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The Dysphoric Style in Contemporary American Independent Cinema

David C. Simmons
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE DYSPHORIC STYLE
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

By
DAVID C. SIMMONS

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The members of the Committee approve the dissertation of David C. Simmons defended on April 11, 2005.

____________________________________
Karen L. Laughlin
Professor Co-Directing Dissertation

____________________________________
Mark Garrett Cooper
Professor Co-Directing Dissertation

____________________________________
Valliere Richard Auzenne
Outside Committee Member

____________________________________
William J. Cloonan
Committee Member

Approved:

____________________________________
David F. Johnson
Director, Program in the Humanities

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
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This dissertation argues that contemporary American independent cinema needs to be theorized in a new way. Film criticism has traditionally defined independent film in one of two ways: financing (which, as we see by George Lucas’ independently financed *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* [2005], is not an adequate approach) or anti-Hollywood content (which is problematic because it only explains what this cinema is *not*, rather than what it is). Instead, I argue that contemporary American independent cinema is best defined in terms of style. This style may best be described as dysphoric (a state of anxiety or restlessness specifically constructed for the spectator). Building from David Bordwell’s analysis of film form, I show how the dysphoric style structures the aspects of 1) narrative causality; 2) temporal relations; and 3) spatial relations. Such a style arises from and conveys the nihilistic themes that characterize contemporary American independent cinema.

Chapter 1 examines narrative, arguing that the dysphoric style constructs narratives with loose causality, ambiguity, unresolved gaps, an open ending, and passive characters devoid of clear goals. Looking closely at the film *Pi* (Darren Aronofsky, 1998), I explicate how its narrative is distinct from a film with similar themes, but which arises from a completely different group style, *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001). Comparing and contrasting the pair of films in this and subsequent chapters allows for greater illumination of the distinct nature of the dysphoric style. I also provide additional examples of independent films in this and the following chapters to substantiate my argument. Chapter 2 examines the realm of temporality, arguing that *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2001) constructs time in a way that heightens ambiguity and leaves unresolved narrative gaps, something quite different than *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) which I show to be a mainstream film, despite its reputation. Chapter 3 looks at space, while providing a critique of Bordwell’s account using more recent scholarship. I argue that dysphoric space is fragmented, unstable, unclear, metaphoric, and subjective. Here *SLC Punk* (James
Merendino, 1998) is revealed as being spatially dysphoric, while *Mallrats* (Kevin Smith, 1995), a film often considered independent, is really only performing the same old classical maneuvers. Chapter 4 describes the evolution of the dysphoric style, presenting a case about how it morphed from the existential styles of film noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s. I also demonstrate how the dysphoric style in turn influences its own neighboring contemporary cinemas. This dissertation provides a new way to conceptualize, theorize, and discuss the phenomenon I am calling contemporary American independent cinema. It enables a more nuanced understanding of its films. It provides an opportunity to notice how contemporary American independent cinema intersects, informs, is distinguished from, and is influenced by other cinemas. Most importantly, it allows us to understand U.S. culture in a more complex manner by seeing how this cinema not only reflects nihilism, but produces it.
INTRODUCTION:
THE DYSPHORIC STYLE
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

What is “independent cinema”? Most answers to this question take one of two approaches. Greg Merritt, in his work *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film*, believes that what constitutes an independent film comes down to its mode of production. He defines an independent film as one “financed and produced completely autonomous of all studios regardless of size . . . Such films do not have a prior distribution arrangement” (xii). Yet, under Merritt’s definition, George Lucas’ *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* (2005) would be an independent film.¹ Few would agree with this classification. Emanuel Levy, in his book *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, presents the second approach: an independent film is one with content that stands in direct opposition to Hollywood cinema. He quotes director James Mangold who believes in “a good, healthy, anti-Hollywood sentiment, working outside the system . . . trying to make movies free of a certain Hollywood aesthetic” (3). Yet this anti-Hollywood approach fails to explain what unifies the type of “opposition” these films present. Even further, the opposition thesis typically ends up recapitulating the first, production-oriented approach I’ve mentioned (as Levy himself clearly does [6]). In contrast to these points of view, I propose that what sets this cinema apart from other cinemas is its discernible style.

The neglect of stylistic issues has prevented prior criticism from understanding this cinema. Whereas Merritt gets stuck using financial data to place films in categories (independent, semi-independent, and studio), examining style will allow us to look critically at common elements that transcend budget or genre. This will exclude certain films made on low budgets without secure distribution deals and include some larger-budget films with

¹Even George Lucas himself, speaking of his six *Star Wars* films, declares, “My movies have always been independent movies” (qtd. in Rich 8).
such prior distribution commitments. And whereas Levy gets distracted over how this cinema is anti-Hollywood, by turning to style, we can account for the “oppositional” features of independent cinema in positive terms. We can say what these features are rather than what they are not. Examining style will provide a clearer view of what allows an independent film to be recognized and marketed as such. It will allow us to raise crucial questions about its history, politics, and social concerns that would not be possible by the two standard approaches. Most importantly, it will allow us to understand how this cinema intervenes in a culture.

According to David Bordwell, a “group style” is a set of paradigms or norms governing aesthetic choices among a group of filmmakers (Classical 3-5). This does not preclude exceptions within individual films; it simply means that certain stylistic choices can be discerned as having preeminence within a particular cinema. This group style generally remains consistent regardless of differing genres or modes of financing. Like the classical Hollywood cinema described by David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Janet Staiger, contemporary American independent cinema is also predominantly structured by a distinct group style. That style seeks to place the spectator in a state of anxiety, confusion, or restlessness—in a word, dysphoria. This dysphoric style both reflects and produces the nihilism that characterizes this cinema.

Nihilism is a particular world-view in which one believes that nothing (religion, government, philosophy, language, cinematic narrative systems, etc.) can ground truth or provide absolute values of any kind. It is accompanied by a distrust of all such systems that attempt to show absolutes and works to annihilate them either through action or complete indifference. (This, of course, is paradoxical in and of itself, as it would be impossible to cling to a system that despises systems. Nevertheless, this is how nihilism has been defined in the tradition of Nietzsche).

The word “nihilism” comes from the Latin “nihil,” meaning “not anything, nothing; that which does not exist” (Oxford Latin Dictionary, qtd. in Carr 13). The same root appears in the verb, “annihilate” meaning “to reduce to non-existence, to blot out of existence” (Oxford English Dictionary, qtd. in Carr 13). The term first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, thus marking it as a concern that is specifically Modern in nature. Indeed, according to Matthew Rampley, it names “the
essential crisis of modernity” (31). Although there is some dispute over who first coined the term, there is evidence that the word “nihiliste” was used during the French Revolution to designate an attitude of political or religious indifference (Müller-Lauter 197). The term underwent particularly significant development in the second half of the 1800s when it was emphatically linked to moral, religious, and political anarchism usually grounded in the loss of belief in God (Carr 15). In part, this meaning arose first from a group of Russian political dissidents who labeled themselves as “nihilists” (and whose views are presented in several literary works by Dostoyevsky and Turgenev) and second, from Friedrich Nietzsche, who began using the term in the 1880s (Müller-Lauter 41).

Nietzsche is perhaps the figure most credited with the development of the notion of nihilism, especially as it has come down to us in contemporary usage. As Michael Allen Gillespie writes, “When it comes to our understanding of nihilism, we are almost all Nietzscheans” (xii). Nietzsche dubbed nihilism “the uncanniest of all guests” and believed it to be “one of the greatest crises, a moment of the deepest self-reflection, of humanity” (Saemtliche Vol. 13: part 11, fragment 119., qtd. in Carr 4). In The Will to Power, Nietzsche provides a definition of nihilism: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (25). He goes on to say “[t]he philosophical nihilist is of the conviction that everything that occurs is meaningless and in vain; and that Being ought not to be meaningless and in vain” (36). For Nietzsche, nihilism emerges when the promises held out by religion and metaphysics reveal themselves as false (Rampley 30); hence we have Nietzsche’s famous declaration that “God is dead.” For Nietzsche, this is more complex than merely a rejection of certain belief systems (particularly those involving denial, such as Christianity and Buddhism). He sees the roots of this rejection in those very systems themselves (Rampley 30). Religion, once thought to ground truth, is seen as being no longer capable of doing so.

In twentieth-century philosophy, Karl Barth vastly expanded the sense of nihilism to include the loss of any humanly knowable absolutes. This loss is perceived as problematic and terrifying, for it throws everything into a random state of chaos devoid of purpose and meaning (Carr 121). Whereas Nietzsche saw nihilism as a temporary phenomenon, linked to the self-dissolution of the Platonic-Christian world-view, Barth regards nihilism as being somehow endemic to the human condition; something that cannot be avoided (Carr 125).
Karen Carr describes the permutations of philosophical nihilism by breaking it down into various denials. Thus, *Epistemological Nihilism* denies the possibility of knowledge; *Alethiological Nihilism* denies the reality of truth; *Metaphysical or Ontological Nihilism* denies an (independently existing) world; *Ethical or Moral Nihilism* denies moral or ethical value; and *Existential or Axiological Nihilism* names a feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, “Life has no meaning.” Carr considers this the most common usage of the word. (Carr 17-18). With all these attributes in mind, she glosses twentieth-century nihilism as “the loss of all sense of contact with anything that is ultimately true or meaningful” (2). Thus nihilism is a philosophy where there are no absolutes about anything: morality, knowledge, truth, reality, even life itself, and where the lack of such absolutes is perceived as a tragic loss.

I argue that such a philosophy structures one of the predominant styles of contemporary American independent cinema. I will demonstrate how “the dysphoric style” offers a preferable label for many contemporary American films conventionally described as “independent.” I will also position the dysphoric style in relationship to the dominant style of Hollywood classicism. I will then make my case for the dysphoric style by describing what Bordwell sees as the three aspects of any cinematic group style: narrative structure, construction of space, and construction of time.

Chapter 1 explains how the dysphoric style structures the narrative elements of many contemporary American independent films. Building from David Bordwell’s theory of cinematic narration, I lay out principles of narrative in the dysphoric style. In particular, I compare Darren Aronofsky’s *Pi* (1998) with Ron Howard’s *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) to show how two films with similar themes and concerns are structured very differently. While *Pi* is dysphoric, *A Beautiful Mind* derives from the distinct classical style. I then show how *Pi*’s dysphoric narrative structure is emblematic of other contemporary American independent films regardless of genre or production cost, such as the gritty urban *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995), the meandering *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), the black comedy *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994), and the bleak drug epic *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000).

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While the term “independent” in itself seems to imply qualities that I want to challenge, its currency is such that I will continue to use it.
Chapter 2 looks at the element of temporality in the dysphoric style. In the
dysphoric style, time is not a vehicle for mere causality, but a process to be investigated on
its own. This is clarified as I demonstrate how *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), is not
dysphoric, in contrast with *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2001), which is. Whereas
temporality works to support the classical notion of redemption in *Pulp Fiction*, temporality
works to subvert it, if not show its impossibility, in *Memento*. I then look at how *Memento’s*
dysphoric temporality is similar to other films in contemporary American independent
cinema, such as the surrealist drama *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), the web-of-life film
*Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (Jill Sprecher, 2002), and the dark, coming-of-age sci-fi

In the third chapter of my dissertation, I explore how the dysphoric style structures
the spatial relations of many contemporary American independent films. In particular, I
compare *Mallrats* (Kevin Smith, 1995) and *SLC Punk* (James Merendino, 1998). Although
both films purport to expose the evils of capitalism, spatially *Mallrats* ends up affirming that
system, while spatially *SLC Punk* rejects it. They thus reveal themselves as having arisen
from different systems: *Mallrats* from the classical style and *SLC Punk* from the dysphoric
style. *Bully* (Larry Clark, 2001) and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1993) are two more examples which
illustrate dysphoric spatial elements. To do this, I need to correct Bordwell’s account of
space by looking to a new theory developed by Mark Garrett Cooper which sees the basic
unit of film not as the shot, but as the discrete spaces within the shot and across them.

Chapter 4 describes the evolution of the dysphoric style, presenting a case for how it
developed out of, yet remains distinct from, two previous cinematic styles—film noir and
European Art Cinema of the 1960s. I show how these two existential styles evolved toward
nihilism, eventually combining to form a manifestation called the dysphoric style. I observe
how the dysphoric style continues to influence contemporary cinemas around it. I argue that
a stylistic account makes possible an interrogation of contemporary American independent
cinema that would not be possible through the two standard approaches. Most of all, I
show how this cinema provides a better understanding of the culture from whence it comes.

As I’ve argued, previous scholarship that works to define American independent
cinema falls into two theoretical traps: budget and anti-Hollywood content. We won’t be
able to describe what makes contemporary American independent cinema a marketable
cinema or evaluate its politics until we get beyond these two approaches and appreciate the style that makes this cinema cohere. The dysphoric style is the dominant style within contemporary American independent cinema, structuring not only the types of stories it tells, but the way in which it tells them.
CHAPTER 1
TRYING TO HOLD ONTO A PIECE OF \textit{Pi}:
THE DYSPHORIC STYLE’S STRUCTURING OF CAUSAL RELATIONS

“Sundance is weird. The movies are weird—you actually have to think about them when you watch them.”

Recently a new importance has been attached to contemporary American independent cinema. Such films as \textit{The Blair Witch Project} (the first American independent film to make over $100 million) have vaulted this cinema to a new prominence in the mainstream media. I am delineating contemporary American independent cinema as starting around 1989 with the advent of \textit{sex, lies, and videotape} at the Sundance Film Festival and continuing through the present. It is my contention that this cinema has its own distinct group style. This style tends to place the spectator in a state of anxiety, confusion, or restlessness—in a word, dysphoria.

This chapter describes how the dysphoric style represents causal relations. Borrowing from David Bordwell’s theory of cinematic narration, I will lay out principles of narration in the dysphoric style. These principles structure Darren Aronofsky’s \textit{Pi} (1998), a film emblematic of contemporary American independent cinema as a whole. They do not structure a more ordinary Hollywood film with similar themes and concerns such as \textit{A Beautiful Mind} (Ron Howard, 2001). To understand the difference, I argue, one must also understand why the dysphoric style lends itself especially well to the nihilistic themes which pervade in contemporary American independent cinema.

According to David Bordwell, a “group style” is a set of paradigms or norms governing aesthetic choices (particularly narrative cues of causality, temporality, and spatiality) among a group of filmmakers (\textit{Classical} 3-5). This does not preclude exceptions
within individual films; it simply means that certain stylistic choices can be discerned as having preeminence within a particular set of films. This group style generally remains consistent regardless of differing genres (e.g. a gangster film, a mystery, or a comedy) or modes of production and financing. Like the classical Hollywood cinema described by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, contemporary American independent cinema is also predominantly structured by a distinct group style.

In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell lays out schemata for understanding film narrative. Bordwell borrows notions from cognitive psychology, believing the spectator to be active, not passive. The spectator seeks to construct an intelligent story, using cues from the film to guide in hypothesis making (37). Film narratives can reward, modify, frustrate, and/or defeat the spectator’s search for coherence (38). For example, *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954) demonstrates how film cues reward a spectator’s search for coherence. As the film opens, the camera reveals neighbors in an apartment courtyard and then moves in through the window of a character the spectator will soon come to know as Jeff. Jeff is asleep, but the camera’s movement around the room gives the spectator certain cues from which hypotheses can be drawn. A cast on Jeff’s leg is a cue which may guide the spectator to wonder, “How did this character break his leg?” A shattered press camera cues the spectator to ask, “Is he a photographer? Did he break his leg on the job?” Photographs of an auto race, a fire, a battered woman, and an atomic bomb may lead the spectator to think, “Does he take dangerous photography assignments?” Seeing cameras, flashbulbs, a framed negative of a model and then a stack of magazines with the model on the cover confirms the previous hypothesis testing: Jeff is indeed a professional photographer who has had many varying assignments. All of this is done before any line of dialogue is spoken. The next scene confirms this hypothesis verbally as Jeff talks to his editor on the phone.³ Cues from the film have led to hypothesis testing by the spectator which have then been confirmed by more cues from the film.

Bordwell’s constructivist theory borrows two theoretical terms of narrative analysis, the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*. The *fabula* is the story the viewer creates by picking up narrational cues, applying schemata, and framing and testing hypotheses. It is chronological, causal, and

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³For Bordwell’s analysis of this scene, see Bordwell, *Narrative* 41.
within a given time and space (49). The *syuzhet* is the plot, the way the film arranges and presents the fabula (50).

The spectator uses cues from the syuzhet to construct a coherent fabula. This fabula is unified by the three elements of causality, time, and space (39). 1. *Causality.* The syuzhet can aid in fabula construction through clear cause-and-effect or arrange events so as to block or complicate the construction of causality (51). In the previous *Rear Window* example, the spectator uses the syuzhet's cues of the cast, the shattered camera, and the photographs to construct a causal fabula. The spectator might deduce that the cause of taking dangerous photography assignments has produced the effect of Jeff's broken leg. 2. *Time.* The syuzhet can cue us to construct fabula events in any sequence (order), time span (duration), or number of times (frequency). These can either assist or block the viewer's construction of fabula time (51). In *Rear Window*, the cues are used by the spectator to begin assembling a mental timeline. Before the film began, Jeff took a dangerous photography assignment; subsequently, at this point in the film, he has a broken leg. 3. *Space.* The syuzhet can facilitate construction of fabula space by informing us of the relevant surroundings, positions, and paths of the characters. It can also impede our comprehension by suspending, muddling, or undercutting our construction of space (51). In *Rear Window*, the spectator uses the syuzhet's cues to construct a sense of space: there is an apartment with a desk, various pieces of furniture, space for Jeff in his wheelchair, and a courtyard outside the window. This will continue to be refined in the spectator's head as the film progresses. In the particular hypotheses of causality, time, and space mentioned above, *Rear Window*’s narrative will continue rewarding the spectator's search for coherence through further verbal and visual cues.

As far as causality, the syuzhet has great control over the amount of information to which the spectator has access, the relevancy of that information, and the compatibility of that information (54). The syuzhet can create gaps by choosing to withhold certain pieces of fabula information. Such gaps may be temporary or permanent, meaning the missing information can be eventually filled in or never provided (55). One of the biggest gaps in *Rear Window* is, of course, the nagging question, “Did Thorwald kill his wife?” This gap will eventually be filled by the syuzhet near the end of the film, making it a temporary, albeit long-lasting gap. Gaps can be flaunted or suppressed by the syuzhet, meaning the spectator
can either know he or she is missing crucial information or not be aware of it (55). In the case of “Did Thorwald kill his wife?”, the gap is obviously flaunted by the syuzhet to the point where it begins to consume not only Jeff, but the spectator. The syuzhet may use retardation (delaying the giving of information) for narrative purposes such as the creation of anticipation, curiosity, suspense and surprise (55). This is the purpose of making the spectator wait until the end to discover whether Thorwald is a murderer or not. The syuzhet may also use redundancy (using repetition to give the same information again) to reinforce and confirm spectator hypotheses (56-7). This happens in the opening of *Rear Window* where visual cues of Jeff’s apartment tell the spectator that he is adventurous; this is reinforced in the following scene when Jeff explains the same thing to his editor (57).

The syuzhet not only controls the amount of information but also the source of this information along with its degree of reliability. A restricted narrative is one where the syuzhet is more or less limited to what a character knows. This is the case in *Rear Window*, where the spectator is confined almost wholly to what Jeff knows (with a few significant exceptions) (57). An unrestricted narrative is one that is more or less omniscient—we know more than any one of the characters (57). An example of this may be seen in *Birth of a Nation* when the narrative crosscuts between Silas Lynch’s attack of Elsie and her subsequent rescue by the KKK, more information than any one character has access to. Narratives also run a full range of reliability. They can be seen as reliable, meaning that the spectator trusts what is being told; such is the case with the narrative of *Rear Window* which generally releases information to the spectator at the same time as Jeff receives it (60-61). A narrative can also be seen as unreliable, meaning that the spectator begins not to trust it because it withholds information, doesn’t explain information, or gives false information. A classic example of an unreliable narrative is in Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright*, where a flashback presented by the narrative as fact is later understood as having been a lie (60-61).

The dysphoric style tends to block the spectator’s understanding of causality by withholding certain information that the spectator desires for clear fabula construction. This style tends to favor a loose causality, where there is often not a strict chain of cause and effect. Unexpected events may happen without a clear explanation. Crucial fabula gaps may arise that are never fully filled. Ambiguity is delighted in for its own aesthetic value. The
narrative may not always be seen by the spectator as being reliable. The film may end without fully and clearly resolving all plot lines.

Such unsettling characteristics are reflected in the kinds of characters and settings likely to be constructed by the dysphoric style. Protagonists are often flawed socially, emotionally, and/or morally. They tend to be passive, not clearly articulating goals, or, if they do, eventually coming to discover that such goals are impossible to achieve. The setting is likewise dystopian, usually placing the protagonist in a grunge milieu of alienation where harm is likely to occur. Such characteristics usually enhance the nihilistic themes common to this cinema. At the end of the film, the spectator may feel an unresolvable hopelessness. The world of the film may not have been made right and might even lead us to the conclusion that such a “making right” of the world is impossible.

Pi offers an exemplary case of these characteristics because its plot explicitly raises the question of whether logic can order chaos. The film’s narrative continually asserts the notion that rationality leads to truth, thereby ordering the chaos of the universe. Pi’s syuzhet, however, consistently works against this, frustrating the spectator’s quest to construct a rational, causal fabula.

Pi opens to credits that feature brief images of impulses from the human brain as well as advanced mathematical equations, graphs, large numbers, and other signs which cue the spectator, even before the film action proper begins, that the narrative believes that logic, order, and rationality are paths that lead to truth.¹ Yet there is a tension here. The fragmented, chaotic presentation undermines the very objects of order it presents, something symptomatic of the film as a whole. Immediately following the credits, the hypothesis that reason leads to truth is again weakened as the spectator experiences a startling moment of chaos. As the credits end, a loud, unexplained crash assaults us and we are thrust up against an unusual image of part of a man’s face. The camera is so close that only one eye and part of his nose are visible. The image is overexposed, strangely lit from above, and shot with grainy black-and-white film stock. Instead of the usual clear

¹As Bordwell explains in his work The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960, narration usually begins before the action does, with the images and sounds of the opening credits cueing spectator hypotheses. “The credits can anticipate a motif to appear in the story proper” (25).
establishing shot which would allow the spectator to develop a cognitive map of the scenographic space, the syuzhet withholds spatial information, troubling the spectator from the very beginning of the story proper and cueing us to adopt another hypothesis. It takes a few shots before the spectator is able to discern that this is a sideways shot of man on a desk.

Once we’ve placed the characters, a shot of blackness appears, again disorienting the viewer. This temporary spatial gap is soon filled as the man turns on the bathroom light and the spectator is able to recognize the room into which he has walked. Slowly the spectator may be able to make a scenographic map of what seems to be the man’s apartment. But the process has been hindered, or at least delayed, by the narrative in a very heavy-handed manner, leading us to question the narrative’s reliability. Our hypothesis that reason leads to truth is again questioned and may require reworking.

The man opens the door of his apartment and leaves. A small girl names him for us: “Max! Max! . . . What’s three hundred and twenty-two times four hundred and ninety-one?”

The man, now known to us as Max, gives the correct response to this and another difficult division problem. The narrative cues the spectator that Max is probably a mathematic genius, able to use his brain to solve large, difficult problems. This, then, accords with the images from the credits, as well as the title of the film. The spectator continues to question whether reason (in such forms, perhaps, as math and logic) is able to order chaos in this film.

As Max wanders the Chinatown neighborhood of Manhattan, his voice-over again reinforces the hermeneutic of reason in the film: “12:45: Restate my assumptions: 1. Mathematics is the language of nature. 2. Everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. 3. If you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge; therefore there are patterns everywhere in nature.” Max’s goal, therefore, will be to use numbers to find a pattern to the universe. This speech exalts the notion of reason. Simultaneously, however, the space is one of utter chaos. There are radical, fast-motion shots of city streets, absurdly quick zooms and swish pans, and shaky, almost unintelligible shots of pedestrians at canted angles. This is a dangerous dystopia (a setting common to the

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As Bordwell has explained, film narratives often construct a character with very few traits, and then spend the rest of the film reaffirming these traits. (See, for example, Classical Hollywood Cinema 13-14).
The snorricam is a device that attaches the camera directly to the actor. While the voice-over holds fast to the notion of reason, it is belied by the chaotic images that accompany it; in which should we place our trust? A unsettling feeling grows within us: this is an unreliable narrative.

Later, Max rides a subway car. He looks over and sees a fellow passenger, an older man who sings “I Only Have Eyes for You.” Max looks away. The song stops mid-verse and Max looks up to discover that the man has vanished from the subway car. The syuzhet withholds fabula information, never explaining who this man is or what meaning this holds. The spectator is thus confronted by a gap. Usually gaps are eventually filled, even if it takes until the end of the film. This gap never will be. The spectator can hypothesize: Is this man produced by a mystical, religious vision of Max’s? Is this man a hallucination of Max’s, placing his reliability as a narrator in question? Does this information mean nothing, placing us in a meaningless, nihilistic milieu? In any event, spectator confidence in the narrative’s logic continues to diminish.

Such a weakening of narrative confidence becomes profound in a key scene of the film: Max’s mental attack at an underground subway stop. Max grabs his head, as if in pain. The syuzhet conveys this by means of a pounding, merciless, unending sound that assaults our ears, just as we assume Max’s attack assaults him. Meanwhile, an extremely grainy film stock and strange lighting make scenographic space particularly difficult for the spectator to construct. The snorricam creates the effect of the narration’s giving us information as if it were inseparably linked to Max (e.g. when Max moves, the surrounding space appears to move in response). Quick, jarring cuts to extreme close-ups through canted angles of a part of Max’s face further trouble the construction of scenographic space, concealing more than it reveals. The spectator might well feel anxious, caught up in the fragmented images and off-putting sounds. Max sees an unknown Hasidic Jew whose hand drips blood. Some shots of this man could be from Max’s POV (he is the assumed narrator.) Others (such as a close-up on the hand) imply a more omniscient outside narrative source. Yet both sets of narrative cues are shaky, grainy, and troubled. In short, our distrust of narrative cues that we assume are coming from Max are projected onto the narrative as a whole; there is little

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3 The snorricam is a device that attaches the camera directly to the actor.
narrative space that is trustworthy here. Max never finds the man, but he does eventually come upon a brain, lying upon some stairs. As he bends over the brain, Max’s face is unusually lit from below, as if there were light coming from the organ. Yet, in the reverse shot, we see that the brain does not glow. The syuzhet again blocks our construction of coherent scenographic space with these two spatially conflicted shots. Max jabs a pen deeply into the brain. A train barrels down upon him, he screams, and the screen goes white for several seconds. This entire episode (the bleeding Hasid, the brain on the stairs, the train barreling down on Max) is one large syuzhet-produced gap that is never filled. The spectator may hypothesize: Is this a dream of Max’s? Is it a surreal space conjured up by the cries of his unconscious? Is it a hallucination which results from the pills Max keeps taking? Yet the syuzhet never reveals any clear answers to any of these hypotheses; it never allows us to place this event from the film’s syuzhet into the film’s fabula. This, I argue, is one tactic of the dysphoric nature of \textit{Pi}’s narrative.

Another dysphoric tactic of the narrative is reflected by its characters who are unable to order chaos with reason. \textit{Pi} develops three groups of people who search for a mysterious 216-digit number and its meaning. Max is “looking for a way to understand our world.” With his super computer, Euclid, his textbooks on math and neuroscience, his microscope, and his own powers of logic, Max is associated with rationality. He believes that comprehending this number will bring about an understanding of spiral patterns that run through everything in the universe from cream formations in coffee to the shape of the galaxy itself.

Marcy Dawson, who works for the large financial corporation, Lancet-Percy, is also on the trail of this number. She believes that the knowledge and understanding of such a number will be invaluable for her corporation, enabling it to make more accurate stock picks. She’s willing to try anything to get it from Max: friendly meetings, grand quid pro quos, or even threats from violent thugs. Thus, through her character, the number becomes related to the largely invisible yet unrelenting power of capitalism.

At the same time, Lenny Meyer and his rabbinic associates believe that the number will be “the key to the Messianic age.” In particular, they see the number as being able to provide the “true name of God.” They believe that Max is merely the instrument that God
used to bring the number to them. Thus, through them, the number becomes linked with religious mysticism.

All three groups (symbolizing rationality, capitalism, and religious mysticism) compete to find the meaning of this number which will provide absolute answers; yet all three of them also find unity in Max. Max shares the Jewish heritage of Lenny Meyer and his associates, as well as some of the capitalistic goals of Marcy Dawson and her associates (he, too, is interested in finding this number so he can predict the stock market.) In a fascinating turn of events, all three groups must come together to discover this mysterious 216-digit number. Max agrees to take a new computer chip from Marcy’s corporation as well as a floppy disk containing Hebrew numerology from Lenny’s group and place them in his own, homemade super computer, Euclid. As Max waits for the computer to calculate the number, the scenographic space becomes highly sexualized and then even dangerous, perhaps echoing the danger that is possible through this number’s conception. The syuzhet shows us Max walking around the room in circles over and over again, so quickly that coherent space is difficult to construct. Meanwhile, Devi, the neighbor, makes love with her boyfriend and their moanings get louder and louder. The screenplay to \textit{Pi} reads: “Then, his neighbor’s lovemaking turns outright evil. It sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah next door and Max can hardly stand it” (Aronofsky 124). Max begins having another attack, revealed to us through the syuzhet’s pounding sounds and quick cuts to extreme close-ups in canted angles of Max’s face. He runs and looks into the bathroom mirror and discovers a strange lump on the side of his head. Touching it brings such agony that he bangs his head against the mirror repeatedly until it breaks. The neighbor’s lovemaking grows louder and more intense. Max grabs his medicine-dispensing hypodermic gun, shoots it into his head at this climatic moment, and then collapses on the bathroom floor. When he gets up again, Euclid has ejaculated the 216-digit number. Suddenly, the number gets larger and larger until it engulfs the screen in a rushing white-out. Then, the screen goes black. Max is completely alone at the moment of conception. There is no God, no connection to humanity, only Max himself, staring into the void of nihilism. This odd sequence suggests there is indeed creation, but it is man-made, not God-made, and it is frightening in its loneliness. Such an unsettling theme has been highlighted by the dysphoric images and sounds used to depict it.
The three systems of rationality, capitalism, and religious mysticism attack each other in the search for truth. A screaming Marcy appears in the night with two of her thugs and they shove a gun in Max’s face to attempt to get the number from him. Because of the low-key lighting, shaky hand-held camera, and grainy film stock, spectator spatial construction is very difficult. Just then, Lenny takes a baseball bat to a thug and Max escapes in a car with Lenny and his associates. They, too, begin to punch Max and demand the number. The underexposure in the car mimics the syuzhet’s spatial cues with Marcy’s gang. The spectator is almost completely prevented from constructing reasonable scenographic space, just as an all-solving number is unable to be found. The syuzhet’s blocking the spectator from clear spatial construction reflects the chaos of the three systems’ fighting among each other.

Suddenly, without any clear, causal transition, we cut to a scene of Max in his bathroom. He peeks in the sink and sees a brain covered with ants. He pounds the brain down the drain. The meaning of this scene is never given to us. We’ve seen several times when ants are in Max’s computer or in his apartment, but this motif is never explained. We can once again hypothesize: Is this a hallucination? Is Max an unreliable narrator? But no clear answers are given. The syuzhet continues to block spectator construction of fabula causality through its continued flaunting of permanent gaps. We continue to question whether reason can order chaos.

Then the syuzhet gives us a strange montage sequence. We see quick flashes of mathematical equations and graphs, intercut with fast-motion shots of New York City streets and pedestrians. Max’s voice-over is just a jumbled mess now. He calls out the time in no discernable sequence again and again: “17:13 . . . 7:10 . . . 12:15 . . . 14:50 . . . 15:10 . . . 16:55 . . . 10:35 . . . 9:15.” From this we may assume that, just as for the schizophrenic, time no longer has meaning. Everything is present. Max’s inability to grasp meaningful temporal relations is echoed by the narrative’s refusal to provide understandable space or clear causality.

Back in his apartment, Max destroys Euclid, his computer, and burns the paper with the 216-digit number. He then takes a drill, “places the bit against the math section of his brain” (Aronofsky 153), and drills into his head. In the closing scene, Max’s head is covered with a hat, as he sits on a park bench beside Jenna. She asks him to do large math problems in his head like he did earlier in the film. He is unable to do so. The math section of the
brain has been destroyed and with it, any knowledge of the 216-digit number and its ability to bring absolute order and understanding to the universe. All Max can do is look at the leaves on trees rippling in the wind in a complacent acceptance of the “now” (Aronofsky 37).

Rationality, capitalism, and religious mysticism fail to obtain absolute answers. None discovers the significance of the one number that was promised to bring order to the universe. None is the system that can answer all questions. In the end, all are left with nothing. Max got close to such a discovery. He found the number but was unable to come to an understanding of its ultimate place in the universe before going mad and performing a self-lobotomy to escape from the quest itself. The implication, then, seems to be that grand quests for an all-encompassing pattern or truth will eventually end in insanity. Absolutes should not and cannot be known. This nihilistic theme has been highlighted by the dysphoric style. The narrative has worked to block the spectator’s construction of absolute causality, coherent time, and understandable space, all crucial components of a fabula (Bordwell, *Narration* 49). Consequently we are left with a syuzhet, devoid of a coherent fabula. In a dysphoric manner, Max’s stare into the void of nihilism has become our own.

The dysphoric style differs substantially from Hollywood classicism. Take, for example, a film with several thematic similarities to *Pi, A Beautiful Mind*. Both films feature eccentric protagonists who are extremely intelligent, yet psychologically troubled. Both protagonists apply their genius in the field of mathematics in their quest for great answers. Yet, *A Beautiful Mind’s* narrative is radically different from *Pi* in both structure and style. Such differences will illustrate how the dysphoric style differs from Hollywood classicism.

*A Beautiful Mind* begins in a Princeton classroom where a math professor, Dr. Helinger, lectures a group of graduate students in 1947. He explains that mathematicians are working to win the war against the evils of global Soviet-based communism. As with *Pi*, the narrative cues the spectator from the beginning of the film that logic is the means of finding answers that can help society.

A few scenes later, John Nash, our logic-trusting protagonist, meets his new roommate, Charles. The two will later have many conversations as well as physical tussles with each other, including an episode when Charles shoves John’s desk out of their dorm window. What the spectator doesn’t realize at the time is that this new roommate is merely
a schizophrenic vision of John’s troubled mental state. The syuzhet withholds this crucial information necessary for coherent fabula construction, causing a gap. However, unlike many of the gaps in Pi, this one will eventually be filled. About sixty-five minutes later, the syuzhet reveals that Charles is one of John’s delusional visions. The gap is filled and fabula coherence is secured.

William Parcher is another character who is a delusion of John’s. When John meets him, Parcher explains that he has been sent by the government to secure John’s help in deciphering hidden codes of the enemy. Parcher takes him into an abandoned warehouse where an elaborate operation (complete with several high-tech machines and a full staff of researchers) works secretly to accomplish this goal. He implants a radium diode in John’s arm which gives him the codes to open a gate where he will deposit his work.

The next major character we are introduced to is Alicia, one of John’s students, with whom he begins to develop a romantic relationship. Alicia is an actual person, not a delusion of John’s schizophrenia. The film develops into a pattern, alternating between scenes of “real” characters (such as Alicia) and “imagined” characters (such as Charles and Parcher). At this point in the film, the syuzhet doesn’t discriminate between the two types; thus, the audience doesn’t know that some characters are real and some are imagined, but they will.

An example of this alternation between real and imagined characters is shown in a scene where John kisses Alicia at a picnic, followed by a scene where Charles introduces John to his young niece, Marcee. The syuzhet withholds narrative cues so that the spectator is placed in John’s position (i.e. unable to discern who is real and who is imaginary.) Yet, small clues provide cues that something is amiss. As Marcee races through a group of pigeons on the ground, none of them scatter. This is the syuzhet’s way of providing a clue that Marcee is imaginary. It is so subtle, however, that few spectators will notice this on their first viewing. Nevertheless, the narrative provides a principle which retrospectively allows for a proper fabula construction: characters that are merely in John’s head do not interact with the environment in the same way as John.

Soon the intermingling between real and imagined characters intensifies. As John prepares to give a lecture, he sees Charles and Marcee (both imaginary) and hugs them. He then goes into the lecture hall and begins delivering his speech before a real audience.
Suddenly, both John and the spectator see men in suits (also a product of delusion) entering the auditorium and walking toward him. He runs out the back door, abandoning his bag and the lecture audience. As he darts across campus, he meets someone who introduces himself as Dr. Rosen, a psychiatrist. John, and at this point, the spectator, believe Dr. Rosen to be a Russian spy. John punches him and tries to escape when a team of men grab him, inject him with a substance, and carry him off in a car. At this point, both John and the spectator probably believe that John has been drugged and captured, rather than sedated and taken to a mental hospital (which turns out to be the case in a subsequent scene). In this manner, *A Beautiful Mind*’s syuzhet deliberately misleads the spectator into constructing a completely different fabula. As such, it shares some similarities with the dysphoric style’s deliberate muddying of fabula waters. However, by the end of the film, *A Beautiful Mind* explains all contradictions and ties up all loose ends. This is much different than the ambiguous and open endings common to the dysphoric style. Spatial construction is also very different here. As John is running across campus, the camera is fairly stable. Lighting and film stocks are such that all faces are clearly visible. Spatiality can easily be constructed by the spectator. This is very different from the almost indiscernible images that *Pi*’s chase scenes presented. Whereas the classical system is clear and understandable, the dysphoric is confused and disorienting.

Up to this point, *A Beautiful Mind*’s narrational cues completely restrict the spectator to John’s mental space. John is present in every scene and the spectator sees the same people that he sees (real or imagined) without the ability to discern which is which or even to know that there is a difference. At about seventy minutes into the film, a large rupture occurs. Instead of the syuzhet’s giving information from John’s perspective, it switches over to Alicia’s. Alicia listens alone as Dr. Rosen explains that John has schizophrenia. John never had a roommate named Charles; he lived alone at Princeton. The syuzhet’s narrational cues have offered the spectator two equally plausible narratives to follow. Either John really is involved in dangerous governmental espionage (and Dr. Rosen is a Russian agent, lying to Alicia) or John has schizophrenia (and Dr. Rosen really is a psychologist, telling Alicia the truth.) At this point in the film, syuzhet narrational cues are ambiguous—the spectator could go either way. As screenwriter Akiva Goldsman explains, “This was always my central
conceit . . . to make the audience think they were watching one kind of picture, when, in reality, they were in something else”.

