely cling to are oblique or suppressed, which makes the task more difficult. Of particular relevance for my purposes is the effect that such a narrative framework has on its portrayal of character identities, which is where I will turn my attention now.

In Chapter Three, I explored how *Memento*'s structure and the relative cohesion of its narrative events are influenced by Leonard as position as the film's 'filtering consciousness.' *Mirror*'s premise and the way in which it is framed make it comparable to this aspect of *Memento*. The comparison is mostly superficial, however, and in this chapter I will work through a number of sequences from *Mirror* to consider how its narrative style and character portrayals set the film apart from those I have looked at previously. The events are drawn primarily from the personal experiences and memories of Tarkovsky

himself and the unseen narrator operates as a loose representation of the director. If we take the film on the content of its narrative, rather than reading around the film about its production history, then it can appear as a general, universal reflection on childhood, family, memory, and life choices. However, there are small details inserted (at one point we see a poster for another of Tarkvosky's films),which hint at the fact that what we are seeing has an unusually personal connection to the director. In filmmaking there is a plethora of creative hands responsible for the creation of the fictional characters and the worlds they inhabit, and ordinarily we do not see these individuals on screen. The protagonist is the fictional tool that is employed by these creative agents to guide the viewer through the story, however there are times when character and author can be brought much more closely into alignment with each other. It is important to use caution when equating authorship with fictional agents since a collaborative process like filmmaking has many creative sources. Large portions of *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959), for example, are well-known to be depictions of the director's own childhood experiences, but as we have seen in Section II, time can cloud and embellish memories. It is perhaps safer, therefore, to acknowledge the inspiration or source for a particular storyline rather than ascribing wholesale accuracy and congruence with an individual person's experiences. As we will see, however, taking this approach in relation to *Mirror* only really applies up to a point, and this is because the film is deliberately designed to encourage a fusion or connection between filmmaker and narrator.

Degrees of Doubling

It is perhaps unsurprising that a film called *Mirror* should display doubling and repetition as prominent visual and thematic features. As I discussed in relation to *Lost Highway*, 'doubles' are a key feature of Freud's account of the uncanny and Lynch's film abounds with examples of uncanny doubling. In *Mirror* the shadow cast by Tarkovsky's real life on the narrative content is just one many examples of doubling, and the tone and narrative function is noticeably different from the portrayal of doppelgängers in *Lost Highway*. The film contains a broad spectrum of examples and one can see how the level of narrative information provided to help inform the likely motivation or meaning behind each instance varies considerably. We saw in Chapter Two how *Lost Highway* uses the Alice / Renee pairing, as played

by Patricia Arquette, to create a high degree of ambiguity over whether or not these figures are actually different characters, and in *Mirror* we can see the same technique being used but with notable differences regarding narrative context and function. In addition to this technique there are a number of other instances of duplication or repetition and taken as a whole these examples, which I will work through here, represent a spectrum of doubling made with varying degrees of subtlety. As with *Lost Highway* the most obvious instance of character duplication is achieved through the use of a single actor in more than one role, in particular the dual roles played by Margarita Terekhova and Ignat Danieltsev (Fig. 38). It is debatable whether or not the film displays clear enough identifiers to allow the viewer to make inferences about time periods, and therefore place the different incarnations of Terekhova and Danieltsev in an established chronology of some sort. Although there are few recognisable alterations to details such as clothing or hairstyles, the difference in locations and general diegetic content are the main sources required to help the viewer to distinguish the different characters from one another.

Fig. 38. (top) Margarita Terekhova as Aleksey's wife, Natalya, and Aleksey's mother, Maria. (bottom) Ignat Danieltsev as the narrator Aleksey's 12 year old self, and as Aleksey's son, Ignat.

We first encounter the character Maria in the scene after the prologue and credit sequence as she sits on a fence at her country cottage. We learn from the voiceover that this is the narrator's mother, pining for her husband who is fighting in the war. By the film's sixth scene Terekhova appears again, this

time in the role of the narrator's ex-wife, Natalya, in post-war Russia. In each case, the characters' hair, make-up and clothing display little to distinguish the different roles from one another, and it is primarily from the settings and dialogue that one is able to deduce that the actress is indeed playing more than one role. Similarly, the film introduces us to the character Ignat (Ignat Danieltsev) during a very short pre-credits scene in which we see him switch on a TV set and watch a programme about someone being cured of a debilitating stutter. The same character then appears in a scene during which he has a conversation with his father on the telephone, which leads on to an embedded flashback in which Danieltsev appears as his father's younger self. I will look in detail at these scenes later in this chapter but at this point it is sufficient to say that by casting the film in this way, Tarkovsky presents a particular challenge for the viewer as regards narrative comprehension. In Murray Smith's detailed analysis of two films that employ the opposite technique - *The Suspended Vocation* (Raúl Ruiz, 1978) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (Luis Buñuel, 1977) - he highlights how the use of two actors for a single role is a technique that can very often undermine 'basic narrative coherence,' depending on the amount of contextual explanation that is made available. In the case of *Mirror*, potential confusion caused by the use of the same actress to play two distinct characters is offset to a large extent by an exchange between Natalya and the narrator, which takes place as Natalya looks in the mirror with her reflection directly addressing the camera (Fig. 40, top left image). In this scene the camera adopts Aleksey's first-person perspective through the use of an optical POV shot, and we hear him say:

> "I always said that you resemble my mother…When I recall my childhood and my mother, somehow she always has your face."

Then shortly thereafter Natalya says:

> "I notice with horror how much Ignat is becoming like you."

Smith writes that when we are '[o]ffered no motivation at the levels of story, realism, or genre, the spectator reaches for what could be described as thematic motivation;'[208] and this would certainly be our instinct with *Mirror* even if the film did not highlight its own symbolism so explicitly. Based on this exchange of dialogue we might reasonably conclude that the conflation of four characters into two actors

appears to have a clear rationale. Even though the technique might appear jarring initially, we should be able to reconcile this detail quite easily since the characters articulate the resemblances they each perceive between mother and wife, or father and son. What is less conventional though is how the resemblances they describe have been rendered in a literal way by using the same actors for different roles. The dual roles played by Terekhova and Danieltsev is one of the film's more obvious examples of doubling, but there are other notable instances, which are perhaps less immediately striking but nonetheless make important stylistic and thematic contributions.

The film is riddled with subtle instances of doubling on a thematic level since it works as a commentary on subjects like familial and world history repeating themselves, reflections on one's life, and the processes involved in filmmaking and storytelling. Indeed, as I mentioned, reflections – and therefore doubles – are inherent in the title itself and feature throughout the narrative in different guises, and the nature of each instance is heavily influenced by the film's overarching premise and its unconventional structure. Tarkovsky, the film's other principal double, features as both filmmaker in the non-diegetic sense, but also as a functioning presence within the diegesis through the use of his own memories, life experiences, and family history as the source material for large portions of the film. The personal connection of the director is further reinforced through having his father, the poet Arsenii Tarkovsky, reading his own poetry on the voiceover, as well as having his mother appear variously as herself, as a substitute and inspiration for the character Maria, and as an unidentified caller at Natalya's apartment. These connections are not explicitly signalled within the narrative, but rather through knowledge of the production history, or perhaps a familiarity with Arsenii Tarkovsky's poetry. Viewer knowledge of course varies significantly across nations and time periods, and there may have been those who were already familiar with much of Tarkovsky's personal life and background at the time of the film's initial release. Even without such knowledge, however, the film is set up to encourage a deeper understanding of personal history more generally because of the way in which it 'universalises' the events and manages to communicate something personal but in a non-esoteric way. For example, the film opens with a narrator describing the old house they had always lived in, and the time they used to spend waiting for 'father', which in turn encourages us to believe the figure we see seated on the fence looking longingly across the field is 'mother'. Bordwell cites childhood and maternal imagery as frequently used cues in

biographical films,[209] whether or not the film depicts a real or fictional biography, and indeed the setting of *Mirror*'s opening scene – a log cabin in a rural location, and a strong suggestion of unhappiness in childhood – recalls *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), one of cinema's most renowned fictional biographies. Tarkovsky does not appear on camera nor does he provide the voice of the narrator, therefore his presence in the film is not of the sort we might associate with Woody Allen, Mel Brooks or Alfred Hitchcock. All of which serves to muddy the narrative water, so to speak, and raises the question over what sort of film we are seeing, since it does not strictly qualify as a straightforward biopic or dramatization of the director's life. While his influence is all around the fabric of the film, the obliqueness of the narrator's physical self and the fact that he acts as no more than a rough substitute for the director creates a sense that Tarkovsky is simultaneously present and absent throughout. Bordwell's analysis of art film narration is of particular relevance in relation to a film like *Mirror* as it displays many of the key features he identifies. He writes how, unlike the classical Hollywood narrative pattern, the art film 'hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision.'[210] For Bordwell, the type of narration that deviates from a more conventional pattern frequently has gaps which are unexplained, or characters who depart from the main thread and are never revisited, but crucially 'these very deviations are *placed*, resituated as realism…or authorial commentary.'[211]

In addition, amidst these instances of self-reference and character duplication, the narrative arguably displays a lack of a recognisable focal point or guide, or at least a traditional kind of central character, and it is this feature that is of most significance regarding my analyses across both chapters in this section. By looking in turn at the narrative structure and the content of certain scenes we can see how the film generates a multiplicity of meanings as well as a variety of contenders for authorship of the narrative's constituent parts.

Navigating Dreams and Memories

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, *Mirror* does not adhere to mainstream narrative principles of logic, causality, and temporal continuity, but rather resembles the fragmented structure of a dream or a series of recollections. The various shifts from one time and place to another are often

motivated by thematic links or an association of mood rather than direct cause and consequence. Additionally, although the motivation for details such as actors in dual roles is virtually spelt out by Aleksey during his exchange with Natalya, there are other moments in the film which draw more readily on other-worldly and quasi-supernatural tropes, for which a diegetic explanation cannot be so easily found. By looking first at the structure and narrative progression, a few examples show how details and information might entice the viewer to assemble an overall picture of the events, or at least glean meaning(s) from what is shown. In Chapter Two I looked at the work of James Peterson in relation to *Lost Highway*, and Peterson's problem solving approach to avant-garde films is equally applicable in the case of *Mirror*. As Peterson points out: 'some films are interesting precisely *because* they challenge rational expectations and try to outflank every effort to recuperate them into some sort of meaning.'[212] It is the obliqueness of the avant-garde film's imagery which holds much of its appeal and is what stimulates our curiosity and, as Peter Wuss writes, they very often make use of dream, memory and fractured narratives and make it:

> difficult to grasp relationships within their composition, and in some cases regularities in terms of narration can hardly be found; as a result, the interpretation of such works becomes increasingly arbitrary or itself takes on the blurred aspect of dreams.[213]

In one early scene we hear Aleksey's telephone conversation with his mother as the camera roams through an otherwise empty house. The use of a Steadicam is less consistent with an optical POV shot therefore it is unclear whether or not we should regard the frame as a rendering of Aleksey's POV, however the 'closeness' of his voice seems to suggest it is. The details of the phone call act as a means of exposition and temporal framing as well as to establish the tense and distant relationship the narrator appears to have with his mother. During their conversation, there are various details which the viewer can use as a means of linking events that we have already seen or will be shown later, as one routinely does when watching a film. Aleksey asks his mother which year the hay barn burnt down, which we can connect with a preceding scene in which we see this same event take place, while his mother mentions the death of an old colleague from the printing press, which is connected to the black and white sequence that will come directly afterwards (Fig. 39).

Fig. 39. Despite the absence of a typical narrative progression, the film scatters details that create links between distinct sequences.

At this point the viewer will be engaged in the process of trying to construct a chronology and will be on the lookout for new information that can be added to what has already been established. The fact that *Mirror* features a combination of dream sequences, memories, fantasies, and imagined past events, presents a challenge for the viewer, who must figure out what 'reality status' to attribute to each sequence. To complicate matters further, the film stock switches between colour and black-and-white, but with no definitive system regarding what each one denotes. In the case of *Memento*, by contrast, different timeframes are coded through the use of colour and black and white for distinct segments. A scene like the one in the printing press (Fig. 39, bottom right) is easily distinguishable from the news footage segments (Fig. 40) due to the clear difference in image quality, and it is obvious that the footage has been sourced rather than shot for the film. However, a later scene involving Terekhova as Natalya is shot in black-and-white, and although the scene has a noticeably different tint to the printing press sequence, this is sufficient to upset any attempt we might make at using a colour scheme as a way of classifying and categorising different time frames (Fig. 41).

Fig. 40. Newsreel footage of historical events (top image) are presented alongside more personal, subjective events (bottom image), although the precise connections are muted and oblique.

Fig. 41. Terekhova again as both Natalya and Maria: the use of black-and-white for both past and present scenes (albeit with noticeable differences in the respective tints) subtly contributes to the way in which their identities are conflated.

Some scenes appear unambiguously fantastical or dreamlike, while others pertain to a recognisable social reality but with intrusions of surreal or magical occurrences. The scene which follows Maria watching the burning barn begins with a young boy sitting up in bed and saying "Papa." This shot is repeated, but in black and white, before we cut to a shot of Maria washing her hair, and her husband

helping her rinse it. The editing suggests an eyeline match with the little boy however it becomes obvious that the sequence must be a dream or fantasy (Fig. 42). Shot in slow motion, we see Maria shake the water from her hair before the ceiling starts to collapse and it begins to rain indoors. She then walks from left to right while the camera pans with her until she exits the frame and we follow her reflection in a mirror that runs along the wall. Spatial continuity is then disrupted when Maria appears at the opposite side of the frame, pulling on a dressing gown. She then walks over to another mirror, and as she wipes the condensation away we can see that the reflection is of an old lady rather than the younger woman we can clearly identify standing before the mirror.

Fig. 42. The celebrated dream / fantasy sequence which once again blends mother and wife.

The scene conveys details whose significance will become more apparent as the film progresses, but at this point it stands in direct contrast to the preceding sequence, which adhered to a more recognisable 'real world' setting. Although the sequence is portrayed as unequivocal fantasy, it is not clear who the dreamer is since the more typical cues that precede such a segment are absent. In actual fact, the scene begins with a young boy waking up and getting out of bed, rather than showing a character falling asleep as we might expect. Furthermore, even if we are encouraged to attribute the dream to the

boy, he is never formally identified in the film, leaving the viewer to infer that he is an even younger incarnation of Aleksey.

In contrast, there are moments in the film which exhibit elements of dreamlike fantasy erupting from a more mundane realism, such as the scene in which Ignat is at home with his mother in their apartment (Fig. 43). As Natalya is getting ready to leave she accidentally spills the contents of her handbag and she and Ignat gather up the various things she has dropped. While crouched on the floor gathering coins, Ignat flinches and gasps saying that he felt an electric shock on his hand as it touched the floor, stating it felt 'as if it had already happened…but I've never been here before.' His reference to a sense of déjà-vu (more 'doubling') combines with a swelling note building on the soundtrack to add an eerie mood to the scene. After Natalya leaves, a woman and a maid suddenly appear in the next room, the latter serving tea to the woman who is seated at a dining table. Ignat appears shocked and recoils slightly, but when the woman asks him to "continue reading" he unquestioningly takes a book from the shelf and begins reading aloud. As the woman listens the room darkens momentarily, suggestive of a cloud passing in front of the sun, before the light increases and shadows are cast on the table once again.

Fig. 43. The mysterious appearance and disappearance of unnamed women in Ignat's home is unsettling and ghostly, but his reaction to them is strangely muted.

We hear a knock at the door and the woman tells Ignat to open it, which he does only to encounter an old lady who says she has the wrong address then leaves. When Ignat goes back inside the table and chair are empty, the two women having seemingly vanished as suddenly as they appeared. A receding

heat impression on the table suggests, however, that the woman and her cup of hot tea may not have been a product of Ignat's imagination; however the telephone rings and interrupts his musing on what has just happened.

Fig. 44. An unnamed lady is recognisable from the dream sequence in which she is linked to Natalya by way of a visual metaphor. However, the extra-diegetic knowledge that the she is played by Tarkovsky's mother adds another layer of symbolic significance.

The viewer may recognise the old lady who appears at the door as the same individual who was reflected in the mirror during the dream sequence (Fig. 44), and we may use the exchange between Natalya and Aleksey to infer that the narrator's mother and his ex-wife are once again being equated visually with one another. Her appearance at the door, however, is less easy to explain, unless the implication is that Maria is so estranged from Aleksey that her grandson Ignat does not even recognise her. Details and relationships between characters and segments are clarified to varying degrees, which is commonly the case with films that use subjective states such as dream and memories for their subject matter as well as narrative structure. These examples illustrate the variety of tactics the film employs and the way in which it segues from one scene to another using subtle transitions and narrative cues that are at times non-existent. The film not only moves seamlessly between dream, memory, and different sorts of diegetic reality, but also blends these elements within individual scenes. In turn, this pattern is mirrored by the way in which no single character is brought to the fore with a level of emphasis befitting a protagonist, meaning that our sense of a narrative fulcrum or focal point around which the events are organised appears elusive. In the introduction to this section I touched on the debate over self-narrativising to which theorists like Galen Strawson and Daniel C. Dennett have contributed, and it is worth looking at some of their arguments in the context of how *Mirror*'s dream-logic structure is

influenced by its use of a narrator's recollections as its framing premise. *Mirror* is a very useful test case in this area of debate because of the fact that we can identify the location of the narrative's 'guide' as being within the film's overarching context, but our capacity for keeping this individual in sight is supressed. This is partly achieved through the lack of a physical presence onto which we can ascribe the more conventional identifiers of a lead character, but also due to the fact that there is an interplay between narrator and director to an extent that we do not normally encounter in most mainstream narratives. *Mirror* can be used as a means of exposing and highlighting our habitual viewing strategies regarding expectations of character development, while the events of the film and the way there are presented also contributes (knowingly or otherwise) to the debate over 'self-narrativising'. As we will see, Strawson and Dennett are two theorists who take up opposing positions regarding the theory that we build a sense of self and a knowledge of our own past in a way that is comparable to a narrative we tell ourselves.

A Question of Perspective

The biographical subject matter of *Mirror* and the different ways in which Tarkvosky's presence permeates the narrative, resonate with certain philosophical viewpoints of selfhood and personal identity. In *The Subject of Experience*, Strawson takes up his strongly 'anti-narrativist' position by arguing against the popular conception that we experience and reflect upon our lives in a way that closely resembles how we consume fictional narratives. He objects to what he sees as a generalisation about how people perceive their lives, and argues that there are other kinds of people, like Strawson himself, for whom '[l]ife never assumes a story-like shape,' and who are 'anti-Narrative by fundamental constitution.' He writes:

> It's not just that the deliverances of memory are, for us, hopelessly piecemeal and disordered, even when we're trying to remember a temporally extended sequence of events. The point is more general. It concerns all parts of life, life's 'great shambles', in the American novelist Henry James's expression.[214]

In the area of critical film theory there has been considerable debate over recent decades about what should or should not be considered as a viable narrative. I have drawn on the significant

contributions of Bordwell, Carroll, Smith and Currie and I would regard my approach in this project as a continuation of that same tradition. Strawson's point about life assuming a 'story-like' shape versus 'life's "great shambles" need not be mutually exclusive, although this is what he seems to imply. We first have to ask: what does he mean by a 'story-like shape'? If we assume that he means a narrative that roughly follows a classical trajectory or paradigm then a film like *Mirror* would probably not qualify, which would in turn suggest that *Mirror* is not a story. Equally, what does Strawson mean by 'shambles'? Clearly the word itself would normally carry a negative connotation but Strawson is embracing 'life's great shambles' and celebrating the untidiness of our remembered past. For Strawson, one objection he holds is that narrative identity theory appears too neat to be applicable to real life, and he also objects to the implied universality of the claim that 'we story ourselves and we are our stories':

> They're not universal human truths even if they're true of some people, or even many, or most. Their proponents, the narrativists, are - at best - generalizing from their own case, in an all-too-human way.[215]

In his argument Strawson aims to create some distance between the way in which narrativists appear to experience life and his own experiences, which he maintains cannot be unique to him. He singles out Dennett as well as Sacks, McAdam, Velleman and Bruner as being guilty of this generalisation and oversimplification of life experiences and our sense of a lived past. Arguing against what he sees as the narrativist generalisation about how each person 'self-authors' or 'self-constitutes' their inner existence, he maintains that there are other individuals (like himself) 'who have no such emotion, and feel that their thoughts are things that just happen.'[216] Strawson finds the term 'shambles' to be 'a much better characterisation of the large-scale structure of human existence as we find it.'[217] It would appear that he is setting up an opposition in which 'story-like' equates to a traditional or mainstream form of narrative, while 'shambles' is the way he regards past events should be more accurately classified i.e. random, messy, disorganised and with no deliberate prioritising or hierarchies; we might therefore restate this dichotomy as 'random' or 'spontaneous' vs. 'controlled' or 'ordered'. For me, the scope afforded by Strawson's dichotomy of 'story' and 'shambles' invites the possibility that a narrative – even a narrative of selfhood – can be both story-like *and* shambolic. A shambolic story (in this restated way of using the

term) is not too difficult a concept to imagine and some narratives may appear more or less accessible or 'ordered' than others. In literature, the work of Henry James or Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* would qualify as just such a kind of narrative, as would examples from the nouveau roman movement, to which Alain Robbe-Grillet was a notable contributor. As we have seen, Robbe-Grillet's style is greatly in evidence in *Last Year in Marienbad* and clearly the film is tightly controlled, highly stylised, and displays considerable attention to detail regarding editing, continuity, lighting, performance, mise-en-scène, and costume. It is certainly not a 'shambles' if we take that term to mean a disorganised mess, however, *if* we overlook the negative connotation that the word carries and consider it instead as referring to the film's apparent randomness and spontaneous shifts in space, time and action, this might more accurately convey what I referred to as the film's 'organised chaos' in Chapter Four. We saw in my analysis of *Marienbad* and memory recall how it is possible to regard re-writing (or re-calling) as ordered and organised but simply in a way that is less traditional, less 'story-like'. The point made by Charles Fernyhough is that recent findings suggest memories are reassembled on demand rather than stored intact from the moment they are consolidated in the brain, and the former process may admittedly appear shambolic compared to the everyday understanding of how memory is stored and recalled. It is likely that Strawson might regard these sorts of narratives as being closer to what he feels is his sense of a lived past, and a necessary antidote to the neat autobiographical recollections he argues is typical of the narrativist approach; and it is for this reason also that I believe his 'shambolic' and 'story-like' opposition can be reconciled. Dennett provides a helpful starting point for considering *Mirror*'s narrative centre when he puts forward his argument that selfhood has certain things in common with another abstract but measurable concept: gravity. He writes:

> a self [like gravity] is an abstract object, a theorist's fiction…Unlike centers of gravity, whose sole property is their spatio-temporal position, selves have a spatio-temporal position that is only grossly defined.[218]

Both gravity and selves are generally held to exist even though neither is tangible, or as Dennett puts it, even though 'no one has ever seen or ever will see a center of gravity… no one has ever seen a self, either.[219] Unlike the *fait accompli* of fiction films, which necessarily simplify and pare-down their

characters (to vastly varying degrees of course), in order to communicate a story within a limited running time, real selves are less easy to pin down and examine. Dennett presents an argument that there is a commonality between the way in which we envisage selves and the way we create, define or understand fictional characters, which he contends is supported by the findings of neurologists who have studied the cases of split-brain patients. Dennett argues that self-identity is a fabrication generated by the human brain which is, in its most reduced definition, a massively complex biological machine. On our sense of personal history and our sense of being part of a self-narrative Dennett writes that:

> We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the center of that autobiography is one's *self*.[220]

In Hume's terms, this 'fictional character' is a non-existent aggregate result of his famous 'bundle of perceptions' that we call *consciousness* or *selfhood*, and Dennett seems to be in agreement insofar as he sees selfhood as an abstraction lacking any real substance. It is worth considering how films like *Mirror* might be situated within the story/shambles opposition set up by Strawson, particularly as regards the function of a leading character. Strawson objects to the position taken up by Dennett and others who he argues are 'at best, generalising from their own case, in an all-too-human way'[221] when they describe how their sense of self-identity resembles a narrative. Conversely, Dennett's reference to our life as a narrative in which '[t]he chief fictional character at the centre…is one's *self*'[222] does not necessarily imply any form of neatness nor that this concept is incompatible with seeing existence and selfhood as part of a 'shambles.' We are just able to glean meaning from the shambles, whether that is the reordered events of a film, or the reconstituted elements that combine to generate our sense of self. In the context of *Mirror*, consideration of the various perspectives that inhabit the film provides some helpful insights, particularly in light of the ideas put forward by Strawson and Dennett. Natasha Synessios writes that '[t]he film's uniting consciousness is the narrator, Alexei [sic], Tarkovsky's alter ego,'[223] and while it is true that Aleksey occupies a central role of sorts, I would argue that any unity his character brings to the narrative is of a very loose sort. If we look at another example from the film, we can see how it creates uncertainty over the subjective vantage points that operate within the narrative.

After the mysterious women vanish from Natalya's apartment, Ignat's father calls on the phone and during the conversation he mentions to his son how he was in love with a redhead whose lips were always blistered, and that his shell-shocked military instructor was keen on the same girl. What follows is a more recognizable flashback sequence, albeit with the anachronistic detail of Danieltsev being in the role of the young narrator once more (Fig. 45). As before, the use of Danieltsev in a dual role can be comfortably reconciled as the narrative has clearly signaled this to be symbolic of how similar Aleksey and his son are.

Fig. 45. Ignat listens to an anecdote told by his father over the phone, which triggers a flashback involving his father's younger self, also played by Danieltsev.

At the mention of this love interest we cut to 'a redhead' who is being watched from afar by the young Aleksey while he is engaged in military drills with a few other boys. We see the narrator's memory play out in what appears to be a standard flashback, although curiously neither young Aleksey nor the redhead play any meaningful part in the scene. Are we to assume that we are seeing an anecdote as it is being described by Aleksey to his son over the phone? If so then the young Aleksey is simply a passive observer of what turns out to be a fairly unhappy event involving an orphaned child and his shell-shocked drill instructor, while the initial motivation for the flashback (the love interest) plays no further role. The

way in which *Mirror* shifts perspective like this recalls the term *autonoetic consciousness*, which I used as part of my analysis of *Last Year in Marienbad*. The term denotes the ability to place oneself at the centre of a memory or dream as opposed to 'observing' the recollection from a third person perspective. Throughout the narrative, *Mirror* moves between these different modes; at times the camera adopts the narrator's perspective through the use of optical POV shots, such as the one in which Aleksey is speaking to Natalya as she looks in the mirror. At others he observes himself within the flashback, and in others still we see an event from a comparatively neutral perspective. The printing press scene, which I alluded to earlier, appears to be a flashback showing Maria rushing to her workplace in a panic. We see her interact with colleagues as she desperately checks the journal they have just published because Maria fears it contains a typing error. Her fears are unfounded, however she is then confronted by a female colleague who accuses Maria of being hysterical and unprofessional. Going by the evidence of who is in the scene, the time frame and the level of information we are given, we could only attribute this scene to Aleksey's subjectivity if it is classed as a constructed memory, presumably based on information given to him by his mother later in life. This cedes authorship to a certain extent from Aleksey to Maria and highlights how certain elements of the narrative originate in more characters than the narrator alone. Alternatively, if we grant that this is Aleksey's flashback then the details are the product of his consciousness and will therefore retain the imprints of his imagination, whether accurate or not.

When analyzing *Memento* in Chapter Four, I examined how Leonard is almost literally dependent on those around him to bolster his sense of who he is and to add meaning and relevance to his speech and actions, perhaps even to validate his very existence. *Mirror* operates on similar territory but in a more abstract way, by creating a multiplicity of perspectives and marrying it with a variety of narrative styles (dreams, memories, 'objective' reality', documentary footage). In Dennett's terms, each one could be regarded as their own 'chief fictional character', and this combination of perspectives seems entirely appropriate as it acknowledges the complexity inherent in the multitude of ways we experience reality but also in how we (mis)remember it. To my mind, *Mirror* could be seen as a rendering of Eliot's metaphor from *Middlemarch* by offering the flipside to Dennett's idea our self being the centre of a lifelong narrative. By offering multiple centres in the form of shared narrative perspectives, *Mirror* raises the point that one's sense of centrality is perhaps illusory, and is as much informed and created by those

around us as it is by our deep-rooted sense of life unfolding from a first-person perspective; it is just difficult to gain that level of experiential overview in real life.

The dual roles played by Terekhova and Danieltsev is the film's overt method for highlighting the relationship between character identity and selfhood, but this surface-level feature encourages more subtle, secondary considerations on the same subject. When watching *Mirror* it quickly becomes apparent that the narrative framing is crucial for explaining or compensating for certain narrative inconsistencies or irregularities. Events and images are shot through with the narrator's perspective and, by extension, Tarkovsky's, and it is debatable where we should draw the line in terms of what we consider the entirety of a given text or narrative. Extra-diegetic information is often brought to bear on how we interpret a particular film, and in some instances it is almost impossible to separate film from filmmaker. In the case of *Mirror* it is difficult to disregard Tarkovsky's personal connection without arriving at a fairly shallow and unsatisfactory appreciation of the film. The production history and directorial inspiration for the narrative events need to be taken into account as they illuminate key aspects of what we see, creating something of an antithetical situation to David Lynch's notoriously evasive responses to questions about his own films. At times, the imagery that Tarkovsky uses in *Mirror* is so specific and idiosyncratic – a girl whose lips always blister in the cold weather; a child mischievously pouring salt onto the family cat's head - that they appear to have been drawn almost inevitably from personal experience. On the other hand, the film features other tropes generally associated with biographical tales – long shots focusing on parents or parental figures, scenes witnessed from a child's perspective, a voiceover recalling events and locations from the past – which gives the film more universal appeal and scope. (Tarkovsky writes about a letter he received in which a woman wrote: 'Thank you for *Mirror*. My childhood was like that…only how did you know about it?'[224]) Greater familiarity with Tarkovsky's background and personal commentaries will not necessarily deliver for the viewer a comprehensive explanation and wholly unambiguous viewing experience, but it does help by encouraging the viewer to take the matter of perspective into account when watching, and perhaps be encouraged to learn more about the production history after a first viewing. For instance, during the scene in which the narrator speaks to his mother on the phone, a poster for *Andrei Rublev* is clearly visible on the wall, a detail which gently breaks the fourth wall by making a reference to Tarkovsky's career as a filmmaker. Similarly, the doubling of director with

narrator is echoed in ways that I have already examined, and combines with the roles Tarkovsky's parents have in the film. Consequently, when one considers how his recollections are indebted to other sources for their existence, Aleksey's presence and narrative clout appear diluted and unsubstantial. His physical presence is referred to but never seen in the scenes when we hear him speak, such as in the conversation with Natalya that I outlined earlier. For this reason, the organising hold that Aleksey has on the film is reduced to a point where even the term 'narrator' seems inappropriate, not least because the soundtrack is 'shared' with Arsenii Tarkosvky reading his poetry.

Contrary to Synessios' claim that '[t]he film's uniting consciousness is the narrator, Alexei [sic], Tarkovsky's alter ego,'[225] I maintain that identities in *Mirror* are all in some way tainted by indeterminacy of one form or another. Aleksey's 'lack' of a clear physical identity, combined with the doubling of roles by Terekhova and Danieltsev, make the viewer more skeptical about how solid and dependable character identities are. This effect is achieved by the fact that no character wields any more or less power than another, and rather it is actually the temporally and causally disparate features that are the overall 'guiding force' – such as it is. As Michael Dempsey writes:

> ...because neither Ignat nor his mother nor any other consciousness generates enough force or clarity, this vortex of images finally registers on our own memories like distant, faded recollection from past life (or movies) which, when re-examined, prove to be either distorted or even nonexistent. *The Mirror* finally speaks only dimly because nobody, nothing quite manages to take this boy's place as either an organizing principle or a center of consciousness.[226]

Where does that leave us, then, in the discussion about narrativity as it relates to both story-ness and self-identity?

Soul Searching

Strawson's argument against narrative identity theory rests on the assumption that what he calls 'bits and pieces' is mutually exclusive from a self-narrative, however if we take a concept like Hume's so-called 'bundle theory,' which I looked in in Section II, then it could be seen that the 'bits and pieces'

simply *are* the self – or rather, they are the by-product of something like Hume's 'bundle' which gives rise to what we refer to as our self. It need not be unified or whole in any empirical or tangible sense so long as it gives one the *impression* of being so, and whether this sense arises from bits and pieces or from an actual cohesive unified whole, the result may conceivably feel the same. Strawson seems to regard Dennett as belonging to a different camp – the narrativists, or diachronics - but to my mind there are similarities in each of their arguments insofar as they each identify a certain kind of fallacy or illusion inherent in the concept of self-narrativisation. Strawson sees the illusion as being the way in which our past experiences arrange themselves, the disconnect he feels towards them, and he draws a distinction between those individuals for whom a sense of self-history arranges itself like a narrative, and those who do not. He uses the terms 'diachronic' and 'episodic' to denote each of these groups, respectively and describes how he feels when reflecting on selfhood in the following way:

> [I]t seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the human being…I have no significant sense that *I* – the I now considering this question – was there in the further past.[227]

Unlike Leonard in *Memento,* Strawson is not declaring a break in his psychological connectedness but simply his sense of how the past (and future) 'present' themselves to him as he reflects on these questions. Describing himself as 'episodic' he asserts that

> this is not a failure of feeling [but] rather a fact about what I am…I know perfectly well that I have a past…and yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative.[228]

While for Dennett, the fallacy or illusion is not that our sense of personal history arranges itself like a narrative but rather it is the belief that one's self is unified in any way. Dennett writes that:

> Our component modules have to act in opportunistic but amazingly resourceful ways to produce a modicum of behavioral unity, *which is then enhanced by an illusion of greater unity*.[229]

We saw how in *Memento* Leonard is a more literal manifestation of what Oliver Sacks termed 'a "Humean" being'. Similarly with *Mirror,* Aleksey is a more subtle demonstration of how we could be

construed as no more than the sum of our perceptions and the thoughts, memories and opinions of ourselves and those around us. That is not to say that the existence of selves in any empirical sense is being disputed but rather their separateness and sense of independence is being questioned; the term *interdependence* may best describe the contingent reality that gives rise to all phenomena, discrete individual selves included. Just as individual segments of a film rely on its other component parts to add up to a cohesive whole, so too do all other phenomena exist in a symbiotic relationship of some sort, whether that is on a neurological or anthropological scale. Separateness is a relative concept while absolute unity and cohesion – of narratives, of characters, and of selves – is a matter of degree.