Alicia does some investigating. She sees John’s office, chaotically covered with newspaper clippings. She goes to the box where he’s been dropping off his top-secret work. When she meets with John in the hospital, she presents him with a stack of his dropped-off espionage work in envelopes which haven’t even been opened. Alicia uses this evidence to explain to John that he has been seeing things that aren’t really there: “It isn’t real, John. There’s no conspiracy. There’s no William Parcher. It’s in your mind. You’re sick, baby.” Goldsman explains, “We have been seduced into believing it, just like John has. We and he are sick.” Actually what has happened is that the syuzhet Goldsman has constructed has purposefully given narrational cues to throw the hypothesizing spectator off track. Yet now the syuzhet begins to fill in the gaps and explain the ambiguities. Both John and the spectator begin to recognize the delusions for what they are.

In the next scene, a hospitalized John digs into the flesh of his arm trying to remove the imagined implant. Now the spectator clearly perceives John’s troubled psychological state and realizes the syuzhet’s deception. Goldsman explains, “Our view of John has been revised by our having stepped out of the paradigm [of his POV].” In Bordwellian terms, however, what has happened is that the syuzhet has begun offering narratively causal cues which encourage a reading of John-as-schizophrenic, rather than John-as-secret-agent.

John next undergoes the terrifyingly archaic insulin shock treatment. As this is happening, Dr. Rosen explains to Alicia, “The nightmare of schizophrenia is suddenly not knowing what’s true. Imagine if the people you’ve known were not real. What kind of hell would that be?” The spectator has cinematically felt that “kind of hell,” by the syuzhet’s giving restricted narrative knowledge (i.e. our narrative cues are limited to John’s.) Now, however, it fills the gaps and explains the ambiguities in the way all good classical Hollywood films must.

Near the end of A Beautiful Mind, John chases an imagined William Parcher outside the campus library. We see the scene both from John’s perspective (chasing what appears to

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4 This and following comments from Akiva Goldsman in this chapter are from the A Beautiful Mind DVD audio commentary track.
be an actual Parcher) and from the gathering students’ perspective (John chasing nobody.)

Goldsman provides interesting commentary:

> Here now we get to see . . . the iconic image of somebody who is suffering from schizophrenia: the person is raging and shouting at empty air. And then we return to John’s perspective to remind us that when that person is doing that, they are not in their own mind doing anything but fighting somebody who is actually there. How many times have we seen this person on the street? How many times have we passed them and thought they were crazy, they were without reason? Well, they’re not without reason; they have perfectly clear reasons for what they are doing.

This lucidly illustrates the difference between narrative causality in the classical style and narrative causality in the dysphoric style. By the end of the film, the classical style consistently gives “perfectly clear reasons for what [characters] are doing.” With the dysphoric style, however, such answers may be sketchy at best, and completely unavailable in many cases. Establishment of clear narrative causality is delayed, if not completely missing. The classical style may tease the spectator with temporary schizophrenia before providing a miracle cure and explaining all the unknowns; the dysphoric style, however, leaves the spectator with unexplained uncausality, banishing him or her to a type of cinematic narrative schizophrenia within the film’s milieu from which one never fully recovers.

Fredric Jameson defines schizophrenia as “the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers. . . . [The] schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (119). Isn’t this the way the dysphoric style often deals with narrative causality: to place the spectator in the impossible position of decoding the uncodeable, of trying to discern causality in the uncausal?

Thus, we can discern that we are in the presence of two different group styles. One style reaffirms the power of the indomitable human spirit as well as the power of cinematic narration. The other leaves us without a clear center to hold onto, just dysphoria.
The dysphoric style predominates in contemporary American independent cinema because it is particularly effective at conveying the anxiety, confusion, and restlessness inherent in many of this cinema’s nihilistic themes. In this cinema, hopelessness abounds. Loose causality, ambiguity, and open endings are particularly effective for portraying a world-view where there is a loss of absolutes, perceived as a tragic loss. Take, for instance, the film *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995). This extremely black film explores the nihilism of a group of inner-city kids with such a general, nonchalant manner that it almost appears representative of kids everywhere. The film begins with Telly’s cajoling an unnamed girl into having sex with him, promising that even though it will be her first time, it won’t hurt. When she screams that it does, he doesn’t care, but continues having his way with her. Afterwards, he brags to his friend Casper about how good it felt to him, even though she was screaming in pain. Adding to the shock value is that all three kids appear to be about age 15. The film’s narrative employs a very loose causality, with an episodic rather than a causal structure. It basically depicts the events of a 24-hour period in the lives of these kids. Telly and Casper steal beer from a deli, urinate on city walls, steal money from Telly’s Mom, and buy weed. When another kid bumps into a skateboarding Casper, the gang of kids beat him to a bloody unconsciousness and then spit on him. Meanwhile, Jenny, an earlier “deflowering” of Telly’s, discovers that she is HIV-positive after having only been with him. She goes to a club to try to find him, only to be slipped a powerful drug that makes her sick and barely able to function. At night, Telly talks 13-year-old Darcy into having sex with him at a party. It’s an echo of the opening scene—she expresses hesitation while Telly says, “There’s nothing to worry about. It won’t hurt. I’ll be gentle, I promise.” Later as she is crying out, “It hurts!” he just ignores her, saying, “You’re doing fine.” Jenny arrives at the party, but collapses under the influence of the drug. The next morning, as she is in a mostly unconscious state, Casper rapes her. The film ends with a voice-over of Telly: “When you’re young, not much matters. When you find something that you care about, then that’s all you got. . . . Fucking is what I love. Take that away from me and I really got nothing.” Nihilism reigns supreme with its refusal to comment on or even to accept absolutes of good/bad or right/wrong. As the kids in this film are unable to look past the void of nothingness, all that matters is what feels right at the moment.
Such nihilistic themes are enhanced by the dysphoric style. The film has an open ending; it simply stops without showing any of the cause-and-effect of any of these actions. We never see what happens to deli owner or Telly’s mom, both of whom were robbed; we never see what happens to the kid who is beaten to a pulp and left for dead; we never see what happens to Jenny or Darcy or the unnamed girl in the beginning who are raped for the sheer power and pleasure of these two boys. The narrative withholds both judgment and consequences for any of these actions of Telly and Casper. Such a construction of protagonists tends to be common in the dysphoric style: they are anti-heroes who may break laws or commit crimes without having to face consequences or punishments by events in the narrative. The adolescents in *Kids* are searching for something to extinguish the nothingness of the hopeless world around them. Ambiguity predominates. We pan over many groups of kids who are never named and whose actions are never explained. An episodic structure prevails over strict causality. The film is constructed as being merely some random events of one day in the life of some kids trapped in a world of nihilism.

The dysphoric style also structures much of the space in this film. In one scene, Telly and Casper take their stolen money to buy drugs in the park from an unnamed dealer. The narrative’s spatial cues are confusing. Trees, objects, and many different unimportant people obscure the action of the kids’ meeting with the dealer. This is a figure/ground issue. What should be the most important event (the drug deal) is obscured both visually and auditorially by less important matters. The spectator is thrust into a space of confusion and incomprehension, in short, dysphoria.

Another example would include the film *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991). This is a film about different groups of people who seem to be searching for great answers to life that never come. They are forced to confront the nihilism of the world in which they live. The film’s dysphoric style complements this theme. The camera shows us one group of people and then suddenly, without motivation or explanation, begins to follow another group. For example, at one point, the camera looks upon a nameless college student as an older man follows him, telling stories of aliens. Soon the college student goes into his apartment and the camera shows the spectator his roommates who are discussing the ’88 election. Who is the college student? Who is the older man? Who are these roommates? We never hear from any of them again. There is no logical or causal meaning for any of these events; they
seem to be merely disjointed, random juxtapositions. As director Richard Linklater explains, in this film,

I wanted to capture how your mind works as you go through a certain day, how you interact with certain people and how you just sort of put it all together. Unlike theater, cinema captures something so real you don’t have to force it on people. I’ve always been fascinated with showing real people in real time. No big drama, just the things we all do, such as walking down the street or getting in a car. (Linklater 22)

Linklater has achieved this. The ambiguity of the narrative highlights the inability to find a great link to an ultimate truth or cause in the universe. We are left with merely a prevailing sense of randomness. The dysphoric style serves the nihilistic theme.

The black comedy *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994), although different in genre, shares a similar dysphoric narrative structure. Dante and Randal, the film’s protagonists, react to the nihilism of their hopeless world with boredom, passivity, and indifference. They watch rather than do. When a store patron breaks a large amount of eggs trying to find the perfect dozen, they sit as passive observers. Not only that, but this plot element never ties in with any clearly announced goal (none is ever even clearly articulated), nor does it result in being crucial to any piece of causality in the film. A sense of “who cares?” pervades the film. The episodic, rather than the causal, prevails. Such characters are emblematic of characters in the dysphoric style. They usually do not have clearly announced goals; if they do, they may not ever achieve them. They tend to be passive; rather than act, they are acted upon. There are no mythic callings or hidden talents that will be revealed within the protagonists to help them achieve a specific goal.

If goals are articulated, they are often shown as hopelessly impossible to achieve. For example, *Requiem for a Dream* gives us the painfully parallel stories of Harry, his girlfriend Marion, and his mother Sara, who all slide into the bleak hopelessness of drug hell without any glimmer of redemption, hope, or happiness available to them in the future. None of the characters’ goals are achieved. Harry’s goal of making money never arrives; instead, his constant drug use brings about a horrific infection that culminates in the amputation of his arm. Marion’s goal of finding love and security with Harry is never realized; she ends up
prostituting herself and becoming a slave in humiliating sex shows. Sara’s goal of finding friends and her self-worth after being on a game show comes to naught; she ends up alone, so psychologically damaged from the abuse of diet pills that she is institutionalized and subjected to extreme shock therapy. The spectator is left with a disturbing feeling of despair, anxiety, alienation, and hopelessness, as if the spectator’s own goals were useless.

In all of the above-mentioned films, the setting is dystopic, usually a grunge milieu of alienation where the protagonists are left open to elements that would harm them. It is a world where graphic violence, sex, and drug use are commonplace in the attempt to fill the void. Poverty prevails and class structures are rigid. Problems remain problematic. The spectator does not leave the theater feeling as though the world has been made right. We gaze straight into the great nothingness.

Thus we see how the dysphoric style is particularly suited to conveying the themes of nihilism which are prevalent in contemporary American independent cinema. This style’s loose causality, ambiguity, open ending, indifferent protagonists, unrealized goals, and grunge setting project a tragic fragmentation, a loss of absolutes, and an unresolvable hopelessness. If one believes that the only worthwhile narratives are tightly causal, have little ambiguity, and are capped by closed endings, such characteristics of the dysphoric style may indeed seem “weird” (as the Britney Spears quote at the beginning of this chapter reminds us.) However, if one is able to see how a syuzhet’s withholding of crucial fabula construction can bring the spectator more fully into the world of nihilism inhabited by the characters of contemporary American independent cinema, then a more thought-provoking understanding of the film is possible.

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As I’ve mentioned earlier, not every contemporary American independent film uses this style. However, under Bordwell’s definition of a group style which includes exceptions, the dysphoric style predominates in contemporary American independent cinema.
CHAPTER 2
FACT OR PULP FICTION: THE DYSPHORIC STYLE AND TEMPORAL RELATIONS

Having seen how a closer examination of narrative elucidates a more thoughtful understanding of the dysphoric style in contemporary American independent cinema, I will now examine how temporality functions within this cinema. Like narrative, time has a distinct nature in the dysphoric style. In some cases, it may be constructed in a non-linear format. In other cases, it may delight in heightening ambiguity or enlarging gaps. Yet, strangely constructed time is not enough to deem a style dysphoric. I continue to argue that one of the main elements of the dysphoric style is that it arises from and reveals a foundation of nihilism. If a style proceeds from a system other than nihilism, then it is not dysphoric. To illustrate how this is so and to explicate several of my notions of temporal relations in the dysphoric style, in this chapter I will demonstrate how Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), a film generally seen as being one of the vanguards of contemporary American independent cinema is not dysphoric, contrasting it instead with Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2001), a nihilistic film that illuminates elements of the dysphoric style. Whereas temporality works to support the classical notion of redemption in Pulp Fiction, temporality works to subvert it, if not show its impossibility, in Memento.

The spectator constructs temporality in much the same way as causality; he or she takes cues from the syuzhet and attempts to assemble a coherent chronology for the fabula. As Bordwell explains in Narration in the Fiction Film: “The temporal relations in the fabula are driven by inference; the viewer fits schemata to the cues proffered by the narration. This process affects three aspects of time: the order of events, their frequency, and their duration” (77).

The order of events controls the spectator’s ability to construct a coherent fabula. If the syuzhet presents the order of events in the fabula chronologically, the spectator has an
easier time piecing together the fabula. Chronological presentation helps the spectator to form clear hypotheses about the future and confirm past hypotheses from what has gone before. Chronological presentation also keeps the spectator keenly focused on what will happen next. *Rear Window*’s syuzhet functions in this way. Although, as a mystery, the syuzhet withholds crucial information from the spectator (e.g. “Did Thorwald kill his wife?”), it will ultimately fill in all gaps (e.g. “Yes, he did”). What is key is that the syuzhet reveals information to the spectator at the same time as Jeff discovers it; in this way, the spectator is cued to ask the same sorts of questions at the same time as Jeff. For example, when Lisa sneaks into Thorwald’s apartment and discovers that Mrs. Thorwald’s handbag is empty, syuzhet events are told in strict fabula order; the audience uses this information, like Lisa and Jeff, to build an even stronger case in their minds that Thorwald must have murdered her. When Thorwald comes walking down the hall toward his apartment in which Lisa is searching, both Jeff and the spectator (who has been closely focused on what will come next due to the events being told in fabula order) feel great concern for Lisa’s safety. As Thorwald begins to assault Lisa, a helpless Jeff (and spectator) watch, unable to do anything to stop it. The police arrive in time to save Lisa from Thorwald. As they are arresting Lisa for burglary, she flashes Mrs. Thorwald’s wedding ring to Jeff and the spectator. This allegedly provides even more evidence that Mrs. Thorwald was murdered by her husband because, as Jeff soon thereafter verbally confirms to Doyle on the phone, “If that woman was alive, she’d be wearing that ring, right?” Meanwhile, Thorwald looks from Lisa’s hand displaying the ring to Jeff in the apartment across the courtyard. The spectator now knows that Thorwald knows about Jeff, which of course, is redundantly confirmed by Jeff’s line of dialogue, “Turn off the light! He’s seen us!” Presenting this sequence in strict fabula order focuses the spectator on what will happen next, creating new levels of suspense. There is no obscuring of the fabula by reordering events; there is only confirmation of past hypotheses as clear causality proceeds.¹

¹Of course, being a mystery, *Rear Window* withholds information (“Was Mrs. Thorwald murdered?”) until it is ready to answer all questions at the film’s conclusion. The spectator also learns through dialogue of events that happened outside the film’s syuzhet. Nevertheless, the film’s syuzhet doesn’t reorder current narrative events as it presents them (e.g. we don’t see Lisa with the ring and then suddenly jump backwards in time to see her breaking into Thorwald’s apartment, leaving us to construct chronological time ourselves.)
If the syuzhet reorders fabula events, a different dynamic occurs. The spectator must actively work to reassemble diverse pieces of fabula information. Instead of the film’s presenting the world as an ordered place, an anxious, less predictable milieu is constructed. An example of this is seen in *Following* (Christopher Nolan, 1999), a film about a man named Bill who shadows people. After teaming up with Cobb, the two men break into homes for the thrill of the act itself, not necessarily to steal. The unsettling part is not the story, but the syuzhet’s manner of presenting the story. The scenes in the film come not chronologically, but in a seemingly random ordering system. The narrative jumps backward and forward without motivation from the story itself. If each scene in the film is lettered alphabetically according the fabula order, the syuzhet presents itself in this order: Q, I, A, F, L, B, G, K, M, C, H, N, D, E, O, I, J, P, R, S, T, U, V. It is up to the disoriented spectator, then, to reorder this information chronologically (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V) in order to construct a coherent fabula.² Take for example, the second scene in the movie, which I have labeled “I.” Here the syuzhet presents a bloodied, unshaven Bill coughing a glove out of his mouth. The next scene, “A,” gives the spectator a clean-cut Bill who meets Cobb for the first time in a café. “I” will not make sense to the spectator until the last part of the film when it is presented again; at that point, we know it was Cobb who attacked Bill and stuffed a glove into his mouth. This film, as opposed to *Rear Window*, doesn’t keep the spectator intently focused on what will come next. Information must be continually reevaluated in light of new information, which tends to disprove earlier hypotheses, rather than confirming them. The film constructs an unsettling milieu where chaos prevails above order.

There are two typical means of reordering events. The first is the flashback, which enacts events at a later point in the syuzhet than they occurred in the fabula (78). Take, for instance, Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Near the end of the film, Scotty has dressed up Judy to look like Madeline. As he looks at her in the mirror, he notices her necklace. This cues the syuzhet to flashback to the museum where Madeline was wearing the same necklace while studying a painting of Carlotta. Hence, Scotty realizes that Judy really is Madeline. This flashback is motivated (Scotty remembers the necklace from earlier in the fabula, and the

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²See Appendix A for a table describing *Following* in chronological order.
syuzhet invites us into his memory of this moment) and fills in a temporary gap (after wondering whether or not Judy is really Madeline, now both Scotty and the spectator have direct evidence that this is so).

A more complicated figure is the flashforward, which enacts events at an earlier point in the syuzhet than they occur in the fabula. Flashforwards are very rare. They let us glimpse an outcome before we have grasped all the causal chains leading up to it (Bordwell 79). An example of this is seen in Baz Lurhmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996). Near the beginning of the film, before going to the ball where he will first meet Juliet, Romeo has some forebodings of dark future events: “I fear too early; for my mind misgives/Some consequence yet hanging in the stars,/Shall bitterly begin his fearful date/With this night’s revels, and expire the term/Of a despised life closed in my breast,/By some vile forfeit of untimely death” (Shakespeare 988). The syuzhet of Lurhmann’s film presents a flashforward to the end of the film where Romeo is walking down the aisle of a church with many neon crosses. Although the first-time spectator does not know what this means, it will later be revealed as Juliet’s tomb—the place where Romeo mistakenly thinks that Juliet is dead and kills himself. Thus, we have the outcome, but not all of the causes which lead up to it. A gap is created by this reordering of events through a flashforward, which will eventually be filled by the narrative near the end of the film.

Along with manipulating the order of fabula events, the syuzhet also controls their frequency. Events can be shown once, more than once, or not at all (Bordwell 79). Events shown more than once may be used to close narrative gaps. The *Vertigo* example mentioned earlier shows Madeline in the museum twice, thus alerting both Scotty and the spectator that Judy and Madeline are the same person. Events shown more than once may also be used to close temporal or spatial gaps. In *Pulp Fiction*, Jules shoots Brett and the scene ends. Much later in the film, the spectator returns to this scene, this time receiving visual cues from the bathroom which reveal a never-before-seen, fourth man in the apartment. By having the same event depicted twice (the shooting of Brett) the spectator is able to link the two scenes together in the constructed fabula, even though they are separated by quite a bit of syuzhet time. The spectator is also able to construct a more specific scenographic space, connecting a bathroom to the living room of the apartment.
Repetition of events can also create gaps which are permanent. In *Memento*, there is a scene where Sammy Jankis gives his wife a shot of insulin. This is matched with an identical mise-en-scene of a shot shown later in the syuzhet, when Lenny is the one giving the shot.³ What does this match of mise-en-scenes mean? Are Lenny and Sammy the same person? Or did they both just happen to give their respective wives insulin shots in identical surroundings? The syuzhet never ultimately interprets this strange repetition of events, leaving the spectators to reach their own conclusions.

The syuzhet also controls the duration of narrative events. Fabula duration is the time the viewer presumes the story action to take, hours or days or weeks or centuries (Bordwell 80). Syuzhet duration consists of the stretches of time which the film dramatizes. Of the ten years of a presumed fabula action, the syuzhet might only dramatize a few weeks (80).

Durational relationships between the fabula and the syuzhet can be expressed as equivalence, reduction, or expansion. With equivalence, fabula duration equals screen duration (81). We see this in the early actualities, such as *Arrival of a Train* (Lumiere Brothers, 1895). The time it takes for the train to arrive and its passengers to begin to unload (the fabula) is the same as its filmic presentation (the syuzhet). Reduction is when the fabula is narrated in an abridged fashion (81). Most narrative films fit into this category. In *Vertigo*, when Scotty drives Judy to the old mission where Madeline died, the drive is abbreviated through cues from the syuzhet. Expansion takes place when fabula duration is lengthened. We see moments of this in *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), when, for instance, Trinity does a jump-kick to a policeman’s face. The syuzhet freezes the moment, swirls around the two characters, then resumes the action. Some films may have moments of all three durational relationships: equivalence, reduction, and expansion. These can either aid in spectator construction of the fabula (the shortened drive in *Vertigo* focuses the spectator’s attention on the importance of the mystery more effectively than if the entire drive were shown) or block construction of the fabula (the short glimpse of the bleeding Hasidic Jew in *Pi* does not give the spectator enough information to understand the significance of this image.)

³For a more complete description of the two mise-en-scenes, see later in this chapter.
How does this apply to the dysphoric style? In the dysphoric style, temporal relations are structured to keep the spectator off-balance. Narrative events are often presented out of chronological order without clear markers that would help a spectator to reassemble them. Important pieces of the fabula may be withheld so that ambiguity or confusion results. This differs dramatically from, say, the classical style, where temporality is constructed in a clear way that keeps ambiguity and confusion to a minimum.

_Pulp Fiction_ is a film that attempts to present itself as being dysphoric. It has some narrative elements that may seem dysphoric: a grunge milieu, flawed protagonists, etc. These may have been what led one newspaper writer, Mary Kenny, to profess: “_Pulp Fiction_ [is] a symbol and a metaphor for so much of the value-free and value-less culture of our time, representing a nihilism which nearly always ends up with boring, mindless cruelty. . . . [It is] a negation of civilized values—which is, of course, a definition of decadence.” Even film theorist Kristin Thompson proudly proclaims _Pulp Fiction_ “clearly non-classical” (340). However, a closer examination will prove that both of them are mistaken; _Pulp Fiction_ is a film which rises from the classical structure rather than the dysphoric.

_Pulp Fiction_ has reached legendary status as a contemporary American independent film. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1994, winning the Palm d’Or (best film prize). It next went on to open the New York Film Festival in September 1994. Richard Peña, director of that festival, remarks that _Pulp Fiction_ “was just such a quantum leap over almost anything happening in American independent cinema” (Bernard 211-12). By the time it was ready for national release, the buzz was everywhere. In October 1994, Miramax opened it wide on 1200 screens domestically, as well as releasing it simultaneously all over the world (Bernard 212), in what amounts, in essence, to a medium-sized Hollywood opening. Miramax spent $8 million on marketing for the film—as much as the film itself cost to make (Clarkson 255). _Pulp Fiction_ quickly became a favorite film among several influential critics. It was a phenomenal commercial hit. Soon afterwards, award after

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4Daily Mail. 22 October 1994, qtd. in Barnes and Hearn, 100.

5Owen Gleiberman, senior critic for Entertainment Weekly, wrote: “_Pulp Fiction_ is the work of a new-style punk virtuoso. It is, quite simply, the most exhilarating piece of filmmaking to come along in the [last] five years” (Gleiberman 35). He later remarked that the film was “nothing less than the reinvention of mainstream American cinema” (qtd. in
award was bestowed upon the film. Quentin Tarantino, the film’s director, was immediately launched into celebrity status. The screenplay became extremely famous and influential. All in all, the film’s influence is so great that one writer even claims that *Pulp Fiction* was responsible for “taking the indie-film movement mainstream” (Fierman 29).

Janet Maslin, critic for the *New York Times* wrote that *Pulp Fiction* is “A work of blazing originality. It places Quentin Tarantino in the front ranks of American filmmakers” (qtd. in Dawson 2).

Costing $8.5 million to make, it grossed over $107 million domestically and over $200 million worldwide, becoming Miramax’s highest earner ever (Dawson 169-170; Bernard 200, Thompson 340).

*Pulp Fiction* won the LA Critics’ Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Actor for John Travolta; the National Board of Review Awards for Best Picture and Best Director; the New York Film Critics’ Circle Awards for Best Director and Best Screenplay; the Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay; the Independent Spirit Awards for Best Feature, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Male Lead for Samuel L. Jackson; and the BAFTAs for Best Screenplay, and Best Supporting Actor for Samuel L. Jackson. In February 1995, the film received seven Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Actor for John Travolta, Best Supporting Actress for Uma Thurman, and Best Supporting Actor for Samuel L. Jackson, all in all “a quite staggering achievement” (Dawson 168; see also Langley 44, 80). Of these Oscar nominations, going up against the mammoth *Forrest Gump*, it would win only Best Original Screenplay for Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avery.

Tarantino’s script for *Pulp Fiction*, published in paperback in October 1994, became “the biggest selling screenplay in British publishing history, gaining a place on the top ten bestseller’s list and being reviewed as if it were a work of literature” (Dawson 13). The screenplay’s influence is felt in many other contemporary American films since that time. Tarantino himself has remarked that he has “development people telling me, ‘Oh, every fourth script I read has your influence on it’” (Keough 201). The adjective “Tarantinoesque” seems to be stamped on any film which follows *Pulp Fiction’s* black comedic violence interspersed with frequent references from pop culture (Keough 201).
*Pulp Fiction* puts forth the appearance of constructing time in a fresh, exciting way. Thompson declares, “*Pulp Fiction* introduces a startling shift in temporal order without warning or motivation” (340). Newspaper critic Roger Ebert calls *Pulp Fiction* “the most influential film of the decade. Its circular timeline can be sensed in films as different as *The Usual Suspects, The Zero Effect,* and *Memento*—not that they copied it but that they were aware of the pleasures of toying with chronology” (Ebert, *Great Movies* 384). A closer examination of the structure of *Pulp Fiction* demonstrates that its temporality is not as unmotivated or purposefully unbalancing as such comments would lead us believe.

There are four stories in *Pulp Fiction*, each focusing on two characters who form a couple:  

10 A) Vincent and Jules, two hitmen who are sent to kill some young men who wronged Marsellus, their boss; B) Pumpkin (Ringo) and Honey Bunny, who attempt to rob the Hawthorne grill; C) Vincent and Mia (Marsellus’ wife) whom Marsellus places together for a platonic night on the town; D) Bruce and Fabienne, a boxer and his wife who are entangled in a mess involving a gold watch.

*Pulp Fiction*’s syuzhet manipulates temporality in the realm of order (some events are shown before or after they occur chronologically in the fabula.) Here’s how the film’s syuzhet presents the fabula:

**STORY B:** Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill

**STORY A:** Vincent and Jules on a Hit

**STORY C:** Vincent Escorts Mia

**STORY D:** Butch, Fabienne, and the Gold Watch

**STORY A:** Vincent and Jules Finish the Hit and Clean Up

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10 Tarantino himself has remarked that *Pulp Fiction* is all about couples (see Smith 41).

11 For a more detailed description of each of these stories, see Appendix B.
STORY B: Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill

The syuzhet has rearranged fabula events in the following manner: B, A¹, C, D, A², B. Had the syuzhet given the spectator the fabula events in a linear manner (A, B, C, D) the story would have been as follows:¹²

Day 1: Jules and Vincent shoot the three young men in the apartment and Marvin in the car. The Wolf helps them get cleaned up at Jimmie’s. They go to the Hawthorne Grill where they interrupt Pumpkin and Honey Bunny’s robbery. They then go to Marsellus’ club where they see him talking to Butch.

Day 2: Vincent and Mia go out for the evening. Mia overdoses and is saved by Vincent.

Day 3: Butch kills his opponent and then flees from the ring to his hotel where Fabienne is waiting.

Day 4: Butch returns to retrieve his gold watch, kills Vincent and gets involved in the pawn shop incident. He and Fabienne ride off into the sunset (from an outline by Dawson 174-75).

Thus, the syuzhet’s reordering of temporal events isn’t as disorienting as one would first imagine. The film is mostly still told by the syuzhet in chronological order with only two changes: 1) Story B: “Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill” is moved out of fabula order in order to bookend the film; 2) The second half of Story A: “Vincent and Jules on a Hit” is moved near the end of the film surprising the spectator with the knowledge of a fourth man in the bathroom of the apartment.

Both of these maneuvers highlight the film’s classical theme of redemption. In fact, all four of Pulp Fiction’s stories are constructed around this theme of redemption.¹³ Examining each of the four stories reveals this central theme.

Story B, “Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill,” is split into two parts which bookend the film. The temporal maneuver of ending the film with this latter

¹²See Appendix C for a table which describes Pulp Fiction in chronological order.

¹³As Barnes and Hearn explain, “Pulp Fiction . . . is concerned with the journeys its characters make to earn or learn redemption” (123).
half of this story performs two classical functions: 1) it creates much more of what Thompson describes as a classical climax than merely having Butch and Fabienne drive off together on a motorcycle (which is the actual end of the fabula); 14 and 2) it highlights Jules’ redemption, bringing to the forefront the classical theme of redemption which lies at the heart of *Pulp Fiction*. 15

The setup to Jules’ redemption begins earlier, in Story A, “Vincent and Jules,” where the film’s classical theme of redemption is most clear. Jules reveals his practice of quoting Ezekiel 25:17 before a killing. In the King James Version of the Bible, this verse reads: “And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them.” By the time it comes out of Jules’ mouth, the verse has been considerably embroidered:

Jules

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down with vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you. (Tarantino 32)

The two men then empty their guns on Brett, becoming, according to this misquoted verse, instruments of God’s vengeance against an evil man. As the rest of Story A continues, temporally moved by the syuzhet closer to the ending of the film, a fourth man comes out of the bathroom and fires six shots at the hitmen, missing them all six times. The hitmen kill

14Kristin Thompson, in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, explains that in classical films, the climax is the final section where a character’s goals are either achieved (usually the case) or not achieved (rarely the case). For more on this, see Thompson 29.

15See Chumo 83 and Smith 33.
him and Jules gives his “born again” speech, clearly showing how divine intervention has not only saved both Jules and Vincent but also changed Vincent’s life.16

16Tarantino’s screenplay reads:

Jules
We should be fuckin’ dead right now. Did you see that gun he fired at us? It was bigger than him.

Vincent
.357

Jules
We should be fuckin’ dead!

Vincent
Yeah, we were lucky.

Jules
That shit wasn’t luck. That shit was something else.

Vincent
Yeah, maybe.

Jules
That was . . . divine intervention. You know what divine intervention is?

Vincent
Yeah I think so. That means God came down from heaven and stopped the bullets.

Jules
Yeah, man, that’s what it means. That’s exactly what it means! God came down from heaven and stopped the bullets.

Vincent
I think we should be going now.

Jules
Don’t do that! Don’t you fuckin’ do that! Don’t blow this shit off! What just happened was a fuckin’ miracle!

Vincent
Chill the fuck out, Jules, this shit happens.

Jules
Wrong, wrong, this shit doesn’t just happen.

Vincent
Do you wanna continue this theological discussion in the car, or at least the jailhouse with the cops?

Jules
We should be fuckin’ dead now, my friend! We just witnessed a miracle, and I want you to fuckin’ acknowledge it!

Vincent
Okay man, it was a miracle, can we leave now?

[Outside, in the car]:

Jules

36
After cleaning up the Marvin mess, Vincent and Jules go to the Hawthorne grill where Pumpkin and Honey Bunny attempt to rob the diner. When Vincent comes out of the bathroom and trains his weapon on Honey Bunny, he explains that he wants “to shoot ‘em on general principle” (Tarantino 186). But Jules has had a mighty change of heart and instead delivers his “I’m trying to be the Shepherd” sermon:

Vincent
What the fuck does that mean?

Jules
That’s it for me. From here on in, you can consider my ass retired . . . . I’m telling Marsellus today I’m through. (Tarantino 137-41)
truth. The truth is you’re weak. And I’m the tyranny of evil men. But I’m tryin’. I’m tryin’ real hard to be a shepherd. (Tarantino 186-87)

Jules lets them take his $1500, paying the price for their redemption as well; they leave the grill with new lives due to Jules’ redemption. As Clarkson explains, “Ezekiel 25:17 is central to Pulp because it concerns the salvation of sinners who turn to the path of righteousness and the damnation of good people who stumble off the path. Eventually Jules pays so much attention to those wise words, they transform his life” (194). If the briefcase’s security code is 666 (perhaps implying that Marsellus is the devil), then Jules’ leaving Marsellus’ employ may be interpreted as his renouncing the devil and receiving a new life with God. Thus, when the syuzhet reorders events to place Jules’ redemption at the end of the film, it allocates it new significance.17

A similar type of redemption comes to characters in the other stories as well. In Story D, “Butch and Fabienne and the Gold Watch,” Butch is able to escape from the Gimp and make it to the front of the pawn shop. He could easily depart and leave Marsellus with the raping rednecks. After all, Marsellus had just been maniacally trying to kill him. But Butch can’t; he is finding redemption as well.18 Afterwards, Marsellus forgives Butch, saying “we’re cool,” (Tarantino 131), meaning, “Your betrayal is forgiven because you rescued me.” Thus, both Butch and Marsellus find a measure of mercy, forgiveness, and, in Barnes’ and Hearn’s words, “redemption” (128). Butch and Mia then ride off on a motorcycle named

17 Other critics have also taken this approach. Peter Chumo asks, “Why does Tarantino make this time shift? For one thing, the final standoff in the diner that concludes the story is more effective at the end of the film as a climactic change in Jules’ character than it would be in the first third of the film” (83). Gavin Smith agrees: “By opting for a structure that scrambles chronology without flashbacks, [Tarantino] grants centrality to the transformation of the character of killer Jules (Sam Jackson) who survives death through ‘divine intervention,’ is blessed and cleansed by Harvey Keitel’s debonair angel, and discovers mercy. Jules is the beneficiary of the film’s accumulated grace, and Tarantino, revising the image of void that ended Reservoir Dogs, frees him to exit in the film’s last shot” (33).

18 Tarantino’s screenplay records: “Butch sneaks to the door. . . . He’s about to go out when he stops and listens to the hillbilly psychopaths having their way with Marsellus. Butch decides for the life of him, he can’t leave anybody in a situation like that” (Tarantino 128).
“Grace,” again reinforcing the notion of divine redemption (Barnes and Hearn 123). In addition to Butch’s receiving grace, this story also shows how he becomes an instrument of divine providence by shooting Vincent, thus delivering punishment to one who refuses to receive redemption.

In Story C, “Vincent Escorts Mia,” Mia nearly dies of an overdose, but is, in a sense, “born again” by the adrenaline shot which Vincent gives her (Barnes and Hearn 123). The story ends happily with Mia and Vincent shaking hands. Yet, while Mia learns a lesson and is redeemed, Vincent remains in his same, unconverted state, resulting in the need for the story to dispense his just destruction.19

In *Pulp Fiction* then, all four of Tarantino’s stories have closed, complete, morality-tale endings which lead to the redemption of Jules and the death of Vincent. The film triumphs the notion that those who receive conversion are rewarded while those who reject it are punished.20 As one writer declares: “Tarantino ultimately redeems genre morally” (Smith 32). The film has used its unique temporality to lead us to this classical conclusion.

*Pulp Fiction* features other classical maneuvers such as plot-motivated dialogue. As Bordwell explains, in the classical style, all scenes serve to: 1. continue, develop, or close off lines of cause and effect from previous scenes and 2. open and perhaps develop at least one new causal chain (*Classical* 64). Some dismiss the claim that *Pulp Fiction* uses dialogue to achieve this. For example, scholar Kristen Thompson declares, “Much of the dialogue in . . . *Pulp Fiction* exists to create atmosphere and explore idiosyncratic characters rather than to further the story” (340). She is joined by pop writer Wensley Clarkson who contends: “The characters did not, as is the case in most movies, speak in order to push the plot forward.

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19As Barnes and Hearn explain: “Vincent remains cynical about redemption and the value of forgiveness. . . . He never empathizes with Jules after the ‘miracle’ of the missed bullets—the result being that he is unable to wash Marvin’s blood from his hands in Jimmie’s house, only reluctantly allows himself to be cleansed by Winston Wolf, and meets a meaningless end when he is machine-gunned by Butch. The bloodbath that closes *Reservoir Dogs* shows how the ignorance of revenge is ultimately self-destructive. The end of *Pulp Fiction* sees Jules an enriched man, having learned the value of redemption” (123-24).

20It would be well to point out that the film’s emphasis on revenge complicates the simplistic morality play of “punishing evil” since revenge itself becomes an evil; hence the need for forgiveness, the “good” deed that ends the cycle. It’s about trying to give ceaseless violence a moral grounding that can end it. This is not nihilistic.
They talked about subjects that did not directly relate to the action” (Clarkson 83). They are both wrong. Many moments of dialogue that are assumed to be merely quirky, atmospheric, postmodern filler are indeed plot-motivated. Take for instance, the famous scene when hitmen Jules and Vincent are driving to their first killing of the morning. They discuss why a Quarter Pounder has a different name in France. Yet, this information is not just throwaway dialogue. It sets up a more powerful moment a few minutes later. As Brett is eating a hamburger for breakfast, Jules trains a gun on him and explains his new-found knowledge of French fast-food nomenclature. The discussion delays the inevitable murder of Brett, creating audience tension while we wait to see what will happen next; Brett’s subsequent murder becomes more climatic.

Another alleged “throwaway” piece of dialogue is in the same story as Jules and Vincent walk up to the apartment door. They discuss whether or not a foot massage is an erotic act. Rather than serving no purpose, this scene reveals a backstory wherein Marsellus had earlier thrown somebody off a balcony for giving his wife, Mia, a foot massage. This also adds dramatic tension to a subsequent scene when Vincent escorts Mia to dinner. Will Marsellus want to kill Vincent for becoming too friendly with his wife? This dialogue furthers the plot, thus aligning itself more closely to the structure of classicism than the dysphoric style.

Comparing the finished film with the original screenplay reveals other examples of classical maneuvers. Several elements were changed to make the final film’s syuzhet less jarring to the fabula-constructing spectator. One short scene that wasn’t in the original screenplay was added during filming, presumably to center the spectator temporally. After having just seen the outing with Vincent and Mia, the syuzhet moves us into the story of Bruce the boxer. In Bruce’s locker room, Vincent and Mia run into each other.

Vincent

Mia. How you doin’?

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21When Tarantino was at Cannes for Reservoir Dogs, he discovered that the Quarter Pounder is called “the Royale” in France because they use the metric system.
Mia

Great. I never thanked you for dinner. (Tarantino 90)

This little bit of dialogue is a cue to the fabula-constructing spectator that the boxing story does indeed come after the date-with-Mia story. It balances the spectator by temporally filling a gap.