In this context and considering the notion of *non-selfhood*, it is quite fitting that the narrator in *Mirror* is for the most part physically absent, and Strawson's use of the term 'episodic' appears particularly charged. The film's structure is built around its concealed narrator's perceptions and memories, displaying collisions and duplications of character identities and historical and personal events, but without ever turning the mirror on the narrator himself. Scenes such as Aleksey's phone conversation with his mother or his conversation with Natalya looking in the mirror stand out as examples of the camera adopting the narrator's first-person perspective through the use of an optical POV shot, although the former is a little ambiguous. However, as Murray Smith points out, the use of this type of shot does not necessarily achieve the effect that is generally associated with it i.e. a greater level of access to a character's subjectivity. Smith calls this the 'fallacy of POV.'

> The fallacy is based on a simplistic, atomistic view of the function of optical POV shots. POV shots are considered to have a special effect in drawing us in to the subjectivity of a character, regardless of context.[230]

By working through some examples, Smith shows how the POV shot cannot be said to automatically give the viewer access to a character's subjectivity purely on the basis of positioning the frame in a first-person perspective. For instance, we might share a character's perspective and see what they are focusing on but that does not necessarily correspond to what they are thinking about, or even if there is a correlation we cannot guess at the nature of their thoughts (a shot of the character's facial expression would tell us more). In the case of *Mirror*, however, this is perhaps an entirely appropriate

stylistic choice. On one reading, the narrator adopting an optical POV shot is more than simply a formal technique but rather a strategic way of underlining the ethereal nature of the individual by favouring and emphasising its mental projections and memories. We see what the character is thinking but this is achieved through flashbacks from a more neutral, third-person perspective, or from a less-clearly cued subjective perspective. Crucially, also, we do not see the narrator's face so we do not see his reactions to anything he is discussing or dreaming or remembering – dream sequences are not followed by the narrator waking, for instance. Smith points out that 'character subjectivity is an emergent quality of the narration as a whole, not the product of any single technique,'[231] and in the case of Aleksey we have a character who remains relatively 'indeterminate' even when all of *Mirror*'s component parts are taken in their entirety.

In his analysis and attempt to define art-cinema, Bordwell identifies one of its characteristic features: 'Lacking identifiable stars and genres, art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text.'[232] This observation has particular resonance when applied to *Mirror* as it not only falls squarely within Bordwell's art-cinema category but it also satisfies the concept of unity-through-authorship in more ways than one. As my analysis has shown, the 'authorship' of *Mirror*, both in its entirety and its constituent parts, can be interpreted in different ways, with the director, the narrator, the narrator's recollections and the effect of other characters on what we are shown all staking a claim for some form of authorship. Does this bring about unity of the sort that Bordwell has in mind? Or is the acknowledgment of multiplicity and ambiguity the guiding principle that unifies the text? The answer, according to Bordwell's argument, could actually be neither, or both, since the art film manages to accommodate seemingly opposing approaches. The key is the 'device of ambiguity,'[233] which he argues is the unofficial slogan of art cinema narratives, and deliberate ambiguity is what allows us to ascribe some events or details to authorial expression and others to realist portrayals of complex characters or situations.

On one reading the film also highlights some of our expectations of how a storyline is more commonly guided and carried, namely through a central character of some kind. In Chapter One, as part of my analysis of *The Thing*, I mentioned how *Star Trek: First Contact* was the target of its fans' ire due to how it altered the established mythology of The Borg, the series' principal villain. Recasting the

collective so that they now followed a leader was seen by some as a sop to the producers' perceived expectations that antagonists and protagonists should always be represented by an individual character. In this respect, *Mirror* confounds expectations by presenting its narrative events in a more diffuse manner and eschewing the more robust guiding hand (or voice) present in mainstream narratives. Paradoxically, the film seems to satisfy the opposing viewpoints of Dennett and Strawson by endowing its 'central' character with a decentralised, almost ghostly presence, around which an 'anti-narrative' assemblage of events and images can be arranged. Just as *Mirror* bears witness to Tarkovsky's recollections, the 'piecemeal' souvenirs of an individual's life, it is housed within a medium which is itself indebted to this very same process. Selecting segments of time and space and putting them in sequence to hopefully give rise to something greater than the sum of its parts is a fundamental process in filmmaking; a process which Tarkovsky famously described as 'sculpting in time.'[234] Tarkovsky's retrospective theme in *Mirror* further highlights the way in which the process of filmmaking can resemble an act of gathering memorabilia in an attempt to shore up history against the ravages of time. A film narrative is by its very nature nothing more than 'bits and pieces' but if they are arranged in a particular way we perceive unity and glean meaning, and ascribe significance and a sense of concreteness to the characters and situations depicted within it. In Chapter Two I mentioned how Bordwell outlines the way in which the capacity for inference and an expectation of viewers' familiarity with film narratives are cornerstones of the entire business of making and watching films. A film narrative involves a complex process of organising events, which is mirrored by the efforts of the viewer to make sense of it. Even though the way in which events are presented in a fictional narrative do not resemble the way in which we experience life as it unfolds, it can nevertheless be seen as resembling the way in which we understand our place in history.

In the introduction to this section, I referred to a well-known passage from *Middlemarch*, which makes use of a metaphor (involving, quite fittingly, a mirror) to illustrate how human perception tends towards egocentricity and experiencing the world in a way which places one's self at the centre. *Middlemarch*, with its myriad characters and a narrative that is densely packed with competing individual concerns and psychologies, illustrates how a more detached view of the world envisages humanity as an enormous array of centres, constantly impacting on one another, each one regarding *their* perspective as the definitive one. There is an irony at the heart of *Mirror* because of how it manages to use a narrator

who is a rough substitute for the director in a narrative that is heavily imbued with Tarkovsky's personal experiences, and yet still manages to avoid establishing a clear protagonist. The narrative design democratises the focal point of the film by distributing storytelling perspectives amongst its characters in a way that is uncommon in mainstream, protagonist-led narratives. There are certain narratives, such *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003) which feature an ensemble cast with clearly established characters but also suppresses the emergence of a leading, central figure. *Identity* ultimately reveals that its array of characters are in fact housed within a single characters consciousness, and they merely represent different aspects of his personality. *Mirror* goes beyond this approach by creating characters that blend into one another, not in the grotesque, physical sense of *The Thing* nor in the sense of multiple personality disorder as portrayed in *Identity*, but through having their subjectivities merged and 'shared' by way of the perspectives that are adopted within the narrative. The result is that we are left with fleeting, nebulous echoes of characters rather than solid, dependable ones. This is partly achieved through the use of single actors for multiple roles but also by suppressing, in Smith's terms, 'recognition' and 'reidentification'. One way this is achieved is by obscuring physical indicators, such as the unseen narrator or the partially glimpsed figure on deathbed, but also by omitting proper names or other identifying contexts, such as the woman who appears to Ignat, and the children we see in the flashbacks to pre-war Russia. In addition, the use of more general events, such as Pushkin's letter to Chaadayev which Ignat reads aloud, the stock newsreel footage of significant world events, and Tarkovsky's customary imagery which marvels at the beauty of the natural world, softens the more personal elements of film and makes its scope more general and transcendent. In the next chapter, as part of my analysis of *Inland Empire*, I will outline how the central character of Lynch's film can be seen as a direct inversion of the way in which Aleksey is portrayed in *Mirror*.

6

Inland Empire and the Elusive Protagonist

> We as human beings never leave the stage and go home and live our lives in some more authentic and comfortable place.[235]

Any form of acting, role-playing or pretence relies on the ability to exit the fictional realm and rejoin reality, otherwise it either simply *is* reality or it is a delusion that is inseparable from it. As Dan P. McAdam points out in the above quotation, as social animals human beings exist on a perpetual stage from which there can be no exit, we merely shift register or modify our behaviour according to the specific situation or setting. These forms of 'social acting' are easily distinguished, more often than not, from what we might call 'professional acting' – we should be able to appreciate and understand when we are watching a performance in a play or a film as opposed to having a conversation with someone in the street. The ability to distinguish objective reality from a fictional one is an automatic mental process and if we cannot make this distinction then we would be regarded as suffering from a delusional mindset. In the opening chapters I alluded to the so-called 'paradox of fiction' - we sometimes react to representations of real events in fiction films as if they were simply real events. Murray Smith refutes this as 'fundamentally implausible' since 'the spectator must be aware of the representational status of a representation at all times in order to respond appropriately to it.'[236] As Smith points out, it is unlikely if not impossible that we ever mistakenly believe that the fiction film we are watching is indistinguishable from our real lives otherwise this would constitute a profound psychological malfunction. However, the prospect of such a notion points towards issues of great relevance to the arguments I will be putting forward in this chapter. I will be looking at *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006) in order to expand upon the ideas I explored in relation to *Mirror*, but also to draw in much of what has been discussed in each of the preceding chapters. Although the film does not engage with specific instances of physical rupturing

or mutation of the kind I examined in Section I, *Inland Empire* does explore the themes of boundaries and the limits of self-identity but in the context of fiction versus reality. Similarly, *Inland Empire* raises issues surrounding the potential unreliability of memory and the confusion that can arise when subjective and objective perspectives become blurred. In the world of fiction films, there is ample opportunity to not only build a story around the type of delusion implied by the paradox of fiction, but also to highlight the methods often used by filmmakers to seduce a viewer into something that *resembles* a blurring of fiction and reality. This feature lies at the heart of *Inland Empire*'s narrative and I will start my analysis by outlining the basic structure of the narrative to establish its constituent storyworlds, before turning my attention to the methods it uses to make the boundaries between these realms, and the characters who inhabit them, unclear. One collection of scenes in particular represents a significant turning point in the story and these will be examined in detail to show how the film establishes a number of irreconcilable diegetic paradoxes. I will highlight the ways in which *Inland Empire* touches on many of the same issues regarding self-identity and character portrayal I have so far explore, but with an added focus on the fabricated nature of a fictional character. I concluded Chapter Five by arguing that the protagonist of *Inland Empire* could be seen as a direct inversion of how Aleksey in *Mirror* is portrayed. Despite being products of quite different filmmaking traditions, *Inland Empire* exists as an ideal complement or counter-example to *Mirror* because of the way in which it obscures and problematizes the identity and nature of its leading character but, in contrast with Tarkovsky's film, this is achieved despite its protagonist being in plain sight throughout. My aim here is to examine how the film generates considerable ambiguity surrounding the identity of its protagonist and consider the potential effects this has on the direction of the plot and the viewer's capacity to decipher the narrative events. After this I will look at how the film is able to successfully avoid establishing a clear protagonist despite presenting us with narrative events in which a lead actor dominates the film's running time. Lastly, I will revisit the arguments about self-narrativising, which I raised in Chapter Five, to evaluate *Inland Empire*'s status in relation to *Mirror*'s method of character development and the questions it engages with regarding self-identity and storytelling.

The film is a comprised of a complex network of narrative strands spread across various times and locations, and the relationship between each of them is never clearly established. The principal

storyline involves the actress Nikki Grace (Laura Dern) who lives in a luxurious house in present day Los Angeles with her domineering husband, Piotrek. Nikki has been cast in the role of Susan (Sue) Blue in a Hollywood feature called *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, and we see the cast and crew setting up shots, discussing the script, promoting the film on TV programmes and so on. Nikki is starring in the film along with her co-star Devon Berk (Justin Theroux) who plays the male lead, Billy Side, and with whom she begins an illicit affair. As shooting continues, we see what appears to be a gradual breakdown in Nikki's psyche as she is unable to distinguish between the scenes of *Blue Tomorrows* (which also features an illicit affair between Billy and Sue) and those of her real life. Eventually, the narrative blends both of these elements so that it becomes difficult for the viewer to distinguish between them also. Aside from this storyline there is a narrative thread involving a group of prostitutes who variously appear in the snow-covered Polish city of Łódź in the 1930s, present day LA and also in the storyworld of *Blue Tomorrows.* The scenes in Poland involve a character credited as The Lost Girl (Karolina Gruszka), who appears to be imprisoned in a room watching a TV on which other scenes from *Inland Empire* appear. The Lost Girl is also involved with two menacing figures referred to as The Phantom and Janek, who appear to be responsible for her imprisonment. In another thread we are periodically shown what appears to be a bizarre sitcom involving anthropomorphised rabbit-humanoid hybrids whose abstract utterances and exchanges are accompanied by canned laughter. A parallel storyline is also developed involving Sue (or Nikki) reciting a monologue confession to a character credited as Mr K. The content of what she says is profane and disturbing, containing detailed anecdotes about childhood trauma, domestic violence and failed relationships. The connections between these various realms are unclear but we see characters move between them in a variety of ways, and we also encounter character duplication of the sort we see in *Lost Highway* and *Mirror*, some of which relates to actors playing more than one role. The trajectory of the plot moves between these different narrative strands, and they impact upon each other in ways that are not always explained, but the general pattern depicts Sue/Nikki becoming increasingly downtrodden and mentally fragmented. In its final segment the film, quite jarringly, returns us to the shooting of *Blue Tomorrows* and appears to unambiguously re-establish Nikki's identity as an actress playing a role in a film. However, as I will show in my analysis, this clarification does not remain unambiguous and the

distinction between the embedded diegesis and the framing story of Nikki's life in LA remains blurred right up to the film's conclusion.

Inland Empire is highly ambiguous in terms of the distinctions it draws between its various diegetic realms, and this is a principal method for blurring the lines between the film's primary diegetic reality and the embedded fiction of its film-within-a-film storyline. Although Laura Dern is clearly the lead actress in *Inland Empire*, the fact that she plays an actress who is in turn playing another character often makes it difficult to say with certainty who the principal character actually is; in fact it even makes the use of the word 'protagonist' a little misleading. The use of a single actor for multiple roles in the same film is not unusual in itself, however in this case the narrative does not always draw clear distinctions between the roles Dern is playing. As such, a paradoxical situation arises in which she stands out as the obvious candidate for the film's protagonist even though it is not always clear exactly who that person actually is. In this chapter I will consider how formal devices such as continuity, costume, performance, and narrative structure all combine to achieve this effect.

One can draw a parallel with *Mirror* in terms of narrative structure since both films share the same loose, associative way of constructing and assembling scene progression. Rather than having a goal-oriented plot, the causality and continuity of *Inland Empire* is difficult to identify and a principal factor behind this is that Lynch built his film from a number of different sources with the hope of finding a link between them during the filmmaking process. He writes about his belief in what he calls 'the unified field' and describes the spontaneity of how Krzysztof Majchrzak, who plays The Phantom, became involved in the film:

> I really had this feeling that if there's a Unified Field, there must be a unity between a Christmas tree bulb and this man from Poland…It's interesting to see how these unrelated things live together. And it gets your mind working. How do these things relate when they seem so far apart? It conjures up a third thing that almost unifies those first two.[237]

Although *Mirror* and *Inland Empire* contrast sharply as regards tone, themes, and narrative events, it is worth acknowledging that both films are structured in a way that at times evokes the

meandering randomness of dreams and memories. Furthermore, as can be seen from Lynch's account, even the filmmaking process itself was an organic, associative and semi-random one. The finished film was assembled from and grew out of a mixture of earlier work (such as the rabbits sections), improvised scenes, and a long, scripted monologue performed by Laura Dern who also co-wrote it with Lynch. As my analysis will show, this has a noticeable effect how we perceive and classify Dern's characters, particularly in the context of Daniel C. Dennett's description of fictional characters being a *fait accompli* compared to the ever-changing nature of real world selves.

From Mise-En-Abyme to Rabbit Hole

One of *Inland Empire*'s early scenes depicts what appears to be a prostitute meeting with a prospective client in a hotel room. Significantly, the woman's face is blurred out with a white haze (Fig. 46), which is perhaps an early signal that we are going to witness a film in which character identities are obscure(d) and problematic, although at this early stage we have no context in which to make such a claim. The murkiness of this sequence is followed by one of contrasting clarity as we shift to the narrative thread involving Nikki winning the starring role in *Blue Tomorrows*, which for the most part demonstrates a faithfulness to mainstream continuity and causality.

Fig. 46. One of the first characters we see has her identity obscured, perhaps laying down a marker of the many oblique moments yet to come.

The level of unambiguous information the viewer is provided with about the shooting of *Blue Tomorrows* is greater than that of other sequences and is arguably the most coherent of the various plot

elements. A story-within-a-story is a familiar plot device, with examples in cinema ranging from *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen, 1952) to *Living in Oblivion* (Tom DiCillo, 1995). We see various encounters between cast and crew behind the scenes on the set of *Blue Tomorrows,* and during a script reading session the director Kingsley (Jeremy Irons) reveals that the film is a remake of a Polish film called *47,* which was never finished as the lead actors were both murdered. Kingsley mentions that some people believed the film was cursed by a gypsy; he then makes an attempt to laugh off such a notion and reassure his lead actors. The scenes on the set of *Blue Tomorrows,* which mainly feature Nikki, Devon, Kingsley and Kingsley's assistant Freddy (Harry Dean Stanton), are readily identifiable as a film-within-a-film due to the use of a distinguishing lighting scheme, noticeably static camerawork, and, most obviously, the presence of the director and crew setting up and shooting the scenes (Fig. 47). In addition, Nikki and Devon speak with accents from the Southern US during scenes in *Blue Tomorrows,* which is another detail that distinguishes them somewhat from the characters they are playing.

Fig. 47. In the opening hour of Inland Empire, *the* Blue Tomorrows *production is clearly delineated from the framing narrative.*

There are clear parallels drawn between the *Blue Tomorrows* storyline and the actors' lives; Nikki is married and we can infer from warnings Devon receives from his agent that he has a habit of

having affairs with his female co-stars. However, we are not dealing with a straightforward meta-cinematic commentary on acting and the business of making Hollywood films, with *Blue Tomorrows* featuring as a neat *mise-en-abyme* within a broader frame called *Inland Empire*. The challenge soon becomes the lack of distinction between the scenes that are part of the film *Blue Tomorrows* and those that are part of the filmmaker's lives, which is to say *Inland Empire*'s diegetic reality. Common to Lynch's work is the friction between moments of clear storytelling which are then shot through with surreal and disturbing moments of uncanny imagery and events, and I will consider some of these moments to try and appreciate how the narrative threads collide and, crucially for my purposes, character identities begin to break down.

Early in the film Nikki receives a visit from a character credited as Visitor # 1 (Grace Zabriskie) who tells Nikki she is a new neighbour and has heard about the fact that Nikki is going to get the lead role in *Blue Tomorrows.* Much of their exchange is tense as Nikki tries to be polite and accommodating as her visitor talks cryptically and at times profanely while displaying an odd array of facial tics and mannerisms. The visitor recites "old tales" and talks about losing track of time and forgetfulness before finally saying to Nikki:

> Me, I can't seem to remember if it's today, two days from now, or yesterday. I suppose if it was 9:45, I'd think it was after midnight. For instance, if today was tomorrow, you wouldn't even remember that you owed on an unpaid bill. Actions do have consequences. And yet, there is the magic. If it was tomorrow, you would be sitting over there.

There is little the viewer can take from these lines at this stage other than assuming they will take on some significance later in the film. What is notable, however, is the way in which the sequence concludes (Fig. 48) as it introduces an additional surreal element suggesting how character identity is going to become destabilised as the film progresses. After the visitor states that Nikki "would be sitting over there," we cut to an optical POV shot showing her outstretched finger pointing towards an empty sofa on the opposite side of the room (Fig. 48, shot 4). A close up of Nikki shows her slowly, perhaps fearfully, turning her head to look across the room to where the visitor is pointing, before a cut shows Nikki now on the sofa, with two women seated next to her. There is no accompanying reverse shot to

show anything otherworldly or surreal such as Nikki in her previous location looking at herself from across the room, however the final shot is accompanied by an ominous chime on the soundtrack. Combined with Nikki's look of trepidation as she slowly turns her head in the penultimate shot, this sound generates an unsettling tone by adding a dark and eerie quality to the edit. The sequence also carries a suggestion of spatiotemporal fracturing not unlike Fred's encounter with the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*, when the latter appears to be in two places at once.

Fig. 48. The conclusion of Visitor #1's encounter with Nikki hints at the unsettling and unexplained occurrences that lie ahead.

This moment is merely a hint of something dark and unsettling and the tone gives way to a lighter mood in the scenes that follow as we see Nikki celebrate being offered the part in *Blue Tomorrows*, followed by the process of shooting the film getting underway. However, her encounter with Visitor #1 is an indication of the way in which *Inland Empire* will develop, and if we examine two more key sequences from the film's opening hour, we can see how it heads towards a gradual descent into a narrative 'rabbit hole' of ambiguity and uncertainty. The principal way in which this is achieved is by a gradual mingling and blending of the identities of Nikki and her character Sue so that the events of the former's life become interwoven and at times indistinguishable from the events of *Blue Tomorrows*.

Significantly, the blurring of identities is established not only as an apparent breakdown in Nikki's psyche but also in terms of the narrative itself. As further examples show, we can see how the increasing ambiguity over whether we are seeing Nikki or Sue is as much a question for Dern's character(s) as it is for the viewer.

In a number of preceding scenes we witness an emerging attraction between Nikki and Devon during their offscreen exchanges, as well as one moment at Nikki's house when her husband, Piotrek, issues a thinly-veiled threat to Devon that he should stay away from his wife. Shortly thereafter we cut to a scene that appears to show Nikki and Devon alone on an empty set following a day of filming. We can see the set from earlier (top images in Fig. 47) but it is now lit more darkly and a handheld shot is used, which is an important formal marker since up to this point the filmed scenes of *Blue Tomorrows* as seen through the camera on set have been static and presumably mounted on an apparatus. By contrast, a large proportion of the action taking place outside of the *Blue Tomorrows* diegesis have been shot using hand-held camerawork. All of which suggests that, in this particular scene, Nikki and Devon are on the film set from earlier but shooting has finished for the day. There is an exchange of dialogue between them, during which she confesses her suspicions that her husband 'knows about them' and that she fears he will kill them both. We are invited to draw the obvious parallel that Nikki and Devon have embarked on a real-life affair, which mirrors the infidelity of the *Blue Tomorrows* plot. Their exchange of dialogue is shown with the actors in extreme close-up, again consistent with scenes which have tracked the lives of Nikki and Devon in between shooting the film. At one point, Nikki suddenly breaks off with a gasp and a smile and exclaims how the conversation they are having "sounds like dialogue from [their] script," at which point we hear Kingsley shout "Cut!". It dawns on Nikki that she is in fact still in the middle of a take, Devon looks concerned at her confusion and as she backs off in fear, we see a shot of a camera off to one side, apparently filming their exchange while Kingsley angrily demands from offscreen to know what is happening on the set. The scene ends abruptly with no immediate resolution other than the subsequent scene in which Devon's agent expresses a concern that the story of a gypsy curse associated with *Blue Tomorrows* is having an adverse affect on Nikki's mental health.

What follows represents a culmination of the preceding sequences which indicate a gradual coming-apart of narrative cohesion in terms of how we distinguish Nikki from Sue, Devon from Billy, and the corresponding spatiotemporal layout and organisation of the *Inland Empire* and *Blue Tomorrows* storyworlds. The parallels drawn between Nikki and Devon's lives with those of Sue and Billy become increasingly blurred, something which is complemented by a corresponding lack of clarity about different locations and where they stand in relation to one another. One reason for this is a lack of establishing shots and an editing style that gives unclear indications about intervening action and the length of time that has elapsed between scenes. As John Orr writes:

> Of course the meaning of the relationship *between sequences*, those notorious Lynchian non-sequiturs, is anybody's guess. In this respect, the film is tougher to read than any of its predecessors.[238]

As we saw in Chapter Five, *Mirror* has a very segmented, episodic structure with little in the way of intervening action or direct causal connections. This does not necessarily impair our comprehension, however, since the meaning of the film is communicated through thematic links and associations rather than a relying on a goal-oriented storyline. *Inland Empire* also has a deficit of intervening action – those 'notorious Lynchian non-sequiturs' – but in this case the effect does impair our ability to achieve a narrative vantage point. The scene which follows Nikki's moment of confusion on set is a love scene that has almost no framing context, and it represents the first moment when Nikki and Sue's identities begin to conflate. We are not shown where this scene is set, all we can see it that it is a bedroom, but it is darkly lit and the image quality is grainy and low-resolution. Nikki's husband appears to be spying on her in bed with Devon (although he does nothing to intervene), and Piotrek's presence clearly invites the hypothesis that we are seeing Nikki cheating on him with Devon. However, their post-coital dialogue makes it very difficult to come to this conclusion:

> Nikki/Sue: "Remember that thing I told you. There's a story that happened yesterday, but I know it's tomorrow."
>
> Devon/Billy: "Don't make no sense."

Nikki/Sue: "It was that scene that we did yesterday. When I'm getting groceries for you with your car, and I was in that alley, and I parked the car. There's always parking there. So there I am –

Devon/Billy: "What? Sue, damn!"

Nikki/Sue: "It was a scene we did yesterday. You weren't in it. One when I'm in the alley, I'm going to get groceries for you, with your car, and I parked there 'cause there's always parking. You know the one? I see this writing on metal, and I start remembering something. This whole thing starts flooding in. This whole memory, I start to remember. And I don't know what it is. It's me. Devon, it's me Nikki.

Devon/Billy: 'Doesn't make any sense. What is this?'

Nikki/Sue: "It's me, Devon, it's me Nikki. Look at me you fucker!"

This scene compounds Nikki's earlier moment of panic after the shout of 'cut' from Kingsley makes her realise that she has mistaken a filmed scene for real life. In this instance, however, there is no such intervention and the ambiguity about character identities spills out further so that the viewer is left with a corresponding lack of certainty. Nikki's enigmatic words about a "story that happened yesterday, but I know it's tomorrow" evoke Visitor #1's cryptic utterances about time, while her insistence that she is Nikki even though Devon/Billy calls her Sue reinforces the identity confusion once more. From the viewer's perspective it is difficult to say with certainty whether or not this is a scene from *Blue Tomorrow*s or not since there is evidence on both sides; if this is a scene from Nikki's life then why is Devon calling her Sue? If it is a scene involving Sue and Billy then why is Nikki's husband present? These are, of course, irreconcilable contradictions, at least if we approach the film as we would a more conventional one. As it transpires, however, this moment is merely a narrative precipice before the film's various strands and associated characters begin to collide and communicate with one another in increasingly complex ways. As Robert Sinnerbrink puts it:

> These topologically communicating filmworlds now set the stage for the film's own vertiginous doubling; its nesting of interconnected cinematic worlds, multiple narrative lines, and blurring character identities.[239]

During the script reading sequence described earlier, we are given a cue to hypothesise about the potential route the storyline might take, by way of a gypsy curse backstory. Upon learning this detail, we might be tempted to see this as a signal that Nikki and Devon will meet a similar fate to those who played the lead roles in the original screenplay. However, it becomes apparent around the half-hour point that the narrative is operating on a much more abstract level, and that whatever is likely to befall the characters is not anchored in the relatively straightforward storyline of a cursed history repeating itself over time. As Sinnerbrink describes, just as this more conventional pattern becomes established, the narrative events begin to deviate and collide in jarring and confusing ways as the distinction between Nikki's life and that of Sue in *Blue Tomorrows* begins to deteriorate further. Significantly, at the same point that the narrative begins to lose its coherence, the film indicates that delusion and uncertainty about subjective identity will become a central theme.

It is after the bedroom scene that *Inland Empire* takes us over the precipice, as we cut to an external, hand-held shot in bright daylight with what appears to show us Nikki in an alleyway carrying shopping towards her parked car. She sees the letters 'Axxon N' scribbled writing on a metal door, and proceeds through the doorway to the darkened interior (Fig. 49). A discord is created by the fact that a hand-held shot is inconsistent with earlier shots of *Blue Tomorrows* scenes, but the details of the mise-en-scène – alleyway; carrying groceries to a parked car; writing on metal - are consistent with the description she gives to Devon of a scene she had been shooting.

Fig. 49. The preamble to the film's 'rabbit hole' moment. Lighting, camerawork, clothing and action might lead us to make the assumption that we are seeing Nikki and not Sue.

After she enters the doorway and emerges from the shadows, the narrative constructs a temporal loop as we see her looking at herself in the earlier scene where she and Devon are rehearsing dialogue from *Blue Tomorrows*, and during which they learn of the gypsy curse (Fig. 50). When we saw this scene the first time around, the conversation breaks off when they think they can hear somebody moving around in the darkened set behind them. Devon walks off to investigate, but he returns saying that he couldn't find anyone, which would indicate that the person the three of them heard creeping around the empty sets during their rehearsal was also Sue/Nikki. We are therefore confronted with the impossible reality that she was in both places simultaneously and have to adjust our approach to try and make narrative sense of this paradox; another moment that recalls *Lost Highway*. We see a repetition of Devon leaving the group to investigate the empty sets but this time there is an additional shot back towards Kingsley. It now shows an empty chair where Nikki had been sitting (Fig. 51), thereby compounding the confusion caused for the viewer by this paradox.

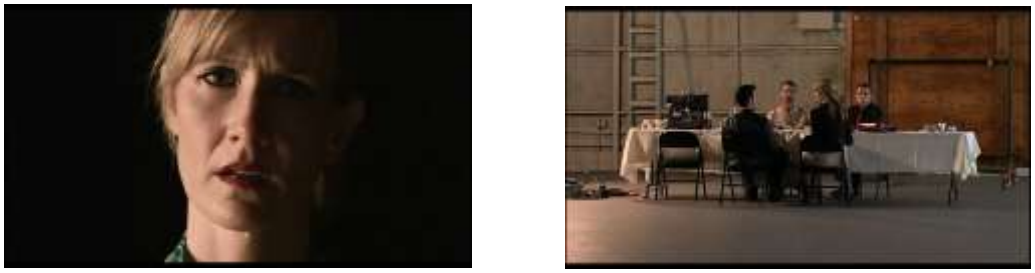

Fig. 50. The spatiotemporal paradox signals a disintegration of boundaries between embedded fiction and diegetic reality as well as between Nikki and her character Sue.

Fig. 51. The shot of Nikki from earlier is replaced by one in which she is absent, with no clear motivation from which the viewer can glean a reliable explanation. In the context of this sequence, however, it is only one of several inexplicable details.

The sequence concludes with Sue/Nikki being chased by Devon through the darkened set; at one point she stops to turn and sees her husband behind a window staring out at her. She becomes fearful and seems to shout to Devon (although she calls him Billy) before turning again to run. After taking refuge inside the little house from *Blue Tomorrows*, referred to as Smithy's house in the script, she looks around and it seems to dawn on her where she is. She frantically she tries to leave but the door is jammed, then she screams to Billy through the window but he (Devon) cannot see or hear her. He returns to his rehearsal as we saw him do in the scene first time around before the space outside the house dissolves and changes from the Devon looking in from film set to (presumably) the front garden of Smithy's house (Fig. 52).

Fig. 52. A pivotal moment takes place when Nikki/Sue appears to be physically transported from the film set into a concrete reality belonging to the world of Blue Tomorrows.

Her reaction suggests that she is unsettled by what she is seeing, strengthening the hypothesis that she is indeed still Nikki, despite the fact that she repeatedly referred to Devon as Billy. As she opens the door, she walks outside into what appears to be a genuine external location and not a film set; an apparent relocation into a physically distinct reality. Murray Smith asserts how 'realist texts require recognition as texts, and do not simply 'absorb' the spectator into the diegesis.'[240] In this instance, these words take on a literal manifestation and the distinction between Nikki and Sue collapses in on itself. She appears distressed at this occurrence, which suggests her relocation to what appears to be an actual world rather than the set of *Blue Tomorrows* is an unnatural occurrence. A clearly motivated and cued transition from a scene involving Nikki to a filmed scene of her acting in *Blue Tomorrows* would create no conflict for the viewer due to clear signposting. However, in this instance she seems as surprised as the viewer might be to see her being literally transported to the fictional world in which *Blue Tomorrows* takes place. In Chapter One I looked at Noël Carroll's definitions of monstrousness, and one point he makes is that a viewer is often cued by the facial expressions of characters when trying to determine if particular events upset the natural order of the diegesis or not. The reaction of Dern's character at this point would suggest that the change in location is an unnatural, magical occurrence, which may strengthen the hypothesis that she is Nikki and not Sue. As I discussed in Chapter Two, *Lost Highway* generates ambiguity over whether or not we should regard the transformation of Fred into Pete as a literal mutation or the delusional experience of a psychologically traumatised person. We have a similar scenario in *Inland Empire,* but on this occasion there is an added emphasis on reality versus fiction by virtue of a storyline involving acting and filmmaking, in contrast with *Lost Highway*'s suggestion of trauma-induced delusion. This is not to

say that the framework in *Inland Empire* does not imply that Nikki is hallucinating or experiencing a psychological breakdown of some sort, but the framing scenario of the *Blue Tomorrows* production arguably creates a more self-conscious viewing experience. If we look at a similar but fundamentally contrasting example, *Synecdoche, New York* (Charlie Kaufman, 2008), we can see how that film engages with a similar technique through the *mise-en-abyme* narrative structure in which a playwright constructs an epic production intended to cover his entire life to date and beyond. This process begins feeding off itself as the cast begin re-casting for a third production housed within their own one. The casting of some actors who genuinely look similar to one another adds to the effect, particularly since they begin relationships with their fictional counterparts even to the point of jeopardising the relationships with their actual partners. This is offset, however, by the fact that the film also casts actors as counterparts who are patently unlike one another, such as being much taller and thinner, or by having a woman portraying a male character (Fig. 53).