At other times, parts of the screenplay that may have been too temporally jarring to a fabula-constructing spectator were left out of the film’s final cut. For example, near the end of the film, when Pumpkin and Honey Bunny rob the grill where Jules and Vincent are eating breakfast, there’s a tense moment where Pumpkin trains a gun on Jules (who is himself hiding a weapon under the table) and demands the suitcase. Jules either imagines (or has a vision?) of what will happen if he shoots Ringo and Honey Bunny: an innocent woman will be hurt. 22 This moment of subjective alternate reality would have certainly been a

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22 Tarantino’s screenplay records:

Pumpkin
I’m countin’ to three, and if your hand ain’t off that case, I’m gonna unload right in your fuckin’ face. Clear? One . .
Jules closes his eyes.
. . . two . . .
 Jules shoots Pumpkin twice, up through the table, sending him to the floor. While still in the booth, he swings around to Honey Bunny, who has aimed at Jules, but slowed down by the shock of Pumpkin getting shot. He fires three times. Honey Bunny takes all three hits in the chest. As she falls screaming, she fires wildly, hitting a surfer patron.

Surfer
She shot me! I’m dying! Sally! Sally!
Jules now brings the gun down to Pumpkin’s face. Pumpkin lies shot on the floor at Jules’ feet. Pumpkin looks up at the big gun.

Jules
Wrong guy, Ringo.
Jules fires straight at the camera, blinding us with his flash.
Jules’ eyes, still closed, suddenly open.
Pumpkin still stands, holding the gun on him.

Pumpkin
. . . three.

You win.
Jules raises his hand off the briefcase.
moment of unease and confusion for the first-time spectator. Since it has been cut from the finished film, the spectator can more easily construct a temporally cohesive fabula leading to the crucial theme of Jules’ redemption.

Other directorial choices also serve to guide the spectator through the film’s temporality. For example, as Woods explains, ‘Clothes are . . . used as a continuity signpost. . . . ‘When you first see Vincent and Jules, their suits are cut and crisp, they look like real bad-asses,’ remarks Tarantino, explaining his dramatic sleight-of-hand. ‘But as the movie goes on, their suits get more and more fucked up until they’re stripped off and the two are dressed in the exact antithesis—volleyball wear, which is not cool” (Woods 105). Such narrative cues help ensure that classical temporality is preserved.

Botting and Wilson agree that *Pulp Fiction*’s temporality is classical, explaining that the film actually does conform, more or less, to Aristotle’s three unities of time, place, and action. . . . While the chronological time of *Pulp Fiction* takes place as if over a 24-hour period, beginning at a Denny’s diner at 9am and ending at 10.30am some days later with Butch and Fabienne riding into the sunset on Zed’s chopper, much of the plot, and the urgency that compels it, takes place in ‘real time’, the two-and-a-half to three hours it takes for the film to unwind in a movie theater (22).

Through these examples we see that *Pulp Fiction*, that alleged bastian of independent cinema, is really a classical film dressed in indie clothing. Even though Roger Ebert has said “I think Tarantino’s going to be influential in freeing other filmmakers from the lock-step formulas of standard Hollywood screenplay outlines,” we can see that *Pulp Fiction* is itself not too far removed from the classical Hollywood film. Although it takes some liberties with order, it is classical in temporality, spatiality, and narrative, having at its heart a classical morality tale about the life-changing power of redemption.

It’s all yours, Ringo.

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23 *Siskel and Ebert* special *Pulp Fiction* program, from the *Pulp Fiction* DVD.
A much different situation, however, is seen with *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2001). Like *Pulp Fiction*, it too has a syuzhet which reorders fabula events. However, *Memento*’s temporality (unlike *Pulp Fiction*’s) is part of its dysphoric style. Whereas *Pulp Fiction* uses temporality to support the classical notion of redemption, *Memento*’s temporality works to reveal the impossibility of redemption.

*Memento* is proudly trumpeted by several reviewers and critics as “a film that goes backwards”. Even philosopher Melissa Clarke, who uses *Memento* to illustrate notions of space and time in Bergson and Deleuze, describes time in *Memento* as progressing from scene to “a new scene prior in time” (174). A closer look, however, reveals that this is inaccurate. The construction of time is far more complex. The only part of the film that truly goes backward is the opening credit scene in which a Polaroid picture of a dead body begins to “undevelop” before our eyes. The syuzhet cues the spectator that he or she is entering an unusual temporality. The picture goes back inside the Polaroid camera and the flash goes off. Slowly, a bullet casing starts to move, blood on the wall flows upwards, and a pair of glasses returns to the head of a man who has just been shot. Then we see a live man with a gun at his head. We’ve just watched a murder in reverse. The syuzhet presents the spectator with a primer for understanding the rest of the film; indeed, the notion of “backwards” will be one important element of the film’s temporality. But it’s a bit more complicated. Each of the color sequences, although playing forward, will be presented by the syuzhet in reverse fabula order. The black-and-white scenes between them run forward in fabula order. The spectator’s challenge, then, is to take the segments of these two unique timelines and reorder them in his or her head to create one linear, coherent fabula temporality.

Joe Klein has catalogued the different scenes in *Memento* by numbering all of the black-and-white scenes (which run forward from 1-22) and assigning an alphabet letter to each of the color sequences (which run backward from A-V). *Memento*’s syuzhet rearranges the order of events to run in this manner: Opening Credit Sequence, 1, V, 2, U, 3, T, 4, S, 5, R, 6, Q, 7, P, 8, O, 9, N, 10, M, 11, L, 12, K, 13, J, 14, I, 15, H, 16, G, 17, F, 18, E, 19, D, 20, C, 21, B, 22/A. The spectator, to create coherent fabula temporality, has to reassemble

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24See a version of this notion, for example in Ebert, “*Memento*” n.p., Scott, n.p., Darke n.p., and Gargett n.p.
these pieces in his or her head chronologically, first placing the black-and-white scenes in forward order and then the color scenes in reverse order, in this manner: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22/A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, Opening Credit Sequence. The change from black-and-white scenes to color scenes comes at 22/A, when Lenny strangles Jimmy Grantz (mistakenly identifying him as John G.) and takes a picture of the body so he will have a record of what occurred when he doesn’t have memory to rely on. As the Polaroid picture develops, the scene itself subtly changes from black and white to color. Building on Klein’s system (and using a structure partially suggested by Daniel Zhu) I have constructed a table of what *Memento* would look like in chronological order (see Appendix D). This, then, represents the fabula of the film (which the spectator is trying desperately to construct) during the temporality covered by the syuzhet.

Thus we have a very different syuzhet-ordering structure than just “a film that goes backwards.” Writer-director Christopher Nolan uses the following metaphor to describe its structure: “If you draw out the time-line, it is indeed a hairpin. If you order the material chronologically, the black and white material moves forwards, and in the last scene switches around and goes backwards to the colour scene. So there is this hairpin turn” (Mottram 33). Jonathan Nolan, Christopher’s brother who wrote the short story upon which the film is based, imagines a slightly different model, explaining that time in this film is like “a Möbius strip” (Mottram 34). Whatever the case, the effect of the syuzhet’s reordering of events cues the spectator to be in the same position as its protagonist, Lenny. We see effects, but not causes. It is as if we have Lenny’s condition as well. As Burt, the hotel clerk, explains to Lenny, “Well like . . . you gotta pretty good idea of what you’re going to do next, but no idea what you just did” (Nolan 115).

Not only does the syuzhet reorder narrative events, but in doing so, it produces gaps that the spectator is unable to fill. At one point in the film, Teddy reveals to Lenny that the twelve missing pages of the police file that have guided Lenny through the maze of this investigation (the set of “facts” that he trusts, because memory is unreliable) were actually removed by Lenny himself. Lenny: “Why would I do that?” Teddy: “To create a puzzle you
could never solve.” This is yet another way the syuzhet places the spectator in the position of Lenny, by dropping us in the middle of an unsolvable puzzle.

When the film was first screened in the United States, at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2001, Christopher Nolan was asked by an audience member during the Q&A, “Yes, but what does it mean? Can you explain what happens at the end?” Nolan smiled dryly and responded, “I don’t know. I’m not sure what happens. I wanted to create a film that doesn’t just hand you objective reality on a plate. I believe life is more subjective than that.”

Nolan’s subjective view of life, at least as seen in Memento, is built on a foundation of nihilism. As Natalie tells Lenny, “You can question everything. You can never know anything for sure.” Yet Lenny fights against such nihilism. He uses his tattoos and his notes to try to keep the world ordered, or at least find some sense of order, in the only way he can. He responds to Natalie, “There are some things you can know for sure. I know what that’s going to sound like when I knock on it.” [He knocks on the table.] “I know what that’s going to feel like when I pick it up.” [He picks up an ashtray.] “Certainties.” Yet, as we will see, by the end of the film, all of Lenny’s “certainties” have slipped away and he is left unable to know anything for sure, as are all residents of a world of nihilism, including the spectator of the film.

In such a world, devoid of absolutes, time is often elusive, difficult to understand, let alone construct. Like Lenny, the spectator may be trying to grasp onto anything solid, but be left saying, “How am I supposed to heal if I can’t feel time?” The only thing Lenny can do, since he can’t heal, feel time, or know answers, is to try his best to order his unorderable life (a bit like the spectator is trying to do with the film itself.) “Habit and routine make my life possible,” he says. But even these will come to naught by the end of the film.

In another instance, we see a flashback of Lenny’s wife reading a book she’s already read several times. Lenny ironically comments, “I always thought the pleasure in a book was in wanting to know what happens next.” This, of course, is what is withheld from us in Memento. The spectator’s desire to know what happens next is a clear, motivating structure of the classical system (see Bordwell, Classical 38-40). In Memento, however, the pleasure is not so much in knowing what happens next, but in trying to grasp the “why” of things that have already occurred.
Part of *Memento*’s fragmented structure is due to brief flashback images that the spectator is unable to place in the chronology of the film’s fabula. Even though a table could be constructed of when these flashback images are perceived by Lenny, the spectator still doesn’t know when they occurred (before the start of the film’s syuzhet?) or even if they actually did occur at all. When Natalie asks Lenny about his wife, the syuzhet gives us some very brief shots of her. It’s not really enough to know her; it’s just enough, as Lenny says, “to get the feel of a person.” This is like *Memento* as a whole. Its fragmentation keeps us from really knowing it; it’s just enough to get the feel of some of the questions it is raising, without truly finding solid answers.

*Memento* presents itself in the form of a mystery film, thus implying a promise to fill in all gaps at the end. Yet, when one does construct a fabula in the correct order (as I have done in Appendix D), all we are left with is ambiguity. The promise of a clear solution to the mystery never arrives. I want to demonstrate this “unknowableness” of *Memento* by posing four questions raised by the syuzhet’s cues that the syuzhet then blocks from ever being answered.

1. What is the meaning of the space on the left side of Lenny’s chest devoid of a tattoo? As Lenny tells the spectator in voice-over, when one has his type of short-term memory condition, “You really need a system if you’re going to make it work. You kind of learn to trust your own handwriting . . . You write yourself notes, and where you put your notes—that also becomes really important . . . You have to be wary of other people writing stuff for you. . . . If you have a piece of information which is vital, writing on your body instead of a piece of paper can be the answer” (scene 3 in Appendix D). He explains that Sammy Jankis, who also had a short-term memory condition, was never able to construct a system like this and thus kept losing his notes and getting into trouble. By the time we reach the fabula temporality covered by the syuzhet, much of Lenny’s body is now covered with these tattoo-reminders. Several of these are crucial, firing the engine of the film’s syuzhet forward: “John G. raped and murdered my wife,” which is why Lenny keeps his hope of revenge on John G. as his primary goal; and “Remember Sammy Jankis,” which prompts Lenny to keep remembering Sammy’s story. Yet, there’s an empty space over his left breast without a tattoo. When Natalie removes his shirt and sees this blank spot, she asks, “What about here?” Lenny responds, “Maybe it’s for when I find him” (meaning the elusive John
G., the man who allegedly raped and murdered his wife). Yet, there is a strange, brief
flashback when Lenny remembers being with his wife in bed, before her death. His skin is
embroidered with all of the tattoos (seemingly improbable since the memory loss and the
tattoos all came after his wife’s death). As his wife rubs his chest, the blank space is now
filled with an “I found him” tattoo (another improbability—how could he find his wife’s
murderer if she hasn’t been murdered yet?) Thus, the syuzhet provides cues which cause
both temporal and causal dissonance with each other, creating questions for the fabula-
constructing spectator which are impossible to answer. Even more troubling may be the
hypothesis that Lenny, through whom the spectator has been receiving all of the cues (he is
telling the story; he is the assumed author of the syuzhet; there is no scene in which he is not
present) may, himself, be giving us cues that are neither truthful or meaningful. This is
especially unsettling due to the spectator’s close relationship at this point to Lenny; in the
midst of such fragmented syuzhet, Lenny has seemed to be the one constant to which the
spectator clings.

2. What is the explanation of Teddy’s changing license plate? The license plate, of
course, is what leads Lenny identify Teddy with John G., the man who raped and murdered
his wife (although it’s extremely doubtful that this true.) Lenny ponders (in voice-over),
“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.” He looks at Teddy’s license plate which the syuzhet reveals
as “SGI371U.” However, he writes it down on an index card ambiguously, so that the “I”
and the “1” both appear as straight vertical lines: “SG|37|U.” When Lenny brings his
notepad to the tattoo parlor, he reads it incorrectly to the woman doing the tattoo:
“SG137IU.” Not only that, but she tattoos it incorrectly on his thigh (different from both
the car itself and Lenny’s verbalization of it): “SG1371U.” Then later, as Lenny is looking
over Teddy’s car title, Teddy’s license plate is documented as being “SG1371U,” which is the
incorrect license plate number that Lenny read off the index card in the tattoo parlor. What
does this mean? Has Teddy’s car title been presented to the spectator as though it were
filtered through Lenny’s incorrect memory? Even more inexplicable is the scene when
Lenny and Teddy drive a bloodied Dodd out of town and the license plate of Teddy’s car is
now presented by the syuzhet differently than the other time we saw it: “SG1371U.” This is the incorrect tattoo on Lenny’s leg. Thus we have a cue from the syuzhet, apparently filtered through Lenny’s memory (as untrustworthy as that is) of the tattoo on his leg, not any empirical truth of any actual car. Absolute truth in Memento’s syuzhet is impossible to find. As Teddy warns Lenny during a lunch scene: “You can’t trust a man’s life to your little notes and pictures. Your notes could be unreliable.” Lenny responds, “Memory’s unreliable. Memory’s not perfect. It’s not even that good. Ask the police. Eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don’t catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts. They make notes and they draw conclusions. Facts, not memories—that’s how you investigate. . . . Look, memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They’re just an interpretation. They’re not a record and they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.” However, as we have seen, the notepad, the tattoo, Lenny’s verbalization of the tattoo, and two appearances of the license plate itself are all at odds with each other. Nothing in this syuzhet can be trusted—neither memory nor “facts.”

Was Lenny’s wife murdered in the bathroom by a John G., or was she killed by Lenny’s shots of insulin? This is, perhaps, a subset of the bigger question: 3. Who is Sammy Jankis? Throughout the film, we are constantly reminded of Sammy Jankis, just as Lenny is, when he looks down and sees the note written on his hand: “Remember Sammy Jankis.” This triggers images both for Lenny (and, for us, via the syuzhet) of the story of Sammy who has the same condition (unable to make short-term memories) as Lenny. He fakes recognition; he is subjected to a test of conditioning with a series of electrified shocks which fail to provide him with either memory or instinct; he eventually kills his wife by giving her an overdose of insulin shots as part of a “final exam” she gives him to test whether or not he really can make new memories; he ends up in a mental institution not knowing that he was the one who killed his wife. The syuzhet, however, presents a telling cue that the Sammy

25 These are not mere continuity errors. These were purposefully placed in the film by the filmmakers. The first time the license plate is seen on the car it reads: “SG1371U” (which is the actual printed tag.) The second time we see it, the third digit has clearly been changed (by permanent marker, perhaps, as it’s quite sloppy) from an “I” to a “1” so that it now reads: “SG1371U.”
The story is problematic. As we see Sammy sitting in a chair in the mental institution, a figure walks in front of the camera; suddenly Lenny is sitting in the chair instead of Sammy. This split-second shot is brief, but even during the Sundance screening several spectators picked up on it, which pleased Christopher Nolan immensely. This match of mise-en-scenes makes the spectator confront the unanswerable question: Is Sammy actually Lenny? As Teddy says of the Sammy story: “Great story! Gets better every time you tell it! So you lie to yourself to be happy. There’s nothing wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there’s a few little details you’d rather not remember. . . . Your wife surviving the assault; her not believing your condition; the torment and pain and anguish tearing her up inside.” Here the syuzhet presents a brief shot of Lenny’s wife which precisely matches the mise-en-scene of Sammy’s wife as she is about to die from an overdose of insulin. Both women are sitting on the same beige couch in front of the same brown curtain on their left, with the same look of worry and sadness on their faces. Teddy concludes his list of details that Lenny would rather not remember: “the insulin.” The syuzhet furnishes a shot of Lenny tapping an insulin needle twice, precisely matching the mise-en-scene of an earlier shot of Sammy doing the same action. Lenny and Sammy are both sitting on the same beige couch wearing the same grey button-down shirt over a white t-shirt as they tap the needle twice. This match of mise-en-scenes intimates but does not validate the hypothesis that Sammy’s story is actually the story of Lenny. Lenny replies, “That’s Sammy, not me.” Teddy: “Yeah right. Like you tell yourself over and over again. Conditioning yourself to remember. Learning through repetition.” Lenny: “Sammy let his wife kill herself. Sammy ended up in an institution.” Teddy: “Sammy was a con man, a faker.” Lenny: “I never said that Sammy was faking.” Teddy: “Exposed him for what he was, a fraud.” Lenny: “I was wrong. . . . See, Sammy’s wife came to me . . .” Teddy: “Sammy didn’t have a wife. It was your wife who had diabetes.” The syuzhet now conveys another shot of his wife, wrapped not in the shower curtain as we saw earlier, but rather in a body bag, perhaps after overdosing on insulin. We then see another flashback as she brushes her hair, and says “Ouch,” as Lenny gives her a shot of insulin. Lenny: “My wife wasn’t diabetic.” Teddy: “You sure?” The syuzhet cues the spectator with an image of how Lenny remembers it—he playfully pinches his wife’s thigh (instead of giving her an insulin shot) and she lightly responds, “Ouch. Cut it out!” Here the syuzhet has again given us two
identical mise-en-scenes (Lenny in a grey shirt lying beside his underwear-clad wife on the bed as she brushes her hair) with two very different actions (one of Lenny’s giving his wife a shot of insulin and another as he merely pinches her thigh playfully). However, the syuzhet refuses to identify which of these two scenarios is the actual event of the fabula. Lenny: “She wasn’t diabetic. Think I don’t know my own wife?” Teddy: “Well, I guess they can only make you remember the things you want to be true.” Now the fabula waters are truly muddied. If the spectator has been constructing a story based on Lenny’s memory cues and he is an unreliable narrator, then surely nothing in this narrative is stable or reliable.

This itself raises a new question which brings another level of doubt and confusion to the narrative: 4. Is Teddy telling the truth? His explanation that Lenny is actually remembering his own story when he recounts Sammy’s could be a viable one. But has Teddy always told Lenny the truth before? The answer, of course, is no. It would seem that Teddy is the one on the phone with Lenny, as he is the one who shows up in the hotel lobby to meet him. However, first he tells Lenny that his name is Officer Gammell, but then he tells him to write the name “Teddy” on his picture because “I’m working undercover.” In the tattoo parlor, Teddy tells Lenny that there is a “bad cop” who has been calling Lenny for days, slipping envelopes under his door to get him to answer the phone. This bad cop, Teddy says, has been laughing at Lenny. Either there’s a mysterious, unseen “bad cop” or Teddy is actually the bad cop and cannot be relied on to tell the truth.

Teddy uses Lenny to kill Jimmy, hoping to profit along the way, by falsely telling Lenny that Jimmy was the one who raped and murdered his wife. When Lenny refuses to believe him, Teddy confesses that Lenny already killed “the real John G. I helped you find him over a year ago. He’s already dead! Look, Lenny, I was the cop assigned to your wife’s case. I believed you. I thought you deserved a chance for revenge. I’m the one that helped you find the other guy in your bathroom that night—the guy that cracked your skull and fucked your wife. We found him, you killed him. But you didn’t remember. So I helped you start looking again. Looking for the guy you already killed. [The guys in the bathroom] were just a couple of junkies too strung out to know your wife didn’t live alone. When you killed them, I was so convinced you’d remember, but nothing ever sticks.” Teddy explains that he took the blood-covered Polaroid of Lenny smiling just after Lenny killed the man. Teddy: “You don’t want the truth. You make up your own truth. . . . Do you know how
many towns, how many John Gs or James Gs. I mean, shit, Lenny, I’m a fucking John G.”

Lenny: “Your name’s Teddy.” Teddy: “My mother calls me Teddy. My name’s John Edward Gammell. Cheer up, there’s plenty of John Gs for us to find. All you do is moan. I’m the one that has to live with what you’ve done. I’m the one that put it all together. You, you wander around, you’re playing detective. You’re living a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life.” This seems a reasonable explanation for several of the gaps in Memento. But what if, as we have observed, Teddy is lying once again to Lenny? Then there is really no explanation that can be trusted. Truth becomes slippery, both in cinematic images and in the spectator’s ability to interpret them.

Memento’s syuzhet ends with Lenny’s decision to kill Teddy. Here he becomes the quintessential hero in a world of nihilism where heroes are no longer possible. He says, in voice-over, “Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes I will. 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 is still there. Do I believe the world is still there?” [He closes his eyes while driving.] “Is it still out there? Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I’m no different.” The whole film has been about Lenny’s trying to create a world where his actions have meaning, when, deep down, afraid to admit it, but at some level knowing it is true, his actions have no meaning. He is just killing random person after random person, many of whom he doesn’t even know, all the while not being able to remember any of it. Thus, in Lenny’s mind, he knows he is just performing meaningless tasks in a meaningless world. The last line of the film is Lenny’s “Now, where was I?,” the perfect line for a nihilistic world which keeps us from knowing who we are or what we are doing here.

These four questions have revealed a syuzhet that not only complicates temporal order, but also narrative causality, highlighting the nihilistic loss of all absolutes found in its themes. Its syuzhet cues furnish the spectator with fragmented information (similar to the way Lenny would receive it) and then refuse to reveal any absolute truth that could provide a rescue. Memento reveals a world of hopelessness where redemption is impossible for Lenny (or any other character) to find.

Thus we see the stylistic difference between Pulp Fiction and Memento, two films which both use a fragmented temporal structure to tell a revenge story. Pulp Fiction declares
that if revenge is accompanied by conversion, it can yield redemption. *Memento* shows that revenge only yields an unending and impossible-to-understand cycle of killing. *Pulp Fiction* is essentially a classical film, with nearly all questions resolved at the end.\(^{26}\) *Memento* is dysphoric, creating levels of confusion from which the spectator never fully escapes. *Pulp Fiction* is a morality tale, where people who choose good deeds find redemption and those who reject such a path find death. *Memento*, however, arises from nihilism, where bad/good aren’t necessarily punished or redeemed; in fact, there is no way of even knowing whether those terms have any meaning.

*Memento* is similar to other contemporary American independent films in the dysphoric style where obscure temporal relations are representative of obscure narrative relations; they work together to create unease and confusion. Take, for example, *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997). In one of the first scenes of the film, the doorbell buzzes and Fred presses the “listen” button. A voice says ominously, “Dick Laurent is dead.” The syuzhet has just opened a big gap for the hypothesis-constructing spectator, producing such questions as: “Who is Dick Laurent?”; “How did he die?”; “Who is outside the house saying this?”; and “How is this information meaningful?” About a half hour later in the film, Fred is at a party when he sees a man dressed in black. He asks Andy who this figure is and the reply is startling, “He’s a friend of Dick Laurent.” The syuzhet thus keeps reminding us of this mysterious figure. At about 49 minutes into the film a huge, Lynchian rupture occurs. Fred has been put in jail for the murder of his wife, Renee. But suddenly, in his cell, there is no longer a Fred, but instead a new character named Peter Raymond Dayton, a much younger man who was arrested five years earlier, yet who also seems to be some sort of an unexplained continuation of the Fred character. The characters in the diegesis all seem to accept this rupture; it’s the spectator who is completely baffled by the change without any syuzhet cues of reorientation. Now we are forced into watching Pete’s narrative, where he sneaks off with the mobster Eddy’s girlfriend, Alice. Nearing the two-hour mark, Pete tells Alice, “I want you.” She responds, “You’ll never have me” and runs into a house. Pete stands up, and suddenly, without explanation, he has retransformed into Fred! Fred asks

\(^{26}\)Except, perhaps, for the McGuffin [which is actually a classical device used in *Kiss Me Deadly*] of the suitcase’s contents.
where Alice is and the Man in Black responds, “Her name is Renee” (which is the name of Fred’s dead wife.) At the end of the film, Fred runs up to a doorbell, pushes the buzzer and says, “Dick Laurent is dead.” This is the same voice that Fred heard in the opening scene of the film. So, is Fred talking to himself? Is there an alternate reality going on? How can time possibly be constructed from such ambiguous, non-informative, clashing cues from the syuzhet? There is, of course, no way to resolve these questions. All one can conclude, like Warren Buckland, is that “a non-rational but meaningful energy governs [Lynch’s films].”

As with Memento, Lost Highway’s fragmented temporal relations follow fragmented narrative relations, revealing a world devoid of absolutes.

Jill Sprecher’s Thirteen Conversations About One Thing (2002) also constructs fragmented temporal relations. In this film, multiple stories interweave. We see a physics professor who is having an affair, a lawyer who hits a young girl and then drives away, and an insurance manager who lives with persistent hopelessness. The syuzhet jumps back and forth not just among the different stories, but among the order of events within those stories. For example, a scene in a bar where the lawyer, Troy, meets a disheartened insurance manager, Gene, happens early in the film; it actually occurs chronologically after many of the other events shown in the film. Time is not dependable, but seems instead to be at the mercy of the subjective whim of the syuzhet. The unsettled spectator must work to assemble chronological fabula time—never a wholly successful effort. All of this is built on a foundation of nihilism. After Troy hits a young girl, Beatrice, and drives away, leaving her for dead, Beatrice tells her friend Dorrie that she used to believe that Fate protected her from danger (such as drowning when she was a little girl). Since then, she is almost killed in a hit-and-run, and she is fired after her employer falsely suspects her of stealing. She used to wonder why such things would happen but “then I realized, there is no reason.” In her completely hopeless state she says, “My eyes have been opened. I can never go back.” Meanwhile, Professor Walker is so depressed after his wife leaves him for having an affair that he unknowingly causes severe depression in a student who shortly thereafter commits suicide. The professor tells the student, “Why do you want to be a doctor anyway?”

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27 Buckland 186. For an extended cognitive analysis of the narrative relations of Lost Highway, see Warren Buckland’s “Cognitive Theories of Narration” chapter in Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland’s Studying Contemporary Film 174-86.
student responds, “So I can help people.” Then Professor Walker says bitterly, “Why? So you can keep them alive? Prolong their misery until tomorrow?” This is a world where life is miserable and has no answers. In another story, an insurance manager, Gene, fires a happy employee just so that he can take the constant smile off the employee’s face. Soon thereafter, though, Gene himself is fired. Drinking in his misery at a bar, his friend tells him, “Life only makes sense when you look at it backwards. Too bad we got to live it forwards.”

In *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*, the world isn’t lived forwards. The syuzhet fragments time in a way that mirrors that broken lives of these hopeless people. The spectator must work to reassemble temporality, not to provide some sort of anchor to hope (for such is never to be found), but so that a small amount of understanding can be found. In the final shot of the film, an unhappy Gene waves slightly to a fellow passenger on the subway, Professor Walker’s ex-wife, bringing a very faint smile to her sad and lonely face. This is all one can do in a world of nihilistic hopelessness, merely interact in small ways with humanity. The dysphoric style has magnified the fragmentation of such a world.

Another film whose fragmentation arises from its nihilism is *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001). This film would seem to have a strict temporal structure (it uses intertitles to announce the date and how many days are left until the prophesied end of the world [e.g. “October 6, 1988: Twenty-four days remain”]). Yet within this strict temporal construction we feel the tension of an untrustworthy, ambiguous narrative. For example, the prophecy of the end of the world is given to Donnie Darko by a gigantic bunny named Frank, whose existence is never ultimately explained. There’s just a great nothingness. Flowing from its nihilistic foundation is the theme that there are no longer any absolutes that can be trusted. For example, at one point, Donnie is made to participate in a “lifeline exercise” in which he is asked by his high school teacher to plot on a line (representing the alleged all-structuring binary opposition of fear/love) the location of Ling Ling, who finds a wallet and returns it, but keeps the money. Donnie responds incredulously, “Life isn’t that simple. I mean, who cares if Ling Ling returns the money and keeps the wallet? It has nothing to do with either fear or love. There are other things that need to be taken into account here, like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You can’t just lump everything into these two categories and then just deny everything else.” Absolutes no longer hold any value, as both nihilism and Donnie assert. All that is left is to slide toward an unstoppable destruction; as with so many
other protagonists in contemporary American independent film, fate is unrelentingly ominous, causing even Donnie’s dad to remark about his son, “He was doomed.” To carry these nihilistic themes, the temporal structure of the film is again fragmented. Even though director Richard Kelly asserts in the DVD commentary that the film is understood to have two timelines, each representing a parallel universe, such information is withheld by the film itself, leaving large, unanswered gaps. In addition to the macrostructure of the film, its micro moments reinforce the fragmented yet fluid nature of time in a nihilistic milieu. There are moments of Bordwell’s “reduction” (such as when the syuzhet introduces us to the school and all the students are moving very rapidly in the hall for reasons that are unknown) and “expansion” (seen, for example, when Donnie’s father is blowing leaves at Elizabeth and, in an unmotivated manner, time suddenly and curiously slows down dramatically, causing him to move very slowly.) Such moments of reduction and expansion, which are numerously peppered throughout this film, remind us of the always-changing, impossible-to-grasp nature of time in a world without absolutes.

Thus we have a murder mystery (Memento), a surrealistic drama (Lost Highway), a somber “web-of-life” film (Thirteen Conversations About One Thing), and a bleak coming-of-age movie (Donnie Darko), all of which differ considerably in genre, yet are unified by a common refusal to create linear temporal links in a fashion that mirrors their own narrative gaps. Through this process, they reveal themselves as rising from a system of nihilism where redemption is impossible to find. Examining the distinct structure of the dysphoric style provides a more astute understanding of the ways that films such as Pulp Fiction and Memento differ in their construction and their interaction with the spectator.
CHAPTER 3

“The Cookie Stand Is Not Part of the Food Court”: The Dysphoric Style and Spatial Relations

After exploring narrative and temporality in the dysphoric style, we now turn our attention to space. Surely no space in the era of postmodernism is as emblematic of nihilism as the suburban shopping mall. Shopping in malls has become a way of life in the United States. Such shopping has been shown to create powerful feelings in the shopper. Some shoppers believe they are having an adventure. Others feel they are finding an escape. Still

According to the International Council of Shopping Centers’ 2002 survey, Mall Shopping Patterns, the average shopper makes 41.6 trips to the mall annually, and spends $78 and 71.6 minutes per trip. This is up from 1995, the first year of data collection, when the average shopper was making 39 trips, spending $59.25 (adjusted for inflation) and 76 minutes per trip (Sokol 16). There are currently 45,000 shopping malls in the United States (up from 11,000 just 30 years ago) which occupy 5.5 billion square feet of American land and generate more than $1 trillion in annual sales (Stephen 70). Today malls have “replaced the Main Street culture of America to become perhaps the most ubiquitous and frequently visited places today” (Banerjee 13).

Studies have shown that shoppers are motivated by a variety of psychosocial needs other than those strictly related to acquiring some product (Arnold and Reynolds 78). Hedonic shopping relates to “experiencing fun, amusement, fantasy, and sensory stimulation” (Arnold and Reynolds 78). Another study records: “Increased arousal, heightened involvement, perceived freedom, fantasy fulfillment, and escapism all may indicate a hedonically valuable shopping experience” (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 646).

Arnold and Reynolds demonstrate that one category of hedonic shopping is “adventure shopping’, which refers to shopping for stimulation, adventure and the feeling of being in another world. A significant number of respondents reported that they go shopping for the sheer excitement and adventure of the shopping trip. The informants often describe the shopping experience in terms of adventure, thrills, stimulation, excitement, and entering a different universe of exciting sights, smells, and sounds” (Arnold and Reynolds 80).

Wakefield and Baker 517.
Arnold and Reynolds also demonstrate another category of hedonic shopping: “gratification shopping,” which involves shopping for stress relief, shopping to alleviate a negative mood, and shopping as a special treat to oneself. Several respondents admitted that they go shopping to relieve stress or to forget about their problems. Other informants view the shopping experience as a way to wind down, relax, improve a negative mood, or just treat themselves” (Arnold and Reynolds 80). In another study, one consumer expressed her reason for shopping: “It’s a high. It occurred to me that if I get depressed, then I want to go shopping. It’s too bad it’s expensive. It’s a thrill. It gives you a lift to buy something fun” (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 357).

For a mere $8.00, one can spend two hours experiencing the life of a Brad Pitt or Keira Knightley at the movies. Is it any wonder that so many of our modern multiplexes have established themselves and thrived at malls?

Stephen 70. Also, as Banerjee reminds us, malls “create an illusion of public space, from which the risks and uncertainties of everyday life are carefully edited out” (Banerjee 13). In malls, “the sanctity of private spaces is preserved by excluding . . . the panhandlers, the winos, the homeless, and simply the urban poor” (Banerjee 13).

Stephen 70-71. “Going inside the mall is actually like going into church; a family occasion where all are welcome, in the mall’s case to stroll around plasterboard piazzas where real trees flutter in a climate-controlled environment with the sun always shining (some malls are open 24 hours a day)” (Stephen 70). Many churches are moving to spaces inside malls to be where the people are (Stephen 71). In Concord, North Carolina, the First Assembly of Concord Baptist church purchased the entire Village Shopping Centre, calling it “Christian capitalism”: a place where “shoppers can fulfil their spiritual as well as retail needs in one place” (Stephen 71).
unfulfilled as a great sense of “nothingness” prevails.⁹ We suddenly confront the wisdom of Wordsworth’s prophetic lines:

The world is too much with us, late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! (560)

The mall’s lure—the promise of a changed life—never materializes and we are left with the realization that we have indeed “given our hearts away.” The giving up on this failed promise is symptomatic of nihilism.

It’s in such a world—engulfed in the nihilism that arises from proximity to a mall—that we find the setting for two movies that would like to present themselves as being a rejection of such failed capitalistic promises: Mallrats (Kevin Smith, 1995) and SLC Punk (James Merendino, 1998). Mallrats has traditionally been seen as an independent film, purporting to be an ironic take on the evils of capitalism. SLC Punk appears to be performing a similar maneuver, revealing that it’s better to “drop out” than to be part of the capitalistic system. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, these films each reveal a distinct style. They arise from two very different systems. An examination of space in both films (along with several examples from other contemporary American independent films such as Bully [Larry Clark, 2001] and Swoon [Tom Kalin, 1993]) will bring this to light. Mallrats’ space in fact ends up reaffirming the unifying power of capitalism at the mall, while SLC Punk’s fragmented space reveals its rejection of that unified system. It’s in the space that the content of these two films will be made clear. Even more, it’s the space that is the content.

In Bordwell’s Constructivist approach, the spectator constructs space in much the same way as narrative causality and temporality: by taking cues offered by the film’s syuzhet to imagine a space that the characters inhabit. These cues are then tested by the spectator’s hypotheses to see if they hold up over time (Narration 100-04).

⁹In an A.P./Ipsos poll (with a margin of error of 3 percentage points) taken Dec. 6-8, 2004, one-half of Americans worry about the money they owe. About one in five people with credit cards say they have charge balances of $5,000 or more. One in ten of those with credit cards say they have balances of $10,000 or more (Lester 3A).
Bordwell is interested in how questions of position relate to narrative (99). He reviews various theories of perspective. During the Renaissance, many artists and thinkers theorized a system known as “linear perspective,” the most famous type being central or “Albertian” perspective where orthogonals converge to a single, central vanishing point such as in da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (see Appendix E). There are also other systems of constructing perspective such as “parallel perspective.” This form is common in Asian art, where parallel edges running into depth are rendered as such on the picture plane, as in Ippitsusai Bunchō’s *The Actor Sanogawa Ichimatsu as the Dancer Chūshō in Imayō dōjōji* (see Appendix F) (104-05).

Bordwell sees film as offering the spectator cues to construct space, perhaps similar to those in different systems of paintings. Bordwell calls this filmic space “scenographic space” which he defines as: “the imaginary space of fiction, the ‘world’ in which the narration suggests that fabula events occur. On the basis of visual and auditory cues, we act to construct a space of figures, objects, and fields—a space of greater or lesser depth, scope, coherence, and solidity” (113). Bordwell explains that the spectator cannot summon up a detailed replica of the scenographic space of a film. However, he or she can do something much more important: a) locate the most important figures and objects in relation to one another; b) hypothesize what actions and views are likely to follow currently visible ones; and c) compare what ensues with what went before (113). Scenographic space is built from three sorts of cues: 1) shot space, 2) editing space, and 3) sonic space, all three of which represent either onscreen space or offscreen space (113).

Shot space refers to cues that help the spectator construct the spatial relations represented in a shot. Overlapping contours help the spectator to surmise that the covering contour is the nearer. Texture differences cue the spectator to depth with rougher or denser surfaces advancing while smoother or less dense surfaces recede. The familiar size of people and objects aid the spatially-constructing spectator in determining what is near or far. Light and shade suggest planes and volume. Color provides cues as well, with warmer, more intense colors (such as pure red or yellow) advancing while cooler, less intense colors (such as pure blue) retreat. Systems of perspective (such as linear perspective or parallel perspective, as reviewed earlier) can provide the appearance of depth and position. Figure movement (the movement of a character) reinforces object/depth hypotheses. Monocular
movement parallax (the movement of the camera) allows the spectator to modify the perceived layout of surfaces and the apparent distances between objects (113-14). Many of these cues provide a clear understanding of the relation of figure to ground. The most important characters or objects in a scene usually become the figure and are clearly distinguished through cinematic means (all of the cues mentioned above) from the less important ground of space they inhabit.

Editing space provides another form of spatial construction. As Bordwell explains, the perceiver constructs intershot space on the basis of anticipation and memory, favoring cause-effect schemata and creating a ‘cognitive map’ of the pertinent terrain. This happens even when figures vary considerably from one shot to another as in the ‘cheat cut’ (117). The spectator makes sense of a string of shots by fitting each cue into a cognitive map of the locale. In classical film, this is usually facilitated by an establishing shot that quickly allows the spectator to become oriented to the larger picture of a new surrounding (113). An example of an establishing shot is seen in Irvin Kershner’s The Empire Strikes Back (1980) just after Rebel forces on the ice planet of Hoth scramble to escape an Imperial attack. To segue from this scene, Kershner gives the audience an establishing shot of Darth Vader’s Star Destroyer spaceship floating in space above the ice planet. This reorients the spectator, giving salient information about the fictional new space that is coming. We then cut to a shot of Darth Vader in one of the specific rooms of the Star Destroyer. The establishing shot quickly gives clear information to the space-constructing spectator and is an integral part of the classical system.

Sonic space refers to auditory cues which help the spectator to construct space. Figure and ground exist in sound as well, with louder or higher-pitched sounds seeming closer to the spectator and softer or lower-pitched sounds seeming further away. Classical film usually foregrounds character speech and relegates atmospheric sound to the background. In discrepancies between image and sound, we tend to trust the image; this can be seen, for example, during a long shot when a character appears further away but her voice appears close—she will still seem to be further away (118-19).

Offscreen space comes in two forms: a) nondiegetic offscreen space, which is space that is not part of the fictional world of the film (e.g. the camera); and b) diegetic offscreen space, which is space that is part of the fictional world. The viewer doesn’t necessarily
construct all areas of offscreen space (which would be too inefficient), but only those that become narratively important (e.g. if framing leaves a space on the right, it is likely that a character will enter the shot from that direction) (119-20).

In general, classical film translates narrational omniscience into spatial omniscience (125). In other words, the narration generally tries to provide visual cues that offer the best position for seeing a particular moment of the film’s action. Most often, the film doesn’t acknowledge the camera or the audience but tries to render these elements invisible.

As Bordwell reminds us, “cinematic space is typically subordinated to narrational ends” (128). In other words, the space is generally constructed to best tell the story in the classical system. However, the same elements that apply to narrative and temporality also apply to space (120). The syuzhet may give spatial cues to the spectator which cause gaps; these may or may not be filled as the film progresses. The syuzhet may create a space which is either easy or difficult to discern. It may aid in the construction of the fabula or work to block fabula construction.

This model of Bordwell’s remains useful for examining cinematic space in general. However, it also carries with it a crucial shortcoming. Bordwell conceives of space as a monolithic block containing all the elements of the mise-en-scene in a unified manner. While this is helpful for seeing how syuzhet cues guide a spectator into predetermined paradigms of spatial construction, it is not as helpful for determining the specific qualities of that space. In order to see how space is constructed differently in *Mallrats* as compared with *SLC Punk*, we need to add the insight of Mark Garrett Cooper’s spatial theory. Cooper builds on the argument of Stephen Heath, who, in his essay, “Narrative Space,” contends that space and narrative cannot be separated. In his response to Heath, “Narrative Spaces,” Cooper goes even further, arguing that space is narrative. Cooper believes there is a better model than the long-held production-based system where the shot is the basic element of film. He proposes instead a reception-based model wherein that narrative derives from the filmic space. For Cooper, the basic unit of film is not in the shot, but in the discrete spaces within the shot and across shots (Cooper, “Narrative Spaces,” 143, 152). As his main figure, Cooper examines the shared look of love between the heroine and her deserving man in the Hollywood love story (“Narrative Spaces,” 150). The couple's shared look “does not merely inhabit, but helps to define the space of resolution” (Cooper, “Love,” 91). Cooper’s insight
that there are specific qualities within the discrete spaces of the film, in addition to Bordwell’s model of how syuzhet cues trigger spatial construction in the mind of the spectator, will be helpful for seeing how space in the dysphoric style is distinct from space constructed in other styles.

The film Mallrats is often described as an independent film because of its writer/director Kevin Smith (whose first film, Clerks, was made for only $27,000 [Hirsch A2]). Mallrats’ narrative space, however, reveal it to be something quite different—classical rather than dysphoric. Robert Horton, a writer in Film Comment, observes that Mallrats “looks nicer than Clerks” (63). Yet their differences are more than merely cosmetic. These films arise from separate, distinct structures: Clerks from the dysphoric style arising from nihilism and Mallrats from the balance and harmony arising from classicism.

Mallrats can be seen as a journey to reunite two couples: Brandi, who has left T.S., and Rene, who has left Brodie. As Cooper has shown, in the classical Hollywood love story, such a reunion of lovers requires a spatial maneuver. The lovers will first have to be brought into a shared space. Then they will need to experience a shared look. Finally, the space will need to be well-lit, self-contained, and uncluttered (Cooper, Love Rules 34, 38, 39). I argue that this is precisely the maneuver that Mallrats performs, thus marking it, narratively and spatially, as classical. In addition, the film is also capitalist-affirming. Where is the location where such a reunification of the lovers is enacted? It is done among the buying and selling which occurs at a suburban mall. In this way, the unifying power of commerce becomes linked with the unifying power of love.

Mallrats constructs classical space from the start of the film with a clear establishing shot of the outside of the mall. This immediately orients the spectator to the location where much of the film will take place. The syuzhet then cuts to various particular spaces inside the mall: Burning Flesh Tanning Salon, Sbarro, Popular Girl, Fashionable Male [the store where Ben Affleck’s character, Shannon, is a manager], Rug Munchers Carpet Outlet. Each of these clearly establishes the space (albeit somewhat ironically) of the various types of commercial pleasures available at the local mall.

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10See Chapter 1 for an examination of Clerks’ dysphoric style regarding narrative causality.
With that, the credits launch. We’re introduced to each of the characters in the film as if they were illustrated super heroes on the covers of comic books. As Bordwell reminds us, in classical film, the credits prepare us for what is coming (Classical 25). This is certainly the case here. The mall becomes a transforming space where ordinary people can employ the power of capitalism to change their identities. By the end of the film, we will see that the mall’s promise of fluid identity (much more so than the rigid absolutes of identity that exist outside the mall) indeed finds fulfillment. As these characters are transformed by their capitalist transactions, so their lives become transformed into types of super heroes who can make everything right.

The break-up of the couples follows the credits. Arguing in front of T.S.’s car, Brandi explains that she can’t go with him to Florida because she committed to help her father produce a game show at the mall. The space is classically configured with traditional, steady shot/reverse shot over-the-shoulder shots between T.S. and Brandi. As the scene continues, Brandi explains her dilemma: “T.S., I’m doing this to get you out of trouble with my father, help him out of a bind, which, you know, you kind of are at least a little responsible for.” T.S.: “I bet he’s happy as a pig in shit that you’re not going away with me.” Brandi: “Are you kidding? He’s absolutely devastated about Julie.” The syuzhet then shows us Brandi’s father, who is naked, except for a towel that’s about to fall off. He jumps around the living room playfully throwing punches, anything but devastated. This is what Bordwell means by classical narration that is omniscient (Classical 30). The syuzhet provides us with narrational information conveyed through spatial cues that are not available to Brandi and T.S. It thus tends toward the objective, omniscient space of classicism, rather than the subjective, ambiguous space of the dysphoric style. The scene ends as Brandi tells T.S. that “You are exactly like my father . . . as thoughtless and self-absorbed as he is. In fact, the two of you have so much in common, I think you should date each other.” With that, Brandi goes in the door of her house, leaving T.S.’s pleas unanswered as he remains outside. Spatially, these two characters have been separated. Resolution will only be reached in the narrative space, once they are back in a unified space. As we will see, this transformation will be effectuated by the power of the mall.

The break-up of Brodie and Rene follows. While both are in Brodie’s room, she wakes him up at 9:30am and he yells at her to “go back to sleep.” Instead of making her
breakfast like he promised, he ignores her to play a video game. Rene is tired of having to sneak into Brodie’s room so that his mother won’t know she’s in the house. She throws him a letter explaining that she’s dumping him and then crawls out a tiny window. Here again, the couple is separated spatially, creating a need for narrative space to reunite them.

As Brodie and T.S. meet to discuss the loss of both of their girlfriends, they happen onto a solution:

Brodie
Why are we sitting here trying to figure out where we went wrong with our significant others? . . . There IS something out there that can help ease our simultaneous double loss.

T.S.
Ritual suicide?

Brodie
No, you idiot, the fucking mall.

T.S.:
I prefer ritual suicide.

Brodie:
Oh c’mon man, it’ll be great. They’ve got these new cookies at the cookie stand. You have to try them. They’re awesome.

Entering the mall, Brodie takes a big sniff and declares, “I love the smell of commerce in the morning!” This reference to Apocalypse Now, as well as the earlier conversation about how the mall has the power to “ease our simultaneous double loss,” could be taken as ironic by those who want to see the film as being truly independent, an attack against the capitalistic world of the mall. Yet by the end of the film, the mall will be shown to have this sort of reuniting power. Commerce will be linked to narrative and space, all of them triumphant in their aid of the Hollywood love story.

In the mall, the world is organized into manageable causes, temporalities, and spaces. Note this conversation between Brodie and T.S.:
Brodie
The cookie stand is not part of the food court.

T.S.
Well, of course it is.

Brodie
The food court is downstairs. The cookie stand is upstairs.
It’s not like we’re talking quantum physics here.

T.S.
The cookie stand counts as an eatery. The eateries are part of
the food court.

Brodie
Bullshit. Eateries that operate within the designated square
downstairs qualify as food court. Anything outside of said
designated square is considered an autonomous unit for mid-
mall snacking. Now if you’re going to wax intellectual about
the subject . . . [Brodie suddenly breaks off because he’s just
seen Rene, with whom he was hoping to reunite, shopping
for clothes.]

This conversation reveals what’s at stake—there’s a difference between location and space.
The mall is the location for most of this film. Yet it’s the narrative space within that location
that will be most crucial for reuniting the two couples. We don’t necessarily need to see how
to get from the cookie stand to the food court. But we do need to have space organized for
us in such a way that capitalism becomes the defining principle, that which will unite
disparate couples and make everything right.

But of course, this will be delayed until the proper time—the climax of the film.
Brodie goes up to Rene in the clothing store and declares, “Look, I know you’ve had some
time to think about the mistake you’ve made and I just want to let you know that you don’t
have to apologize. I’m sure you were just P.M.S.ing or something.” Rene tells him to “piss
off.” She continues looking through clothes on a rack, barely meeting Brodie’s glance
before breaking it and turning away to examine clothes on a different rack.
Finally she abandons Brodie and leaves the store altogether. This is not the shared look of love within a unified space, but it will be.

The clarity that will eventually come to the emotional lives of T.S. and Brodie is continually reflected by the clarity of the film’s space. At the food court, T.S. and Brodie sit at a table with Jay and Silent Bob. A shot/reverse shot show us first one couple (Jay and Silent Bob) and then the other (T.S. and Brodie). There is nothing that comes between the camera and the characters, thus providing a clear, unobstructed space. But then we see another shot: Rene is with Shannon (the “Fashionable Male” character played by Ben Affleck.) They are shown together in the same frame as they make purchases in the food court—linked commercially as well as spatially. Then they ride up an escalator, joined not only by their two looks but by the construction of the space which again unites them within the frame. At this point in the film, space is constructed around the “wrong” couples: T.S. and Brodie are together and Rene and Shannon are together. The film’s classical maneuver, then, will be to sort out the space and put the “right” couples together within it, defining a new, unified space in the “proper” way.

Space in this film is constructed not only by framing, but also by sound. When Shannon beats up Brodie in a back hallway of the mall, sound both constructs and clarifies the space. We hear an echo, which reinforces the length of the long hallway we can see. We hear the squeak of tennis shoes on the floor, reinforcing the surface of the hallway’s painted floor. There are no strange sounds that can’t be interpreted, troubling the unified diegesis of the film, as will be the case with dysphoric space. This is realistic space, rather than metaphoric space.

After being told (falsely) that Brodie was attacked by the mall Easter Bunny, Jay and Silent Bob beat up that costumed character. First we see the image of Silent Bob holding the Easter Bunny while Jay punches him. We then cut to a reaction shot of the faces of horrified little children. Finally, we cut to a long shot where we see the kids attacking Jay and Silent Bob. The space that conveys this is unified, not fragmented. It is clear, causally-defined space, bringing out the motivation of the narrative: attack on the Easter Bunny, reaction shot, resulting violence by children. The space has clarified the narrative, rather than obscuring it. Even more, the space is the narrative. Here we have the taking down of a supposedly benevolent, commercialized icon of the mall. While a surface interpretation
could see this as a critique of the mall’s capitalism, the space that conveys it is unifying and affirming rather than disruptive.

In a subsequent scene in a women’s clothing store, Gwen and Brandi sit on a couch together. Gwen tells Brandi that “T.S. is a great catch.” She tries to help the two get together because “the good guys are really few and far between.” There are no figure/ground problems here, just clear, orderly, traditional cinematic space. Traditional Hollywood lighting keeps the faces well and warmly lit, almost like some of the glamorous starlet shots of earlier, classical Hollywood cinema. The exposure and film stock contribute to the clarity of the image, rather than obscuring it. Such techniques endow Brandi’s face with symbolic meaning (Cooper, *Love Rules* 40). It renders her face more desirable, part of the narrative’s ploy to reunite it with T.S.’s face.

The transformation of narrative space to bring about this reunion occurs during the “Truth or Dare” game show at the mall. Brandi is the contestant, but a curtain separates her, both in location and space, from three potential suitors: T.S., Brodie, and Gil Hicks. After a banter back and forth between Brandi and the three suitors who are hidden from her sight, she discovers the identities of T.S. and Brodie.

 brandi

Suitor number one, you just don’t know when to quit, do you?

t.s.

No, no, but you sure do. C’mon, I thought you were in love!

Brandi occupies most of the frame, with the big, pink back of a chair behind her, framing her like a heart. Yet she is alone in the frame. When we see T.S., however, he is in a two-shot with Brodie. Not only can Brandi not see T.S., but the spaces are constructed so there is still a separation of these characters—T.S. is kept away from her, locked in the same space as Brodie.

 brandi

When I walked away, did you make any effort to repair that breach? No, you just ran off and cried on the shoulder of Bumble, the boy wonder, over there. . . .
T.S.

Miss Suitorette, Suitor Number One loves you, has always loved you, and will always love you. He’s only got one question that he’s got to ask. Will you marry me?

Here the syuzhet presents significant images: first T.S., alone in the frame, looks longingly out the left of the frame; then Brandi, alone in the frame, looks longingly out the right of the frame. This is a traditional spatial maneuver of the Hollywood love story: to construct a hindered gaze that looks outside of frame boundaries, longing to be reunited (Cooper, *Love Rules* 35). Eventually the syuzhet returns to Brandi, who, still alone in the frame, replies, “Yes.” The audience, perhaps constructed to represent us, stands up and claps. Brandi runs to T.S. and they share a gaze. They embrace and kiss within the same frame, reunited narratively and spatially.

The next problem the syuzhet has to solve is the reuniting of the second couple. At this point, Brodie is shown clapping in a two-shot with Gil. The Hollywood love story couldn’t leave that as the final space for these two characters. Eventually Brodie takes the microphone in a one-shot. He looks down at Shannon and Rene who are sitting next to each other in the audience, linked in a two-shot. This is the real problem that the film has to solve: getting the “right” couple together. Brodie looks down at Rene and says, “You have my heart.” In a two-shot, Shannon tries desperately to make and maintain eye contact with Rene, but she avoids his glance, first looking down, and then looking straight ahead, presumably at Brodie. Rene says, “What can I say? I love the retard.” As Shannon rushes to the stage to attack Brodie and a bevy of policemen head toward the stage to arrest Brodie, Silent Bob plays a video tape of Shannon having sex with a 15-year-old girl. The police arrest Shannon. He passes Rene, being forcibly taken out of the right side of the frame; the space will no longer link them. In the next shot, however, the syuzhet presents the back of Rene’s head in the foreground and all of Brodie in the background. To make sense of this space, the spectator has to put foreground and background together, creating a spatial link between the two characters. Thus, we see the fulfillment of Cooper’s model of space: the basic unit of film is not in the shot, but in the discrete spaces within it and across shots (Cooper, “Narrative Spaces,” 152). Without a cut, both the heroine and her deserving man
walk toward each other, within the frame, and end up with Rene on the right side of the frame and Brodie on the left. At first they each avoid the other’s gaze, even though they are facing each other. Then Brodie says, “Well, I was wondering if you weren’t busy tomorrow night, would you like to come over to my house for dinner and meet my mother?” Rene grabs him, they share a look, and then they kiss passionately, linked in a two-shot, spatially and narratively. Brodie is further rewarded by becoming the host of the *Tonight Show*, with Rene as his band leader. T.S. and Brandi get married on the *Jaws* ride at Universal Studios; not even an imposing mechanical shark is able to separate their now-unified space. What was lost at the beginning has been regained, with interest. The capitalism of the mall has been augmented by the capitalism inherent in the worlds of TV talk shows and amusement parks.

*Mallrats’* topoi of the mall urge us to consider that there is something about location and space that is crucial here. The mall has fulfilled its promise of providing new, changed lives. Here at the mall T.S. and Brodie can shop, socialize, and have fantastic Hollywood-like adventures. Here Jay and Silent Bob can evade security guards by using Silent Bob’s “bat-belt” to shoot an escape wire. Here Brodie and Rene can have sex in a mall elevator. Here T.S. and Brandi can participate in a game show and come to realize how much they truly love each other. Here Silent Bob can reveal to a mall audience the truth about Rene’s potential suitor, Shannon, so that she can end up with the “right” suitor—Brodie—and Shannon can go to jail with burly cellmates. These categories (e.g. discovering adventure, finding an escape, experiencing fun, relieving stress, transforming into glorified celebrities, feeling safer, nurturing the soul and society) are identical to the arguments put forth by business writers (and reviewed at the beginning this chapter) of what constitute hedonic shopping. Thus, even though *Mallrats* may seem to present a jaded look at the mall, through its seemingly anti-social or counter-culture characters, we see that it is actually a reinscription of capitalism through the subtle maneuvers of narrative spaces which place characters in the “right” social and narrative spaces where they belong, all the while attributing this reinscription to the transforming power of the mall.
The closing credits of *Mallrats* feature the song, “Social” by Squirtgun. These lyrics seem to be advocating a rejection of capitalism with all of its social structures; combined with the ironic tone of the film, one can see how *Mallrats* could appear to be a truly independent film with radical ideas. However, examining the space of this film, particularly the shared look of love and the spaces that are reunited, reveals the movie to be just another affirmation of capitalism produced by the classical system rather than an attack on capitalism by a nihilistic system.

What makes dysphoric space distinct from the classical space constructed in *Mallrats*? Whereas *Mallrats’* classical space is working toward unity, the dysphoric style promises and then undermines the stable spatial distinctions that produce a unified, diegetic world. As with narrative and temporality, such an unsettling of space highlights the unsettling themes of nihilism which underlie it. Dysphoric space has several characteristics. It tends toward the metaphoric and the exaggerated, rather than the realistic. It favors the subjective rather than the objective. It often contains figure/ground dissonance. It is frequently a space which is claustrophobic, unclear, unsteady, and fragmented. Ultimately it is space that proves both unknowable and unsettling.

*SLC Punk* is a film that constructs this type of space, revealing its underlying nihilistic themes. In this way, it is markedly different from *Mallrats*. From the beginning of *SLC Punk*, even before any images appear from the black screen, we hear a voiceover: “The thing about me and Bob was, we hated rednecks more than anything else. Period. Because

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11 Select lyrics include:

“A skeleton in a suit and tie
Tells us what we oughta buy.
Bag his coke and move to your heart.
Support your conscience, that’s a start.
Here we are again some afternoon.
More parties than you can choose.
You were born into a social class.
Stuck there, and it’s hard to pass it.
Social norms and social rules
With social skills and social tools.
They tell us all better socialize,
Ignoring all our social drives . . .
We better teach ourselves never be social.
We don’t play the game, never be social.”
rednecks for us were America incarnate. And America? Fuck America!” We then see two punk kids beat a group of “rednecks” with bats and run away. Suddenly, the images and sounds appear to slow to a halt, as if the film *SLC Punk* jammed in the movie projector.\(^{12}\) A narrator again addresses the audience in voice-over: “What can I say? We weren’t much more than a couple of young punks.” This is our introduction to the two protagonists of the film, Stevo (who often addresses the audience directly) and his punker friend, Heroin Bob. The title of the movie then appears (both in image and sound) to be spray painted onto the screen. The film capitalizes on the nihilistic world of punk rockers. As Heroin Bob says later in the film: “It’s a crazy, fucked-up world, and we’re all just barely floating along waiting for somebody that can walk on water.” Here the film seems to be promising a deliverer, a person who can bring meaning to this meaningless world. Such a person will never arrive in *SLC Punk*. This is what makes it nihilistic—there’s a promise of hope that is never fulfilled. As another character named Mark explains: “The world has no way to clean itself. That’s why there’s so much dust.” Without a righting of wrongs, there’s just dirt, chaos, and eventually nothing absolute that can bring cleanliness and order to the universe. How can characters in such a milieu respond? As Stevo later explains, “Bob and the rest of us had made an oath to do absolutely nothing. We were going to waste our educated minds. We had no other way of fighting.” Opting out is the only way for these characters to combat such an environment.

The construction of space in *SLC Punk* is inseparably connected to these themes of nihilism. There’s a mall scene in *SLC Punk* that, in contrast with *Mallrats*, demonstrates the differences in how their respective spaces are constructed. In voice-over, Stevo directly addresses the spectator about the problem of “posers”: “Sure. There’s a lot more punks than there was four years earlier. But there was also as many posers. Posers were people that look like punks but they did it for fashion. And they were fools.” As Stevo continues his voice-over, the syuzhet reveals close images of two escalators, one in the background with people traveling in one direction, and one in the foreground with people moving the same direction, just to a different floor. This is differently constructed space than the scene

\(^{12}\) This is similar to Bergman’s *Persona* (1966). For more on how European Art Cinema influenced the dysphoric style, see Chapter 4.
in *Mallrats* where Rene and Shannon ride an escalator together, for three reasons: 1) we look straight down on the tops of heads, making people’s faces impossible to discern; 2) the images are so close that the space is difficult to discern; it’s hard to know even which escalator is going up and which is going down; 3) there is no establishing shot nor a shot back far enough to show us the ends of either escalator. Where are these looming figures coming from? We know the off-screen space couldn’t be our living room, although it appears to be that way. Thus we have unclear on-screen space along with unclear off-screen space, a rendering that is dysphoric.

Stevo continues his voice-over by explaining that such posers say, “Anarchy in the U.K.” Stevo’s voice says that line, but the syuzhet presents a poser-punk lip-syncing it as he descends a mall escalator. We then cut to Stevo, suddenly and inexplicably sitting in the middle of the mall. He is in the foreground on the right of the frame, while a group of posers are standing in the background on the left of the frame. The film constructs a space whereby a “true” punk in the foreground, Stevo, is established to contrast the poser punks in the background. Yet then suddenly Stevo, mocking such posers for pretending to be British, walks back to group and grabs one of them by his leather jacket. Stevo pulls the poser’s jacket toward the camera so that the spectator can clearly see a patch of the Union Jack. Speaking directly to the spectator, Stevo says, “See what I mean? ‘The fuck’s up with the England bullshit?’” Then Stevo turns to the poser and says: “The Union Jack is a fag!” The poser, however, never acknowledges either camera or spectator, even though Stevo physically interacts with him. Stevo then turns back and continues his direct address to the spectator. The syuzhet places both Stevo and the posers in the frame—the same footing, if you will—in a sort of promise by the syuzhet that their differences will be contrasted. But then the syuzhet pulls the rug out from under the spectator, constructing entirely different spaces. Within the same frame, Stevo is able to directly acknowledge and address the spectator while the poser is withheld from this narrative privilege. It is not a unified space at all, but a jarring, unequal, fragmented construction, very different from what we saw in *Mallrats*, where the characters were all on equal spatial ground.

Bordwell is of limited help in discussing this difference in narrative space. He can only describe the cognitive schema called “the camera” as “an ideal invisible observer, freed from the contingencies of space and time but discreetly confining itself to codified patterns
for the sake of story intelligibility” (Narration 161). Thus, he can only go as far as saying that traditional cues of narration present themselves as being invisible. Laura Mulvey, although coming from a different theoretical perspective, seems to agree with this particular presumption when she states:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience (33).

Thus, both the psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches speak of a spectator that remains unacknowledged by the narration of classical cinema. Clearly we can see that SLC Punk does not arise from a classical structure. But neither the Bordwell nor the Mulvey model allow us to say what is specifically dysphoric about this space. We need a different way to conceive of spatial differentiation rather than something that’s different from classicism. For this, we turn to Cooper’s model. Whereas both Bordwell and Mulvey conceive of space as a monolithic, unified block, Cooper sees space as disparate spaces within the frame. Cooper’s model allows us to see what is really at stake with dysphoric space: spatial differences within the frame promise unity but instead deliver fragmentation. With this approach, we see that Stevo and the poser punk are not in a unified space at all, but instead in a fragmented, unequal, dysphoric space within the same frame.

In this significant mall scene, as Stevo resumes his direct address of the spectator, maligning the problem of poser punks, the syuzhet continues to construct fragmented space. At seemingly random moments during Stevo’s monologue inexplicable cuts occur, creating a jarring effect. Sometimes the camera will cut from a medium shot on Stevo to a medium-close-up shot and back again. At other times, cuts will occur without any change in the camera angle. This fragmented space contrasts markedly with the unified space we saw in Mallrats. In that film, shots utilized unified space, cutting only when necessary to provide a new camera angle for the spectator.
The differences in space reveal differences in the way the figure of the mall functions in the two films. In *Mallrats*, the mall is the place that brings lovers together through the miracle of commerce. Its characters pick out clothes, have discussions in the food court, or participate in mall game shows, all three locations producing enlightenment about who belongs with whom. In *SLC Punk*, there is no such advocacy of commercialism. Stevo is never seen buying anything in this mall. In this film, the mall serves only to reveal the presence of posers—those who are fake. The mall’s promise of unity is shown to be just as false as the posers’ promise of being true punks. This mall is not a sacred temple, not a place to feel safer, not a place to become a glorified celebrity, not a place to find love and unity. This mall is the emblem of nihilism.

Other examples in *SLC Punk*, while not occurring at a mall, are extensions of the nihilistic theme that we live in a world of despair and purposelessness without any clear answers to be found. Fragmented space continues to convey this, becoming a visual embodiment of the chaos and uncertainty of such underlying nihilistic themes. *SLC Punk* delivers fragmented space in a variety of ways. The first way, as I’ve argued, is by creating unequal space between characters in the same frame. The second is by cutting when cuts are not necessary. A third way of creating fragmented space is through a process I call “frame removal.” In frame removal, there may seem to be a cut, although the camera hasn’t necessarily moved; instead, several frames are removed, giving the appearance of a jarring cut. This process of frame removal was famously used by Godard in *Breathless* (1959).\(^\text{13}\)

This third type of fragmented space (both by means of cuts and frame removal) is constructed during the scene when Heroin Bob discusses Napoleon’s suspicious death with Stevo. As Heroin Bob speaks, the syuzhet adds many jarring, superfluous cuts and instances of frame removal without any seeming motivation whatsoever. The syuzhet constructs

\(^{13}\text{Although Thompson and Bordwell refer to this as a “jump cut” [“In *Breathless* (France, 1960 [sic]), Jean-Luc Godard violated basic rules of continuity editing, notably by tossing out frames from the middle of shots in order to create jarring *jump cuts*” (Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History* 440; italics in the original)], I think “frame removal” is a clearer description of the practice; it will allow me to contrast it with actual cuts to a different shot as I discuss *SLC Punk*. Merendino certainly has a higher saturation of frame removals than Godard used. See also Chapter 4 for a description of how techniques such as this one from the French New Wave influenced the dysphoric style.}
visual cues that make it appear as though we are Stevo, on the ground, looking up at Heroin Bob. I will provide the dialogue of this scene to illustrate how, by the sheer number of frame removals and cuts, the space is fragmented, and thus disunified.

Bob: “You know that dude, [Frame removal] Napoleon?
[Frame removal] Uh, uh, [Extreme frame removal for particularly jarring effect] he was [Frame removal] banished to an [Cut to a shot of Stevo, lying on the grass with his head resting on a cement step] island when the [Cut back to a shot which looks up at Bob] French got sick of him. [Frame removal] That’s right, [Cut back to the shot of Stevo lying on the ground smiling] he supposedly [Cut to Bob] died of stomach [Cut to Stevo tilting his head] problems right? [Cut to Bob] Wrong! [Frame removal] He was actually poisoned over a long period of time. [Frame removal] Murdered [Frame removal] by [Frame removal] arsenic. [Frame removal] A preservative. [Frame removal] And [Cut to Stevo moving his neck] you know [Cut to Bob] how?” [Cut to Stevo] Stevo: “No idea.” [Cut to Bob.] Bob: “His hair.” [Cut to Stevo]. Stevo: “Hair?” [Cut to Bob] Bob: “His fucking hair. [Frame removal] It was arsenic [Extreme frame removal where too many frames are removed so that words of dialogue are missing] could tell [Frame removal] how [Cut to Stevo] long he was being poisoned [Cut to Bob] by following the [Cut to Stevo] traces of poison [Cut to Bob] up his hair. [Frame removal] Dude, dude, [Frame removal] dude, [Cut to Stevo] if you do [Cut to Bob] enough hits of it [Frame removal], you’re dead! [Cut to Stevo] [Cut to two shot as Stevo stands up from the grass] [Sound, as if the filmstrip is moving backward in the projector] [Jump cut to Stevo who’s inexplicably back sitting on the grass as he begins to directly address the audience].
This short, 31-second scene contains 39 cuts or instances of frame removal. These aren’t being used to provide the spectator with a new, better camera angle (as with the traditional Hollywood rule that a cut should only occur if the camera is going to move to a new position.) Instead, they divide up the space dysphorically so that we are kept from a smooth, unified diegesis. The space here acquires metaphoric qualities, portraying the account of the fragmentation of Napoleon’s body by poison in the very space of the film itself. If Mallrats were to discuss the figure of Napoleon, it would probably be brought about by having a character purchase a pastry or a costume—something consumable. In SLC Punk, however, Napoleon is conveyed in terms of his death by poisonous drugs. What we can’t know about space in this film is what we can’t know about drugs that can kill us.

Other examples not only expand such nihilistic themes (e.g. an acknowledgment of a forthcoming yet unforeseeable pain that awaits us), but also illustrate how dysphoric space favors metaphoric over realistic space. When Heroin Bob recounts the story of Sean’s running from a cop through sprinklers that make the LSD in his pocket soak through his pants and into his leg, the syuzhet represents this for us metaphorically. First we see an image of Sean running, which slows down until it is in fairly slow motion. We then dissolve to a close-up on Sean’s hips and pocket as he is running. Third, we dissolve to a shot supposedly inside Sean’s pocket, which contains the wet acid. Fourth, we dissolve to the image of Sean’s naked leg, streaked with blue lines running down it (representing the narrative’s imagining of the effect the acid is having on his leg underneath his pants). Finally, we dissolve to a shot of a bloody leg that’s been eaten down through the flesh and muscle until the bone is exposed. To this, the sound of sizzling meat assists with the sonic construction of metaphoric space. None of this actually happens, of course, even in the fictional narrative to the fictional character. The narrative simply relates the horror of Sean’s ingesting too much acid through his skin by means of metaphoric space. This information could have been conveyed merely through Bob’s verbal account. Instead, the narrative spatializes the account metaphorically. In the case of both Napoleon and Sean, drugs are not seen as a commercial purchase that brings joy or adventure like hedonic shopping at a mall. These drugs bring unforeseeable agony, destruction, or even death.

Because of the extreme acid trip, Sean experiences a long-term mental breakdown. When Heroin Bob goes to visit him, Sean recounts his story of chasing his own mother.
around the kitchen with a knife. The different layers of narration in this sequence are worth noting. This sequence represents the state of Sean’s mind as he describes it to Heroin Bob, who reports it to Stevo, who informs the spectator of *SLC Punk* about it, who then receives a spatialized representation of it from the syuzhet. The dysphoric style has no problem with spatial-narrative complexities such as this one. In fact, it thrives on them.

Through a process I term “subjective expressionism,” (which is the syuzhet’s spatial representation of a character’s inner state) the syuzhet presents for the spectator a representation of what Sean might have been feeling at the time. Sean explains, “Satan is in the house. He killed my mom and he turned her into a bull.” Now the narrative spatializes the account for us as if we were inside Sean’s head at the time. We see Sean in the foreground with a knife behind his back as his mother enters the kitchen in the background and says, smiling, “Oh, I didn’t hear you come in.” Seeing a hidden knife in the foreground and a smiling Mother in the background provides a frightening moment of possible matricide for the spectator who links the two spaces. Meaning arises here not at the level of shot, as Bordwell would explain, but at the level of discrete spaces, as Cooper describes (Cooper, *Love Rules* 12).

Sean chases his mother around the kitchen counter while the syuzhet fragments the diegesis with fourteen very fast, jarring frame removals. At various times, the syuzhet creates space which is not unified. As Sean continues to pursue his mother through the kitchen, the syuzhet will suddenly and inexplicably show us an extremely brief image of Sean holding a knife to his forehead, then go back to the chase, then show an image of Sean putting the knife in his mouth, then back to the chase. In other words, the syuzhet defies conventional rules of space in this representation by crosscutting between images that could not possibly be happening at the same time in the same setting. We also see other strange images intercut into the sequence, such as Satan, bathed in red light through the doorway into the next room, who ducks out of the bottom of the frame and then jumps remarkably high, out of the top of it. Concerning off-screen space, we are not allowed to see where Satan jumps or what happens after that. The syuzhet thus withholds any cues that might allow us to construct off-screen space. It does, however, give us strange, very brief, extreme close-ups of the eye and one horn of a bull intercut with the other images. In so doing, it
withholds an image of the entire bull along with its location within the house. Off-screen space is thus left ambiguous in the spectator’s mind.

Sonic space is also used as part of the subjective expressionism of this scene. There is an ongoing, primal, minimalist drum beat that continues throughout this sequence. When the syuzhet cuts to Sean’s holding the knife at his forehead or in his mouth, there is a loud, unnerving screeching sound. Sean’s hard breathing is foregrounded in the shots when the camera is panning left from Mom. During the shots with the bull, we hear the loud roar of a bovine. On each quick cut back to Mom’s head, we hear a high-pitched scream. These last two unsettling sounds go back and forth with their respective images so quickly they are almost imperceptible on the first viewing. As this sequence builds in intensity so does some chaotic singing, performed by a solo voice. All of these sounds combine to represent the disconcerting space within Sean’s mind.

A full shot-by-shot breakdown of this sequence is provided in Appendix G to demonstrate the extreme fragmentation of this scene, provided by many cuts (54) in a relatively short period of screen time (29 seconds). Once again we have fragmented space, although this time it’s possibly motivated by Sean’s fragmented state of mind. Even more, we have subjective expressionism in that the syuzhet attempts to represent spatially what Sean is experiencing internally, including a leaping Satan and a bull that Sean believes is his mother’s new form. This means, of course, that subjective expressionism includes characters as being part of the space, something that Bordwell is unable to conceive. For this we again need to go to Cooper’s model, where subjective expressionism, like the Hollywood love story, “does not happen in space, so much as to space” (Cooper, Love Rules, 12). The dysphoric style constructs a new type of space where an inner, psychological state of a character is spatialized for the spectator. This fragmented, metaphoric space reveals a type of nihilism in which family relationships inherently fall apart—very different from the unified space that works to create families in Mallrats.

When Stevo feels guilt for ignoring a homeless, beggarising Sean, he turns to his nihilistic, “dropping-out” response: “So what did I do? I dropped acid with Sandy in Highland Park to further ignore the truth.” In this scene, subjective expressionism utilizes the dissolve as its primary figure. This is not the traditional use of the dissolve, however; it’s a dysphoric rewriting of Hollywood codes. As Bordwell explains, Classical Hollywood
Cinema traditionally used the dissolve as a transition from one shot or scene to another (see Bordwell, *Classical 374*). He groups it with a whole series of filmic transitions that he calls “punctuation marks” which “enable the narration to skip unimportant intervals by simple omission” (*Classical 44*). Under this definition, it falls under Bordwell’s category of temporality (see *Classical 42-49*). Bordwell furthers this by declaring that the dissolve “serves the purpose of smoothly advancing the story” making the dissolve “a superb way to soften spatial, graphic, and even temporal discontinuities” (47). Historically, Bordwell explains, Hollywood quickly codified the dissolve and “severely curtailed [its possibilities]” (47) for the purposes described above.

In this “dropping out” scene of *SLC Punk*, the dissolve is not used at the level of shot as Bordwell describes. It is instead appropriated for the purposes of subjective expressionism. A god’s-eye-view cranes down to Stevo who is leaning back on the lawn beside a kneeling Sandy. Sandy: “This shit is good. I got it from Trish. Trish got it from Mark.” The syuzhet dissolves closer to the two characters, still in a god’s-eye-view shot showing a leaning back Stevo and a kneeling Sandy. Stevo: “That’s a weird couple, Bob and Trish.” Sandy: “Do you think they’re in love?” Stevo: “Don’t know.” The syuzhet dissolves to a medium-close-up shot of Stevo on the left side of the frame with one part of Sandy’s arm visible on the right side of the frame. Most of Sandy, here, is in off-screen space. Stevo: “I’ll have to ask him that.” The syuzhet dissolves to a medium-close shot of Sandy on the right of the frame. Stevo: “It’s weird.” Sandy: “What’s that?” The syuzhet dissolves to an extreme-long shot of the two of them on the lawn. Stevo: “The park. So dead.” Sandy: “This town is dead.” The syuzhet dissolves to a medium close-up shot of Sandy on the right of the frame. Stevo: “It’s what?” Sandy: “It’s dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.” The syuzhet dissolves to a medium close-up shot of Stevo on the left of the frame. Stevo: “Maybe we’re dead.” The syuzhet cuts, not dissolves, to a medium close-up shot of Sandy. Sandy: “Wouldn’t that be nice? The syuzhet dissolves to a medium close-up shot of Stevo. Sandy: “That’s the canyon where the devil worshipers go. Want to check it out?” In this 30 seconds of screen time, there are 8 dissolves and 1 cut. In this scene, *SLC Punk*’s syuzhet changes the traditional temporal employment of the dissolve into a spatial one. These dissolves don’t signify either the transition to a new scene or the passage of time, as Bordwell describes. Instead, they create a new type of dysphoric space. The dissolves do
not necessarily provide us with an ideal view (in fact, the syuzhet often dissolves to a character at just the wrong time, so that we miss the one who is speaking.) This calls forth a sense of randomness. Dissolve after dissolve constructs a new form of subjective expressionism, where the spectator is cued to the state of mind of the acid-dropping Stevo and Sandy, who experience a more fluid sense of space and time. In this state there are no absolute answers, nor uplift from a shopping rush; there is only an empty nihilism where the only significant thing one can do is to opt out and do nothing at all.

As *SLC Punk* draws to a close, we see an example of another form of dysphoric space, unclear space, specifically in the form of an unfocused shot. During a critical narrative moment when Stevo discovers Bob’s dead body (after an accidental ingestion of Percodan and alcohol), Stevo’s face puzzlingly goes out of focus as he cries: “Now what am I going to do for a friend? You’re my only friend!” During this emotional moment when classical film would normally clarify space, dysphoric film muddies it. The space keeps the spectator from clearly seeing Stevo’s reaction.