Fig. 53. Genuine resemblances between Emily Watson and Samantha Morton (left) are exploited in order to blur distinctions between characters. This is balanced out, however, by the contrast of characters who are clearly physically dissimilar, such as Dianne Wiest (right) and Tom Noonan (left) each playing Phillip Seymour Hoffman's character Caden in different 'versions' of his life.

Although the concept is a little dizzying, as we saw with *Memento* Kaufman's film can be grasped once its pattern is established and provided the viewer remains vigilant about how character identities are being manipulated and their distinctiveness blurred. There is also additional assistance provided through dialogue to keep the narrative thrust clear and by ensuring that the identity of its principal character - the real, original Cade – remains recognisable and free from any ambiguity. In the

case of *Inland Empire*, the moment when Sue and Nikki become intertwined signals a departure from the storyworld we have associated with the actress Nikki Grace and an arrival in a seemingly distinct realm in which Nikki may or may not be the character Susan Blue. I will now move on to look at exactly how the film makes it difficult for us to say exactly which character we are seeing at various points in the narrative and what conclusions the viewer is invited to draw.

"Look at me, and tell me if you've known me before."

Richard Wollheim devised the term 'twofoldness'[241] to describe the way in which we can (and usually do) look at representations in visual art and be simultaneously aware of its depicted scene as well as its status as a depiction. In his essay 'On the Twofoldness of Character,' Murray Smith considers Wollheim's concept in relation to fictional characters in a variety of modes of representation, but in relation to fiction films specifically he writes:

> One of the most routine and explicit ways in which we exhibit awareness of the configurational aspect of film characters is via their embodiment by performers, and stars in particular. We move fluidly between reference to the character, and to the actor or actress embodying the character; sometimes the difference matters, but it is the ease of movement between the two that is important here.[242]

Inland Empire is to a large extent playing with (and on) this cognitive process and the institutional viewing habits that the majority of cinemagoers deploy when consuming fiction film narratives. The ability to rapidly shift between seeing actor and character simultaneously without any detriment to our viewing experience is foregrounded by the jarring conflation of Laura Dern's portrayals of both Nikki and Sue. In '*Engaging Characters:* Further Reflections', Smith writes that 'seeing [characters] at once as (more or less realistic) representations of persons and as artifacts in their own right…enables us to understand fictions which foreground…this duality.'[243] *Inland Empire* is one such fiction as it wrong-foots the viewer and draws attention to the techniques involved in identifying and developing an understanding of characters. A similar example can be found in Abbas Kiarostami's

Certified Copy (2010) when the two lead characters, Elle and James, begin their acquaintance as apparent strangers only to segue into familiarity with one another suggesting they are actually married. Their conversation is unbroken and inexplicable changes, such as James suddenly being able to speak French and Italian, are woven seamlessly into the action with no clear (literal) explanation. Similarly, in *Inland Empire*, there are few (if any) clear indicators after the moment when Nikki appears to be drawn into the world of *Blue Tomorrows* that we can use to determine if or when Dern is playing Nikki or Sue. These oblique, elliptical transformations - the exact opposite of the graphic, explicit transformations I examined in relation to *The Thing* – are a manifestation of the 'fluid referencing' of characters Smith develops from Wollheim's twofoldness idea. In a similar way to *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) and *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette, 1974), we can see in *Inland Empire* that a character transition of sorts has occurred but lack the narrative information to fully reconcile it with other aspects of the story; the 'fluid referencing' effect acts *against* our attempts to identify characters clearly.

As a way of trying to unpick how the fabric of a narrative could provoke this sort of response, it makes sense to look in the first instance towards the figure who would, in a normal case, be the storyline's guiding figure - which is to say, the protagonist; in this case Sue/Nikki. Even if we cannot always determine which character is which, Sue/Nikki is clearly the fulcrum around which the majority of events revolve, so it is logical to work through the markers we habitually use for identifying and tracing the existence of individuals, both in real life and in film. In Smith's terms, we can easily 'individuate' and 're-identify'[244] the actress Laura Dern, but it is less straightforward to for us to determine which character she is portraying. In Dominic Power's review of the film he summarises the progression(s) of, and transitions between, Dern's character(s) in the following way:

> Gradually the role of Susie Blue changes from confident housewife to a violent drifter, battered and abused by life. Laura Dern delivers the performance of her life, playing differing aspects of a shattered personality with absolute conviction, mixing sweetness and vulnerability with disillusion and despair.[245]

This is a useful description insofar as it oversimplifies the narrative and insufficiently conveys how disorienting the unmotivated changes of location and appearance are. The description suggests that

Dern plays a single character with an easily distinguishable sub-character embedded in a separate fictional layer. The description also suggests a linear progression when in fact the changes are more sudden and erratic than the gradual degradation he describes. As part of the viewing process, and in our efforts to discern and keep track of certain characters, we habitually attempt to associate specific individuals within a particular place and time since a clear spatio-temporal location can help reinforce physical identifiers and behavioural characteristics we have come to recognise in relation to a particular character. The opening scenes portray Nikki with a particular lighting scheme and her general appearance – hair, makeup, clothing – as well as her surroundings all give the impression of an affluent, successful individual.

Fig. 54. Nikki is portrayed with a particularly 'polished' appearance in the opening hour of the film but appears noticeably different in a number of scenes following her 'entry' into the world of Blue Tomorrows *via Smithy's house on the film set.*

In contrast, in many of the sequences which follow the transition into the world of *Blue Tomorrows*, Sue/Nikki appears dishevelled, dirty, wearing tattered, drab clothing and displaying signs of injury such as blood and bruises on her face (Fig. 54). However, the narrative does not set up a simple dichotomy between Sue and Nikki whereby we can rely on external physical identifiers to conclude that clean and well-groomed equals Nikki, while battered and unkempt equals Sue. After we see Nikki/Sue being drawn into the fictional realm of *Blue Tomorrows*, she tentatively begins to explore her surroundings after she realises that there is no immediate way back to the film set. The viewer, being offered no alternative perspective within the diegesis, has no option but to follow her, and at this stage we must make use of the limited information available to draw distinctions between the different realms of the film and form plausible hypotheses and explanations. However, as Michael Atkinson wrote in his

review of *Inland Empire:* '[T]he film behaves like a narrative deprivation tank, forcing you to scramble for corollaries,'[246] and such corollaries are in short supply at this point. On a superficial level one might latch on to a detail like clothing and speculate that the person we are witnessing in Smithy's house is indeed Sue because we have seen her portrayed unambiguously in the role of Sue wearing the clothing she is in now. However, we have also seen her unambiguously as Nikki on the set in between takes and still wearing her character's outfit so this is hardly conclusive, although even if this were a reliable way of distinguishing them, the narrative's subsequent turns makes the task even more difficult.

The film's supporting cast is also used to compound the sense of unstable and duplicated character identities. Mirroring the conflation of Nikki and Sue are the different incarnations of Nikki's husband, who appears as Piotrek in Nikki's 'real world,' but also as the character Smithy in *Blue Tomorrows* and as an unnamed man in the scenes from 1930's Poland (Fig. 55). As Piotrek he is dressed in expensive clothing and appears confident and domineering, while the scenes in Smithy's house show him as downtrodden, lacking in confidence and dressed in cheap, drab clothing. Common to both realms, however, is his violent and obsessive jealousy fuelled by a suspicion that his wife is being unfaithful.

Fig. 55. Piotrek/Smithy (Peter J. Lucas) has multiple incarnations and appears on separate occasions as Nikki's husband, as Smithy in Blue Tomorrows*, and also as the unnamed man in 'old world' Poland.*

As part of my analysis of *The Thing* in Chapter One I looked at how the cast features a number of individuals who have a passing resemblance to one another and/or are shot and styled in a particular way that may cause them to blend into one another in terms of how we perceive and remember them. A similar device is used in *Inland Empire* to add an additional, more subtle element of identity confusion by featuring a variety of actors who are similar in physical appearance. One element of the *Blue Tomorrows* narrative thread involves Billy's jealous wife Doris (Julia Ormond) who is plotting to kill Sue/Nikki because of her affair with Billy. The way in which she is framed, along with her hairstyle,

bears a resemblance to The Lost Girl, who we periodically see crying and watching the TV set showing what we the viewers are also seeing. In addition, Sue/Nikki has an encounter with another strange caller, identified as Visitor #2 (Mary Steenburgen), when she is in Smithy's house. She too is shot using similar framing and low lighting, and has a similar hairstyle, adding a sense of déjà-vu which resonates with the theme of history repeating itself (Fig. 56). Another technique that contributes to the viewer's sense of disorientation is the extensive use of medium shots and close-ups, which is ironic given that close-ups are often used to clearly identify the facial expressions and appearance of a particular character. While they do achieve this effect, these types of shots also limit the viewer's ability to clearly see the characters' surrounding environments.

Fig. 56. Some of the film's supporting characters are framed and arranged with similarities, which adds to the sense that characters are doubled or linked in some way. The technique recalls the associative doubling that is set up between Fred and Pete in Lost Highway *through repetition of shot compositions* (Fig. 14).

Ambiguities surrounding character identities are echoed by a corresponding vagueness regarding the film's spatial boundaries. As with *Lost Highway*, the narrative creates paradoxes of space and time by constructing temporal loops with the result that characters seem to exist in more than one place at once, events within the narrative appear to repeat themselves, and the chronology is seemingly reconfigured and revised as the film progresses. Robert Sinnerbrink identifies the prevalence of recording equipment as a narrative motif – 'Gramophone needles, movie cameras, DV cameras, even the strange *camera obscura* using cigarette and silk screen' – and as well as acting as symbolic commentaries on technology, each of these objects also functions as a doorway or portal within the various narrative threads. Furthermore, there is a permeability and porousness between these realms which combines with the film's premise to heighten the ambiguity about its diegetic laws. As Anna Schaffner observes:

> the boundaries between acting and non-acting, between the film within the film we are watching and films that are watched by characters within the film, are rendered fluid; the structure is labyrinthine, Chinese-box-like, but with boxes that are not clearly separable from each other.[247]

One such moment of transportation occurs after Nikki/Sue has been drawn into the world of *Blue Tomorrows* and we see her increasingly wretched existence in 'Smithy's house'. As she sits on the floor during a scene for which we have little context, a group of prostitutes mysteriously appear in the room with her, cackling and shining torches in one another's faces. They speak to Nikki but their words are cryptic and gradually Nikki is reduced to tears before we hear one of them say to her: "In the future, you'll be dreaming, in a kind of sleep. When you open your eyes, someone familiar will be there." She begins to sob and covers her face with her hands, and as she takes them away we cut to an optical POV shot showing her hands as they move aside to reveal a snow-covered Polish city street to where she has been transported, along with two of the prostitutes (Fig. 57).

Fig. 57. Just as the narrative appears to be establishing the world of Blue Tomorrows, *Sue/Nikki is once again transported and, as before, seems as bewildered by the change in her surroundings as she did the first time around.*

As before, she appears fearful and disoriented, which helps sustain the sense that 'the confusion of the spectator is shared by Nikki/Sue herself,'[248] which in turn motivates the viewer to reach for a less conventional interpretation. Atkinson argues that 'Lynch seems to have constructed the film deliberately to evade the butterfly nets of critical response altogether,'[249] but I would argue that this is probably too

extreme a position to take. In his article, Orr articulates the obvious questions that would arise for the viewer after we see Sue/Nikki transported to the scene in Poland when he asks:

> Is this then the 1930s, the time of the original Polish film of which the present Hollywood film, starring Laura Dern and directed by Jeremy Irons, is a remake? The film that never got finished because its lead actors were murdered? […] We shall never know.[250]

Orr's reaction to the film's puzzles reveals the feeling of resignation that might be typical of some viewers, which makes it clear that we must adopt a less literal way of processing the narrative events. Before Sue/Nikki is transported from Smithy's house to Poland we hear one of the prostitutes say to her: "Look at us and tell us if you've know us before." Encapsulated in this simple sentence is the very essence of the key viewing habit that Smith calls 're-identification'; with each new scene we attempt (amongst other things) to recognise characters who are continuous with ones we have seen previously, and place them in the context of what we have seen earlier in the narrative. It is an articulation of what we routinely do without necessarily being aware of it, although in the context of *Inland Empire*'s disorienting spatio-temporal shifts it comes across almost like a challenge, a gauntlet being thrown down to the viewer. Much like the experience we may have when watching *Marienbad*, narrative footholds that we can use to build context and meaning do not offer themselves up readily, if at all. Much like *Marienbad*'s almost obsessive repetition of dialogue referring to memory, *Inland Empire*'s characters vocalise an uncertainty or curiosity about who they each are, but the narrative events do not advance towards clarity of character identity any more than *Marienbad* settles on an unambiguous recollection of events in its storyline. However, again like *Marienbad*, as well as *Lost Highway*, *Inland Empire* seems to dangle tantalising narrative clues inviting the viewer to gather information, problem solve and decipher the unfolding events. A certain proportion of sequences in the film contain causal links to one another and adhere to principles of spatio-temporal continuity, and there are a number of recurring motifs and characters who appear in different incarnations throughout. For example, the film opens with a black and white shot of a spinning gramophone turntable and we hear an announcer on scratchy audio say: "*Axxon N*. The longest running radio play in history. Tonight, continuing in the Baltic region, a grey winter day in an old hotel…" The mention of 'the Baltic region' creates a link with the scenes in Poland and the

numerous Polish characters, such as Nikki's husband Piotrek, and we can also link the mention of 'Axxon N' with the moment we see the same word scrawled on the metal door in the alleyway. This gives the impression that enough motifs are littered throughout the narrative to create links between scenes, however tenuous and mysterious they are. Although some critical responses, like that of Power, warn that if we 'look for linear development, a conventional three-act structure or any kind of allegory... you will be disappointed.'[251] Power's point suggests that, to avoid disappointment, we must deliberately *not* seek a 'conventional three-act structure or allegory,' however on the latter point this is too rigid an approach to take. An allegorical interpretation is a much more flexible hermeneutic method and allows for a different way of reading a text than simply extracting the surface meaning from a typical goal-oriented narrative. In his article comparing the work of Lynch and Krzysztof Kieślowski, Orr declares the following about the narrative structure of *Inland Empire*:

> This is not simply a forking-path device of 'network narratives' whose plot-lines, in Bordwell's formulation, finally converge to 'work out' a solution to the puzzle of chance and coincidence, a typical Hollywood third-act device like we find in *Magnolia* (1999) and in *Crash* (2004)…but a deeper meditation on what mysteriously connects all of us as humans to one other…[252]

As part of my analysis of *Memento* in Chapter Two I highlighted the way in which the chronology of the black-and-white sequences, in which we see Leonard speaking on the phone to an unknown caller, is finally revealed and provides the key to the film's reverse structure. The sequence in which we see Leonard go from his motel room to the place where he kills Dodd gradually changes from black-and-white to colour and establishes a link between this moment and the other sequences, and at that point *Memento*'s structure is laid bare and we are able to appreciate the 'hairpin' design of the narrative. By contrast, in *Inland Empire*, we periodically cut to Sue/Nikki's monologue and we hear her profane confessions to the character credited as Mr K as she is seated at a table in a bare, darkened room. In this case there is no spatio-temporal context within which we can place these scenes, and therefore we have insufficient narrative information for determining whether this is Sue or Nikki that we are seeing. Her appearance is dishevelled and her face is bruised, although the anecdotes she tells gradually begin to resonate with other sequences that might otherwise appear similarly isolated or lacking in context.

Fig. 58. The narrative is punctuated by Sue/Nikki's 'confessions' to the mysterious Mr K, but the context for her being there is vague and remains unexplained.

However, at this point the only reference we have to Mr K's room is its link to the diegetic world of the rabbit sitcom when we see one of the figures enter the same room and sit at the desk before Sue/Nikki arrives (Fig. 58). In the film's final third, we see Nikki mount a flight of stairs to Mr K's room and hear a repetition of lines we have heard before, and the use of a dissolve and elision of action and dialogue suggests a recap and an acknowledgment that this is the same scene as before. However, unlike *Memento*, even with the benefit of this additional context, creating this sequential and spatial link does not provide a grand reveal about the narrative structure or a reconciliation of the storyline's ambiguities. In fact, with *Inland Empire* we might say that at this point in the film our ability to say whether we are seeing Sue or Nikki is as unclear as it has ever been.