This is where *SLC Punk*’s narrative has been leading us, to an end where we discover: nothing. Stevo’s one absolute that he put faith in—friendship—has turned out to be something that can instantly disappear, leaving him with nothing. Unlike the classical system where “good” characters are generally rewarded and “bad” characters are usually punished, here we have the sympathetic characters of Stevo and Bob who are victims of a nihilistic world of randomness. After a film filled with opting out, there’s nothing left with which to opt in.

So where does this put *Mallrats* in relation to *SLC Punk*? What is the ethos of the space of the mall which has been present in both films? In *Mallrats* the space of the mall is presented as not only unified, but unifying. It brings together the two couples who have been separated not only emotionally but spatially. Its unified diegesis is not just a given, but the goal. Contrastingly, in *SLC Punk*, the space in the mall is fragmented and disunified. It is constructed as being subjective. Its space promises to contrast the existence of posers with real punks, but in reality, there is an uneven diegesis established whereby Stevo interacts with the spectator while the posers do not. The syuzhet of *SLC Punk* reveals these posers who appear to opt out of the capitalistic system by pretending to be punks, but in actuality are just part of the system itself. This is like *Mallrats*, a poser independent film. It
appears to be presenting an ironic look at capitalism, when, in fact, it ends up reaffirming that very system through narrative, time, and space. It confirms the unity that capitalism, in the form of mall shopping, can bring to individuals’ lives and to couples in love. It twice brings together the socially reproducible couples of the white male and the white female in a way that makes it appear self-evident that such will strengthen the nation and the capitalistic system (Cooper, Love Rules 12-13). SLC Punk rejects this. In both narrative and space, it repudiates the notion that capitalism creates unity. Its narrator, Stevo, seeks ways to truly opt out. Stevo rejects capitalism, refusing to use the mall for shopping. He rejects the extravagant home of his wealthy parents, preferring instead to live in a slum-like apartment. He rejects his parents’ advice to set goals for himself, instead deciding to hang out and with friends. He rejects his education, actively choosing to do nothing as a way to strike back against the system. He rejects codes of preppy grooming, donning instead the garb of a punk with colored hair or a mohawk. He rejects authority by continuously breaking the law. He parties and does drugs as a neo-’60s way of opting out of his surroundings. After all, if there are no absolutes, then nothing matters but the now. Most of all, Stevo is not shown at the end of the film in the same unified space with a beautiful white woman, in which Hollywood would be wont to place him. Stevo’s desires and dreams are not satisfied. He is alone, literally, in a frame that shows an empty street. Contrasting both of these films has revealed not only the distinct systems from which they arise, but also the impossibility of separating form and content. The space, in both of these films, is the content.

SLC Punk is representative of the spatiality of other films in the dysphoric style which are also fragmented, unclear, metaphorical, and subjective. Another dysphoric film, Bully (Larry Clark, 2001), for instance, not only exhibits those characteristics, but also delights in what I call “figure/ground dissonance” (where the less important obscures the more important within the frame). The film recreates the historical story of a teenager named Bobby who, in the film, thinks nothing of punching his friend Marty or raping a girl named Ali. Marty and Ali join other teenagers in the neighborhood (such as Lisa, Donny, and Heather) in seeking revenge by murdering Bobby. To portray this story, Bully often offers space that purposefully obscures the most important elements of the frame, even though there is no narrative motivation for it. Take, for instance, the scene when Lisa is having breakfast with her mother. When the camera shows Lisa, there are some out-of-
focus plants obscuring the left side of the frame. When the camera shows her mother, the out-of-focus plants obscure the right side of the frame. There is no narrative purpose that is served by the syuzhet’s constructing this sort of space. It feels random and odd.

This is similar to the figure-ground dissonance in the scene when Lisa calls her friend Ali and confirms that she’s going to have Marty’s baby. The camera frames Lisa from behind a cluttered shelf. Most of the screen is thus black, blocked out by the out-of-focus, silhouetted objects. It’s a handheld shot that keeps moving voyeuristically back and forth behind the objects. At one point, the obstruction of the frame is so effective that all we can see is half of Lisa’s face in the top right-hand corner of the frame. Again, the camera isn’t representing anyone’s point of view. It merely constructs unclear space for the sake of unclarity.

Figure/ground dissonance can problematize space even during crucial plot moments that would otherwise seem to require clear space to witness a character’s emotions. During a scene on the beach, Lisa asks Marty, “Why do you let Bobby treat you the way he does? . . . Hit you and stuff and make fun of you? He disses you right to your face in front of everyone.” Lisa continues: “I love you . . . and I don’t want to see you suffer. I don’t want to see Bobby picking on you ever again.” This causes Marty to break down and weep: “It’s been like this, since we were little fuckin’ kids, Lisa. He’s always been like this. He always just beats the fuck out of me whenever he wants.” The syuzhet presents these two lead characters behind a thicket of sea grass. The handheld camera moves back and forth instead of cutting; we can’t tell if the camera is trying to secure the perfect view and is unable to, or if it is trying to obscure space. In any event, there is no clear space, just as there is no clear understanding of what these kids are capable of committing. The sea grass is so thick between the camera and Marty that he is completely concealed from us at one of his greatest emotional points in the film. Lisa says, “So there’s nothing we can do to stop him, ever.” Marty: “Kill him, that’s about it.” Lisa responds, “That’s what I was thinking.” This is the moment the film hinges upon—when these two kids decide to kill the narcissistic Bobby. Yet space is constructed so that the ground (the sea grass) obscures the figure (the faces of these characters which reveal their emotions.) This is a very different construction of space than classical space, which Bordwell explicates as having “anthropocentric commitment”
(Classical 53), meaning, in particular, the clear revelation of the outward state of the characters.

Just as dysphoric films reject steady, balanced narratives, they also reject steady, balanced space. The space that is constructed is often shaky and unstable, rather than calm and clear space. It often derives from a shaky, hand-held camera. Such is another way for the syuzhet to muddy the fabula waters and challenge the fabula-constructing spectator. *Bully* often constructs this type of space. For example, in one scene, Bobby talks a reluctant Marty into dancing on stage as a go-go boy. The unsteady space that is constructed makes it difficult to discern exactly what is happening. By the end of the scene, the hand-held camera is moving back and forth so rapidly between the bodies of the go-go dancers that all the images are blurred to the point of obfuscation. *Variety* reviewer Dennis Harvey complains that this scene is “so clumsily handled it's hard to muster much outrage, let alone engagement” (21). Stuck in a classical, production-based worldview, Harvey is unable to see that this is the very point of the dysphoric style's construction of unstable space: to disengage the spectator from the images so that he or she is forced to confront the instability of the nihilistic system from whence it arises.

Unsteady space not only blocks character comprehension, it can do so in ways which are random and unsettling. When the teenagers of *Bully* ask a character known simply as “Hitman” to kill Bobby, the syuzhet gives us a shaky, handheld-camera-produced image that circles around inside the ring of kids. The camera swirls around a total of eight complete revolutions, cutting only once, but then quickly resuming its circular motion. During the 228 spoken words of this sequence, the swirling camera only shows us the character who is speaking for 51 of those words; during the other 177, however, it is swirling around on other people, randomly missing not only the most important person at the moment—the speaker—but also any crucial reaction shots of other characters that could be provided by a more classical shot/reverse shot system. We are left with a hand-held, shaky image that obscures faces because of its quick, circling movement and seems to be divorced from the narrative importance of the moment. A full breakdown of this segment is catalogued in Appendix H. For now, let's look at one brief example of how this unsteady space blocks character comprehension. As Hitman says, “I think you need to chill out and plan this out a little better,” the swirling camera misses him completely. Instead, the camera moves past
Derek who looks off into space, away from the two speakers, Lisa and Hitman. The camera then moves past Heather, who chews her gum while glancing nonchalantly down at the ground. At this point, Lisa says: “No, I want it done now, God damn it. I want the son of a bitch dead. I want his sorry ass dead tonight. Do you understand me?” These would seem to be crucial narrative lines of dialogue. Yet the swirling camera misses her completely. Instead, it continues moving past Donny, who bobs his head while smoking, and then stomps out some ash with his foot. It then moves past Ali, who, void of expression, remains aloof from the conversation. These are not crucial reaction shots. This is another instance where the ground is brought forward to obscure the figure. The quick-moving, unsteady camera movement also makes the space unclear, blocking us from crucial narrative information. This is very different than the classical construction of space which seeks, as its primary concern, to clearly reveal characters’ faces (Classical 53). Variety reviewer Dennis Harvey stumbles when he describes this scene as “just inept” because “[e]ditor Andrew Hafitz is unable to impose a viable rhythm on the proceedings” (21). Such is the point of this seeming-random approach to spatial construction in the dysphoric style: to reject classical rhythms as a means of destabilizing the space and revealing the impossibility of a steady, unified diegesis in a nihilistic milieu.

Destabilization can be produced by other means as well. Several examples of destabilizing spatial maneuvers are seen in Swoon (Tom Kalin, 1993), a black-and-white film that tells the historic story of 18-year-olds Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb who murder 14-year-old Bobby Franks “purely for the intellectual stimulation afforded by the crime” (Okewole 87). Swoon portrays this story in a much grittier manner than that depicted in other cinematic interpretations, for instance, Alfred Hitchcock’s Rope (1948) and Richard Fleischer’s Compulsion (1959). In Swoon, the homosexuality of the two boys is not shied away from, nor is the graphic nature of the murder which happens just because they can. This crime may have been inspired by Nietzschean, nihilistic philosophy. In any event, the harsher narrative assumes a different type of space to convey it. Seun Okewole, a writer for Sight and Sound, in trying to describe the space of Swoon, is only able to say, “Visually Kalin  

14 Okewole 18. Consider, for instance, Nietzsche’s notion of the “Superman” who lives above the false moral codes constructed by the superstitious vestiges of religion and who uses to “will to power” to fulfill himself (Magee 172-77).
opts for a contemporary veneer” (Okewole 88). Were he aware of the dysphoric style, he would have more tools for understanding how both the visuals of the space and the nihilism of the story are inseparably connected.

In classical film, an establishing shot is usually provided to orient the spectator to the space of the new scene (Bordwell, *Classical* 63, 196-98; *Narration* 113). The dysphoric style, however, avoids orienting establishing shots. Such is the case with *Swoon’s* opening. Without an establishing shot, the syuzhet begins by revealing what appear to be distant clouds. Inexplicably, a woman in 1920s-style garb seems to float (not walk) from the left side of the frame to the right. A man dressed in a black gown with a long string of pearls floats across the screen in the opposite direction. Another man dressed in 1920s-style female clothing moves in the same odd manner from left to right across the frame. Then we cut to a close-up of a man who says the first line: “My blood rose in my heart. I threw myself at her feet and began to cry.” The syuzhet dissolves to a close-up of an unknown woman in profile. The scene continues like this for some time, showing pieces of things, but not their entirety. The identity of these characters, the activities they are performing, and the limits of their space are not clearly delineated. The syuzhet withholds from the spectator the ability to construct coherent scenographic space. A full two unsettling minutes later, we see two male figures walking away from a backdrop with painted clouds and a landscape on it. There appears to be a dolly track and a boom microphone in front of the painted backdrop. But even this isn’t enough information to qualify as a delayed establishing shot. The spatial information in this opening scene, although repeated later in the film, is never explained by the narrative, creating a never-filled gap.

Unestablished space not only creates confusion at the beginning, but also throughout the film as we move from scene to scene. After the murder of Bobby Franks, the syuzhet suddenly jumps to an image of a crowd of people. A voice-over says, “Police go undercover in an attempt to apprehend the degenerate kidnapper of Bobby Franks.” The syuzhet furnishes the image of an unknown woman. The voice-over continues: “The mayor has declared a city-wide state of emergency.” This appears to be a newsreel, which, like that in *Citizen Kane*, serves to provide important narrative details. Unlike *Citizen Kane*, however, this newsreel isn’t introduced by a “News on the March” title and vocal announcement to cue the spectator to what is happening. Here the spectator is required to quickly discern its
mock-newsreel format without any syuzhet assistance. Immediately the syuzhet cuts to a close-up of an older man against a white background, offering no cues as to the identity of this person or his location. He says, “I would ask everyone in Chicago to look around him. And to note whether neighbors, friends, acquaintances, showed signs of muddy clothes, shoes, and so forth. Or muddy and dirty automobiles. And who was away from their usual haunt and calling on Wednesday afternoon and night.” The syuzhet then leaps directly into a series of close-ups and medium close-ups of various people discussing the case. Again, by withholding clear establishing space and location cues, the syuzhet impedes us from ascertaining the identity of these people, their setting, and the limits of their space.

[An unknown, older man in front of a plain, white background:] “I think whoever did it should be tarred, feathered, and hung.”

[Swish pan to the right. Close up on a man in his 30s:] “I agree completely. Whoever did this must be some kind of deranged pervert to kill a little boy like that.”

[Swish pan to the right so quickly we barely see a man in his 20s:] “Absolutely.”

[Swish pan to the right. Woman with pearls:] “I still can’t believe it. What a terrible loss.”

[Swish pan to the right so quickly we barely see the man in his 20s again, whom we may now recognize as Richard:] “It is.”

[Swish pan to the right. Again we see Richard, even though we just swish panned off him:] “May I be excused?”

[Swish pan to the right. Older man, probably Richard’s father:] “What for this time?”

[Swish pan to the right. Richard:] “I just remembered, I have to stop by Nathan’s house.”

This has been a very abstract representation of space with absolutely no establishing shots and very few visual cues to help the spectator devise a spatial map in his or her head. The entire sequence has been quite confusing. The syuzhet jumps from the mock newsreel to (one assumes) a plain-clothes police commissioner warning the residents of Chicago to (one
assumes) the dining room where Richard Loeb’s family discusses the crime while eating dinner. Without an establishing shot, leading from the space of one scene to another, confusion and spatial ambiguity reign. The syuzhet’s lack of establishing shots troubles fabula waters, reminding us of the nihilism that undergirds the film.

Dysphoric space also constructs unclear space through the use of over- or under-lighting, or over- or under-exposure, often for no discernible narrative purpose. Grainy film stocks may also be used. We saw all three of these elements used extensively in *Pi*. A similar function occurs in *Swoon*. Take, for instance, the scene when Nathan is playfully typing a ransom letter for fun, long before the two boys kill anyone. Richard: “Who are you addressing it to?” Nathan: “Dear Sir.” The images here feature extreme chiaroscuro lighting. Although the two figures move their heads in and out of the light, at one point Richard’s face is almost completely wiped out by the bright, reflected light while Nathan’s face is almost in silhouette. Instead of traditional 3-point lighting, these faces are not lit for the purpose of narrative comprehension, Bordwell’s main assumption about space in the narrative style (*Classical* 50, 52; *Narrative* 128). Adding to the confusion is an overexposure which dramatizes an already extreme use of lighting. Grainy film stock heightens the tumultuous cinematography. All of these methods create a dysphoric space that in turn obscures the fabula.

Dysphoric space also employs what I term “claustrophobic framing” (where images are filmed too closely, creating an uncomfortable effect.) At one point, the syuzhet cuts from a shot of Nathan driving a rental car down the street to a close-up of a bunch of string-like objects filling the frame. These may be faintly discerned to be fringes on a lamp shade. The camera pans to extreme close-ups on liquor bottles and wine glasses, which are too close for a clear focus. The camera continues moving to show us part of the body of a transvestite playing cards. Cut to another transvestite in a big white wig who says, “So, Jenny, how do you play poker?” Jenny, a transvestite in a large black wig, responds, “Well, there’s a variety of poker games.” Jenny is shot with a fairly extreme high-angle shot for no discernible purpose. All of these techniques (an absence of an establishing shot, extreme

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15See Chapter 1 for an extended treatment of how lighting, exposure, and film stocks contribute to the ambiguous, unsettled narrative causality of *Pi*. 
angles, and claustrophobic framing) combine to create very difficult-to-construct scenographic space. One could assume that Bordwell might classify this as shot space (Narration 113-15) that works to block fabula comprehension. Sonic space (Narration 118-19), (what we assume to be the diegetic sound of someone playing the piano), is our only clue that we have entered some sort of nightclub, even though the images themselves are fairly ambiguous—there are no background sets to suggest this, just blank space.

Adding to the confusion comes a troubling of the editing space (Narration 117-18). In this very abstract space that may or may not represent a nightclub, Nathan and Richard have a tense exchange.

Richard

“Did you get the car?”

Nathan

“Yes.” [Throws the keys at Richard.]

Richard

“Don’t start. I waited around for hours for you when you went to get the rope and the chisel.”

Claustrophobic shots of various transvestites continue, along with a shot of Nathan sitting with his back to the group, visibly annoyed. But then something quite unusual occurs spatially. The syuzhet cuts to an extreme close-up on a wire in front of a man’s well-dressed chest. It pans down this wire while we hear Nathan’s voice: “I am small. My heart is pure.” We then hear what we assume to be a recorded voice, uttering that same phrase in German, traveling up those wires to Nathan’s ears. Nathan repeats the phrase in German. The camera continues to pan with claustrophobic framing down to an out-of-focus hand. Then a different recorded voice says the same phrase in French, which Nathan repeats. Meanwhile, the syuzhet withholds not only the image of Nathan’s face, but also the space that Nathan is occupying. The camera continues panning via claustrophobic framing over a book where Nathan is writing. One might assume that he is doing his homework for school. But is he in a new space (say, at home?) or is he still in the nightclub? This remains ambiguous. Without a clear establishing shot, or at least a break from the claustrophobic framing to more of a long shot, it is impossible to tell. Both editing and shot space have
been obscured. And then, suddenly, another transition happens, again with claustrophobic framing and no establishing shot. The syuzhet cuts to a close-up of sleeping Richard’s head. But where is he? Then we see a close-up of an alarm clock which may help us to think we have spatially and temporally moved from the nightclub to Richard’s room at home. The camera pans from knees covered in a blanket to the two heads of Richard and Nathan on pillows. This medium close-up allows the spectator to construct the idea that the two of them are in bed together. But how did they get there? What amount of time has elapsed since the nightclub? Whose bed are they in? What does the rest of the space in the room look like? None of these questions will be answered by the syuzhet. This is significant because the narration of Swoon demonstrates a type of spatial stream-of-consciousness where, instead of jumping back and forth between thoughts or between different characters’ thoughts as in a modernist novel, here the syuzhet seems to jumping back and forth between different times and spaces without clear delineation—it’s the syuzhet that appears to be making the decisions here. Notice, too, how the syuzhet troubles the scenographic space in all three of Bordwell’s categories: shot space, editing space, and sonic space.

Sonic space can itself be dysphoric. Near the end of the movie, an imprisoned Nathan is lying in his cell bunk. We see the image of a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The syuzhet then inexplicably offers the sound of a whip being cracked. We see Nathan lying in his bed. Then we see a mysterious naked torso lying face down. Again we hear the sound of a whip being cracked, as well as the flutter of bird wings. A figure walks down the cell block to Nathan’s cell and calls out: “Leopold, hey Leopold! Hear about your old man? Well, he kicked the bucket.” In response, the syuzhet again offers us a shot of the light bulb hanging from the ceiling along with the sound of a bird flapping its wings. The ambiguity of images in this scene is extraordinary enough. Combined with sounds that are difficult to interpret (such as the cracking whip and the fluttering bird), the sonic space becomes troubled as well. The referents to these sounds are never disclosed. The syuzhet has constructed a gap that can never be fully and authoritatively filled.

SLC Punk, Bully, and Swoon illustrate several of the confusing and unsettling spatial possibilities offered by the dysphoric style. These include but are not limited to: fragmentation, metaphoric space, subjective expressionism, unclear space, unestablished
space, figure/ground dissonance, unsteady space, claustrophobic space, and dysphoric sonic space.

What *SLC Punk* does (that is, advocate a rejection of the capitalistic social system by showing its failings), *Mallrats* doesn’t do (presenting instead a morality-tale-inducing type of mall where capitalism fulfills its promises of changed lives). These two films have differed not only in their respective themes, but also their respective styles, which, as we have seen, cannot be separated. *SLC Punk*’s dysphoric spatial structure keeps its spatial world in a fragmented, disunified state. Here the mall, and by extension, capitalism, are unable to bring characters together spatially and emotionally. *Mallrats*’ space, in contrast, while appearing to be an ironic critique of the mall, merely reaffirms the transforming power of capitalism in both theme and style. Here the mall does indeed have the power to simultaneously unify diverse spaces and diverse couples. An understanding of the dysphoric style brings a nuanced reading to these two films that are often wrongfully grouped together under the catch-all umbrella of contemporary American independent cinema.
CHAPTER 4

OUT OF THE PAST: THE DYSPHORIC STYLE COMES OF AGE

“Everything is noir—try finding something blanc! . . .
Every film is a film noir now” (Andrew Sarris).¹

Having described the dysphoric style in terms of narration, temporality, and space, I now examine where it has come from and raise questions about where it is going. Certainly, paradigms of style do not arise out of thin air. They may foreground elements that were present in other cinemas. With paradigms of style, a full range of norms is possible (Bordwell, *Classical 4-6; Narration* 150-52).

In this chapter, I trace the stylistic genealogy of the dysphoric style. Although such a genealogy of style reveals diverse ancestors, two precursors stand out as direct influences—film noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s (particularly the French New Wave and the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, and Ingmar Bergman).

I argue, along with others, that both film noir and European art cinema of the 1960s arise from a philosophical foundation of existentialism. Existentialism is an outlook whereby a disoriented individual faces a world that is devoid of meaning except what the individual creates for him or herself.² Note, though, that individual meaning still exists. One can still make individual choices and thus control one’s destiny. Thus it is both similar to and distinct from nihilism. Existentialism is similar to nihilism in its despair, alienation, and


loss of absolutes. It differs from nihilism in its emphasis on freedom, individual choice, and the ability to control one’s destiny. This positive aspect of existentialism can be seen in Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the alternative to suicide in the discovery of life’s meaninglessness comes in the form of a stubborn perseverance, such as continually pushing a rock up a hill in order to create personal meaning (Porfirio 81). In nihilism, however, there is no such positive aspect.

Briefly surveying the style of these cinemas will reveal their existentialist elements. I will then be able to show how this style developed and changed, eventually morphing into the dysphoric style. Many of the stylistic elements of these earlier existentialist cinemas are reassembled in ways that not only express the nihilism of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries, but also produce it. By looking at these two cinemas, I can provide a better account of the stylistic history of independent cinema than can be had by looking to means of production or an anti-Hollywood aesthetic. It also allows me to raise social, political, and economic questions that are not possible with these common approaches.

**Film Noir**

Clearly, a film like *Memento* reveals a stylistic debt to film noir. But how is *Memento* different from film noir? How does its style reveal a system that is distinct from film noir? Tracing the history of the dysphoric style from film noir up through its present manifestation will allow me to answer these questions, while sidestepping several weary critical debates.

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3 As Porfirio describes it, existentialism’s “positive aspect is captured in such key phrases as ‘freedom,’ ‘authenticity,’ ‘responsibility,’ and ‘the leap into faith (or the absurd).’ Its negative side, the side to which its literary exponents are most closely drawn, emphasizes life’s meaninglessness and man’s alienation; its catch-words include ‘nothingness,’ ‘sickness,’ ‘loneliness,’ ‘dread,’ ‘nausea’” (Porfirio 81).

4 The means of production argument is seen in Merritt xii. The anti-Hollywood aesthetic argument is found, among other places, in Levy 3.

5 One such debate ensues over what dates should delineate film noir. In his famous 1972 essay, Schrader proposed the dates of 1941-1958 in order to make *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) the bookends for the category (Schrader 214; see also Naremore 280). Porfirio expands this boundary slightly, making it 1940 to roughly 1960.
Film noir, rather than being a genre, is a group style. It has the same elements that make up any group style: a similarity of norms governing narrative, time, and space (Bordwell, *Classical* 3-5). It does not preclude exceptions; it simply means that certain stylistic choices have preeminence. Film noir cannot be a genre because it permeates many different existing genres. It is, however, a group style, remaining evident regardless of genre or mode of production (Bordwell, *Classical*).

Film noir has been tied to an anxiety arising from the historical circumstances leading up to, including, and following World War II. There is thus a certain kind of pessimism with film noir where all wrongs are not necessarily made right, as with the events (Porfirio 78). Several critics have since challenged these various dates, with some even questioning the relevancy of ascribing dates to film noir (Vernet 2-4).

Another weary critical debate is that which seeks to define what film noir is. Film noir has been variously labeled as a genre (Erickson 308), a subgenre (Dickos 2), a transgeneric form (Naremore 280), a series (Borde and Chaumeton 17), a mode (Belton, *American Cinema* 187-88), a movement (Dickos 2), a form of male melodrama (Cowie, “Film Noir” 129), a motif (Durgnat 39), a visual style (Place and Peterson 65), a period of film history (Grist, *Out* 203), an attitude (Dickos 2), a tonality (Dickos 2), a mood (Dickos 2), a set of “patterns of non-conformity” (Bordwell, *Classical* 75), a sensibility (Hirsch 71), a phenomenon (Krutnik 10), a type of romantic or expressive realism (Cook 451), an anamorphic distortion affecting different genres (Žižek 199), a sheen (a slick packaging of fashions in hair, lighting, decor, and repartee) (Reid and Walker 57), and a discourse (Naremore 11).

For example, Porfirio has shown how there are film noir westerns, gangster films, suspense thrillers, detective films, and comedies; there are also other westerns, gangster films, suspense thrillers, detective films, and comedies from this period that are clearly not film noir (Porfirio 77-8). Therefore, the term “genre” becomes an inadequate description.

Sobchack calls film noir “a pessimistic cinematic response to volatile social and economic conditions of the decade immediately following World War II” (Sobchack 130). Buchsbaum agrees, seeing film noir as being grounded in the mid-twentieth century context of the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, and McCarthyism (Buchsbaum 89). Hirsch backs them up, explaining that film noir “traces a series of metaphors for a decade of anxiety, a contemporary apocalypse bounded on the one hand by Nazi brutalism and on the other by the awful knowledge of nuclear power” (Hirsch 21). Porfirio expands these boundaries a bit, describing film noir as a response to a loss of optimism due to “the Depression; the rise of totalitarianism; the fear of Communism; the loss of insular security; and finally, the tarnishing of the ideal of individual initiative with the growth of the technocratic state” (Porfirio 80).
of its own time (such as the Depression, the Holocaust, and the fear of nuclear destruction during the Cold War). There is also a sense of danger that remains hidden, yet is ready to strike at any time.

Such historical conditions produced the proper atmosphere for existentialism to flourish. Existentialism, in turn, becomes the defining philosophy of film noir. As Fred Pfeil explains, “[T]hematically, [films noirs] consist above all in the absurd existential choice of moral behaviour according to one’s own individual ethical code, in a hopeless dark universe in which more consensual authorities are ineffectual, irrelevant, or corrupt” (Pfeil 229). Existential angst manifests itself in film noir directly, creating “a new mood of cynicism, pessimism and darkness” (Schrader 213). Film noir is full of existential meaninglessness and purposelessness (Porfirio 89). It contains a hopelessness that is almost palpable. It is also rife with existential alienation. As Porfirio explains: “The concept of alienation is crucial to most existentialists from Kierkegaard to Sartre. For them, man stands alone, alienated from any social or intellectual order, and is therefore totally self-dependent” (Porfirio 85).

Such existential characteristics of pessimism, hopelessness, and alienation manifest themselves in particular stylistic elements of traditional film noir. In narrative, existential alienation finds expression in the form of anti-hero protagonists (Copjek xi; Cook 450). Such protagonists are alienated from the world, both reflecting and producing the alienation inherent in existentialism. Porfirio links the film noir anti-hero to existentialism by explaining that his “world is devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero” (Porfirio 83). He is thus full of “loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, [and] insecurity” (Schrader, Schrader on Schrader, qtd. in Evans 165; see also Hirsch 19). He is better with his body than with his mind. He is also compromised morally (Copjek xi).


10As Porfirio explains, “To a large degree, every noir hero is an alienated man” (86).

11As Oliver and Tango remind us, “Within film noir, the use of reason does not lead to truth. Rather, the truth can only be found through the body and not the mind. Even then, what film noir shows us is that truth is always compromised and ambiguous” (Oliver
Flashbacks and subjective camera are often used to represent the disturbed mental state of the maladjusted protagonist (Maltby 47; Dickos 7). Thus, we have a protagonist who is often without traditional morality, whose viewpoint is provided by the syuzhet in a very subjective manner. This is similar to the protagonist in contemporary American independent cinema. Think, for instance, of Stevo from *SLC Punk*. He rejects traditional morality, living the way that feels best to him. Large portions of *SLC Punk* cue to the spectator to his viewpoint with subjective cues. The same could be said of Lenny from *Memento*. Lenny chooses to kill John G. just to continue killing JohnGs. *Memento*’s syuzhet cues the spectator to be as confused about events in time as is Lenny. There are many other examples of anti-hero protagonists in the dysphoric style. The gangster-noir *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) is about a group of criminals (Mr. Orange, Mr. White, Mr. Blonde, Mr. Brown, Mr. Pink, and Mr. Blue) who think nothing of killing each other in order to succeed. In the drama *The Believer* (Henry Bean, 2000), Danny Balint is a neo-Nazi skinhead who commits violent hate-crimes against Jews, even though he himself is Jewish. In *Loverboy* (Kevin Bacon, 2005), Emily plays a mother who has such a severe attachment disorder to her six-year-old son, Paul, that she attempts to kill them both rather than see him leave her to go to school.

Existential pessimism and hopelessness manifest themselves in film noir protagonists who are slowly sliding toward doom. Remember, for instance, Walter Neff from *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and Christopher Cross from *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945). Both protagonists are inescapably on the road to destruction. Yet, as Porfirio reminds us, “even the most victimised among [the noir heroes], have some opportune moments to make choices which will affect their lives” (Porfirio 88). Thus, even though Neff and Cross

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12 For example, after dropping acid with Sandy in the park, Stevo takes her to the canyon where his hallucinations of images such as blood running down a riverbank or a snake being held in Stevo’s hand are constructed to cue the spectator into visualizing what Stevo is visualizing. Chapter 3 gives more examples of how subjective cues are used in *SLC Punk*.

13 Chapter 2 provides multiple examples of how this is accomplished.
As Porfirio explains: “The precipitous slide of existentialism toward nihilism is only halted by its heavy emphasis on man’s freedom. In exchange for this benefit, the individual must be willing to cast aside the weight of outmoded beliefs in a tough recognition of the meaninglessness of existence. He must choose, in other words, between ‘being and nothingness’ between the ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ life. The inauthentic life is the unquestioned one which derives its rationale from a facile acceptance of those values external to the self. To live authentically, one must reject these assurances and therein discover the ability to create one’s own values; in so doing each individual assumes responsibility for his life through the act of choosing between two alternatives. And since man is his own arbiter, he literally creates good and evil” (Porfirio 87).

The dysphoric style shares several of these qualities with film noir. It too constructs narratives where protagonists are alienated, trapped in a world devoid of meaning, and slowly sliding towards doom. For example, recall Max from Pi (1998) or Lenny from Memento (2001), both of whom are searching for absolute answers, but are unable to find any. But there are also differences between the existential system of film noir and the nihilistic system of contemporary American independent cinema. Whereas the pessimism in film noir derives from the choices made by the protagonists, in the dysphoric style it comes simply because they are ensnared in systems in which no absolutes exist. There’s no choice that either Max or Lenny can make that will stop their slow descent toward the abyss of nothingness. Similarly, there’s a hidden danger lurking below the surface of dysphoric films. In The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), for instance, there’s nothing that the young filmmakers can do to stop their slide toward certain destruction by an unseen danger.

Thus, the hopelessness of film noir is appropriated by the dysphoric style, yet is reassembled somewhat differently. Oliver and Tango believe that the anxiety in film noir

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15 Max is looking for a number that will contain the grand key to understanding the universe. He never finds it. Lenny is searching for the John G. who killed his wife. We can’t be certain if he’s already killed him long ago, has never killed him, or if he even exists in the first place.
arises from “various condensations and displacements of symptoms of concrete anxieties over race, sex, maternity, and national origin that threaten the very possibility of identity by undermining its boundaries” (Oliver and Tango xiv). If this is true, then this is a very different anxiety than, say, the protagonists in SLC Punk experience. They are not so concerned about issues of race, sex, etc. as they are about a loss of all absolutes. As Heroin Bob puts it, “It’s a crazy, fucked-up world, and we’re all just barely floating along waiting for somebody that can walk on water.” Such a deliverer, such a solution to life’s meaninglessness never appears. Stevo and Heroin Bob are forced into making an oath “to do absolutely nothing. We were going to waste our educated minds. We had no other way of fighting.” Such nihilism contrasts with the existentialism of film noir. Whereas in film noir the protagonists’ ability to make their own choices mitigates the meaninglessness of life, in contemporary American independent cinema the choices themselves are inherently meaningless.

Along with the anti-hero, existential anxiety in film noir is manifest in the figure of the femme fatale (Copjek xi). The femme fatale is the dangerous “spider woman” (Janey Place, qtd. in Grist, “Out’ 207). She is “alluring, venal, devious, and utterly treacherous” (Britton, “Betrayed” 213). She exudes a new fiery, available sexuality. We see this in Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity (1944). When insurance agent Walter Neff makes a house call, Phyllis Dietrichson appears above him (in a position of power) at the top of the staircase dressed only in a towel. In a redundant manner, Walter, Phyllis herself, the dialogue of the script, and the mise-en-scene (especially lighting, costuming, and camera angle) all acknowledge her teeming sexuality. Walter explains he would hate to think of her having a smashed fender “while you’re not . . . [pause, smile] fully covered.” Phyllis responds, “Perhaps I know what you mean, Mr. Neff. I was just taking a sunbath.” Walter jumps in: “No pigeons around, I hope.” A few moments later, Neff’s voice-over reveals his thoughts: “I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she looked at me. And I wanted to see her again. Close. Without that silly staircase between us.” Meanwhile, the syuzhet gives us a close-up of Phyllis’ feet as she descends the stairs, a remarkable visual example of fetishism (Mulvey 29). When she gets to the bottom floor, the camera looks up the length of her
body, this time providing evidence for scopophilia. Both of these notions are reinforced by Walter when he interrupts his insurance lecture to state, “That’s a honey of an anklet you’ve got there.” A few minutes later, he again reinforces the power of her sexuality by looking her up and down and saying, “I wish you’d tell me what’s engraved on that anklet.” Sharp dialogue with pointed sexual tension closes out the scene with a powerful reminder that this woman is not only sexually available, but she uses it to her advantage.

Why does this oversexualized figure of the femme fatale arise at this particular time—the era of traditional film noir? Paula Rabinowitz offers several explanations. She argues that changing work conditions placed women in housing arrangements with other women; hence, they were away from men and more readily sexually available. In the years leading up to noir, women were allowed employment that was more investigative in nature. Rabinowitz also links the femme fatale to more open discussions about sexuality, brought about by events such as the publication of the Kinsey report in 1948 (Rabinowitz 28).

Contemporary American independent cinema takes this figure of the femme fatale from film noir and transforms it. In Memento, the first time the syuzhet shows us Natalie, she is sitting in a diner, dressed in black and wearing sunglasses. Iconically, she could be a femme fatale. Yet, she’s lacking the oversexualization of the femme fatale of traditional film

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16See Mulvey 28. As Rabinowitz writes: “The iconic pan from the floor up to the star’s face tells us everything we need to know about her character” (172-73). This character is valued for her sexuality.

17See Appendix I for a transcript of this knowing, sexually charged dialogue.

18Rabinowitz 27-28. Rabinowitz explains that women in this position are “poised in a strange contradiction. Alone and mobile, they are free from family scrutiny and control; yet their availability is limited by the absence of men who have deserted this and other urban spaces for war. . . . All dressed up and nowhere to go, these women wait—for men. No wonder the films made immediately upon the war’s conclusion feature a new brutal kind of female sexual aggression” (30).

19As Rabinowitz writes: “[D]uring the 1930s, a large number of women began to investigate, looking for truths. They worked for the state and its agencies as the profession of social work became central to ameliorating the effects of the Depression. Middle-class women’s access to poor women’s homes occurred through a supervisory effort to protect children’s welfare during a decade of unprecedented attention to poverty’s effect on children” (143).
noir. The camera does not pan up her body. The dialogue between Natalie and Lenny is not full of sexual innuendo. Natalie thinks and acts—she helps Lenny trace a license plate to John G.—but she’s not coded as being dangerous for doing so. Later in the film, Natalie does trick Lenny, sending him to kill Dodd. However, such a ploy is also enacted by not only by Teddy (who tricks Lenny into killing various people for him) but also by Lenny himself (who knowingly sets himself up to kill Teddy.) Thus, in the dysphoric style, oversexualization of the femme fatale is diffused and her betraying nature is projected onto all characters, not just the female. Other examples of betraying men and women in contemporary American independent cinema include the black comedy *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997) where yuppies Chad and Howard trick their deaf female co-worker, Christine, into thinking that they like her before breaking her heart in a cruel ruse of gender revenge. In the slow-moving drama *Forty Shades of Blue* (Ira Sachs, 2005), Russian bride Laura deals with her husband Alan’s infidelity by sleeping first with his son, then with a random passerby in the woods. In the bitter Hollywood satire *The Dying Gaul* (Craig Lucas, 2005), Robert betrays his dead lover by selling out a personal screenplay about their life together; studio executive Jeffrey betrays his wife, Elaine, by sleeping with Robert; and Elaine betrays Robert by pretending to be his dead lover who communicates with him via email.

Existential pessimism manifests itself in the particular setting of film noir. These films usually take place in a dangerous urban environment. They have a high number of scenes set at night (Walker 26). Most of all, their milieu is decidedly anti-domestic. Noir protagonists are devoid of nurturing homes. Homes are replaced by cheap motels,

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20 See, for example, Dickos 6. The notion of the city as a dangerous place has seen as a “response to the waves of immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which seemed to make the city no longer the locus of American ‘civilisation’ (a native version of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism) but rather of antithetical ‘otherness’” (Thomas 61).

21 Oliver and Tango argue that “the free-floating existential anxiety of film noir is an anxiety over ambiguous spaces. Its heroes are homeless, directionless, wandering travelers who unsuccessfully try to escape their past and find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place with nowhere to turn and nowhere to go” (Oliver and Tango 217). Sobchack adds to this by writing: “[W]artime and postwar American culture’s loss of home and the spatial and psychological integration it imaginatively and mythically provided is
uncomfortable boardingrooms, shady diners, and seedy cocktail lounges and nightclubs. 22 These are “all places for transients, all fragmented, rented social spaces rather than coherently generated places of social communion, all substitutes for the intimate and integral domestic space of home” (Sobchack 146). There are no marriages here, only the dissolution of families “through infidelity, separation, divorce, or murder” (Sobchack 162; see also Sobchack 156-58). There is no nurturing of children or caring for the home, only unbridled libido (Sobchack 162). In this space, leisure time is not seen as idyllic and regenerational, but as “idle restlessness, as a lack of occupation, as a disturbing, ambiguous, and public display of unemployment.” In noir, the focus is on “passion, libido, hate, vengeance, and boredom rather than on love and sublimation of sexuality in the family” (Sobchack 162). Such a milieu is similar to what is constructed in contemporary American independent cinema.