Before finding her way to Mr K's room, we see that she has taken refuge from the streets of Hollywood and Vine where she is being pursued by Billy's wife, Doris, which provides a little more context about how and why Sue/Nikki began speaking to Mr K in first place. However, the way in which she finds herself on the streets of LA is far from clear and it represents another instance of spatiotemporal impossibility and ambiguity about how different narrative strands and storyworlds align and communicate with one another. The sequence (Fig. 59) begins with Sue/Nikki sitting in the armchair in Smithy's house when sound and light become distorted and she begins to scream, at which point we cut to Hollywood and Vine where the prostitutes are greeting Sue/Nikki. She appears disorientated at first but her expression changes and she says in a slow, mocking voice: "Where am I? I'm afraid." She laughs manically along with the prostitutes before we cut to another Sue/Nikki walking along the other side of the same street. The two see each other and the laughing 'version' grins sarcastically and aggressively across the street at

the other Sue/Nikki, who visibly recoils before noticing Doris Side striding towards her. This second Sue/Nikki is the one who then runs and finds her way to Mr K's room and we see no further interaction between the doppelgängers.

Fig. 59. During the Hollywood and Vine sequence, Sue/Nikki encounters another version of herself, further complicating the network of narrative strands and the physical laws of the storyline.

At one point, the words spoken by Sue/Nikki during the opening part of her monologue to Mr. K could be seen as a vocalisation of the challenge the viewer is faced with:

> The thing is, I don't know what was before or after. I don't know what happened first and it's kinda laid a mind-fuck on me.

Similarly, when her character whines with mock-fear: "Where am I? I'm afraid", it comes across as taunt and could be read as an acknowledgment of the fact that the viewer might be thinking the very same thing. It is through having our expectations denied, frustrated, confounded or hindered in some way or another that we can be made aware of what those very expectations are. The viewer continually strives to determine 'what was before or after' and *Inland Empire* does not make this process easy, unlike *Memento* with its rewarding chronological denouement. Despite having recognisable film stars in its cast, *Inland*

Empire should certainly be categorised as more akin to the art cinema tradition than mainstream Hollywood narratives. Bordwell writes that when a film displays certain features they can be identified as belonging to the 'art cinema' tradition, which very often contain examples of the filmmaker(s) stylistic choices being foregrounded:

> Deviations from the classical canon – an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement, an unrealistic shift in lighting or setting – in short any breakdown of the motivation of cinematic space and time by cause-effect logic – can be read as "authorial commentary."[253]

It is easy to find examples of all of the above in *Inland Empire*, however this need not be interpreted solely as directorial expression, and Bordwell points out how aiming for realism of a subjective or psychological sort can paradoxically mask the overt intentions or expressiveness of a filmmaker. He argues that 'to push the realism of psychological uncertainty to its limit is to invite a haphazard text in which the author's shaping hand would not be visible.'[254] The way in which these seemingly mutually exclusive aims can be reconciled, Bordwell argues, is through the deliberate use of ambiguity as a guiding stylistic principle: 'Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision. Whatever is excessive in one category must belong to the other.'[255] If we adopt this approach then we have much greater freedom of interpretation, just as we saw how research into *Mirror*'s production history and Tarkovsky's biography can provide a more rewarding appreciation of the film. The film encourages us to make links by association and also accept that certain elements of the story will remain unexplained. The film defies meaning and explanation in the conventional sense of storytelling, and all that it can leave the viewer with are unanswered questions about paradoxes of time, space, and identity. It would appear both from the opinion of reviewers and of Lynch himself that the search for literal meaning in *Inland Empire* is a futile task:

> Cinema is a lot like music. It can be very abstract, but people have a yearning to make intellectual sense of it, to put it right into words. And when they can't do that, it feels frustrating.[256]

If we take Piotrek, for instance, it is difficult to reconcile his change in appearance with the narrative events, and with our hypothesis about the two 'versions' of Nikki/Sue, because this would imply that he is also starring in the film with Nikki. There is nothing to suggest that he is also an actor and therefore his presence in the *Blue Tomorrow*'s realm is incongruous and has to either be simply tolerated, or we need to reach for a less literal interpretation. A third incarnation of Piotrek also appears in the 1930's scenes in Poland; in this way the film seems to point towards a theme of historical recurrence or perhaps the potential for magical, supernatural transportations of characters through space and time. As Sinnerbrink puts it:

> We do not comprehend so much as intuit the fragmented, nested, mysteriously connected strands that link the ambiguous narrative 'abstractions'…composing the film.[257]

Lynch's own comments about the making of *Inland Empire* are of value here and his well-documented interest in Transcendental Meditation sheds a particular light on what can be gleaned from the film. His beliefs (such as the 'unified field' mentioned earlier) and a semi-improvisational method of working is obviously a factor behind Sinnerbrink's 'abstractions,' and it conveys how the creation of disparate links are a crucial element of the film, be it thematic, spatiotemporal, or in terms of how the film itself grew into its eventual form. If *Inland Empire* is working on the level of metaphor, what are some of the points it might be seen as putting forward? If we accept that the film is trying to convey meaning(s) on levels other than the literal then what can be said about the film beyond its narrative events? The next logical step might be to look into the abstract, the metaphorical, or the illustrative functions of the film. With this in mind, I believe the film yields much when looked at in the context of theories of narrativism and self-identity, which I opened up in the previous chapter, so I will now turn my attention to those same issues and revisit the key arguments in the context of *Inland Empire*.

Narrativism and Self-Authorship

The premise of *Inland Empire* adds a layer of complexity to the point made by Bordwell about how psychological realism can offer another 'category' under which we can organise apparent narrative

ambiguities and paradoxes. If a storyline suggests a psychological rift or breakdown then we can ascribe this explanation to certain irreconcilable details, such as Nikki appearing to be literally trapped in the world of *Blue Tomorrows* (the alternative explanation might be a magical, supernatural one but there is less detail provided to support this interpretation). However, if we add in the layer of an embedded narrative then it becomes less easy to say whether or not she is delusional, acting, a combination of the two, or even – at a stretch – acting with lucidity but portraying a delusional character in the film-within-the-film. *Inland Empire* plays with cinematic conventions through its tendency to draw attention to the artificiality of what we are seeing, and by individuating characters in the opening scenes and then portraying them in later scenes with noticeable alterations to their appearance, name, and characteristics. Crucially, however, there is often insufficient narrative evidence supplied in the intervening scenes to either explain the changes or for the viewer enable the viewer to form reasonable hypotheses. When changes to character identity occur without an obvious explanation, it can create a jarring effect and may provoke a number of reactions from the viewer; potentially confusion and frustration, but perhaps also curiosity and the thrill of a mystery. Throughout this study I have made reference to the 'person schema' which Smith argues is a model we use not only to relate to people in the real world, but also to evaluate and understand fictional characters. Often when we encounter particularly unusual events and occurrences, they can serve to defamiliarise the commonplace and thereby foreground processes and reactions that are otherwise diminished as they are so instinctive and automatic.

It is certainly not my aim here 'to make intellectual sense' of *Inland Empire*, but rather to focus on the way in which the film portrays its characters and engages with issues of storytelling and character identity. Lynch is no doubt correct when he suggests that it can feel frustrating when we are unable to put into words the exact meaning of a particular film, and this response once again brings us back to the issue of thresholds and boundaries that I first explored in Chapter One. In the real world we rely on categories and a sense of 'self' and 'other' to navigate our way through life successfully, and as I have tried to articulate, it is likely that we approach film narratives in a way that echoes this instinct. In *Memento* we are shown the tragic and agonizing situation of Leonard who tries to plug the gaps in his own memory in order to function normally and, more ambitiously, solve the mystery surrounding the murder of his wife. The narrative structure of *Memento* is tightly bound with overlapping action to allow the viewer to build

an ever-expanding sense of what has taken place, while the gaps and deficits of knowledge are restricted to Leonard. With *Inland Empire* we seem to lurch from one time period or location to another with little or no causal connectivity and the result is an *increasing* lack of clarity about who the characters we are seeing actually are. Orr's 'Lynchian non-sequiturs' are the antithesis of Christopher Nolan's 'loops' in *Memento*, and they create a space in which radical alterations to characters, settings, and the overall natural order of the diegesis can be accommodated. The film is not unique, however, by virtue of leaving questions unanswered and presenting the viewer with irreconcilable paradoxes and narrative ambiguities; as outlined earlier, these are features which Bordwell identifies as quite typical of the art-cinema. What is perhaps a less typical feature, and one which distinguishes *Inland Empire* even within this body of films, is its handling of character identities. Bordwell writes how the art-film often exhibits

> Violations of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters.[258]

Inland Empire manages to suppress the identity of its protagonist while also sustaining that same individual as a clearly identifiable figure throughout the narrative - hiding in plain sight, as it were – which is a feat that would place it at the extreme end of character complexity even in the context of Bordwell's category. As I mentioned previously, the protagonist traditionally dictates the yaw of the storyline and provides the focal point or organising centre for the main plot events; and in a certain respect this is the case with *Inland Empire*. However, what events are we being shown and who exactly is leading the way? If *Inland Empire* is simply a blank canvas onto which the sub-film *Blue Tomorrows* is presented then it begs the questions a) what is the need for the *Inland Empire* frame and b) what is *Blue Tomorrows* about? The lack of a guiding hand in the form of a clear protagonist is reflected and compounded by the way in which Kingsley, the director of *Blue Tomorrows*, does not feature for the majority of the film. As such, the events of the film appear to be careering blindly from one sequence to another and without any firm grounding in which Nikki is explicitly moving in and out of character. In fact, after the film's 'rabbit hole' moment when Sue/Nikki is transported into Smithy's house, there is a total absence of any framing devices to indicate that the production of *Blue Tomorrows* is still taking place. As I indicated earlier, in the context of the Narrativist / Anti-narrativist debate, Dennett describes a fictional character as a *fait*

accompli since the character has to be fully realised so that there is a finished product that the viewer can experience and consume. However, the sense we might have of *Inland Empire*'s almost improvised nature provides, in Dern's characters, a pertinent example of something that comes close to an unwritten or not fully realised individual. If we look once again at some of the arguments in this area, we can appreciate the ways *Inland Empire* can offer some valuable contributions and insights to the debate on personal identity. As I discussed in Chapter Five, at the core of Dennett's argument is the way in which he equates selfhood with another kind of unseen phenomenon: gravity. He argues that nobody has ever seen gravity, merely its effects, but equally nobody would argue that it does not exist. His point is that the same logic should be applied to selfhood since 'no one has ever seen a self either,'[259] although he does qualify this point in the following way.

> Unlike centers of gravity, whose sole property is their spatio-temporal position, selves have a spatio-temporal position that is only grossly defined.[260]

For Dennett, selfhood is more of a moving target and less clearly delineated than gravity, or fictional characters for that matter. If we examine the concluding section of *Inland Empire*, we can see how the film goes against the grain of how we anticipate and appreciate a character's pre-written nature as a feature that distinguishes it from real world selves. I would venture that the film does not simply appear difficult to consume purely because of the way in which it rails against cinematic conventions of structure, running time, and character portrayal. A certain degree also stems from the way in which it portrays its lead actress as existing within an inescapable fictionality; a form of self-identity appears to emerge from the relative (constructed) reality back into the diegetically real world before being once again swallowed up by the fictional. At the opening of this chapter I described how the film initiates a sudden and potentially jarring return to unambiguous portrayal of the *Blue Tomorrows* production as a distinct embedded fiction with the framing story of Nikki's life. If we examine the final portion of the film, we can see how this (short-lived) moment of narrative clarity provides an example which is highly pertinent to the self-identity discussion.

As I have illustrated, the film employs a variety of techniques to blur the distinction between Sue and Nikki, so by the film's final act their two characters have become deeply intertwined. Sue/Nikki's

final scene in Mr K's room concludes with Mr K taking a mysterious phone call, which causes Sue/Nikki to become fearful and flee into the streets of Hollywood where she once again comes across the group of prostitutes. Sue/Nikki at first appears alarmed at the sight of them, suggesting she does not know them, then they ask her where she has been. She keeps trying to tell them that someone is trying to kill her before undergoing a strange transition in which her concern drops, her facial expression changes and as before when she encountered her doppelgänger, she seems to collect herself and psychologically adjust to her circumstances; in folk terminology you might say it looks like someone 'getting into character.' The prostitutes then disperse and Doris appears behind Sue/Nikki and stabs her with a screwdriver, leaving her screaming and bleeding as she lurches across the street between passing cars. She lies bleeding amongst a group of homeless people, who talk to her about everyday irrelevances, before finally dying. The camerawork changes noticeably from hand-held to a crane shot, which tracks backwards to reveal a camera mounted on a crane and a boom mic, before we hear "cut it" from offscreen (Fig. 60). The production of *Blue Tomorrows* is suddenly reintroduced and the apparent death of Sue/Nikki is revealed as no more than a filmed scene in a fictional world. This moment is striking due to the fact that Kingsley and the other characters associated with the making of *Blue Tomorrows* have been absent from the narrative events for over an hour. To have the *mise-en-abyme* suddenly reconfirmed after such a lengthy period of ambiguity provide a narrative jolt, as does the uncued transition from a scene that was clearly shot on location but concludes in a studio. As a light offscreen floods the set the illusion is broken and we see the extras get to their feet and leave the frame, however Nikki remains motionless. A cut to Kingsley mirrors our concern that she might actually be dead before she very slowly and gingerly gets to her feet.

Fig. 60. The shooting of Blue Tomorrows *suddenly reappears to contextualise the events and draw a distinction between Sue and Nikki. However, the framing context does not remain intact for very long.*

Kingsley calls for a round of applause for 'Nikki Grace. Nikki Grace everyone,' but she wanders off the set without acknowledging them. Kingsley and some other members of the crew appear concerned and come over to her to clean her up. Kingsley holds her by the shoulders and declares: "Nikki! You were wonderful!"; then she merges from the set, wearing the silk robe we had seen her wearing backstage previously. An optical POV shot from Nikki's perspective reveals the layout of the studio lot and at this point all the evidence points towards the hypothesis that we should regard her emergence from the actual film set into the studio lot as the diegetic reality of Nikki Grace; the switch from moving to static camera suggests as much, as does the very obvious sight of the studio lot buildings themselves. This moment is short-lived, however, and as she walks out into the set there is a return to a handheld shot and the spatial geography alters once more. As Nikki passes in front of a pillar, the studio lot in the background is replaced by a red curtain, which signals a transition to a new setting that appears inconsistent with the established surroundings shown in the sweeping optical POV shot moments before. She finds herself in a cinema, and onscreen sees herself delivering her monologue to Mr K which, very poignantly, is at a point when we hear her utter the lines about watching her life happen around her "like in a dark theatre' (Fig. 61). We watch the onscreen Sue/Nikki leave Mr K's room as we saw her do before, then Mr K 'in the flesh' walks down the side aisle of the theatre and looks at Nikki before climbing a set of stairs. She

looks back at the screen and it now shows the same scene as we are witnessing, a real-time *mise-en-abyme* like the one used towards the end of *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974).

Fig. 61. After shooting has concluded, Nikki watches her confession to Mr K on the cinema screen, before the same man appears in the cinema itself and appears to beckon Nikki back into a fantasy world.

In this sequence, we see Nikki apparently emerge from the world of *Blue Tomorrow* and back into the reality of her life as an actress on a Hollywood studio lot, only for her to be swallowed up once more by the diegetic worlds she has seemingly just left behind. This progression erodes the distinctions between storyworlds once more and, despite the fact that we have heard Kingsley call her Nikki, places a question mark over her identity yet again. After Nikki follows Mr K up the stairs in the theatre we see that she is somehow able to move from studio lot to the realm of the rabbit people, while encountering The Phantom along the way. These transitions undermines a more conclusive interpretation of what we have been seeing, such as Nikki being so immersed in her role in *Blue Tomorrow*s that she lost her sense of who she really is. It is as though the *mise-en-abyme* device can only operate in one direction - that which draws us into the embedded fiction rather than the other way round. This pattern, in conjunction with the film's running time, creates a distance between the Nikki Grace of the opening scenes so vast that the character's identity appears as an entirely constructed entity from which she cannot escape, much like *Marienbad*'s suffocating refusal to create an anchor for either character or viewer to gain perspective or critical traction. Sinnerbrink sees this as a criticism of corruption in the film industry and the inescapable reach of Hollywood in particular. He argues that

> the degradation / transformation of [*Blue Tomorrows*] into the genre of psychological horror [shows how] Hollywood's dream factory has become an all-encompassing cinematic-mythic nightmare.[261]

Schaffner meanwhile approaches the film from a psychoanalytical / feminist perspective and argues that, rather than Nikki being continually swamped or swallowed by an inescapable fiction, which symbolises the Hollywood system, Nikki transcends all of *Inland Empire*'s realms and by the end of the film 'fully emancipates herself from the influence of shadowy male forces.'[262] She refers to one shot in particular in which Nikki is seated back in her home on the sofa where Visitor #1 said she would find herself (Fig. 62). Schaffner argues that Nikki is shown sitting 'in a state of calm bliss', which reinforces her point that the trauma of releasing herself from her 'inauthentic selves'[263] is now behind her. We can extend this interpretation along similar lines to the observation of Smith in relation to *That Obscure Object of Desire* when he analyses how the film has two actresses (Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina) playing the single character, Conchita. By providing no narrational cues or motivations for the changes in performer, and the fact that no surprise is registered by the other characters whenever these changes occur, creates discord in our efforts to trace character identities in the film. As a result, and as we have seen already in the case of films which evade a literal explanation:

> Offered no motivation at the levels of story, realism, or genre, the spectator reaches for what could be described as thematic motivation. The obscure object of desire is not this woman or that woman…but Woman Herself.'[264]

Similarly, the different 'selves' that Dern plays could be seen as metaphors for different aspects of her character or for women in general, especially when we consider the fact that the narrative strand involving prostitutes is spread across different countries and historical periods. The blurred face of the woman in the opening sequence of the film could be read as a way of anonymising the character's identity and diluting her level of individuality, which resonates with the theme of violence – and the multiple scenes of *actual* violence - against women featuring throughout the film's historical periods (and by implication human history more generally).

Fig. 62. Is this Nikki once again, in her home? If so, how did she get there? What is the temporal location of this shot in relation to everything else that has come before or after?

To my mind there is also room for an additional reading of the portrayal of multi-layered selves emerging and re-emerging from an apparent fiction; one which evokes Hume's bundle theory of selfhood and one of the key objections to it. As I outlined previously, particularly in relation to *Memento* and *Mirror*, on the subject of self-identity Hume argued that that 'we are nothing but a bundle or collection of different sensations, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.'[265] When selfhood is conceived in this way, Hume argues, the search for an enduring and material inner essence is futile:

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.[266]

The argument against Hume's position is that it is self-defeating since the 'bundle of emotions' can only be identified as such from the vantage point of another perspective or 'self-location' which is doing the observing. Dennett asks: 'After all, who is this *I* that has looked in vain for a self, *according* to Hume?'[267] This line of reasoning opens up a potential *mise-en-abyme* of its own if we consider that an 'observing self' might also be nothing more than a bundle being observed by yet another 'observing self' and so on *ad infinitum.* The structure of *Inland Empire* presents a similar type of scenario with the way in which it conflates the identities of Sue and Nikki and their respective worlds and prevents one clear

individual from achieving an existence that transcends or exists objectively outside of a given storyworld or storyline. Characters such as the ones portrayed by Dern could be regarded as an illustration of how selfhood is, in Dennett's words, 'grossly defined' in a spatio-temporal sense. As we saw in Chapter Five, Dennett equates selves with gravity insofar as they are phenomena that cannot be seen but are difficult to deny, however he distinguishes centres of gravity as having a spatio-temporal position as its sole property. The spatio-temporal position of a self, by contrast, cannot (yet?) be identified with such 'fine-grained localisations' to the point where we can say '"That cell right there…that's the self!"'[268] By frustrating the viewer's ability to establish a clearly-defined context beyond the world of *Blue Tomorrows* creates a sense that the diegetic events are developing in something resembling real time (even though this patently cannot be true), especially when we see Nikki finally emerge from the film set only to be reabsorbed into the realm of the rabbits and The Phantom. At this point, Nikk/Sue appears less like Dennett's *fait accompli* and more like his idea of a 'grossly defined self'; someone who has reached the end of her scripted role and is now venturing into an 'unwritten' narrative landscape.

In 'The "Remembered" Self', Jerome Bruner's argues that 'Self is a perpetually rewritten story.'[269] This way of conceptualising selfhood overlaps with the arguments of Charles Fernyhough which I looked at in relation to *Marienbad* in Chapter Four. Bruner argues that we 'self-narrativise' by remembering our personal history but that we also 'undergo turning points that clarify or "debug" the narrative'[270] in order to keep our personal story intact. Fernyhough too makes the point that recalling memories has a perpetual freshness or newness about it since the constituent parts are only reassembled when required, which would suggest that our 'remembered self' is actually very fluid and malleable. By the end of *Inland Empire*, the status of Sue/Nikki as a character within the diegesis appears as fluid and malleable as at any point in the film, and has reached the point where she is literally stepping out of the internal filmworld and into uncharted territory. While we cannot refute Dennett's point that a character simply has to be prewritten before we can consume the fiction in which that character appears, *Inland Empire* stretches the bounds of how fully-realised a character can appear to be. Part of this must surely be down to the way in which Lynch and Dern developed certain segments of the film, which was partially improvised, with her monologue being the only fully-scripted narrative thread. Of course, a finished film cannot also be improvised at the time of watching it, but the end product does bear the hallmarks of

improvisation taking place during its production. The design and development of Dern's characters gives the impression of incompleteness, which comes across as a reaction against Dennett's description of character as a *fait accompli*. The fact that we are left with a lack of clarity about whether we are seeing Sue or Nikki is what makes Dern's character(s) stand out as an inversion of Aleksey, the disembodied narrator in *Mirror*. While in Tarkovsky's film, its protagonist (if Aleksey can be classed as such) haunts the narrative with a ghostly, unseen presence, Sue/Nikki dominates events and is present throughout the film. Nevertheless, the exact nature of her identity remains at least as elusive as Aleksey's, because of the fact that we are always able to 'individuate' and 're-identify' Dern the actress but rarely the character she is playing. I concluded in Chapter Five that *Mirror* has a deep irony at its core because of how it manages to suppress the emergence of a clear protagonist despite its use of a narrator who effectively acts as a surrogate for Tarkovsky in a narrative that is immersed in the director's personal experiences. *Inland Empire* manages to pull off a similar achievement but not through tactics like unseen narrators or voiceovers.

Lynch acknowledges that our inability to interpret narratives in a way that makes intellectual sense can be frustrating, and certainly the question of character identity in *Inland Empire* is one that is difficult to answer with any sort of literal or everyday reasoning. In Chapter One I looked at what Stephen Prince refers to as 'the symbolic system' [271] to describe the way in which we categorise and organise phenomena as a way of functioning safely and successfully in the world. If we are able to separate scenes involving Nikki from those involving Sue then we can categorise them neatly in our heads and observe two storylines as developing distinctly from one another. However, confusion results once the boundary between those two storylines become less clear and we are forced to question almost every scene in trying to establish exactly which character we are seeing. As my analysis has shown, as the film develops it gradually erodes our ability to identify a physical location, or series of locations, which we can clearly identify as belong to the world and reality of Nikki's, and without an origin like this the shifts in time and space, and the alterations of character become so prevalent, that the viewer may actually abandon any attempts to explain the events. If we cannot arrange information into clear categories then frustration may arise, not least if what we are struggling to apprehend relates to people, whether real or fictional. In life we depend greatly on the ability to say with reasonable certainty who a person is, so to be able to watch

Sue/Nikki's character develop for nearly three hours and still not be totally clear is likely to provoke frustration, and maybe even fear. Frustration with the multiple ways it upsets conventions of cinematic narration, but perhaps fear in the way it points to a fragility inherent in selfhood more generally.

Conclusion

It is the task of art to make manifest the contradictions of being – Sergei Eistenstein[272]

One of *Fight Club*'s most frequently quoted lines (part of which has recently found its way into popular socio-political discourse) is Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt)'s assertion to his followers that "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake." He is making the point that self-cherishing, in his eyes, is a human weakness and that the key to emancipation is recognising and embracing one's own mortality and suppressing a sense of uniqueness. While Durden's 'Project Mayhem' may be no more than a misguided fusion of Buddhist philosophy and terrorism, one member of what Galen Strawson refers to as 'the narrativists,' the psychologist Dan P. McAdam, appears partially to support Durden's point. In *The Art and Science of Personality Development* he writes the following:

> the individual artistry of any human life must ultimately come down to a variation on the theme of human nature. The possible variations are many, but they are not infinite. Moreover, certain variations seem to resemble other variations…Everyday observations suggest to us that there are certain *kinds* of people out there, certain *kinds* of lives.[273]

In my introduction, I highlighted how the world of fiction offers a seemingly infinite number of ways that characters can be conceived, developed, altered, and recast. I have worked through examples encompassing science-fiction, horror, psychological thrillers, noir mysteries, and experimental art films, and in doing so have examined a broad spectrum of characters and character-types. As McAdam points out, despite each (real world) person representing a 'variation' on a basic human model, patterns begin to emerge and we can discern 'certain *kinds* of lives' within the seemingly endless variations of individuals. So too, it seems, when we look at fiction film characters that, despite this seemingly infinite choice available to the creators, narratives tend to settle on and utilise established types (or stereotypes) to mobilise their storylines. That is not to say, however, that human beings can be reduced to the same criteria as film stereotypes or even particular character types, but rather that characters who could be regarded as psychologically complex (and, arguably, resemble real people more closely) do not populate the majority of mainstream film narratives.

Despite the fact that we can make such an assertion, it is nevertheless a challenging endeavour to try and isolate and define what constitutes a fictional character and to explain the ways in which (and the reasons why) we as film viewers yearn to perceive a 'corresponding personhood' within fiction narratives. It has been my intention to create a bridge between critical film theory, (particularly studies of character as put forward by theorists such as Murray Smith, Jens Eder, Noël Carroll, and David Bordwell), and ideas and arguments on self-identity from philosophy and psychology. Throughout this study I have engaged with several of the more prominent philosophical ideas regarding selfhood and personal identity, notably those put forward by John Locke, David Hume, Daniel Dennett, Derek Parfit, and Galen Strawson, in order to highlight how hugely complex and multifaceted any debate is which attempts to define or deconstruct self-identity. While there is no single or straightforward answer to the question of what constitutes personal identity, this is no deterrent to those who are interested in building an ever-greater understanding of selfhood. Furthermore, to my mind it follows quite naturally that if one has an interest in the philosophy of self-identity then one might very often reach for fictional representations of persons as a means of illustrating a point or reflecting upon real-world phenomena that are pertinent to the debate. Just as real-world selves find their 'fictive counterparts'[274] in the form of characters, debates about selfhood can – with a little nuance and modification – be brought to bear on analyses of fictional individuals as well. Such an approach is common to the film-philosophy and film-as-philosophy debates (which I outlined in Chapter One), and through this study I feel I have contributed to this ongoing academic discussion. At various points (particularly in Chapter Three) I alluded to the wider debate about whether or not a film could be considered as advancing philosophical ideas in its own right, or is limited to articulating existing ideas via the content of its storyline. I have stopped short of trying to make the case for either side of this debate, primarily because my principal interest lay in exploring what our engagement with fictional characters can tell us about discussions of real-life identities, rather than evaluating a given film's philosophical credentials.

Much like films that invite multiple interpretations, questions and discussions about selfhood and personal identity can be fascinating, contentious, and emotive. Fictional narratives can, in the right hands, be the perfect vehicle for engaging with the far-reaching subject of what constitutes an individual self, and at times this subject can produce hugely entertaining and original storylines. Certain films are

able to express a particular idea or perhaps advance a novel philosophical position of its own, whether it is a commentary about film viewing, film production or our role as viewers and consumers of moving images. Given the right combination of skilled filmmakers, an original cinematic approach, and an absorbing concept or storyline, it is even possible to achieve the combined effect of telling an engaging story about human identity while making a commentary about film viewing, our roles as spectators, and even inviting us to reflect on our own selfhood. My initial motivation for this project came from encountering films which portrayed characters in ways that seemed to be genuinely perplexing and unconventional. By 'genuinely' I mean to say films whose storylines not only involve devices such as duplication, elision, reversal, and physical alteration to character identities but also, crucially, contain occurrences of this sort when the motivations for them cannot readily or easily be found with the diegetic information supplied by the narrative. The body-swap / mind-swap device is very common, both within and beyond film storylines, and it is very often portrayed in a correspondingly conventional or mainstream way. These storylines fascinate and entertain and their prevalence in philosophical thought experiments testifies to the fact that contemplation of changes to an individual's identity raises salient questions. We can all accept and follow that Josh Baskin (Tom Hanks/David Moscow) in *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988) is really a 13-year-old boy because the simple supernatural plot device involving a magical arcade machine is emphatically presented in the film's opening segment. Without ensuring redundancy[275] (to use Bordwell's term once again) of this plot point, we would otherwise find it difficult to reconcile the appearance of Josh waking up in his bunk bed and suddenly being played by Hanks as opposed to Moscow - the younger actor who portrays Josh as a boy and who we saw go to sleep in the same bunk in the previous scene. To present any barrier to our understanding of this transition would ultimately block the filmmaker's intention of advancing the narrative to the point where the comedy and drama common to body-swap storylines can begin. *Big* therefore, as I explained in my introduction, belongs to a specific category of films that do not contain what I would classify as having 'genuinely' perplexing instances of identity changes to their characters. If we take *Lost Highway* as a pertinent counter-example once again, it is obvious that its plot development of having Fred seemingly change into Pete with no clear, unambiguous diegetic explanation, is an occurrence that we would not normally associate with a classical three-act film. At the outset of my research I was struck by the fact that we do not encounter narratives

that behave in the way that *Lost Highway* does, and wondered why that should be so. Moreover, I was curious about the reasons that might lie behind negative critical and anecdotal responses that I had encountered in relation to films that display ambiguous character identities. A classical film narrative strives for tidiness, and goals being achieved, with the 'boring' parts benevolently removed for the viewer's pleasure. As Noël Carroll puts it:

> In contrast to our encounters in everyday life, movie events have an unaccustomed intelligibility and lucidity; movies, that is, are so much more legible than life.[276]

Evidence such as cinemagoing figures and output of classical narrative films would suggest that mainstream filmmakers and audiences gravitate towards correspondingly 'legible' characters so that their stories can be told swiftly and according to a paradigm that is widely accessible and recognisable. It would appear to be the case that a certain kind of individual self or character is better suited to, or at least is more prevalent in, narrative storytelling, and an a-central, unfeatured or problematically unstable protagonist does not seem to be it. Bordwell, as we saw, equates or aligns a certain kind of art-cinema output with psychological complexity and / or realism that better reflect the actual way life is; 'life's untidiness'[277] as he puts it. In *Parenthood* (Ron Howard, 1989), Steve Martin's harassed character Gil despairs at how unpredictable his children can be, to which his wife states very simply: "Life is messy." The only response he can muster is: "I hate messy. It's…so messy!" The prevalence and popularity of straightforward, accessible storylines and characters seems to suggest that there is a majority of viewers who also 'hate messy,' hence the dominance of the classical Hollywood narrative model with its strong preference for clear protagonists. As with narratives, so too with characters. Do we enjoy narratives that are simplified because they do not resemble life too closely, while narratives that are complex or 'untidy' generate a sense of frustration? Perhaps we enjoy the presence of a lead character precisely because they do not resemble us too closely, and because they *can* say and do all the things we cannot – our own escapist alter-ego.

At this point I must pause and clarify my own position within the critical and theoretical context I have mapped out in the preceding chapters. Firstly, who is this 'we' that I am alluding to when describing a spectatorial preference for mainstream narratives containing accessible, conventional character types?

In one sense it is an imagined or perceived group of film viewers who represent the corresponding audience for conventional, mainstream films, which are themselves the prevalent form at least in terms of output and popularity. In another sense I am invoking critics and respondents to the films I have studied who see unconventional character portrayals of the sort I have analysed as a failing of whichever film it may be. For example, in Chapter Two I referred to Roger Ebert's casual dismissal of *Lost Highway* by writing how 'there is no sense to be made of it' [278] and that, in his opinion, trying to decipher why Fred changes into Pete and then back again is a kind of joke being played on the audience. These sorts of reactions would represent the individuals I am referring to when using 'we', but this is potentially misleading since I do not regard myself as belonging to a group that would endorse such a critical response. I must be wary that I do not overcompensate for a perceived mainstream audience and therefore, once again, it is necessary that I restate my position and the arguments I have presented in this study. Almost without intention, my focus on affective responses viewers may have to the films I have studied tended to gravitate towards (potentially) negative or unwelcome emotions. Reactions such as disgust, unease, discomfort, aversion, and fear, feature prominently in the analyses I have conducted, while a little further down the scale I often suggest frustration or confusion as potential viewer responses. Of course, there is a clear distinction to be made between some of these responses: in the case of *The Thing*, for instance, it is clearly the filmmakers' intention to evoke feelings of disgust and fear, just as *Memento* is designed to generate intrigue and tension. However, is *Marienbad*'s purpose to confuse and frustrate, or is *Lost Highway* merely, as Ebert claims, and elaborate joke played on the viewers? Without embarking on a discussion of intentionality, it is sufficient to acknowledge that in some instances the likely reaction is fairly obvious while in others there is a more complex and ambiguous range of interpretations and affective responses. Upon reflection, I realise that in some instances, perhaps when I have too readily invoked a perceived mainstream 'we', and this might suggest a negative evaluation of a particular film. I should emphasise that this is certainly not the case as it has been my intention to highlight the unconventionality of certain character portrayals as their strongest and most appealing features.