Those films also tend to reject comfortable, nurturing domestic settings for a harsh, transient life on the streets. Remember, for instance, the episodic Slacker (Richard Linklater, 1991), which takes place almost entirely on the streets and small businesses around the University of Texas in Austin. In the gay buddy/road picture The Living End (Gregg Araki, 1992), Luke and John journey from Los Angeles to San Francisco which suddenly places them in a crime spree. In Kids (Larry Clark, 1995), the harsh streets of New York become the home to a group of hedonistic teenagers. In Johns (Scott Silver, 1996) the street hustlers Donner and

22This is a significant change from the Hollywood films of the 1930s, in which “cocktail lounges and nightclubs and hotels are generally figured as celebrated and glamorous spaces—the places where sophisticated and affluent people display their wit, strut their stuff upon a polished dance floor that reflects the grace of Fred and Ginger, amuse themselves with all the fluff and romance of a feather boa, and gamble with money and hearts they can afford to lose” (Sobchack 153). In noir, “the rooms of hotels and motels and boardinghouses figure as spaces of social dislocation, isolation, and existential alienation” (Sobchack 155). Such places “substitute for and fragment into ‘broken’ status the nurturant functions of . . . the home. They transport spatially contiguous and intimate familial activity (eating, drinking, sleeping, and recreating) from private and personalized to public and anonymous domain. They substitute impersonal, incoherent, discontinuous, and rented space for personal, intelligible, unified, and generated space. They spatially rend and break up the home—and, correlatively, family contiguity and generational continuity” (Sobchack 156-58).
John struggle on the streets of Los Angeles. In films that are set in a home, we see that the homelife is miserable, often accompanied by emotional or physical abuse. The family is not seen as nurturing but as indifferent and uncaring, unfaithful, destructive, or morally corrupt. For example, in three-fold (documentary/horror/surrealistic autobiography) *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), one of the stories tells of seven-year-old Frankie Beacon who is so physically and emotionally abused by his father that he shoots him. *Spanking the Monkey* (David O. Russell, 1994) tells of Ray, a young, sexually frustrated college student who has an incestuous relationship with his deceitful mother. *Star Maps* (Miguel Arteta, 1997) depicts a father, Pepe, who employs his teenage son Carlos on the streets of Los Angeles as a male prostitute. In *Happiness* (Tod Solondz, 1998), Helen finds herself enmeshed with an obscene phone caller while her sister Trish has her perfect perception of married life shattered when she discovers she is married to a predatory pedophile. In the murder-drama *Bully* (Larry Clark, 2001), all of the parents are either clueless or helpless as their suburban-nurtured teenagers do drugs, have sex, get raped, and commit murder. In the dark coming-of-age film *The Chumscrubber* (Arie Posen, 2005), none of the neighborhood parents seem to be concerned by or even notice the hanging-suicide of teenage Troy, or the kidnapping of pre-pubescent Charlie.

Part of film noir’s unsettling nature comes from its use of suppressive narrative, in which important plot points are withheld from the audience (Pye 100, 109). There are also moments of convoluted plot and unclear motivation (Copjek xi). However, film noir eventually fills in all of its gaps.²³ Think, for example, of *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941). Sam Spade is run through a remarkably complex series of twists and turns involving a statue of a bird, but eventually everything comes together at the end. This is quite different from the nihilism inherent in contemporary American independent cinema where crucial

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²³See Pye 102. I can think of only one outstanding exception. The syuzhet does seem to withhold the knowledge of who killed Sternwoods’ chauffeur in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946). The story is told that during production, director Howard Hawks and screenwriter William Faulkner wired Raymond Chandler (who wrote the original story) to ask him who killed Sternwoods’ chauffeur and Chandler responded that he didn’t know (Hirsch 75; see also Jameson, “Synoptic” 33). This story, however, may be apocryphal (Hirsch 75). In any event, *The Big Sleep* is “deliberately . . . knotted and sinuous . . . very hard to follow” (Hirsch 75).
plot information may be completely withheld from the audience so that gaps are never filled. I’ve explained how this was accomplished in both *Pi* and *Memento*. Another example would be David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Here the syuzhet spends time developing the characters of wanna-be-actress Betty and amnesiac Rita. We begin to piece together the puzzle as to why Rita has amnesia. In the final half hour of the film, however, the syuzhet explodes into a different type of story with different characters. There is almost nothing that can be established except for the impossibility of a fixed reality or fixed identity.

Along with narrative, film noir also delights in playing with temporality. *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), for instance, features two temporalities: “real” time and remembered time. The film opens with Walter Neff arriving at his office in the middle of the night, having been mortally wounded by a gunshot. He speaks into a dictating machine and delivers a confession for killing a man: “for money . . . and for a woman.” These words trigger a flashback that is occasionally narrated by his voice-over confession. Gradually the narrative brings “real” time and memory together (Sklar 309; Dickos 179).

Another film that is almost entirely comprised of flashbacks is *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950). At the beginning, our protagonist, Frank Bigelow, tells us he’s “already been murdered.” He just doesn’t know how, when, where, or by whom, as the murder weapon is a slow-working poison. Thus he ends up being both the detective and the victim of his own murder. This provides the opportunity for “a set of extremely complex flashbacks within flashbacks, evocative of the jumbled, or mosaic, nature of time—its passages and elongations—in large cities” (Christopher 10). Eventually, however, both Bigelow and the spectator come to know the how, when, where, and by whom. The narrative reveals that which it had temporarily suppressed.

A third film noir featuring the hero’s posthumous voice is *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950). The film opens by showing us the murdered body of Joe Gillis floating in a swimming pool. His voice-over cue, “Let’s go back about six months to see how it all happened,” triggers the flashback which encapsulates the rest of the film. Here again, although time is played with by means of a flashback structure, eventually we come to know who killed Gillis and why she did it.

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24See Chapter 1 for the *Pi* analysis and Chapter 2 for the *Memento* analysis.
Another example of fragmented temporality is found in *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), which features not only flashbacks from multiple points of view but also flashbacks within flashbacks (see Hirsch 72-75). This fractured temporality makes it similar to contemporary American independent films such as *Memento* (2001) or *Donnie Darko* (2001). The difference is that whereas all of the fractured temporality eventually comes together to provide answers in *Double Indemnity*, *D.O.A.*, *Sunset Blvd.*, and *The Killers*, temporality in *Memento* and *Donnie Darko* creates gaps which are never fully filled.\(^{25}\)

Film noir creates a distinct style of space that arises from its particular manifestation of existentialism. It employs chiaroscuro, low-key lighting which casts expressionistic shadows “that both conceal and project characters’ feelings” (Sklar 305; see also Walker 26; Hirsch 90). It uses cluttered, off-balanced, claustrophobic framing that creates a sense of unease (Walker 26, Sklar 305; Hirsch 89). It utilizes “choker close-ups” (framing the head or chin too closely) which are “obtrusive and disturbing” (Place and Peterson 26). It contains canted camera angles and extreme high- and low-angle shots that portray a feeling that something is not right with the world (Copjek xi; Hirsch 89; Place and Peterson 68). It often withholds establishing shots providing the spectator with no means of spatial orientation (Place and Peterson 68). It favors deep-focus cinematography in which danger is present in both the foreground and the background (Walker 26; Place and Peterson 67). Thus sets, characters, and film language all have elements of expressionistic distortion that echo the moral distortion of the story.\(^{26}\)

The same could be said of the dysphoric style. It too creates space with dark lighting, strange framing, and obscured space. Consider, for instance, *Pi* (1998). In the scene where Max is running from Marcy’s agents, the space is so dark, grainy, obscured, and shaky that it is hard to discern. The unclear space reinforces the notion of the impossibility of discovering a number which contains the secret of the universe. In this way, it goes

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\(^{25}\)See Chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of this phenomenon.

\(^{26}\)As Place and Peterson describe it: “The ‘dark mirror’ of film noir creates a visually unstable environment in which no character has a firm moral base from which he can confidently operate. All attempts to find safety or security are undercut by the antitraditional cinematography and mise-en-scene. Right and wrong become relative, subject to the same distortions and disruptions created in the lighting and camera work” (Place and Peterson 69).
beyond the dark and gloomy space of film noir which seeks to merely to convey angst and conceal danger. In film noir, however, truth eventually comes to light through the choices of individuals. In the dysphoric style, truth either may not come to light, or may be found as something impossible to hang on to.

The Evolution of the Noir Style

Having established the noir style and its similarity to dysphoric film, I now wish to show how the one evolves into the other. The style of film noir gets darker and bleaker as it progresses. By 1955, it is developing into the style of apocalyptic noir with a film like *Kiss Me Deadly* (Gaines 336-38). This is, perhaps, the darkest moment for traditional film noir. Here, noir’s hidden danger threatens the safety of not just the anti-hero protagonist, but also the world itself.

Existential anxiety and disorientation are present from the beginning of *Kiss Me Deadly*. The film opens with a shot, from the waist down, of a woman in a trenchcoat running along a highway at night. The first seconds of the movie, then, are devoid of an establishing shot—all we can see is the woman’s legs. A lack of establishing shots, as we have seen, is also an element of the dysphoric style. The difference, of course, is that within a few seconds, we see a long shot of the woman in her entirety, including her face. Film noir continues to tease us with confusion, but still fills in the gaps. After some jarring cuts back and forth between the long shot of the woman running and the medium close-up showing just her legs, she eventually manages to throw herself in front of an oncoming car in order to get it to stop. She crawls in the front seat next to the male driver. The camera shoots from the back seat looking forward out the windshield. With this strange beginning, the opening credits begin to “scroll from the top to bottom of the screen, so that we must read them unconventionally, from the bottom upwards. So used is the eye to reading downwards that the effect is difficult and disorienting—we are being taken in a direction in which we are unwilling to follow” (Gallafent 240). Who this woman is or what she was running from is still not revealed by the end of the opening credits.

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27 See Chapter 3 where I describe how a lack of establishing shots starts *Swoon* (1993) in a disorienting manner.
The man driving the car is private eye Mike Hammer, the quintessential anti-hero. After picking up this woman who is obviously in need, all Hammer can muster is: “I should have thrown you off that cliff back there. I might still do it.” This type of emotional coldness defines his character. He constantly uses violence to get what he needs.

The syuzhet gives us extremes in close-ups, odd angles, and strange lighting in order to depict the brutality and betrayal of this world. For example, when thugs attack Hammer and Christina in the car, as well as the subsequent scene where they torture Christina with pliers next to a semi-unconscious Hammer, the syuzhet only reveals their feet. This creates an unsettling mood, where danger is unable to be fully seen and comprehended. When the thugs push the car containing an unconscious Hammer and Christina off a cliff, again the syuzhet ominously reveals only their feet. In the following scene, spatial subjectivity is heightened. The syuzhet creates blurry, out-of-focus space to represent Hammer’s emerging consciousness after surviving the car crash. As he wakes up in a hospital bed, the syuzhet presents the image from a very acute canted angle, providing the feeling that all is not right with the world. Later in the film, when Mike is in his apartment, the syuzhet constructs him in an extreme high-angle shot that is quite unsettling. In ways such as these (fragmenting the space, obscuring the space, subjectifying the space, and tilting the space) *Kiss Me Deadly* pushes the envelope, creating a milieu where something is horribly wrong with the world and the only meaning that is possible is that which comes from subjective experience and violence.

Strange space combines with strange lighting to keep that existential angst alive. When Hammer first goes to see Lily Carver, the syuzhet constructs ominous space by looking through the bars of the headboard of Lily’s bed toward the door where Hammer enters. We can’t see Lily’s face, but she’s pointing a gun at Hammer. Hammer thus looks to be in an ominous situation, visually trapped between the gun and the bars—conveying his

28As Telotte explains, Hammer is “presented from the start as fundamentally selfish and inarticulate, unwilling and unable to put himself out, to talk meaningfully to others, or to stop in his headlong rush into oblivion” (Telotte 211).

29For example, later in the film, Hammer breaks a valuable record in order to get an opera singer’s attention. He slams the arm of a mortician in a drawer to get a key. At the Hollywood Athletic Club, he slaps an elderly attendant to gain access to a locker.
entrapment in a dangerous world without meaning, without escape. The lighting in this shot is such that Hammer’s face is left in silhouette, representative of a shady world where truth is difficult, if not impossible to discern.

*Kiss Me Deadly* reveals a world where concealed danger lurks. Mike is nearly killed first by a thug who sneaks up behind him with a knife while he’s walking down the street, and then by two bombs that are secretly planted in his car. His friend Nick is crushed underneath a car by an unknown assassin. Mike’s secretary, Velda, asks him if what he’s looking for is worth Nick’s life, or Christina’s, or Raimondo’s or Kowalski’s or her own? Mike responds that “they” killed them. Velda responds, “They’ . . . a wonderful word. And who are they? They are the nameless ones who kill people for the great whatsit. Does it exist? Who cares? Everyone, everywhere is so involved in a fruitless search. For what?” The fruitless search is an existential one, but it’s nearing the boundary of nihilism.

In *Kiss Me Deadly*, the search is long and complex. The film’s narrative has Hammer visiting many different people in a labyrinthine plot. But at the end, after all the fragmentation, the different puzzle pieces come together. The syuzhet reveals that Dr. Soberin and his gang were trying to get a certain case from Raimondo. Those who stood in their way—like Christina, the running woman at the beginning of the film—were murdered. Lily Carver is revealed as the betraying femme fatale. She shoots Hammer and opens the box, destroying both herself and the beachhouse. We learn from the F.B.I. that what’s in the box has to do with the Manhattan Project and Los Alamos, New Mexico, clearly implying that it is deadly nuclear material. This is confirmed both by the film’s spectacularly explosive ending and by comments in subsequent articles about the film when director Robert Aldrich revealed that the briefcase contained atomic material constituting a bomb (Gallafent 245). Thus we have a film where truth is difficult to find, but is eventually brought forth. Hammer and Velda, the protagonist and his girlfriend, live while all of the “bad guys” die. They are rewarded with life because of the choices they made. This holding out for partial truth, for an ending of hope, even if it is only through choices that individuals themselves have made, marks this film as existential. However, it begins the descent into nihilism—a fact revealed by the bleak, chaotic nature of its style.

Film noir begins its descent from existentialism into nihilism during the 1970s with what critics have termed “neo-noir,” an attempt to signify its distinct nature as compared to
Sharon Cobb, for instance, sees neo-noir as starting with *Chinatown* (1974) and continuing on through *L.A. Confidential* (1997) to the present (Cobb 207). John Belton agrees with her, attempting to explain this difference when he writes: “Neither the technology nor the conditions under which it was ultimately developed were the same” (Belton, *Cinemascope* 29-30). Yet, Belton’s explanation is inadequate. Although he’s correct in noticing differences in technology and historical conditions, what he is unable to account for is an evolution of the film noir style. The so-called “neo-noir” contains some elements of traditional film noir while transforming others to suit its own philosophical purposes. Such monolithic views prevent these critics from seeing that the noir style progresses and evolves rather than ends. They are unable to see that noir is crossing over from existentialism to nihilism.

*Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) reveals such a stylistic progression. It becomes a sort of limit film—a marker, if you will, of this evolution of style. *Chinatown* opens with unestablished space. The syuzhet shows us close-ups of black-and-white photos of a man and woman in various sexual positions. We hear various gasps and cries of despair. This renders a sense of disorientation. Eventually we learn that we are in the office of investigative detective Jake Gittes, who has provided proof to a man named Curly of his wife’s infidelity.

Many noir aspects are present in the narrative. Gittes is another form of the hard-boiled anti-hero. He speaks with the sharp, witty dialogue of the noir detective, such as when, instead of comforting a grieving Curly, he says, “All right, Curly, you can’t eat the venetian blinds. I had them installed last Wednesday.” Gittes thinks nothing of threatening a man in the barbershop who insults him or punching migrant orange growers who accost him. He’s fine with slapping a woman named Mrs. Mulwray over and over in order to glean information about her mysterious relationship to a young girl.

Noir elements are also present in the construction of space. As Gittes hears from a woman claiming to be Mrs. Mulwray, diagonal venetian blind shadows fall across their faces, a traditional noir element that represents the shadowy world in which the characters are...
enmeshed. In a scene when Gittes enters the home of a Miss Sessions to find her dead on the floor, the lighting is so dark that Gittes’ face can barely be discerned.

Yet, there are also some elements which have changed since the era of traditional film noir. Paradigms of the noir setting expand a bit. Instead of the claustrophobic night setting on urban streets, many of the scenes in *Chinatown* take place in wide-open spaces in rural settings (such as reservoirs or orange groves) and they often occur during the day. The anxiety and hidden danger once confined to the city at night have spread until they are now ubiquitous. By 1974—following and including such national events as the Vietnam War, the assassination of several crucial political and social leaders, and Watergate—terror is not confined to one setting, but is all around us.

The figure of the femme fatale undergoes a change. The syuzhet presents Mrs. Mulwray using traditional codes of the femme fatale. She dresses in black in a scene in Gittes’ office. She looks beautiful, but exudes a dangerous manner. She seems to be hiding something. After holding out these expectations, however, the syuzhet tricks the spectator, and Mrs. Mulwray is shown to be the one nice character in the film. As screenwriter Robert Towne explains: “The classic female in the noir films is a black widow. The Faye Dunaway character, in a way, is a character who gives you those expectations of being potentially that but, in fact, she’s the heroine of the movie. In fact, she’s the one person in the film who’s operating out of decent and selfless motives.”

The syuzhet creates disorientation by playing on noir expectations, thus becoming dysphoric not just through the effects of noir elements, but because of the unmet expectations of the elements themselves.

The construction of causality is also markedly different. Whereas *Kiss Me Deadly*’s convoluted plot eventually leads to clear resolution, that is not the case with *Chinatown*. The syuzhet teases the spectator with the promise of clear causality, but many crucial plot strands dissolve without resolution. For instance, Gittes discovers a pair of glasses in a salt-water pond on the property of Mr. and Mrs. Mulwray. Since a drowned Mr. Mulwray was found with salt water in his lungs, he accuses Noah Cross of drowning him in that pool. Yet, a scene or two earlier, Mrs. Mulwray explains that those couldn’t have been Mulwray’s glasses because he didn’t wear bifocals. The syuzhet constructs a plot path that implies it’s taking us

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31 Transcribed from an interview with Robert Towne on the *Chinatown* DVD.
somewhere, but then leaves us stranded.

The biggest change of all, however, is seen in *Chinatown’s* ending. After spending the entirety of the film figuring out who is behind the diversion-of-water scheme, Gittes should have an airtight case to present to Police Lieutenant Escobar. Yet, at the film’s finale, Escobar wants to arrest Gittes for extortion. Our only clue to this is Mrs. Mulwray’s scream that her father, Noah Cross, “owns the police.” Thus, traditional markers of who is good and who is bad are dissolving. As Mrs. Mulwray tries to escape with her daughter who was sired by her father, Cross tries to stop them. Mrs. Mulwray shoots Cross in the arm and then drives off. The police shoot, and Mrs. Mulwray is killed by a bullet that travels through the back of her head and out her eye. Noah Cross drags off his screaming daughter/granddaughter. The syuzhet gives us no clue about how any of this will be resolved. For all we know, Cross will not only get away with his scheme to divert water from the citizens of Los Angeles, but will also end up with custody of his daughter/granddaughter. It appears as though he will not be punished for any of his murders, his crimes against the city, or his incest. Meanwhile, Mrs. Mulwray is the one the narrative punishes with death in way she doesn’t seem to deserve. The world of the film remains in a state of unresolved chaos where the wrong people remain free and the wrong people are punished. In the words of Richard T. Jameson, *Chinatown’s* explosive finale “does not purge. . . . It seems, instead, one in a series of inevitable disasters—inevitable and virtually innate, gathering themselves toward horrible maturity” (“Son of Noir” 204).

This, then, becomes the boundary crossing from existentialist noir to nihilist noir. Whereas with traditional film noir, anxiety reigned but always eventually submitted to order, here there is suddenly no order to submit to. Even with *Kiss Me Deadly* the bad guys are punished while the good guys escape. With *Chinatown* this is no longer the case. *Chinatown* is the limit film—a bit past noir but not quite yet to the dysphoric style where causality is even more loose, temporality even more fragmented, and space even more difficult to comprehend.

What we have, then, is a noir style that doesn’t miraculously end with *Touch of Evil* in 1958 as Schrader’s famous essays insists (Schrader 214). Instead, we have a style that continues and evolves through time until it reaches its new manifestation in the nihilistic form of the dysphoric style.
European Art Cinema of the 1960s

The dysphoric style is also indebted to the European Art Cinema of the 1960s. Like film noir, it too is built on a foundation of existentialism. It too has elements that will evolve into what will manifest itself later as the dysphoric style. However, the manifestation of existentialism of the European Art Cinema of the 1960s differs from the way existentialism is expressed in film noir. Film noir, as we saw, channels its existential angst into elements of anxiety and hidden danger. In contrast, European Art Cinema of the 1960s is more concerned with the discovery that life has become meaningless. Whereas film noir creates a particular kind of unsettling, claustrophobic atmosphere, European Art Cinema of the 1960s is more philosophical in nature and devoid of the darkness present in noir. Narrative, temporality, and space all work together to construct these two distinct styles that each derive from differing aspects of existentialism. By describing the films of the French New Wave, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Federico Fellini, this distinct nature will be clarified. I will then be able to show how this style begins its own unique evolution into the dysphoric style by reviewing the work of Ingmar Bergman.

Films of the French New Wave contain certain commonalities. As one critic writes: “Despite their differences, these films [of the French New Wave] share connections, a common essence which is nothing less than their notion of mise-en-scène, or a filmic écritoire, based on shared principles. Just as one recognizes the vintage of a great wine by its body, color, and scent, one recognizes a nouvelle vauge film by its style” (Claire Clouzot, *Le cinéma français*, qtd. in Neupert xv). What is this style and where did it come from? I argue that the shared commonalities of New Wave films are existential ones.

Like film noir, the New Wave arises at a specific historical time. Following years of occupation during World War II, the newly liberated France is not only poor in finances, but in spirit. Two of the country’s most famous philosopher-writers of the time, Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) become known for their existentialist writings in which they affirm that the human condition is one of anxiety experienced in the face of

32Remembering, as Kline reminds us, “By now, most historians have agreed that there was no movement per se, in the sense of a program, but rather a temporal coincidence of reaction” (Kline 227).
nothingness. The only hope is that human beings can make choices and then bear the responsibility for those choices. The New Wave has long been seen as owing a debt to the work of Camus and Sartre (Neupert 16, 24). André Bazin was heavily steeped in existentialist thought and he passes this legacy down to the New Wave directors (Naremore 25-26). Thus, New Wave existentialism derives from a different historical background than its film noir cousin. New Wave existentialism comes from a philosophical/literary tradition, while film noir is more indebted to anxiety over historical events. They thus foreground slightly different elements of existentialism. The New Wave focuses on being alone in a meaningless world while film noir taps into the anxiety arising from concealed danger.

Yet, “[b]efore the New Wave directors could modify the profound nature of the cinema, they had to attack its structures so as to shake up the system” (René Prédral, qtd. in Neupert 39). Such an stylistic attack arrives in the films of François Truffaut, who taps into that New Wave slant on existentialism. Truffaut was well versed in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre (Jacob and Givray 19, 55, 238). He was an acquaintance of Sartre himself (Rabourdin 35; Jacob and Givray 351-53, 552). Truffaut was one of the few directors of the New Wave to sign the “Manifesto of the 121,” a 1960 document written by Sartre that encouraged French soldiers to desert (Rabourdin 32; Jacob and Givray 150; Monaco 39). Truffaut follows in Sartre’s existential footsteps when he confesses things like: “I think Sartre is right in calling all those who think their existence is indispensable ‘louses’” (Rabourdin 95). He frequently acknowledges his debt to Sartre’s work (Jacob and Givray 57).

Truffaut’s style arises from that existential outlook. Take 400 Blows (1959), for instance. Here, Antoine Doniel is the existential protagonist, trapped in a system where everything is meaningless. School fails him—he is constantly getting in trouble with his instructor and the administration. Family fails him—between his parents’ indifference, harsh slaps, and infidelity, Antoine feels no connection to them. The state fails him—after stealing a typewriter, Antoine is sent to a juvenile center where there is still no absolute comfort, love, or help. All that is left to do is to run from everything. But even after all the running, Antoine merely arrives at the ocean, with nowhere left to run. Life is just as meaningless for him as before.

Antoine is a protagonist who lacks clear goals (Bordwell, Film Art 488). He never reveals any of his intentions to the audience. He’s walking aimlessly through life devoid of
meaning, passively receiving the random blows that continually strike him. He not only reflects the existentialism from which he arises, but also produces it for the spectator. This type of protagonist in European Art Cinema differs from the protagonist in film noir, who declares his goals and then either makes choices to achieve them or falls prey to the femme fatale and finds death instead.\(^{33}\)

In *400 Blows*, existential alienation is profound. Recall, for example, the scene of Antoine speaking to a female social worker at the detention center with remarkable candidness.\(^ {34}\) This scene is famous for its “elimination of any reaction shots of the female psychiatrist and for the impressive, often spontaneous performance by Jean-Pierre Léaud sitting alone in a dark room at a barren table” (Neupert 187). Dissolves shorten the interview down into “a series of six almost dreamlike responses” (Neupert 188). The result is a young protagonist who seems very alone in the world. This is similar to the use of the dissolve in *SLC Punk* when Stevo and Sandy drop acid in the park.\(^ {35}\) There, dissolves create a drug-induced, dreamy feel. In both cases, a feeling of being alone (even when physically next to another person) prevails. The difference is that Antoine is alone because he’s in a world without meaning, except for his personal choices. Stevo is alone no matter what he does; the only solution is to drop out by numbing the pain through drugs.

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\(^{33}\)Protagonists who achieve goals are found in films such as *The Maltese Falcon* where the priceless bird is kept out of the hands of the enemy. Protagonists who fall victim to the femme fatale include Walter Neff from *Double Indemnity* and Joe Gillis from *Sunset Boulevard*, both of whom underestimate the deadly power of the female and end up being shot by her.

\(^{34}\)The original reviewer of the film in *Cinéma 60* called this: “one of the most amazing scenes in cinema history” (*400 Blows* review in *Cinéma 60* 42, January 1960: 14, qtd. in Neupert 184). Truffaut originally had an actress signed to play the social worker but when she was not available he shot the scene without her, using himself as a stand-in with Léaud. He planned to shoot the reverse shots of the social worker later. Truffaut asked the social worker’s questions himself. He explained, “I gave Léaud complete freedom in his responses because I wanted his expressions, hesitations, and a total spontaneity. . . . He even introduced the whole notion of a grandmother” (Truffaut, in Gillain, *La Cinéma selon François Truffaut*, 92, qtd. in Neupert 187-88). After seeing the rushes, Truffaut decided to retain the images of the boy alone and simply dub in the questions with the actress’s voice. This practice was radical for narrative filmmaking at the time (Neupert 188).

\(^{35}\)See Chapter 3 for an in-depth account of this scene.
400 Blows features a much looser form of causality than classical film (Bordwell, Film Art 488). This reflects the rejection of an ordered, planned universe—where causes lead to predictable effects. For example, during the sequence in which Antoine and René ditch school, Truffaut uses “a loose sequencing of shots, often placed end-to-end rather than building classical unity” (Neupert 185). There is a shot of the boys in-depth, walking toward the camera. The next five shots are a montage of the boys walking, crossing streets, entering a movie theater, playing pinball, and then entering the rotor ride (Neupert 186).

“Throughout this entire scene, Truffaut and [cinematographer] Decae maintain a near documentary objectivity, observing the boys in-depth, on location, and celebrating their childish freedom” (Neupert 186). This sequence is not about hidden meaning in the universe; it’s about mere existence.

400 Blows' open ending reflects a worldview where questions don’t always have answers. In the famous closing shot, Antoine, after running for a very long sequence, arrives at the ocean and the syuzhet presents him captured in a freeze-frame. His face, the film itself, and the existential system from which it derives, all seem to say, “After all this running, where am I?” All three unanimously leave the question unanswered.

These elements which are present in the New Wave (loose causality, alienated protagonists without clearly announced goals, and open endings) will later be foregrounded by contemporary American independent films such as Slacker (Richard Linklater, 1991), Clerks (Kevin Smith, 1994), and Kids (Larry Clark, 1995). The existentialistic New Wave differs from the nihilistic Contemporary American independent cinema, however, in that in the former there are at least choices which have consequences. Antoine’s ditching of school gets him into trouble with his parents. His stealing of the typewriter lands him in a detention center. His running at least brings him to the end of land. This differs from the nihilism of contemporary American independent cinema that not only reveals a world without meaning for the protagonists, but a world where their choices are meaningless. Slacker is comprised of episodes where a cause in one vignette has no effect on another. Clerks refuses to show any connections between seemingly random events (such as a patron’s dropping of eggs) and other events of the day. Kids reveals a world where actions (such as Telly’s rape of Jenny) have no consequences. The dysphoric style appropriates
several characteristics from the New Wave, but then reassembles them for its own purposes in its own unique structure.

Another New Wave director who taps into existentialism is Jean-Luc Godard. Godard has also been linked directly to the ideas of Sartre (Kreidl 53). As Kreidl explains, Godard employs “the basic tenet of Sartrean existentialism, ‘existence precedes essence,’ . . . in the early hours of his cinema, in the 1960-65 films” (Kreidl 181). Breathless (1960), exemplifies this. Its protagonist, Michel, has been categorized as an existential protagonist modeled after the work of Sartre and Camus (Kline 189).

Breathless channels this existentialism by means of a particular style. Godard and cinematographer Raoul Coutard used a mail cart and wheelchair as dollies, creating a rough aesthetic that could be seen as trying to capture existence, rather than some mythical essence. The same thing applies to Godard’s technique of improvisational shooting; it shows the existence of characters, rather than their glorification.

Several of these stylistic elements have a lasting legacy in the dysphoric style. Take, for instance, the opening of Breathless which arrives with unestablished space. We first see an illustration of a woman in her underwear from the magazine, Paris Flirt. A voice says, “So, I’m a son of a bitch. After all, it has to be done. It has to.” The magazine obscures the

36Coutard hand-held the camera, perched on his shoulder, while seated in wheelchairs, a mail pushcart, or the backseat of a car, rather than placing it on conventional camera mounts. As Neupert explains, “The goal was to capture a rough documentary quality, following the characters as if Coutard were a reporter out to get a story” (Neupert 211, 41).

37Coutard explains that he and Godard would improvise the shooting techniques: “From day to day, as the details of his screenplay became more precise, he explained his conception: no [tripod] for the camera, no light if possible, traveling without rails . . . little by little we discovered a need to escape from convention and even run counter to the rules of ‘cinematographic grammar.’ The shooting plan was devised as we went along, as was the dialogue” (Raoul Coutard, “Statements: Raoul Coutard” in Andrew, Breathless 176, qtd. in Neupert 210). Godard’s procedure with the actors was similar: he often showed up in the morning with sketchy notes for the actors, who were expected to improvise as the camera shot them from various angles, experimenting in order to capture their loose performances (Neupert 211).
Finally, when the magazine is lowered, we have a medium close-up of Michel who is wearing a hat and smoking. He performs a strange Humphrey-Bogart-like gesture of moving his thumb across his lips. The syuzhet then cuts to a close-up of a woman who gestures to him. We don’t know who these people are, nor even where they are because of a lack of establishing shots. This is similar to certain maneuvers in contemporary American independent cinema, such as Swoon (1993), that opens various scenes, including its first scene, with unestablished space. The unestablished space of European Art Cinema differs from its manifestation in film noir. In European Art Cinema, unestablished space denotes difficulty in discerning meaning; in film noir, unestablished space cues us to understand that there is hidden danger lurking.

Characters sometimes address the spectator directly. In the following scene, Michel is driving by himself through the French countryside. He then breaks the fourth wall by turning to the camera and speaking directly to the audience: “If you don’t like the sea, if you don’t like the mountains, if you don’t like the city, then get stuffed!” This helps set the stage for scenes in such films as SLC Punk (1998), where Stevo directly addresses the spectator.

As opposed to noir, long takes are plentiful in European Art Cinema in a manner that glorifies everyday existence. When Michel finds Patricia for the first time in the film (as she is selling copies of the New York Herald-Tribune), the camera follows Michel and her as they walk, deep in conversation, their backs to the spectator. The syuzhet delivers a long take which lasts for almost three minutes without a cut. Such long takes may have been appropriated by certain films in the dysphoric style, such as Slacker (1991), in which a roving camera follows various groups of people, eavesdropping on their personal conversations.

38 As Neupert reminds us: “Camera and sound selection, especially in the opening scene, obscure the character, disrupting any clear exposition” (216).

39 See Chapter 3 for a description of several of these scenes.

40 See Chapter 3 for multiple examples of this technique.

41 As explained in Chapter 1.
Yet Godard also uses an intense, fragmented style of editing in other shots. As Michel and Patricia are driving in a stolen car, the syuzhet presents a shot of the back of Michel from a camera in the back seat of a car. Patricia asks: “Don’t you have your Ford anymore?” Michel responds: “It’s being serviced. Come on, I’m staying with you.” [Cut to Patricia, again as if the camera were in the back seat, looking at the back of her head.] Patricia: “I have a headache anyway.” Michel: “Not to do anything, just to be with you.” Patricia: “It’s not that, Michel.” [Frame removal to Patricia suddenly checking her hair in a hand mirror. The camera is at the same angle it just was, but the syuzhet inexplicably cuts ahead.] [Frame removal, without changing angle. The syuzhet gives us the same shot, behind Patricia, looking at her, but her mirror is suddenly gone.] Patricia: “Why are you unhappy?” Michel: “Because I’m unhappy.” Patricia: “That’s silly. Why are you unhappy? Do you mind my asking?” Michel: “I don’t care. I can’t live without you.” Patricia: “Of course you can.” Michel: “But I don’t want to. Look! A Talbot! Beautiful!” [Frame removal.] Patricia: “You’re someone who . . . I don’t know.” Michel: “Patricia, look at me. I forbid you to see this guy.” [Frame removal.] Michel: “I love a girl with a lovely neck . . .” [Frame removal.] “lovely breasts . . .” [Frame removal.] “and a lovely voice . . .” [Frame removal.] “lovely wrists . . .” [Frame removal.] “a lovely brow . . .” [Frame removal.] “and lovely knees.” [Frame removal.] “But who is chicken.” Patricia: “It’s here. Stop.” Here the syuzhet’s editing is just as fragmenting as is Michel’s dissection of Patricia into mere body parts. In this 1:26 clip, there are 12 frame removals on Patricia, without cutting to a new camera angle. In the words of Neupert, “Style disrupts rather than clarifies Godard’s story” (Neupert 216). Such frame removal reflects existentialism’s belief in an disunified world. It is distinct from spatial fragmentation in film noir which is motivated by a desire to represent anxiety and hidden danger. In European Art Cinema, fragmentation occurs for the sake of fragmentation—to remind us that we are merely watching a film, not experiencing reality. As D. N. Rodowick explains, one of the problems

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42 As Neupert explains, in Breathless “[t]he jump cut is highly significant since it calls attention to the constructed reality of the filmic text, to the spectator’s on-going labor of generating a fictional world out of often contradictory stylistic cues, and to Godard’s own expressive, auteur presence” (216). In Breathless, “continuity editing is rejected in favor of discontinuity” (Neupert 215).
of realism is that it functions “ideologically since it allows received meanings and received forms of meaning to circulate unchallenged and unchecked in society as a ‘natural’ visibility or pure perception” (Rodowick 17). Thus, “the aim of modernist film practice is considered to be a refutation of the transparency of conventional film technique through the full exploration of the material properties of cinematic expression” (Rodowick 5). In other words, films such as Breathless seek to jar the spectator out of complacency in an attempt to remind him or her that this is merely a film, not reality. This notion lays the groundwork for the frame removal in SLC Punk, where space is again fragmented. However, the philosophy behind this stylistic maneuver changes by the time it is passed down to the dysphoric style. Dysphoric films are not interested in critiquing realism. After all, in nihilism, it’s not just realism that one loses faith in, but everything! The dysphoric style instead attempts to convey a new psychological state (specifically, in SLC Punk, a drugged-out one, representative of the only way of coping in a nihilistic world.)

The syuzhet of Breathless delights in creating gaps, not only within the individual shot itself, but also from scene-to-scene. As Neupert explains, “after Michel shoots the police officer and runs across a field, the audience next sees him in Paris riding in a car. No attempt is made to explain how much time has passed, whether he hitchhiked the whole way, or whether the police have even discovered the crime yet. Similarly, when Michel enters a café, checks for money, orders breakfast, and runs out to buy a paper, the viewer never knows whether he returns for the food. Moreover, the spectator is left pondering whether this scene is in anyway significant to the story” (Neupert 213). Godard creates confusion by creating small, jarring “shards” of the most important narrative events such as the shooting of the police officer; he then lavishes long, extended shots on insignificant events such as watching Patricia brush her hair (Neupert 214). In this way, the daily moments of mere existence overshadow the most dramatic events; both are united in their

43 An example is the scene where Heroin Bob explains about Napoleon’s death. The syuzhet creates jump cuts for no reason than to jar the spectator with dysphoric space. For a full description, see Chapter 3.

44 Godard was once asked by a bewildered colleague whether his movies have any kind of structure—even a beginning, a middle, and an end. Godard famously replied, “Yes, but not necessarily in that order” (qtd. in Sterritt 20 and Monaco 109).
rejection of a system that forces a hierarchy on meaning. It becomes a direct attack against ordinary, realist narrative.

Natural lighting not only reveals unglorified existence, but also creates obstructions to understanding. A lucid example is the scene when Patricia walks into a restaurant where she’s meeting a journalist. The room, lit only by natural lighting, is so dark that the faces are nearly obscured. This certainly isn’t Hollywood 3-point lighting, established for the clarity of characters’ features. The dark or natural lighting of European Art Cinema of the 1960s differs from that of film noir. Here, darkness is representative of a difficulty in discerning clear meaning rather than the creation of anxiety by concealing danger as we saw in film noir. Natural lighting will later evolve into what we see in dysphoric films like thirteen (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003), where the darkness of the surroundings exemplifies the darkness of the state of Tracy and Evie. It’s the same with Raising Victor Vargas (Peter Sollett, 2003) where natural darkness reminds of unglorified class problems. Another example might be Forty Shades of Blue (Ira Sachs, 2005) where deceit within marriage is covered not only by lies but the darkness of natural lighting.

Although Breathless features some cinematic elements that will later be appropriated by the dysphoric style (including its overwhelming sense of despair and loneliness), it’s of a much different nature. Breathless is a critique of morality tales. Even though Michel seals his doom through his choice of shooting the policeman (which eventually leads to his being shot to death in the street by police), all he is able to do at the end is to cry out with ambiguous meaning: “This is really disgusting!” He is punished by forces of the plot, but remains uncriticized by the syuzhet. The dysphoric style goes even further, not only withholding criticism by the syuzhet but also punishment by the plot. For example, the criminals in Four Dogs Playing Poker (Paul Rachman, 2000) not only steal but murder and yet walk away successfully without punishment in the fabula or critique by the syuzhet. In Kids (Larry Clark, 1995) Casper and Telly beat up a guy in the park and Casper rapes Jenny; none of these actions have any consequences. Even Tracy and Evie from thirteen (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003), try everything from slapping each other while high from huffing, to having sex with older boys, to shoplifting, to attempting suicide, with neither remorse nor punishment. The European Art Cinema’s existential meaninglessness slides into the
dysphoric style’s nihilism, where even individual acts have no meaning, and there seems no point in critiquing realism.

Michelangelo Antonioni is another director whose existentialism bequeaths a legacy to the dysphoric style. Antonioni’s films have been compared to the work of Sartre (Rifkin 11). His protagonists have been characterized as “estranged” and “alienated” (Rifkin 11). Such an existential urge can be felt in L’avventura (Antonioni, 1960). Its story is fairly simple: Anna disappears and the rest of the film is spent unsuccessfully looking for her.45 The film poses the question, “What happened to Anna?” and then doesn’t really care about answering it.46 French film critic Pascal Bonitzer calls this “the disappearance of the disappearance of Anna” (qtd. in Brunette 31). As Brunette explains, “This double disappearance creates a gaping hole in the film, an invisibility at its center, which suggests an elsewhere, a nonplace, that remains forever unavailable to interpretation and that destroys the dream of full visibility” (31). As Rhodie explains, in L’avventura “the mystery itself becomes abandoned, other interests displace it with nothing being solved, nothing definite being secured” (Rhodie 46). This reveals its existentialism—there are no real answers to be found. This is similar to David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive (2001), a murder mystery that’s not concerned about solving the murder.

In L’avventura, rich people on yachts, bored with their wealth, become representative of the alienation and emptiness of modern society engulfed in existentialism. As Antonioni once famously remarked to Mark Rothko after visiting his studio: “Your paintings are like my films—they’re about nothing” (qtd. in Chatman 54). Richard Gilman elucidates Antonioni’s comment by explaining that “Antonioni’s films are indeed about nothing, which

45Roger Ebert writes: “The plot of L’avventura became famous because, it was said, nothing happened in the movie. What we saw was a search without a conclusion, a disappearance without a solution” (The Great Movies).

46Once, when Antonioni was confronted with a comment that L’avventura leaves one cold because it doesn’t “come to any definite conclusion,” he responded: “Lucretius, who was certainly one of the greatest poets who ever lived, once said, ‘Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only thing certain is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain.’ Think about this for a moment. What Lucretius said of his time is still a disturbing reality, for it seems to me this uncertainty is very much part of our own time” (Antonioni 39-40).
Chatman explains that Antonioni’s films “are indeed ‘about’ something: they are about the anxiety that the world has felt since the fifties” (Chatman 66). In other words, Chatman sees in Antonioni a modernist critique of realism, which seeks to endow everything with meaning. Antonioni rejects the realist system, constructing a syuzhet with a loose, episodic type of causality with purposeful gaps that remain unfilled. This will, supposedly, jar the spectator out of complacency and make him or her consider the anxious nothingness of life. This prepares the way for films like *Slacker* or *Clerks* which are more episodic in nature than strictly causal. Such films may have inherited the desire to show—through loose causality and open endings—a world that has lost connections and meaning. *L’avventura* is about the boredom of people floating in an existential sea where there are no answers to be found. Such a theme, along with its stylistic elements of an open, unresolved ending and loose causality, are other elements bequeathed to the dysphoric style. Yet again, *L’avventura* ends with love as the one hope in a world where answers do not come easy. Here its existentialism contrasts with the nihilism of the dysphoric style, where not even love has the power to make things right.

Federico Fellini is another European art cinema director of the 1960s who illustrates the connection between existentialism and style. In this case, Fellini’s style changes as the structure of his films become more and more existential. We see this in later Fellini as his

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47 Chatman explains that Antonioni’s films “are indeed ‘about’ something: they are about the anxiety that the world has felt since the fifties” (Chatman 66). However, “this condition is shown primarily in images. It is not spelled out in dialogue or connoted by mood music. It is always depicted, never pronounced. It occurs in visual details of the plot, behavior, and composition so veiled and subtle that Antonioni risks making the audience impatient and bored” (Chatman 66).

48 See Chapter 1 for a more complete discussion of this issue.

49 Before *La dolce vita* (1959), Fellini’s style is indebted to Italian neorealism (Bondanella 26; see also Burke, *Fellini’s Films* 2-4). Fellini even worked on the screenplay of one of the great Italian neorealist films, *Rome: Open City* (Fellini 58-64; Chandler 56). Bondanella observes a change in style in Fellini’s later films, however, explaining that from *La dolce vita* onward, Fellini begins to abandon that style, instead becoming increasingly interested in representing the subjective, often irrational areas of human behavior connected with the psyche or the unconscious (Bondanella 26). Again, instead of placing this is
style moves from neo-realist to the very extravagant, baroque, and subjective (Bondanella 8).

Take, for example, the space of Fellini’s *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965). This was Fellini’s first film in color, and he makes plentiful use of it with a very bright mise-en-scene, particularly the reds associated with his protagonist Juliet (played by Giulietta Masina, his real-life wife and the heroine of several of his other films like *La Strada* [1954] and *Nights of Cabiria* [1957]). This film is exceptionally subjective as it attempts to spatialize outwardly what is occurring in Juliet’s head. After Juliet discovers that her husband Giorgio is cheating on her, her inward, emotional space (and the film’s outward, cinematic space) gets troubled with many odd images.

Fellini employs subjective expressionism to convey this. Take, for instance, the scene when Juliet asks a private investigator to spy on Giorgio. After listening to her story, the investigator asks her one more time: “Are you sure you want to know everything?” Juliet ponders this, in a worrisome matter, without saying anything. Suddenly we hear a voice-over: “Woe unto those who shall tolerate sin, for it makes them accomplices.” We see a strange bearded man dressed in black at the very right edge of the frame. Cut back to Juliet, pondering. Cut back to bearded man in black who looks into the camera with one finger raised. “They shall burn with the sinner in eternal fire.” Cut to the investigator’s staff. “Take vengeance in the name of God!” Cut to Juliet’s friend. Cut to strange bearded man outside the door of the office. “I am the Lord of Justice!” Cut back to Juliet who says, determinedly, “Yes. I want to know. I have a right to know.” We never learn the origin of the voice. The whole sequence seems to be a strange mixture of the external and internal realities of Juliet. This is space which is extremely subjective—the inner workings of Juliet’s head spatialized outwardly. It is very different from the realism of Fellini’s earlier films such as *La Strada* (1956) or *Nights of Cabiria* (1959).

Another example of subjective expressionism comes at the film’s explosive finale. After her husband leaves to take his mistress on a trip (which he lies about), Juliet has an interesting inner dialogue which the syuzhet again spatializes for the spectator in a very psychoanalytic terms, I believe the style changes as the structure of Fellini’s films change from a type of realism to a type of existentialism.
bizarre, extended sequence.\textsuperscript{50} The images fire upon the spectator one after another. Yet there seems to be very little the spectator can use to ground them to meaning or reality. All one can surmise is that they are the outward manifestation of Juliet’s inward, troubled journey to self-dependency. The chaos represents the shattered psyche of Juliet, the voices, the fears that she has to purge, before she can truly be free of her husband. Images such as these leave large gaps that are difficult for the spectator to fill. In this way it is similar to the subjective expressionism of \textit{SLC Punk} (1998). In that film, Sean’s drug-induced hallucination involving Satan and his mother’s being turned into a bull are spatialized by the syuzhet. Yet \textit{Juliet of the Spirits} is different from the nihilism of the dysphoric style, in that, after all of the fragmentation, everything comes together at the end. Juliet walks out of the house she’s shared with Giorgio and walks by herself. In other words, this has been her journey from dependence on her husband to self-reliance. At the end of the chaos, there’s still a center—there’s still hope through personal choice. The style of European Art Cinema has used subjective expressionism to problematize realism, while the dysphoric style has employed it to problematize all systems.

**The Evolution of the Style of European Art Cinema of the 1960s**

Ingmar Bergman is another director who journeys into existentialism and then, perhaps, beyond. There are many different approaches to the films of Ingmar Bergman. Some critics take a psychoanalytic approach.\textsuperscript{51} Others adopt a biographical one.\textsuperscript{52} Still others note the influence of existentialism in his work.\textsuperscript{53} What hasn’t been done is to show

\textsuperscript{50}For a shot-by-shot description, see Appendix J.


how Bergman’s style not only arises from that existentialism, but then reveals the beginning of the transition over to nihilism.

One can trace Bergman’s cinematic journey from faith to existentialism in his so-called “Faith Trilogy”: Through a Glass Darkly (1961), Winter Light (1962) and The Silence (1963).\(^5^4\) This philosophical journey provides the set-up for my stylistic analysis of Persona (1966), demonstrating how the style of that film not only arises from the existential system to which Bergman is, by then, fully committed; it then pushes the boundaries, becoming a transition into nihilism.\(^5^5\)

Persona (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) rises from the existential foundation laid by the Faith Trilogy, taking the loss of the absolute of God and forging ahead with it. This loss is made all the more palpable through a syuzhet that constructs cues of heightened ambiguity and large gaps that are never filled. Persona is a film where, in both theme and style, certain absolutes are difficult to find.\(^5^6\)

Take, for example, the opening sequence, which Bergman has called a “poem, not in words but in images” (Björkman 198). The film begins with two rods of a movie projector which touch and ignite, along with a split-second image of an erect penis which matches with the projector’s right arch, and a curled piece of film that looks strangely vagina-like (Cohen 229-30). This is a film which is bringing itself into existence. There is no longer a Creator-God; if there is to be any creation at all, it will be done by the power of human beings (the filmmakers) and by the power of film itself. Then the syuzhet presents a strange montage: the images of film, film projectors, and film projections are juxtaposed against images of horror: a tarantula, the gutting of a terrified sheep, and the driving of a spike

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\(^5^4\)See Appendix K for my analysis of these three films which details this cinematic journey from faith to existentialism.

\(^5^5\)As second witness to Bergman’s existential or nihilistic state of mind at the time, note his response to an incident in 1967, the year following Persona, when he was accidentally given too much anesthesia for a minor operation. He recalls, “Six hours of my life vanished. I don’t remember any dreams; time ceased to exist, six hours, six micro-seconds—or eternity. . . . The lost hours . . . provided me with a calming message. You were born without purpose, you live without meaning, living is its own meaning” (qtd. in Cohen 261).

\(^5^6\)As Peter Cowie explains, “Everything one says about Persona will be contradicted; the opposite will also be true” (Cowie, Ingmar 231).
As Susan Sontag has written: “[I]t would be a serious misunderstanding to demand to know exactly what happens in *Persona*; for what is narrated is only deceptively, secondarily, a ‘story’ at all. It’s correct to speak of the film in terms of the fortunes of two characters named Elizabeth and Alma who are engaged in a desperate duel of identities. But it is no less true, or relevant, to treat *Persona* as what might misleadingly be called an allegory: as relating to the duel between two mythical parts of a single ‘person,’ the corrupted person who acts (Elizabeth) and the ingenuous soul (Alma) who founders in contact with corruption” (Sontag 262). As a side note, “Alma” means “soul” in Spanish and “Elizabeth” means “consecrated to God” in Hebrew (Lauder 128).

Another montage takes us to a morgue where we see the fragmented body parts of corpses. During one particular upside-down close-up of a dead woman’s head, the telephone rings several times until a jump cut startlingly shows the woman’s eyes instantly open. As Blackwell writes: “She is alive, then, whereas she had appeared dead. This image undermines our security about the validity of our perceptions” (25). As we cut to a sheet-covered boy on a bier, the preceding images have led the spectator to assume that the boy, too, is dead. But just as suddenly, he rolls over, covering himself with a sheet. It’s as if the boy is waking up to a new consciousness of nihilism, realizing that there is no center to tie the preceding images of his dream-state together to give him comforting, reliable absolutes. He puts on his glasses and picks up a book, *The Hero of Our Times*, as if searching for a stabilized referent of any sort. Unable to find it, he turns toward the camera and touches it, almost as if he were touching the spectator. A reverse shot reveals that he is actually touching a movie screen showing the alternating images of Alma and Elisabeth. What do these images mean? What is the identity of these two women? As we will see by the end of the film, neither of these questions is able to be fully answered. The syuzhet presents gaps which are never filled. Linear, easily-explained, traditional filmmaking is gone and we are left with only fleeting relationships between images which are just as arbitrary as society’s constructs of identity.

Slowly moving from existentialism into nihilism, *Persona* gravitates toward the unsettling of identity. This notion is seen in the affliction of the actress, Elisabeth, who

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The doctor explains: “I understand, all right, the hopeless dream of ‘being.’ Not seeming, but ‘being.’ At every waking moment, alert, the gulf between what you are with others and what you are alone. The vertigo and the constant hunger to be exposed. To be seen through . . . perhaps even wiped out. Every inflection and gesture a lie. Every mile a grimace. Suicide? No, too vulgar. But you can refuse to move, refuse to talk so that you don’t have to lie. You can shut yourself in. Then you don’t have to play any parts or make any wrong gestures. Our reality is diabolical. Your hiding place isn’t water-tight. Life trickles in from the outside. And you’re forced to react. No one asks if it’s true or false, if you’re genuine or a sham. Some things matter only in theater, and hardly there either. I understand why you don’t speak, why you don’t move, why you’ve created a part for yourself out of apathy. I understand and admire. You should go on with this part until it’s played out, until it loses interest for you. Then you can leave it just as you’ve left all your other parts one by one.”

58 The doctor diagnoses Elisabeth, explaining to her the hopeless dream of being. The doctor here has stumbled onto a remarkable situation. The patient, an actress, has had an unstable, constantly changing identity as she has played many parts. Realizing the “falseness” of this situation, but also the impossibility of maintaining a fixed identity, she has stopped speaking and acting altogether (which is, in fact, yet another role.) Elisabeth self-consciously wants to call attention to the fact that everyone’s identity is, in fact, a role that one plays. “Reality” in the sense of a set identity may not exist and so can’t be found. As Bergman himself has said: “[Elisabeth] desires the truth. She has looked for it everywhere and sometimes she seems to have found something to hold onto, something lasting, but then suddenly the ground has given way under her feet. The truth had dissolved or disappeared or had, in the worst case, turned into a lie” (Images 58). Dissolving, disappearing, or lying truth places us right in the middle of nihilism.

As “Nurse” Alma attempts to cure “Patient” Elisabeth at a summer home away from the hospital, the two women begin to exchange roles. Elisabeth begins to leave her role of patient and assume the role of nurse. For example, Elisabeth writes a letter which reads like a diagnosis: “Alma spoils me in the most touching way. I think she is fond of me . . . even a tiny bit in love in a charming way. In any case, it’s fun studying her. Sometimes she weeps over past sins, an orgy with a boy and an abortion afterwards. She complains that her ideas don’t tally with her acts.” Meanwhile, “Nurse” Alma begins to play the role of the mentally
unstable patient. She leaves a broken piece of glass for Elisabeth to step on in her bare feet and delights in it. She also prepares to sling a pot of boiling water into Elisabeth’s face. Then Alma says: “That scared you, didn’t it? For a second you were scared stiff. ‘Alma has gone mad,’ you thought. What kind of a person are you? I’ll give you something you won’t forget.” It is interesting to note that this breakdown of identity happens once the two women are away from the confines of the “establishment,” (the hospital, under the authoritarian control of the doctor) where such binary-based identities as nurse/patient are fixed.

It is during this dissolution of identity that something extraordinary occurs. It appears as though the film *Persona* sticks in the gate of the projector and slowly melts from the buildup of heat. The film appears to slip off its sprockets and all we see is a blank screen. Eventually, the film appears to rethread itself and the images and sounds of *Persona* resume once more. Has the search for absolute identity—the search itself—been so traumatic that when film attempts it, it can only self destruct? Or is *Persona* reminding us that we are merely watching a film, not experiencing a true reality or discovering an essential identity?

Identity continues its descent into complete instability as *Persona* progresses. Elisabeth’s husband, Mr. Vogler, arrives at the summer house, and mistakes Alma for his wife. Alma goes along with the role and appropriates Elisabeth’s “identity” as Mr. Vogler’s wife. During their exchange, Elisabeth has been standing right behind Alma without

59 The scene plays as follows:

Vogler: The doctor has explained things. But it’s hard to explain to our boy. I’ll do the best I can. There’s something deep down I can’t get at. One says one loves someone, or rather says one does. It’s tangible, as words I mean.

Alma: Mr. Vogler, I am not your wife.

Vogler: When one is loved in return, one forms a bond. It gives security. You see a chance of holding out. How can I say what’s on my mind without losing myself, without boring you?

Alma: I love you as much as ever. [Vogler removes sunglasses (a constant motif of filtering “reality” throughout the film) as she embraces him.] We have each other. We know each other’s thoughts. We love each other. . . Tell your little boy that mummy will soon be home. That mummy has been ill.

Vogler: I have a great tenderness for you.

Alma: I live on your tenderness.
speaking. Then the syuzhet moves to a close-up on Elisabeth while the background match-dissolves to show her husband and Alma in bed together. Alma cries out: “You’re a wonderful lover. You know that. [Then a marked change.] Give me an anaesthetic! Throw me away! I can’t go on! Leave me alone! I’m cold and rotten and bored. It’s nothing but lies and cheating.” All of the people involved in this scene (Mr. Vogler, Elisabeth, Alma, and perhaps even the spectator?) seem to accept the idea that Alma really is Elisabeth. The identity of the wife is not fixed, but is merely a role, performed this time by Alma instead of Elisabeth.

This destabilization of identity reaches its apex in the remarkable scene that is filmed twice. Here Alma says: “It’s a picture of your little boy, the one you tore up. Tell me about it, Elisabeth.” Elisabeth declines, by shaking her head. “All right, then I will.” Alma tells Elisabeth’s story of bearing a son that was repulsive to her. The syuzhet cuts from an over-the-shoulder shot from Alma looking at Elisabeth, to a cut of a front shot of Elisabeth, to match-dissolves that bring us closer and closer to Elisabeth. Then, suddenly, we realize that the entire scene is being shown again, this time in the reverse shot: we go from an over-the-shoulder shot from Elisabeth looking at Alma, to a cut of a front shot of Alma, to match dissolves which bring us closer and closer to Alma, all as the same speech is being told again. Alma ends the speech: “I’m not like you. I don’t feel as you do. I am Sister Alma. I’m only here to help you. I am not Elisabeth Vogler. You are Elisabeth Vogler. I love . . . I haven’t . . .” Then suddenly, half of Alma’s face is placed next to the other half of Elisabeth’s face. Identity has become so fluid that we can’t tell the two women apart. *Persona* testifies that identity is a role rather than an essence.

The film ends with the boy from the opening sequence reaching out as if to touch the alternating images of Alma and Elisabeth, which he can’t quite grasp. Essentialized identity does not exist, no matter how hard we reach for it. It’s the reaching, in fact, that makes the film melt in the projector from trying (as happens in the middle of the movie) or make the projector light goes out, as the film *Persona* turns itself off (as happens at the end).

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60Cohen believes that this moment represents the breaking of “the space-time-psyche barrier [by] . . . photographing a dissolving ego” (Cohen 229). Rather than express this in psychoanalytic terms, I prefer to see it in stylistic terms: *Persona’s* fractured, dysphoric style flows from it nihilistic structure.
*Persona* has demonstrated the impossibility of discovering absolute identity in a world where it doesn’t exist.

The problem of identity in *Persona* is different from that of *Chinatown*. In *Chinatown*, as in traditional film noir, identity is at first hidden but eventually comes to light. It takes several slaps from Gittes, but eventually Mrs. Mulwray reveals that the young girl is both her sister and her daughter. Such a resolution of identity never arrives in *Persona*, in fact, it demonstrates its impossibility. The two films derive from distinct styles—*Chinatown* from film noir and *Persona* from European Art Cinema. Even though both can trace their stylistic genealogy back to a philosophical foundation of existentialism, they remain different from each other.

One crucial aspect of their distinct nature is that above all, European art films of the 1960s reveal themselves as modernist critiques of realist films. As D. N. Rodowick writes, there is a “European ‘narrative’ tradition that from Eisenstein to Godard is concerned with problematizing cinematic illusionism by exploiting, through various montage strategies, the heterogeneity of the semiotic channels available to film” (Rodowick 4). When Fellini creates indecipherable images juxtaposed against each other in *Juliet of the Spirits*, he not only jars the spectator, but rejects the realist system which he sees as naturally and invisibly delivering ideology. When Michel makes a Humphrey Bogart-like move in *Breathless*, the syuzhet sets us up with expectations of a cool-mannered detective who eventually triumphs; instead Michel bumbles around Paris before being shot unglamorously in the street. *Breathless* makes a statement about the impossibility of characters and narratives like those in typical Bogart films. When the film *Persona* burns in the projector, it too critiques realist films. It reminds us that any attempt to find essential identity or meaning is a fruitless quest. All we have left are constructed filmic artifacts rather than transcendental truths. This agenda differs greatly from film noir, and is, in fact, a critique that includes it.

With its push from existentialism past the boundaries of nihilism, *Persona* comes the closest to the dysphoric style of any film up to this point. The dysphoric style is indebted to not only the nihilistic foundation it begins to build, but also the stylistic elements it uses to build that structure. For instance, *Persona’s* opening images which create never-filled gaps are echoed in dysphoric films such as *Pi* (1998). In *Pi*, many questions are raised that are never answered. What does the dripping blood signify? What is the meaning of the Hasidic Jew?
Of what importance is the man who sings, “I only have eyes for you?” These gaps remain unfilled.\footnote{See Chapter 1 for a more complete examination of these unanswerable questions.} The cinematic moment where the film \textit{Persona} seems to jam in the projector finds a stylistic legacy in the opening of \textit{SLC Punk} (1998), where that film also appears to jam in the projector. Both remind us that films aren’t reality, but merely man-made artifacts. In Rodowick’s language, it “disturbs the unity and self-presence of the [spectator] by discouraging identification and by drawing attention to the work of its own textual processes” (Rodowick 12-13). The distinction, however, is that while \textit{Persona} is critiquing realism, \textit{SLC Punk} rejects not only realism, but all systems. \textit{Persona}’s concern for the loss of absolute identity passes down a legacy in dysphoric form to \textit{Lost Highway} (David Lynch, 1997). \textit{Lost Highway} features an extreme rupture where the lead character suddenly and inexplicably morphs into a different character played by a different actor.\footnote{For more on this, see Chapter 2.} Identity becomes even more impossible to pin down.

The difference, of course, is that the agenda behind European Art Cinema is a political one. Modernist film wants to disrupt realism, to problematize the normative assumptions of family life and other issues. The dysphoric style, by contrast, deals more with psychological concerns. \textit{Pi} uses stylistic techniques to convey a growing sense of madness; \textit{SLC Punk} employs them to represent a drug-induced state; \textit{Lost Highway} creates a great state of unresolved confusion. Whereas modernist film sees realist representation as a political problem, the dysphoric style concerns itself with more personal psychological battles. It critiques realism as a set of conventions as well, but is less concerned with that agenda than with conveying the sense that there is nothing left to believe in anyway.

\textbf{The Legacy Left by Film Noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s}

The dysphoric style derives from both the evolving film noir style and the European Art Cinema style. It receives a different stylistic legacy from each. From film noir the dysphoric style borrows the notion of anxiety arising from a sense of hidden danger. This manifests itself in narrations filled with disorientation, pessimism, and hopelessness. It constructs anti-hero protagonists who are betrayed by those around them. It maintains a
high level of subjectivity. It delights creating narrative gaps and fluid temporality that work
to block clear narrative causality and understanding. It creates space that is darkly lit and
difficult to comprehend.

From European Art Cinema of the 1960s, the dysphoric style also appropriates a
sense of anxiety, but this time it is due to the meaningless of life, rather than some hidden,
lurking danger as we saw in film noir. This also creates narrations of disorientation,
pessimism, and hopelessness, but it’s of a more philosophical nature than the atmospheric
manifestation in film noir. From European Art Cinema, the dysphoric style receives lonely
protagonists who lack clear goals. It borrows a loose sense of causality and open endings. It
takes rough, fragmented, unestablished space that is naturally lit. It delights in showing the
existence of people, rather than their glorification. It demonstrates the problem of issues
like identity and systems like realism.

The dysphoric style is hybrid of the evolving styles of film noir and European Art
Cinema of the 1960s. At the same time, it is distinct from both of them. It leaves
existentialism by sliding into nihilism. Where the two former styles eventually found some
sense of purpose—even if it is through individual choice and responsibility—the dysphoric
style rejects these. It appropriates the elements it needs from these sources and then
transforms them to suit its new philosophical needs.

*Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) exemplifies the two genealogical lines of the
dysphoric style’s family tree. The film opens immediately into unestablished dysphoric
space. Against a surprisingly cheery jitterbug score, dancing figures float in space against a
purple background, some in silhouette and some in color. But the figures overlap each other
like cut-outs on a table. The space is claustrophobic and difficult to comprehend. The first
time we see Betty’s (the protagonist’s) face, it is obscured by three overexposed figures. The
syuzhet then cuts to a bedroom with unfocused space. These
characteristics—unestablished space, claustrophobic space, and obscured space—are
elements derived from film noir.

Iconic material from film noir continues to make up *Mulholland Drive*. A brunette
woman is being driven through the darkness of the night when the car stops and a hit man
in the front seat prepares to shoot her. Suddenly, a car smashes into their car, saving the
woman’s life but leaving her with amnesia. Such noir elements (a night setting, ominous hit
men, and a disoriented protagonist) are soon joined to elements from European art cinema. The brunette eventually finds herself living in the same house as Betty, a fresh-faced young woman who just moved to Hollywood. The brunette begins to call herself Rita, after a poster of Rita Hayworth she sees in the house. Rita describes her foremost problem to Betty: “I don’t know who I am.” This concern for identity clearly owes a debt to European Art Cinema. Betty soon comes up with a plan to discover Rita’s true identity: “There must be a police report. We can call anonymously from a pay phone, just to see if there was an accident. Come on, it’ll be just like in the movies. We can pretend to be someone else.” The notion of identity as a role one plays flows down from films like *Persona*.

Rita remembers a name: Diane Selwyn. Betty volunteers to help her find this person in hopes that she might be the means to discovering Rita’s identity. The two women find an address and take a cab to find this woman. On the way there, Rita ducks down in the cab as they pass a car with two men in sunglasses. The cab drops them off behind the house. As the two women walk toward the apartment where Diane lives, the syuzhet presents visual codes from their point of view. Such subjective spatial codes are a hallmark of film noir. As they are about to get to the door of the apartment, they see one of the men in sunglasses and duck behind the bushes. Betty says, “Now you’ve got me scared.” The two women eventually break into Diane’s apartment. The lighting is very dark, from the noir tradition. Covering their noses and mouths, they enter the bedroom to discover Diane’s rotting corpse. They scream and run out of the apartment. They were not expecting dangerous hit men to be watching the house, nor were they prepared for a rotting corpse. The notion of an unseen, lurking danger is a legacy bequeathed to the dysphoric style from film noir.

Eventually, Rita starts to become more like Betty. She becomes more involved in discovering her identity. She begins wearing a blond wig that looks just like Betty’s hair. At one point, she crawls into Betty’s bed and the two women merge even further by making love. The camera dissolves to a shot showing their fingers intertwined and pans up the two sleeping women. We see Rita’s profile in the foreground which melts into Betty’s straight-on face in the background so that their two mouths make one mouth, Rita’s nose becomes the main nose, and each woman’s eye becomes one eye of a new two-sided face. *Mulholland Drive* has, for a moment, become a modern-day *Persona*, not only mimicking the exploration of identity, but providing a visual homage to the earlier film.
Betty and Rita go to the “Silencio” theater, where a circus-like master of ceremonies bellows out about how “there is no band in the orchestra pit. This is all a recording. And yet we hear a band. . . . a muted trumpet.” A man comes out and plays a trumpet. Suddenly, he puts the instrument down, but the trumpet music continues. The master of ceremonies disappears in a cloud of smoke. A woman comes out and sings for a long time, reminiscent of long takes in films such as 400 Blows, where the syuzhet simply shows Antoine riding a gravitron for about four minutes without concern for the length of the experience. Near the end of her song, the woman startlingly collapses, but her singing continues. Mulholland Drive, like the European Art Cinema from whence it partially derives, is attacking realism. It reminds the audience that no matter how invested in these characters we have become, it is all just an illusion. But even more than this, the dysphoric style attacks all systems, even as it peers into the great void of nothingness.

That illusion folds in upon itself in a remarkably dysphoric fashion during the last 27 minutes of the film. After peeking into a mysterious blue box, Betty morphs into a different character named Diane and Rita morphs into a new character named Camilla. Temporality becomes extremely fragmented and unchronological. For instance, in one scene, a neighbor retrieves her ashtray from Diane’s apartment. In the subsequent scene, the ashtray is mysteriously back on the table. Subjectivity becomes heightened in scenes such as one where Diane sees Irene and her male companion as tiny little people who crawl in under the door. No explanation is ever given for this huge rupture where the identities of the two protagonists simply change and no other characters question it. What was begun in Persona reaches a startling nihilistic extreme in Mulholland Drive where identity not only becomes fluid, but shatters altogether.

Mulholland Drive owes a stylistic debt in causality, temporality, and spatiality, to both film noir and the European Art Cinema of the 1960s. From film noir it adopts the notion of anxiety arising from hidden evil. It creates an atmosphere of pessimism and homelessness. It fragments temporality. It constructs dark, unclear, fragmented space with a high level of subjectivity. From European Art Cinema it borrows the philosophical notion of the meaninglessness of life. It creates a very loose, at times non-existent, type of causality. It has an open ending where many, many things remain hopelessly unresolved. Mulholland Drive exemplifies the dysphoric style by showing that it necessarily draws from both film noir
and the European Art Cinema stylistic traditions, and then combines them in a way that renders it distinct from both. Merely calling this an anti-Hollywood aesthetic is crude and inadequate. It doesn’t distinguish the complexity of the dysphoric style’s debt to both film noir and European Art Cinema, nor does it allow the dysphoric style to be located in history.
CONCLUSION:
THE VALUE OF A STYLISTIC ACCOUNT

Although I have delineated contemporary American independent cinema as 1989-present, that is merely for convenience in talking about a specific group of films. There certainly is an ebb and flow of characteristics within that group. I see this cinema as gravitating towards more nihilism, more darkness, and more hopelessness in the years leading up to and following the events of 9/11. For instance, although the bleakness of existence in Sex, Lies, and Videotape (1989) is palpable, it is not as bleak as, say, Requiem for a Dream (Darren Aronofsky, 2000), Raising Victor Vargas (Peter Sollett, 2003), thirteen (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003), Tarnation (Jonathan Caouette, 2004), or Reefer Madness (Andy Fickman, 2005).

Many of the same historical conditions that produced the dysphoric style also influence other cinemas. In Hollywood, films like Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) and The Hours (Stephen Daldry, 2002) begin delving into the bleakness of nihilism along with accompanying elements of the dysphoric style. As Kristin Thompson explains: “the reason for the success of the independent films was not so much that they were taking over Hollywood as that Hollywood was taking them over” (Storytelling 342).

Foreign cinemas also begin tapping into certain elements of the dysphoric style. In England, Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996), Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels (Guy Ritchie, 1999), and Trauma (Marc Evans, 2004) each express and produce nihilism with its accompanying dysphoric style. In France, it is evident in Hate (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) and The Dreamlife of Angels (Erick Zonca, 1998). It comes out of Japan in Zatoichi (Takeshi Kitano, 2003). In Spain it is present in Lovers of the Arctic Circle (Julio Medem, 1998), Talk to Her (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002), and Bad Education (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004). In Mexico, it is seen in Amores Perros (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), Y Tu Mama Tambien (Alfonso Cuaron, 2002), and 21 Grams (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003). In South American
One should note that during bleak conditions, there are usually two cinematic responses. One is to go even further into the darkness, the other is to create ways to escape it. During the 1940s and ‘50s, noir went further into the darkness while this was also the heyday of the musical—an optimistic way to forget about the problems of society. We see a similar dichotomy during the harshness of the 1970s due to fallout over disheartening national events like the Vietnam War and Watergate. Some films like Airport (1970), The Poseidon Adventure (1972), The Exorcist (1974), The Towering Inferno (1975), and The Omen (1976) tend to go deeper into the darkness. Other films, such as Star Wars (1977), Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), and Superman (1979) attempt to escape it. In the post-9/11 period, the darkness of the dysphoric style contrasts with happy, good-prevailing endings of popular fantasy and superhero films such as The Lord of the Rings (2001-03), Spider-Man I and II (2002, 2004), X-Men, X-2, and X-Men 3 (2000, 2003, 2006), The Fantastic Four (2005), and Superman Returns (2006).

What makes the dysphoric style distinct from not only its progenitors (such as film noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s) but also its progeny (some examples in foreign cinemas, as well as the rare Hollywood film) is that the dysphoric style casts radical doubt on the ability of causality, time, and space to function. Where a film like Sin City (Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller, and Quentin Tarantino, 2005) displays several elements of the dysphoric style (such as anti-hero protagonists, fragmented temporality, and unclear space), it still ends by placing faith in those systems (the anti-heroes make choices that determine their futures; the temporality eventually fills in all gaps; the space at last comes together to clearly show resolution). A film like Memento not only refuses to perform those maneuvers, but casts doubt on the ability of narrative, time and space to perform them at all.

Where do I see the dysphoric style going? I believe that just as film noir thrived during bleak conditions, the dysphoric style will continue to flourish during similar times, even as it is appropriated and changed from place to place and condition to condition. Some critics have characterized film noir as being one of many ongoing cycles throughout history: “Greek tragedy, Jacobean drama and the Romantic Agony (to name three black cycles) are earlier responses to epochs of disillusionment and alienation” (Durgnat 37). If so,

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63One should note that during bleak conditions, there are usually two cinematic responses. One is to go even further into the darkness, the other is to create ways to escape it. During the 1940s and ‘50s, noir went further into the darkness while this was also the heyday of the musical—an optimistic way to forget about the problems of society. We see a similar dichotomy during the harshness of the 1970s due to fallout over disheartening national events like the Vietnam War and Watergate. Some films like Airport (1970), The Poseidon Adventure (1972), The Exorcist (1974), The Towering Inferno (1975), and The Omen (1976) tend to go deeper into the darkness. Other films, such as Star Wars (1977), Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), and Superman (1979) attempt to escape it. In the post-9/11 period, the darkness of the dysphoric style contrasts with happy, good-prevailing endings of popular fantasy and superhero films such as The Lord of the Rings (2001-03), Spider-Man I and II (2002, 2004), X-Men, X-2, and X-Men 3 (2000, 2003, 2006), The Fantastic Four (2005), and Superman Returns (2006).
then we are undoubtedly in a later cycle of noir. Instead of its existential manifestation, it is now in a nihilistic form. And if this is so, then perhaps it will continue on at different times, in different places, with different manifestations, as historical conditions warrant.

The same could be said for the legacy of the style of European Art Cinema of the 1960s. That style also evolved, changing from an existentialist view to a nihilist one as historical circumstances provided. Combining with the evolved film noir style, it comes forth in this particular manifestation as the dysphoric style. Here it can not only reject realism, but go farther into the rejection of all meaning, even that attempted by individual choice.

Levy attempts to explain what contemporary American independent cinema is doing when he argues that it has become the new art cinema of the United States, filling a lack that was brought on by the major studios’ commitment to big-budget “event” movies and its subsequent abandonment of “serious, issue-oriented, provocative films” (Levy 21). A stylistic genealogy of the dysphoric style provides a more interesting framework for interrogating this cinema than Levy can offer. Once we see that the dysphoric style not only reflects a particular worldview but also produces it, a more discerning understanding is had. The dysphoric style is not only coming from a particular mode of production but intervening in a culture. It’s not just anti-Hollywood in its serious and provocative orientation, but also providing a particular way of understanding the construction of national identity, gender, and homelife. Levy’s description—although helpful in its ability to perceive a thematic consistency in this group style—doesn’t go far enough to enable us to see how this cinema not only reflects nihilism but produces it.

In the past, group styles have helped critics to understand cultures in a different way. The group style of film noir helped critics to see mid-twentieth-century U.S culture as not only fervently patriotic (as declared by the national discourse) but simultaneously as experiencing a crisis of homelife brought on by mobile women. Critics who saw Truffaut and Godard as a particular style were able to think of postwar culture in France with more complexity. Not only was there a surge in French patriotism, but also an undercurrent of

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64 This possibility is raised by Grist who sees neo-noir as being one of the later incarnations of the noir cycle (Grist, “Moving,” 267-85).
existential angst that was being felt in the war-torn nation. Similarly, by understanding dysphoric cinema as a group style we will be able to ask and answer questions about post-1989 U.S. culture differently.

Where film noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s challenge certain narratives of national identity, the dysphoric style borrows from those predecessors to perform a similar maneuver. We see this in a film like *SLC Punk* which not only testifies that we are a nation of malls, but also that, at the same time, we can’t stand that fact. A film like *Pi* shows us that this is a nation that delights in producing scientists, with the downfall being that it all ends in madness.

How does the inheritance of the group style play a part in the construction of national identity? From film noir, the dysphoric style borrows the notion of an “outsider” protagonist whose attitude is critical of the American dream, showing instead how it has become the American nightmare. Such an element stands in visible contrast to the national discourse of the time which supported World War II (with its accompanying dropping of the atomic bomb as a means of achieving its victory), and heralded the patriotic fervor inherent in the Cold War. Noir’s suppressed narration and fragmented temporality advocates the idea of the great chasm that was forming between what the national discourse was describing and the anxiety that was felt by its citizens. Noir’s off-setting space reminds that even in such supposed patriotic eras as World War II and the Cold War, things were not seen by everyone as being right with the world. There is a questioning of the direction the nation is heading. Meanwhile, from the style of the European Art Cinema, the dysphoric style borrows a loose sense of causality and open endings, representative of a worldview where difficult philosophical questions were being discovered as unresolvable. Its experimentation with new cinematic styles demonstrates its distrust of tradition and authority. Its rough, naturally lit space (that shows the existence of people, rather than their glorification) triumphs an identification with the working-class rather than the elite. Thus, the dysphoric style not only adopts the style of these predecessors, but the underlying ideology reflected in them. Such a

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We see this exemplified in the existential struggles of characters such as Antoine and Michel who are powerless against the meaninglessness of life that seeks to overcome them.
question of politics could not be satisfactorily answered by looking to means of production or an oppositional aesthetic. Concerns of budget or of showing what this cinema is not are too crude to demonstrate this cinema’s complex stylistic and ideological heritage. Not only this, but they are inadequate for showing how this cinema enables us to look at a culture differently.