The quote from Eisenstein at the opening of this section could be seen as highlighting a principal and pivotal element in the kind of films that I would classify as being distinct from those in the group that *Big* and its variants belong to. 'Contradictions of being', to use Eisenstein's words, encapsulates the type

of ambiguous character portrayals and identities that have provided the substance and driving force for my analysis and research. In *Lost Highway*, Pete's appearance and the associated tangential storyline could be regarded as a 'contradiction of being' insofar as his identity and existence in relation to Fred appears unclear and inexplicable. The same could be said of the pairing of Alice and Renee, as well as the Mystery Man's apparent ability to occupy two places at one time. As I have shown, there are alternative ways of highlighting and exploring questions of self-identity when we consider films which present their 'identity problems' using more unconventional cinematic approaches which, in some instances, elevate the mode of expression beyond the level of story alone. In some cases, the film engages quite overtly with these issues while in others the connection is less explicit but is evident nonetheless. Although the examples I have chosen are not necessarily 'about' identity, each one contains salient and highly pertinent instances of character portrayal that in some way challenge either our expectations as viewers or at times even attempt to challenge how we conceptualise real world selfhood and personal identity. On a more general and fundamental level, we could also regard our capacity to see unity in spite of fracturing as a 'contradiction of being'. Even though Eisenstein's approach to filmmaking and film criticism was predominantly socio-political rather than psychological (he uses this term when writing about the 'social mission' of art), the phrase seems applicable here nevertheless. Eisenstein writes that art achieves its social mission by 'stirring up contradictions within the spectator's mind'[279], which chimes with a principal argument that I have been making throughout. I believe we can draw a parallel between how viewers are able to effortlessly reconcile disparate images and assemble them into a coherent narrative whole, and the way in which we perceive unity of self-identity in spite of its underlying composite or fractured makeup.

Embedded with narrative cohesion is of course unity of characters, and film narratives more often than not strive to portray stable character identities in a way that does not draw attention to their artificial nature. Ordinarily, we are both aware of the constructed nature of a film and the characters that inhabit its storyline while also being able to skip over this awareness and engage with the fictional world without any disruption to our viewing pleasure. This ability that a viewer deploys when watching a film – another example of a 'contradiction of being' if you like - is what Richard Wollheim described as 'twofoldness'; an idea which I examined in Chapter Six in the context of *Inland Empire*, and the way in

which Murray Smith applied Wollheim's concept to film characters. In some less conventional narratives, such as those I have examined, the filmmakers will make deliberate efforts to draw attention to the fact that we are watching a film and that the characters within it are a composite construct of the creators' efforts. The apparent preference of relatively simplified character types exists in spite of the fact that, from some philosophical viewpoints, self-identity perhaps deserves to be regarded as a more ethereal, nebulous and unsubstantial entity than it is commonly considered. Hume, for instance, was a major proponent of the idea that selfhood is more than the sum of its parts; an offshoot or by-product of sensory perception and the human brain's sentience and cognitive abilities. There appears to be a temptingly easy distinction to make about characters and real people: we are self-aware, cognizant, complex animals while characters are constructs that we dream up for our own entertainment, edification, education, and so on. For Dennett, however, we cannot be too confident in making this assertion since we may only be talking about a matter of degrees regarding complexity and capabilities (and, presumably, time to evolve). His argument, as we saw particularly in Section III, is that our sense of self-awareness is the product (or by-product) of our brain's complexity, and that our brain is an incredibly sophisticated network that is not aware of what the overall result of its myriad activities is. In other words, cogs in the most complex machine on earth but the cogs do not know that they have created a self. He also cautions that, on the subject of whether selfhood exists at all, that: '[w]hen a simple question gets two answers, "Obviously yes!" and "Obviously no!" a middle-ground position is worth considering'[280]. I will not attempt to get into the finer detail of Dennett's arguments at this stage, just as I am drawing my ideas and arguments to a close, but rather I will use them to look towards where my research can be placed within the wider theoretical context, and avenues that might be explored in any work that comes after.

In the film-as-philosophy debate, ideas such as Dennett's might be dismissed as irresolvable just as there may never be agreement over whether or not a film can be considered philosophical in a purely cinematic way. However, as we have seen, the lack of agreement does not quell the discussion, nor should it. What I have been drawn to is what I see as a similarity between selfhood and fictional characters and their respective levels of fragility and nebulousness, what I have referred to as 'fracturing'. This is intriguing because of the confidence with which we assert the claim that we are real people, and *those* people on screen are constructs and representations. However, as my analysis has shown, there is a huge

amount of valuable discussion and discourse, claims and counter-claims, from various schools of thought and disciplines about how we form a sense of self, and what the significance is that we can and do attach to fiction films. The events depicted in *The Thing* help to remind us that we cherish our physical self, trying hard to keep it free from infection and in once piece as much as possible, just as *Memento* makes us thankful for having our minds intact with a memory we can mostly rely on to function. *Inland Empire* and *Mirror* share these features as well as illuminating the appeal of a protagonist, and each in their own way raise the question about whether that appeal is more than simply a logical vehicle for communicating an entertaining tale. *Marienbad*, while not displaying the grotesque horror of *The Thing* nor the acerbic, disorientating psychosis of *Lost Highway*, also portrays the fallibility of memory and the fragility of our inner selves, and these themes are conveyed in more subtle way than *Memento*'s handling of the same ideas. Its framing premise is only loosely suggested, and the shifts between nostalgia, imagined past events, contradictory recollections, and competing voiceover narration, keep the viewer guessing throughout about the reliability of who and what they are seeing.

One of my overriding tasks has been to highlight what could be regarded as a variety of fragilities in our physical and psychological makeup in order to draw certain parallels, or at least rough similarities, with the makeup and construction of fictional characters. By working through storylines which use these fault lines as a focal point of some sort I've been able to speculate as to why a particular narrative might evoke a particular response such as frustration, fear, horror, uncanniness or unease. The focus in my opening chapter was on *The Thing* - by far the most mainstream of the films I have selected - and this was intended to be a way of broaching the weighty subject of self-identity by way of a more accessible text. Furthermore, by starting with a film that behaves more conventionally provides a useful anchor for the debate and an example against which the subsequent examples could be compared. *Inland Empire*, *Lost Highway*, *Marienbad* and *Mirror* feature lead characters whose portrayals and identities do not conform to the kind of protagonists we generally encounter in mainstream film narratives, but this very fact may conversely qualify them as being more congruent with real selves. Although we may feel strongly our sense of individuality, the behaviour and accomplishments of a hero protagonist within a film often bears little resemblance to how we honestly view ourselves. In *Mirror* we are positioned on the inside looking out and the events cascade around in a seemingly unfiltered way, and at times with

contradictory or conflated occurrences or recollections. Furthermore, the characters in *Mirror* could be read as being as much the product of other people's opinions, actions, and competing recollections as they are of the speech and actions of the lead characters themselves. The same could be said of Leonard in *Memento*, but this is only manifest on the diegetic level and not extended in the same way to the structural or stylistic elements of the film. The viewer's experiential perspective is of course closely aligned with Leonard through the reverse-chronology structure but his mental instability contrasts sharply with what is a tightly bound and very linear plot.

I have predominantly drawn on the work of film theorists that could be grouped under the cognitivist heading and, where appropriate, utilised findings from psychology and neuroscience to bolster certain arguments or speculate about likely affective responses. Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* is often regarded as the forerunner to what would later become the cognitivist approach to film studies. Theorists who came after, particularly the contributors to Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith's influential collection of essays *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, added greatly to the discourse on audience affect. While more recent work, such as that of Julian Hanich in *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, has advanced further the attempts of theorists to develop an ever-increasing precision and understanding of how and why moving images are able to elicit the sorts of emotional responses viewers routinely experience. Recent and continuing research in areas of film studies which overlap with psychology and neuroscience, such as the activities of those involved with the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image, reveal the possibilities of determining with greater precision affective responses to films. Technological advancements like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allow analysts to evaluate the types of responses a viewer has towards a particular film, such as a deeply contemplative response or a more heavily emotional response, depending on the regions of the brain that are stimulated when the subject is viewing the images. Whether or not this approach, termed 'neurocinematics'[281] by Uri Hasson, will one day allow us to identify specific *emotions*, rather than simply areas of the brain *associated* with certain emotions, only time will tell. Looking beyond my own study towards further areas of potential research, the confluence of ideas from film theory, philosophy, and cognitive psychology, represents a fusion of disciplines which are working towards similar goals to reach a greater

understanding of how we come to know and rely upon certain fundamental aspects of the world around us. Increasingly, fiction film narratives are delving into these disciplines for inspiration and the dialogue and overlap between them needs to be maintained so that real knowledge of the psychology of film viewing and affect, which can entertain and fascinate as well as having practical applications, can be nurtured and expanded.

It was against this backdrop of theoretical approaches that I set out to explore what I regard as a parallel between the composite nature of fiction film characters and what I have referred to as fault lines or fractures in real individuals. The parallel that I have articulated is that both real-world selves and characters in fiction films are capable of creating an illusion of unity over and above their respective composite structures. In other words, it is not difficult to imagine or build an argument that human beings can be regarded as a set of highly complex systems as opposed to a coherent, unchanging entity, but it is a quite different argument to assert that we harbour a fear that this seemingly coherent whole might come apart at the seams at any moment. The aspects of *The Thing* and *Memento* that we find repellent and discomfiting are easier to pin down and explain: we see a rupturing body infected with an alien parasite and we recoil as it is a distressing image of physical disunity; while Leonard suffers from a memory condition that we know exists in science and his plight taps into a fear we will most likely share about the loss of one's memory and, to a certain extent, sense of self. In short, the scenarios we are presented with in these examples would most likely evoke feelings of aversion - but these are *targeted* negative reactions. The same argument becomes altogether trickier when trying to apply a similar affective logic to more oblique narratives like *Marienbad* or *Inland Empire*; and it is at this point where I must perform a necessary adjustment to my approach and acknowledge the extent to which I can legitimately arrange my argument under a cognitivist banner. A central element of my argument has been that certain affective responses to the sorts of character portrayals I have studied *may* stem from an underlying and unacknowledged anxiety about our own sense of personal vulnerability. Towards the end of Section II, I suggested that *Marienbad* could be read as a phenomenological enactment of memory recall, but not necessarily within a damaged or traumatised psyche. My aim was to highlight how real-world individuals can in a sense be regarded as inherently fractured and composite in nature, even though we are not routinely aware of it. However, since we are not conscious of our finer physical and psychological

structures being in a state of perpetual flux – synaptic firing, cell renewal, different forms of ageing, and so on – it does not impinge upon our daily activities or adversely affect our ability to function from one moment to the next. To suggest that particular film narratives and character portrayals can zero in on and evoke such a fear from viewers, however, is venturing into the kind of speculation that does not sit easily with a cognitivist approach, and it is imperative that I acknowledge as much here. In order to square this particular circle, and to try and head off any criticism in advance, it is necessary to acknowledge this point and distinguish what different schools of thought would most likely say about a claim such as my own. Substantiating the *direct* cause and source of a given affective response to a motion picture is a difficult task on its own, so to speak of an indirect, underlying or unacknowledged *secondary* emotional response begins to take us beyond the limits of cognitivism and into more psychoanalytical territory. Those who feel an affinity with a cognitivist approach are presumably attracted to the idea that empirical evidence and a scientific methodology should be the main starting point for considering how to evaluate something like our emotional or intellectual responses to moving images. It is in some ways the antithesis of certain other approaches which invoke a perceived ideological intentionality, such as Marxist or post-colonial schools of thought, or Freudian, Lacanian or other psychoanalytical interpretations, which at times make claims that are difficult to substantiate in any empirical sense. I am conscious of the fact that I have mostly aligned my research with that of some key contributors to the cognitive film studies school of criticism and, implicitly by doing so, have positioned myself in opposition to interpretive approaches such as psychoanalysis. This is only partly true however, as in Chapter Two I drew on Freud's ideas about uncanniness as part of my analysis of *Lost Highway*, and I am sensitive to the fact that the concept of 'self-aversion' that I introduced in the same chapter might, to some readers, resemble a psychoanalytical claim about subconscious or repressed fear. As a result, the research I have undertaken for this study has brought me to a theoretical crossroads of sorts. If I want to venture that a film which draws attention to its characters' artificiality in some way unsettles the viewer by tapping in to an uncomfortable anxiety about the fragility of real selves, then there is little room to manoeuvre if I wish to make this argument while remaining under a cognitivist banner. Furthermore, the origin of my inquiry stemmed from actual negative responses as well as perceived ones (the imagined 'mainstream viewer'), so it is necessary to

firmly acknowledge that there are significant numbers of film enthusiasts who gravitate towards films whose narratives do not pertain to the classical paradigm.

To make a final point it is once again of use to bring in Strawson's arguments about self-narrativising, which I looked in Chapters Five and Six in the context of Dennett's seemingly contradictory ideas on the same concept. Strawson objects to what he sees as an oversimplification and generalisation of how human beings view our personal histories, arguing that it need not (and for him personally *does* not) assume a story-like shape. As I argued in those chapters, there is a lack of agreement and clarity in his point about what a sense of a lived past that is 'story-like'[282] might look like, but this gap actually makes it easier for us to accommodate a greater number of models and patterns that we might consider 'narrative' or 'story-like' in nature. If we are to attach any credence to the idea that selfhood and narrative are inextricably linked to one another – whether that pertains to characters in fictional worlds or an autobiographical self-narrative that we use to understand ourselves – then there will doubtless be varying capacities between individuals for what they will or will not tolerate or feel comfortable with. As such, reactions (whether positive or negative) to films which contain unconventional character portrayals could stem as much from our relative enjoyment of certain narrative structures, and our opinion of how a story should behave, as it could from discomfiting suggestions about our fragile sense of self. Perhaps, this line of argument will lead to a confluence of theoretical positions, one at which it is perhaps necessary to reach out to other interpretative models to make a claim or argument, or at least recognise the limits of what I can reasonably substantiate, or even need to defend, about viewer affect. Maybe, as I suggested earlier, speculation that appears to run a little too close to a psychoanalytical position will, through future developments, successfully hold up under the type of empirical evaluation common to cognitivism.

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Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979)

All of Me (Carl Reiner, 1984)

An American Werewolf in London (John Landis, 1981)

Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999)

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)

Blazing Saddles (Mel Brooks, 1974)

Boys Don't Cry (Kimberley Peirce, 1999)

Celine and Julie Go Boating (Jacques Rivette, 1974)

Certified Copy (Abbas Kiarostami, 2010)

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)

District 9 (Neill Blomkamp, 2009)

Don Juan de Marco (Jeremy Leven, 1995)

Don't Look Now (Nicolas Roeg, 1973)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004)

Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999)

Freaky Friday (Gary Nelson, 1976)

Get Out (Jordan Peele, 2017)

Hellraiser (Clive Barker, 1987)

Identity (James Mangold, 2003)

Inland Empire (David Lynch, 2007)

Inside Out (Peter Docter and Ronnie del Carmen, 2015)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Philip Kaufman, 1978)

Jacob's Ladder (Adrian Lyne, 1990)

Kanał (Andrzej Wajda, 1957)

Last Year at Marienbad (Alain Resnais, 1961)

Living in Oblivion (Tom DiCillo, 1995)

Lone Star (John Sayles, 1996)

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Men In Black (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997)

Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945)

Mirror (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975)

Moon (Duncan Jones, 2009)

Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001)

Multiplicity (Harold Ramis, 1996)

Naked (Mike Leigh, 1993)

Parenthood (Ron Howard, 1989)

Persona (Ingmar Bergmann, 1966)

Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)

Raising Cane (Brian De Palma, 1992)

Rebecca (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)

Reconstruction (Christoffer Boe, 2003)

Robocop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)

Sherlock Jr. (Buster Keaton, 1924)

Singin' in the Rain (Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen, 1952)

Slacker (Richard Linklater, 1991)

Society (Brian Yuzna, 1989)

Star Trek: First Contact (Jonathan Frakes, 1996)

Still Alice (Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2014)

Sunset Blvd. (Billy Wilder, 1950)

Synecdoche, New York (Charlie Kaufman, 2008)

The People vs Larry Flynt (Miloš Forman, 1996)

That Obscure Object of Desire (Luis Buñuel, 1977)

The 400 Blows (François Truffaut, 1959)

The Fly (John Carpenter, 1986)

The Fly (Kurt Neumann, 1958)

The Game (David Fincher, 1997)

The Haunting (Robert Wise, 1963)

The Others (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001)

The Prestige (Christopher Nolan, 2006)

The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)

The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999)

The Suspended Vocation (Raúl Ruiz, 1978)

The Thing (John Carpenter, 1982)

The Thing from Another World (Christian Nyby, 1951)

The Usual Suspects (Bryan Singer, 1995)

Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990)

Under The Skin (Jonathan Glazer, 2013)

Vice Versa (Brian Gilbert, 1988)

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (Robert Zemeckis, 1988)

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