Along with the question of national identity, the dysphoric style concerns itself with the construction of gender. The question of how gender changes in contemporary American independent cinema can best be handled by means of stylistic comparison. Film noir constructed a femme fatale, where the female was seen as primarily sexual and duplicitous. However, we saw that this figure was transformed as it evolved into the dysphoric style. Sexuality and betrayal were soon no longer seen as primarily feminine traits, but were more generally dispersed over a range of characters, regardless of sex. From the European Art Cinema come complex females like Juliet, whose subjective view is not only endorsed but made the viewpoint of the film. In Breathless, Patricia makes the decision to call the police while Michel passively drifts along. In Persona, Alma and Elizabeth remind us of the impossibility of essential identity, sexuality, or roles. Mode of production or anti-aesthetic are inadequate for addressing such questions of gender because neither of them are able to account for the stylistic history that contributes to the shaping of gender in this cinema, nor are they able to show how this cinema helps us to think of the culture’s construction of gender in a more complex manner.

Another set of concerns has to do with how the nation perceives homelife. As we saw in film noir, the traditional, nurturing construct of the home was rejected for one that depicted a harsh, transient life on the streets. Loners like Walter Neff from Double Indemnity, Mike Hammer in Kiss Me Deadly, or Frank Bigelow in D.O.A. have no nurturing homes to run to for safety; in fact the dangers of the street follow them into their lonely homes. This notion gets even bleaker as it evolves from noir into the dysphoric style. Soon the homes themselves become places of corruption and abuse. From European Art Cinema, similar but distinct elements come forth. Antoine is slapped or ignored by his parents. Juliet is betrayed by her husband. Anna’s disappearance is quickly forgotten while the other characters have sexual encounters on the streets, uninterested in nurturing homes. Alma and Elizabeth turn their backs on children by ignoring them or having an abortion, and
Elizabeth’s husband makes love to Elizabeth in a subjective or metaphorical manner. The dysphoric style borrows this notion of a homelife in crisis from both film noir and European Art Cinema of the 1960s, but transforms it into something different. In the dysphoric style homelife becomes irredeemably pathological. Memento, for instance, gives us Lenny who continues an insane game of killing different people to avenge his dead wife, when we can’t even be certain that he wasn’t the one who killed her himself. SLC Punk, Bully, Kids, and The Chumsscrubber all show families that are indifferent or oblivious to the crises of their families. Loverboy constructs a mother who becomes so obsessed with her six-year-old son that she tries to murder the both of them.

It would be too hasty to say the nuclear family is in ruins in post-1989 U.S. culture, as many people continue to inhabit that model. Nevertheless, there is clearly something changing with homelife in this culture. In the United States from 1970 to 2003, marriage declined while divorce increased. More and more children grew up in single-parent homes, the product of divorce or parent abandonment. Child abuse rose. The negative effects of these issues began to manifest themselves in the lives of the children. The presence of the

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66 The percentage of married males drops from 65.4% to 55.4% from 1970 to 2003. The percentage of married females drops from 59.7% to 51.6% from 1970 to 2003. The percentage of separated/divorced males rises from 3.5% to 10.1% from 1970 to 2003. The percentage of separated/divorced females rises from 5.7% to 13.3% from 1970 to 2003 (America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003, U.S. Census Bureau, issued Nov. 2004, 14). The proportion of marriages ending in divorce continues to grow in the latter half of the twentieth century, nearing the 60% level by 1992 (Shapiro and Lambert 397).

67 Married-couple households with their own children decline from 40% of all households in 1970 to 23% of all households in 2003 (America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003, U.S. Census Bureau, issued Nov. 2004, 2). Between 1970 and 1990, the number of births to unmarried women relative to those of married women increased (America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003, U.S. Census Bureau, issued Nov. 2004, 5). From 1970 to 2003 the proportion of single-mother families grew from 12% to 26% and that of single-father families grew from 1% to 6% (America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003, U.S. Census Bureau, issued Nov. 2004, 8).

68 A 1993 report found that half of all teenagers are hit by a parent and the percentage increases with younger children (Flynn 972).

69 Children of divorced parents are less likely to finish high school, go to college, or finish college. They are more likely to have lower occupational status and earnings. They
nurturing homes of previous generations became fewer and fewer. Dysphoric cinema triumphs a kind of messed-up youth culture arising from these factors. Not only many of its directors but also many of its spectators come from such a homelife and thus share a particular way of looking at society. Dysphoric films, in turn, reinforce a nihilistic set of values. Clearly the dysphoric style helps us to understand the family with more complexity.

My dissertation provides a more fulfilling interrogation of contemporary American independent cinema. We can see it as unique blend of the styles and ideologies of film noir and European Art Cinema. We can understand how its style enables us to see its culture in a particular way. We can see how it not only reflects but produces a culture of nihilism. We can witness its ability to cast radical doubt on narrative, time, and space. Without an account of this cinema’s style, we are left with the meaningless term “independent film.” The traditional accounts of mode of production or anti-Hollywood aesthetic are inadequate for exploring such issues. It’s only through a stylistic account that we can begin to evaluate this cinema’s history, politics, and social issues.
### APPENDIX A

*Following’s Fabula in Chronological Order*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Syuzhet Cues</th>
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<tr>
<td>A/3</td>
<td>4:25-16:37</td>
<td>Bill types: “Most important rule: if I found out where somebody lives, then I never follow the same person twice. That was the rule I broke first.” Bill, with a beard, goes into a café and watches someone. Cobb sits down at his table: “You’re obviously not a policeman so why are you following me?” Cobb lets Bill look in his bag. Cobb puts gloves on, takes Bill to an apartment. They learn things about the people who own the place they are burgling. “It’s about interrupting someone’s life. Make them think why they wanted all this stuff, what it’s for. If you take it away, you show them what they had. Take anything you heart desires. This is the point: breaking in, finding out who they really are, people you’ll never meet.” When the owners come home, they talk their way out: “We’re with the agency.”</td>
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<td>B/6</td>
<td>22:19-24:49</td>
<td>Bearded Bill and Cobb go into another place. They find stuff, think the guy’s unemployed, and decide to leave quickly.</td>
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<td>C/10</td>
<td>29:21-34:40</td>
<td>Bearded Bill and Cobb break into an apartment with a wrench. They go through an underwear drawer. Cobb, looking at a picture of The Blonde, whose place this is, says: “Look at her; she’s a babe.” Cobb takes one earring. Bill takes CD and pictures of The Blonde. Cobb puts the earring in the piano bench. They go to a place that Cobb had earlier broken in to and changed the locks.</td>
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<td>D/13</td>
<td>40:38-43:13</td>
<td>Cobb: “You’re developing a taste for it.” At a restaurant, Cobb and bearded Bill eat a fine dinner together. Cobb: “You’re going to pay for it. Actually, D. Lloyd will pay for it.” Bill signs an application for the credit card. The woman from the first break-in recognizes them, even though she’s with her first boyfriend now. Cobb: “If you’re so nervous, why don’t you change your appearance?”</td>
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<td>E/14</td>
<td>43:14-48:37</td>
<td>Bill types at the place where they burgled. (We recognize the tapes and the typewriter.) Bill shaves and cuts his hair. Bill gets the Blonde’s stolen CDs, candlesticks, books, box, pictures, out of her bag. “Everybody has a box.” He opens the box. It has a seahorse, money, necklace, etc. He calls Cobb. “I’ll have a go on my own and give you half.” Cobb, with The Blonde: “It’s perfect. I even got him to change his appearance.”</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>F/4 16:38-21:29</td>
<td>Clean-shaven Bill wanders down the stairs and into a bar. He offers to buy The Blonde a drink; she says she’s with the owner of the place. “My name’s Daniel Lloyd.” She says, “Say something to me.” Then she slaps him. She says, “I’ll see you outside in ten minutes.” They go to Bill’s place. The Blonde says she got burgled yesterday. Bill: “What did it feel like getting burgled?” The Blonde: “Great.” Bill: “How’s the guy dangerous?” Girl: “Criminal, pornography. It took me a long time to realize the kinds of things he was capable of.” Her boyfriend wanders into a place.</td>
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<td>G/7 24:50-28:26</td>
<td>Shaved Bill invited into The Blonde’s place. The Blonde talks about how burglars rifled through her underwear. “They took one of my earrings; not both.” Bill: “Why just one?” The Blonde: “It gives me something to talk about.” Bill goes upstairs and kisses The Blonde.</td>
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<td>H/11 34:41-37:39</td>
<td>Shaved Bill and The Blonde at some basement bar, talking at a table. Bill: “You never explained to me why you were so afraid of him.” [Flashback] The Blonde tells the story of how a bald man took a hammer to this guy, smashed his fingers, and then his skull. The Blonde: “He made a mess on my carpet.” Bill: “Were you working for this guy?” The Blonde storms off. “You better find somebody else to tell you little stories.” She forgets her credit card.</td>
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<td>I/16 and 2 50:34-57:29 and 4:12-4:24</td>
<td>50:34 Clean-shaven Bill rings the bell of The Blonde’s house and comes in because he wants to apologize. He explains to the Blonde that he broke into her house. Bill wonders why The Blonde is still seeing the bald guy. She says he’s blackmailing her with photos of herself. Money and the photos are in the safe and she knows the combination. Clean shaven Bill meets Cobb who says, “You’re late.” Bill tells Cobb about the safe. Bill says, “I’m seeing someone. The woman whose house we hit.” Cobb asks, “Have you slept with her?” Bill replies in the affirmative. Cobb beats him up and stuffs a rubber glove in his mouth. 56:40 Bill coughs the rubber glove out of his mouth [also at 4:12]. He stands up. Beat-up Bill types. Bill coughs out the glove.</td>
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<tr>
<td>J/17 57:30-59:00</td>
<td>The Blonde: “Did you have to beat him?” Cobb: “Did you have to sleep with him?” Cobb: “Any witness may put me there at the time of death. An old lady beaten to death. He’s a loner. He’s our man.”</td>
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<td>K/8 28:27-28:29</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill with sunglasses watches door of the place the bald guy entered.</td>
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<td>L/5 21:30-22:18</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill calls Cobb and asks advice about a job. Cobb tells him to get a hammer.</td>
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<td>M/9 28:30-29:20</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill takes a hammer and puts on rubber gloves.</td>
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<td>N/12 37:40-40:37</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill breaks in, wanders around a dark kitchen. He finds a safe, opens it, gets out money and looks for a bag. He can’t find one. He uses tape to secure the money to his body.</td>
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<td>O/15 48:38-50:33</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill tapes the cash he’s stealing to himself. Somebody comes in. Bill takes the hammer, hits him on the head, and runs.</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>P/18</td>
<td>Beat-up Bill pulls the money off himself. He opens the envelope. He looks at the pictures; they aren’t pornographic. He goes to The Blonde, slaps her, and confronts her. She explains: “For a friend. He needs a decoy. Somebody who uses his methods. Cobb. He found an old lady. Somebody saw him. He’s a thief, not a murderer. Cobb thought you were perfect.” Bill: “How could you do this to me?” The Blonde: “You’ve got the money. You’ve never killed the lady. They’d pull you in, ask you about the woman.” Bill: “It’s his blood on my hammer.” “You could back up my story.” The Blonde: “I won’t.”</td>
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<td>Q/1</td>
<td>Hand going in a glove; opening a box; looking at pictures, trinkets. V/O: “I started shadowing, following.” Unseen voice: “Who?” [We can’t see who is talking during the V/O]. Shaky camera as Bill follows people. We see Bill being questioned by The Policeman. Bill: “I’m a writer, I was gathering material for my characters. When it stopped being random, that’s when it started going wrong. Other people are interesting to me.”</td>
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<td>R/19</td>
<td>Bill finishes telling his story to The Policeman: “That’s it.” Policeman: “We don’t have any unsolved murders of old ladies. There’s no such ongoing investigation. And we don’t know this Mr. Cobb of yours.”</td>
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<td>S/20</td>
<td>The Blonde and Cobb talk. Cobb puts on gloves and wipes glasses clean. “The old man was very specific about how we should do things. He’s letting me keep the money from his safe. He said something about your being a witness to an incident in this very room.” Crosscut back to The Policeman and Bill. (And then back and forth to Cobb and The Blonde.) The Policeman: “We found her body this morning. We found a hammer with two types of blood. All her fingers were smashed. You must have tortured her to get the information. We found passport photos of the deceased in your flat. We also found this pearl earring that matched one on the dead girl’s body.” Bill: “Check the address! Find Cobb.” Policeman: “We checked the address. The flat belongs to a Mr. D. Lloyd. His flat was burgled while he was away on holiday. Not much was missing but his new credit card has not yet arrived. We found this [the missing credit card] at your flat.”</td>
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<td>T/21</td>
<td>Final shot: Cobb gets away without being caught. Wrong is not brought to justice. The innocent man, Bill, will pay for the Blonde’s murder, which Cobb committed. There are no absolute condemnations for the guilty or redemptions for the innocent.</td>
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<td>U/22</td>
<td>Credits: typed, white letters against a black background. The music ends at 69:40, a full 1:23 before the credits do.</td>
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APPENDIX B

*Pulp Fiction*'s Four Stories in Syuzhet Order

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<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Syuzhet Cues</th>
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<td>B</td>
<td><strong>Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill.</strong> The film opens <em>in media res</em> as a young couple, Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, decide that instead of robbing a bank, they will simply rob the grill where they happen to be eating breakfast. The space is composed in classical Hollywood style, with shot/reverse shots showing the action leading up to the beginning of the crime. The opening credits then play “Misirlu,” some ’60s surfer music performed by Dick Dale. (For more on this song’s influence in the film, see Woods 111). Halfway through the opening credits, we hear a sound like the tuning of a radio dial and a new song, “Jungle Boogie” starts to play. The syuzhet cues us that we are in postmodern territory through its use of this pop-culture song.</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td><strong>Vincent and Jules on a Hit.</strong> Vincent and Jules, two hitmen driving in a car en route to a killing, discuss how a McDonald’s Quarter Pounder is known as a “Royale” in France because of the metric system. They arrive at the soon-to-be-victims’ apartment, talking about whether or not foot massages are significant. Jules explains that Marsellus once threw someone off a four-story balcony for giving his wife Mia a foot massage. This terrifies Vincent who has been chosen by Marsellus to look after Mia while he is out of town. They check the time: 7:22 a.m. They’re early, so they walk down the hall and continue this conversation. Then it’s time to “get into character” (Tarantino 23). They enter the apartment where Jules talks with its inhabitants, Marvin, Brett, and Roger, about how a Quarter Pounder is known as a “Royale” in France because of the metric system. Soon, a briefcase is brought forth (the contents of which are not revealed by the syuzhet to the spectator.) Vincent checks out the briefcase and assures Jules that “We’re happy” (28). Jules then shoots and kills Roger. Brett is terrified as Jules continues to talk to him about how the boys wronged Marsellus. He gives an embroidered account of Ezekiel 25:17. He and Vincent then shoot Brett several times, and the screen fades to black.</td>
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| C     | **Vincent Escorts Mia.** At his bar, Marsellus tells Butch to purposefully lose the upcoming fight. Vincent and Jules arrive with the attache case and meet Marsellus. The syuzhet keeps the spectator from seeing Marsellus’ face, thus endowing him with mystery and power, a motivated cinematographic technique utilized by many classical films of the past.

   In the next scene, Vincent buys some drugs from Lance and shoots up in classically motivated slow motion, the syuzhet manipulating duration to construct a space that is like Vincent’s drug-induced state.

   At night, Vincent goes to Marsellus’ house where his wife, Mia, is sniffing cocaine. They go together to Jackrabbit Slim’s, one of the “1950s diners [that] have sprung up all over LA” (Tarantino 51). The two of them make awkward conversation and then enter a dance contest. Back at Mia’s house, we crosscut between Vincent, who is in the bathroom trying to talk himself into leaving before anything happens between the two of them, and Mia, who finds heroin in Vincent’s pocket and snorts it like cocaine, causing her to go unconscious. Vincent gets her quickly to Lance’s house where the syuzhet’s use of a hand-held camera with swish pans classically conveys cues of Vincent’s anxiety that if Mia dies, he’s a “greasespotted.” Vincent and Lance argue about who will give Mia an adrenaline shot directly into her heart. The task falls to Vincent, who, after some anxiety, successfully accomplishes it and Mia wakes up with a start. Back at Mia’s house, she and Vincent vow not to tell Marsellus about this incident. |
**Butch, Fabienne, and the Gold Watch.** At the beginning of this section, the syuzhet plays with temporal order by giving us a flashback to 1972 when a five-year-old boy named Butch meets a Captain Coons who served with his father in the Vietnam War. Coons tells Butch a three-generational story about a gold watch: Butch’s great-grandfather wore it during WWI; his grandfather had it during WWII but then died in combat; while in a Vietnam prison camp, his father and Captain Coons kept it safe “up [their] ass[es]” (Tarantino 86), thus completing its “dark journey down through the generations” (Ebert, “Pulp” n.p.).

The syuzhet then brings the spectator to the present; Butch wins the fight (disobeying Marsellus’ orders) and escapes in a taxi, where he learns that his boxing opponent has died. He goes to the hotel where his girlfriend, Fabienne, is waiting. The next morning they realize that Fabienne forgot to bring Butch’s watch from the house. Butch, knowing the risk he’s taking, goes back to his home to retrieve it. Not only does he safely retrieve the watch, but he shoots and kills an unknowing Vincent who is coming out of the bathroom. As Butch leaves in his car, he stops at a red light where Marsellus is crossing the road. Butch slams on the gas pedal, running into Marsellus; then he coasts into the intersection where he’s hit by another car. Both wounded, Marsellus chases Butch into a pawn shop where Maynard, the owner, ties them up, gets his brother Zed, and another masked, leather-clad character known as the Gimp. While Maynard and Zed rape Marsellus, Butch breaks free, hangs the Gimp, and is about to escape when he realizes he can’t let anyone go through what Marsellus is going through. He goes back with a samurai sword and frees Marsellus from his redneck captors. Marsellus forgives Butch for not throwing the fight. Butch steals a motorcycle named “Grace,” gets Fabienne, and the two of them ride off together to safety.

**Vincent and Jules Finish the Hit and Clean Up.** Here the syuzhet plays with temporal order again, cueing the spectator of a return to the earlier segment of Vincent and Jules as they are about to shoot Brett. The particular cue that does this is Jules’ memorable, wrongly quoted speech of Ezekiel 25:17. Thus, although the syuzhet manipulates temporal order, it gives the spectator a clear cue to follow so that a linear fabula can be constructed in the spectator’s mind. The syuzhet then brings the spectator into the bathroom of the apartment where we see a new character, a fourth young man with a gun. After Jules kills Brett, the fourth man jumps out and shoots at Vincent and Jules, missing them with all six shots. The hitmen easily kill him. Jules explains that it was a miracle of God that saved them. They bring the only remaining young man, Marvin, with them in their car. At one point, a bump of the car makes Vincent’s gun go off, obliterating most of Marvin’s head and making a terrible mess of the car. The two hitmen go to Jimmie’s house for help with cleanup. As Jimmie’s wife, Bonnie, will soon be home, presenting the likely possibility of divorce if she sees such gangsters with a bloody mess, an expert named The Wolf is called. The Wolf arrives quickly and has coffee while instructing the two hitmen to clean out the car themselves. He then hoses them off and has them put on some of Jimmie’s surfer t-shirts.

**Pumpkin and Honey Bunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill.** All cleaned up, Vincent and Jules go to breakfast at the Hawthorne Grill, the same fabula time and setting that the syuzhet showed the spectator at the film’s beginning. Jules explains that because of the miracle this morning, he’s convinced that God wants him to give up his career as a hitman and wander the earth like Cain until his next calling comes. Vincent is incredulous but goes off to the restroom to ponder the situation. Then we see Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, who start the robbery. They come to Jules who shows Pumpkin the contents of the mysterious briefcase (still and always hidden to the spectator by the syuzhet.) Jules gets Pumpkin’s gun away from him and points his own weapon at the robber. A wild Honey Bunny points her gun at Jules, who tells her to, like Fonzie, “be cool” (Tarantino 181-83). Jules tells Pumpkin and Honey Bunny that they cannot take the briefcase but he allows them to take $1500 out of his own wallet. Having formed an equitable truce, the robbers depart with the money. Vincent and Jules calmly leave the diner.
### APPENDIX C

*Pulp Fiction’s* Fabula in Chronological Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Syuzhet Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1   | A  Vincent and Jules on a Hit  
     B  Pumpkin and HoneyBunny Rob the Hawthorne Grill | Jules and Vincent shoot the three young men in the apartment and Marvin in the car. The Wolf helps them get cleaned up at Jimmie’s. They go to the Hawthorne Grill where they interrupt Pumpkin and Honey Bunny’s robbery. They then go to Marsellus’ club where they see him talking to Butch. |
| 2   | C  Vincent Escorts Mia | Vincent and Mia go out for the evening. Mia overdoses and is saved by Vincent. |
| 3   | D  Butch, Fabienne, and the Gold Watch | Butch kills his opponent and then flees from the ring to his hotel where Fabienne is waiting. |
| 4   | D  Butch, Fabienne, and the Gold Watch | Butch returns to retrieve his gold watch, kills Vincent and gets involved in the pawn shop incident. He and Fabienne ride off into the sunset. |
## APPENDIX D

*Memento*’s Fabula in Chronological Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Syuzhet Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (B/W)</td>
<td>2:35</td>
<td>Lenny wakes up in the hotel room. His voice-over explains that he doesn’t know where he is: “So where are you? You’re in some hotel room.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (B/W)</td>
<td>6:24</td>
<td>Lenny’s V/O: “You know who you are and you know kind of all about yourself, but just for day-to-day stuff, notes are really helpful.” He explains that Sammy Jankis got his notes mixed up. “You really need a system if you’re going to make it work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (B/W)</td>
<td>10:13</td>
<td>Lenny’s V/O (as he shaves his thigh): “You really need a system if you’re going to make it work. You kind of learn to trust your own handwriting... You write yourself notes, and where you put your notes—that also becomes really important... You have to be wary of other people writing stuff for you... If you have a piece of information which is vital, writing on your body instead of a piece of paper can be the answer.” The phone rings and Lenny answers it saying, “Who is this?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (B/W)</td>
<td>16:13</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny says, “You say we’ve talked before? I don’t remember that.” He begins to explain about Sammy Jankis, who had the same condition, but would get his notes mixed up. “Sammy had no drive, no reason to make it work. Me? Yeah, I’ve got a reason.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (B/W)</td>
<td>22:17</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny explains that he met Sammy through his work as an insurance agent. “Sammy was my first real challenge.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (B/W)</td>
<td>26:45</td>
<td>On the phone, while shaving his thigh, Lenny continues explaining about Sammy Jankis. Flashbacks show us Lenny investigating Sammy’s claim of memory loss. He watches Sammy give his wife an insulin shot, even though he can’t follow the plot of Green Acres. He wonders if Sammy is faking it: “So now I’m suspicious and I order more tests.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (B/W)</td>
<td>31:43</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny continues explaining about Sammy and how conditioning might be able to help him. We see a flashback of Sammy picking up objects to test whether he could learn to avoid the electrified ones “not by memory, but by instinct.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (B/W)</td>
<td>39:26</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny explains that Sammy was not able to respond to conditioning. Because of it, they turned down his insurance claim and his wife got stuck with bills. Unlike Sammy, though, conditioning works for Lenny. “Habit and routine make my life possible.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (B/W)</td>
<td>45:03</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny explains that Sammy’s wife was troubled by the insurance company’s decision and we see a flashback of her desperate condition with Sammy. Lenny says, “I never said he was faking it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 (B/W)</td>
<td>48:56</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny explains that Sammy’s wife didn’t understand that you can’t bully anyone into remembering. He asks the caller to call him back and hangs up. He prepares to make his own tattoo with a needle and ball-point pen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Scene Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Lenny prepares to make a tattoo on his thigh: “Fact 5 Access to drugs.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Holding the card that says, “Tattoo: Fact 5 Access to drugs,” Lenny prepares to give himself a tattoo. The phone rings. Lenny answers it, “Who is this?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>13:00</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny receives information from the caller and excitedly says, “I was hoping for a little more on the drugs angle.” Lenny checks the police file. Parts of the file are missing or crossed out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:00</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny comes to the conclusion that John G. is a drug dealer. He crosses out the “Access to drugs” portion on the index card and writes “Drug dealer” in its place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15:00</td>
<td>While on the phone, Lenny changes the previous tattoo on his thigh, “Access to drugs,” to “Drug dealer.” We see a flashback of Sammy’s wife asking Lenny for his honest assessment of Sammy. “I believe that Sammy should be physically capable of making new memories,” he says, in flashback. On the phone Lenny explains, “I thought I’d helped her. I thought she just needed some kind of answer. I didn’t think it was important what the answer was, just that she had one to believe.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>16:00</td>
<td>While on the phone, Lenny uncovers a “Never answer the phone” tattoo on his arm. Lenny asks “Who is this?” and the caller hangs up.</td>
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<td>17:00</td>
<td>The phone rings again, but Lenny hangs it up. He calls the front desk and tells Burt he doesn’t want any phone calls.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:00</td>
<td>Lenny listens through the wall with a glass when Burt comes up and tells him that a cop keeps calling. Lenny refuses to take any calls.</td>
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<td>19:00</td>
<td>The phone rings again but Lenny doesn’t answer it. An envelope slides under the hotel door. Lenny takes out a blood-covered Polaroid picture of himself. The phone rings again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20:00</td>
<td>Lenny answers the phone and asks what the caller wants. “Nobody believed Sammy; I didn’t even fucking believe Sammy.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>21:00</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny tells the officer the story of Sammy’s “final exam.” Flashback as Sammy’s wife asks him to give her an insulin shot. Then she turns back her watch, asks for, and receives, another. Then she turns back her watch and asks for a third one (which she gets, this time in her thigh.) Then, she overdoses on insulin and dies. An non-understanding Sammy panics. Sammy is now in a home. At 90:01, we see a shot of Sammy in the mental institution when a figure walks past the camera and there is a split-second shot of Lenny in the chair previously occupied by Sammy. Back in the hotel, Lenny explains to the caller that sometimes a person with a memory condition fakes recognition. Lenny then says, “What drug dealer?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>22:00</td>
<td>On the phone, Lenny learns that Jimmy Grantz deals drugs out of the bar where his girlfriend works. The caller tells Lenny that he’s calling from the hotel lobby, so Lenny goes down to meet him. It’s Teddy. Lenny calls him “Officer Gammell.” They walk out to the parking lot. Teddy stands by a truck as Lenny takes a picture of him. He tells Lenny to write “Teddy” on the picture instead of “Office Gammell” because he’s undercover. He gives Lenny the address of an abandoned building and Lenny</td>
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</table>
drives there. As Jimmy pulls up, we have quick match cuts of Lenny matched with color shots of his wife. Jimmy enters the building, calling for “Teddy.” Jimmy recognizes Lenny as “Memory Man.” Lenny hits him and tells him to strip. Jimmy says, “I knew I couldn’t trust that fuck.” Jimmy begs Lenny to take the 200 grand in his trunk and walk away. Lenny doesn’t want the money, he wants his “life back.” He strangles Jimmy, intercut with shots of his wife. He dresses in Jimmy’s clothes. He then takes a picture of Jimmy’s body. As the Polaroid picture develops, the black-and-white scene we have been watching slowly turns to color. This scene (22) then morphs seamlessly into the next one (A).

As the Polaroid picture develops, the black-and-white scene we have been watching slowly turns to color. The last scene (22) then morphs seamlessly into this scene (A). Lenny finishes changing into Jimmy’s clothes and then drags the body down to the basement. He then remembers that Jimmy mentioned Sammy. “How the fuck does he know about Sammy? What have I done?” Just then Teddy arrives. Lenny flips over the picture of Teddy, but there are no notes on the back. He asks Teddy to help him get Jimmy to a doctor. Teddy tells Lenny, “Don’t worry, I’m a cop.” Lenny hits Teddy, who blurts out Lenny’s name, so that Lenny knows that they have met before. Lenny looks at Teddy’s badge and realizes that he really is a cop, but he demands answers. Teddy tells him that Jimmy was the guy who raped Lenny’s wife, although Lenny doesn’t believe that. Teddy explains that the 200 grand was for a load of amphetamines, “that, and your thing. He’s your guy; I just figured we’d make a few dollars on the side.” Teddy says that Jimmy knows Lenny because he used to deal drugs out of the Discount Inn. Jimmy knew about Sammy because Lenny tells everyone about Sammy: “Great story! Gets better every time you tell it! So you lie to yourself to be happy. There’s nothing wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there’s a few little details you’d rather not remember. . . . Your wife surviving the assault; her not believing your condition; the torment and pain and anguish tearing her up inside; the insulin.” At this point we see a quick shot of Lenny tapping an insulin needle twice, just like Sammy would do in the flashbacks. Lenny says, “That’s Sammy, not me.” Teddy: “Yeah right. Like you tell yourself over and over again. Conditioning yourself to remember. Learning through repetition.” Lenny: “Sammy let his wife kill herself. Sammy ended up in an institution.” Teddy: “Sammy was a con man, a faker.” Lenny: “I never said that Sammy was faking.” Teddy: “Exposed him for what he was: a fraud.” Lenny: “I was wrong. See, Sammy’s wife came to me . . .” Teddy: “Sammy didn’t have a wife. It was your wife who had diabetes.” Quick flashback of Lenny’s wife, not in a shower curtain, but in a body bag after overdosing on insulin. Then another flashback as she brushes her hair, and says “Ouch,” because Lenny gives her an insulin shot. (This is like the flashback we see when Lenny is burning the hairbrush, only then he merely pinched her thigh and she said “Ouch. Cut it out!”) Lenny: “My wife wasn’t diabetic.” Teddy: “You sure?” Now we see the other flashback when he merely pinches his wife’s thigh and she says, “Ouch. Cut it out.” Lenny: “She wasn’t diabetic. Think I don’t know my own wife? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Teddy: “Well, I guess they can only make you remember the things you want to be true. Like ol’ Jimmy down there!” Lenny: “He’s not the right guy.” Teddy: “He was to you. C’mon, you got your revenge! Enjoy it while you still remember. What difference does it make if he’s your guy or not? When it’s over, you won’t remember! . . . You [already] did it! That’s right, the real John G. I helped you find him over a year ago. He’s already dead! Look, Lenny, I was the cop assigned to your wife’s case. I believed you. I thought you deserved a chance for revenge. I’m the one that helped you find the other guy in your bathroom that night—the guy that cracked your skull and fucked your wife. We found him, you killed him. But you didn’t remember. So I helped you start looking again. Looking for the guy you already killed. [The guys in the bathroom] were just a couple of junkies too strung out
to know your wife didn’t live alone. When you killed them, I was so convinced you’d remember, but nothing ever sticks.” Teddy explains that he took the blood-covered Polaroid of Lenny smiling just after Lenny killed the man. Teddy: “You don’t want the truth. You make up your own truth. Like your police file. It was complete when I gave it to you. Who took out the 12 pages?” Lenny: “You probably.” Teddy: “No it wasn’t me, see. It was you.” Lenny: “Why would I do that?” Teddy: “To create a puzzle you could never solve. Do you know how many towns, how many John Gs or James Gs, I mean, shit, Lenny, I’m a fucking John G.” Lenny: “Your name’s Teddy.” Teddy: “My mother calls me Teddy. My name’s John Edward Gammell. Cheer up, there’s plenty of John Gs for us to find. All you do is moan. I’m the one that has to live with what you’ve done. I’m the one that put it all together. You, you wander around, you’re playing detective. You’re living a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest that you wouldn’t end, even if I wasn’t in the picture. You’re not a killer. That’s why you’re so good at it!” Lenny takes Teddy’s keys and throws them in the bushes. Then he gets in his car. Lenny V/O: “I’m not a killer. I’m just somebody who wants to make things right. Can I let myself forget what you’ve just told me?” Lenny flips over Teddy’s picture and writes the inciting message on the back: “Don’t believe his lies.” He burns the picture of Jimmy’s body, and the smiling one of himself after killing the earlier guy, so that he won’t know that he’s already finished his revenge. Lenny V/O: “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.” He looks at Teddy’s license plate which says “SGI371U” and writes it down ambiguously: “Tattoo: Fact Six, Car license SG|37|U.” Lenny V/O: “Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes I will.” He takes a picture of the Jaguar with the money in the trunk and then drives away in it. Lenny: “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 is still there. Do I believe the world is still there?” Quick flashback to his wife, rubbing his chest, which now has “I’ve done it” tattooed in the formerly empty place. “Is it still out there? Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I’m no different.” He pulls up in front of the tattoo shop. Lenny V/O: “Now, where was I?” Closing credits.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D (Color)</td>
<td>82:30</td>
<td>Lenny drinks from a mug while an older patron chuckles. Natalie says, “Well, you really do have a problem, just like that cop said.” She offers to get him another drink.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E (Color)</td>
<td>77:52</td>
<td>Natalie brings Lenny back to her house. Lenny brings out the police file. Flashbacks show us Lenny's memory of what happened the night of his wife’s “murder.” He rushes in to find his wife wrapped in the shower curtain; he kills an intruder, but a second man slams him into a mirror and he collapses on the floor. Natalie says that Lenny can stay at her place while she goes to work. He takes a picture of her and writes “Natalie” on it. Later, while Leonard is looking at the police file, Natalie comes back in, shuts the curtains and says, “Somebody’s come already.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>F (Color)</td>
<td>73:25</td>
<td>At Natalie’s house, Leonard is looking at the police file when Natalie comes in, shuts the curtains and says, “Somebody’s come already.” Natalie explains that Jimmy is missing after going to meet some guy named Teddy. She implores Lenny to “Get rid of Dodd for me.” She then provokes Lenny until he hits her. She leaves, sits outside in her car, and Lenny desperately searches for a pen to write down what just happened. Natalie comes back in the house with a bloody face and explains that Dodd did this to her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>G (Color)</td>
<td>69:57</td>
<td>At Natalie’s house, Lenny desperately searches for a pen to write down what just happened. Natalie comes back in the house with a bloody face and explains that Dodd did this to her. Lenny comforts her and decides to help. Natalie writes down Dodd’s information and gives it to Lenny. He gets in his car and is surprised by a waiting Teddy who says, “A car this nice, you should lock.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H (Color)</td>
<td>64:57</td>
<td>Lenny gets in his car and is surprised by a waiting Teddy who says, “A car this nice, you should lock.” Lenny can’t remember who Teddy is and begins to choke him until Teddy says that he knows about Sammy Jankis. This calms Lenny down enough for Teddy to tell him that Natalie can’t be trusted and is involved with drugs with her boyfriend, Jimmy. Teddy tells Lenny to write “Do not trust her” on the back of Natalie’s picture. Teddy gives Lenny the address for a hotel called the Discount Inn. After Teddy leaves the car, Lenny reads the back of Teddy’s picture which says, “Do not believe his lies,” and then scratches out the “Do not trust her” on the back of Natalie’s picture. He goes to the Discount Inn and takes a picture of it so he can remember where he is staying.</td>
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<td>I (Color)</td>
<td>60:10</td>
<td>Lenny, following a note on a coaster, goes to the Discount Inn. In a room, he puts up his constructed map of the city. He calls a prostitute and tells her to scatter some of his wife’s items around the room and then go into the bathroom and slam the door. She does, and he wakes up.</td>
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<tr>
<td>J (Color)</td>
<td>57:30</td>
<td>Lenny wakes up during the night to discover a prostitute snorting drugs. He asks her to leave. He takes a bag of his wife’s items and gets into the Jaguar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K (Color)</td>
<td>53:46</td>
<td>Lenny takes a bag of his wife’s items, gets in the Jaguar, drives to a deserted spot, and burns them. The items trigger various flashbacks of his wife. As Lenny burns a hairbrush, we see a quick flashback of his wife brushing her hair when Lenny pinches her thigh and she says, “Ouch. Cut it out.” An old book triggers a flashback of his wife reading a book she’s already read before. Lenny says, “I always thought the pleasure in a book was in wanting to know what happens next.” Lenny stamps out the fire at dawn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>L (Color)</td>
<td>52:19</td>
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<td>Lenny stamps out a fire at dawn and gets back in the Jaguar. A horn blows, and Dodd, having spotted Jimmy's Jaguar, pulls out a gun and points it at Lenny. Lenny runs, Dodd shoots through the window, and then begins chasing Lenny. As Lenny is running, he thinks, “OK, so what am I doing?”</td>
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<tr>
<th>M (Color)</th>
<th>49:25</th>
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<tr>
<td>As Lenny is running, he thinks, “OK, so what am I doing? Oh, I’m chasing this guy.” Dodd pulls out a gun and prepares to fire it. “No, he’s chasing me.” He leaves in the Jaguar, pulls out a note with the location of Dodd’s apartment and decides to go there first. After accidentally knocking out the wrong man, he goes to Dodd’s apartment to wait for him. “I need a weapon.” He grabs a bottle of booze. “This will do.” While holding the bottle in Dodd’s hotel room, Lenny thinks, “Hmm . . . I don’t feel drunk.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>N (Color)</th>
<th>46:04</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>While holding a bottle in Dodd’s hotel room, Lenny thinks, “Hmm . . . I don’t feel drunk.” He takes a shower. Dodd returns and Lenny attacks him, tapes him up, puts him in the closet, and takes his picture. On the back of the picture he writes, “Get rid of him.” He calls Teddy and leaves a message for him to come over to the hotel room.</td>
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<tr>
<th>O (Color)</th>
<th>40:13</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quick flashback images to wife’s “murder” in the bathroom. Lenny wakes up in a strange hotel room. He finds an unknown person (Dodd) bloodied with his mouth taped shut in the closet. Teddy arrives. Lenny asks Dodd, “Who did this to you?” Dodd replies, “You did.” Lenny takes the gun, cleans up Dodd, and they both march him down to his car to drive him out of town. As Teddy backs his car up, the license plate now reads “SG1371U,” which is the incorrect tattoo that was placed on Lenny’s thigh. Lenny pulls up in front of Natalie’s house and goes inside. He shows her a picture of bloodied, tape-mouthed Dodd and demands to know who Dodd is.</td>
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<tr>
<th>P (Color)</th>
<th>32:35</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Lenny pulls up in front of Natalie’s house and goes inside. He shows her a picture of bloodied, tape-mouthed Dodd and demands to know who Dodd is. Natalie says, “Guess I don’t need to worry about him anymore.” Lenny says, “I think somebody’s fucking with me, trying to get me to kill the wrong guy.” She explains that Lenny offered to help her even though, “you can question everything. You can never know anything for sure.” Lenny responds, “There are things you know for sure . . . I know what that’s going to sound like when I knock on it. [He knocks on the table.] I know what that’s going to feel like when I pick it up. [He picks up an ashtray.] Certainties.” Natalie takes off his shirt and looks at his tattoos. He has a blank spot over his left breast. She asks, “What about here?” He says, “Maybe it’s for when I find him.” She explains that she’s lost somebody also, a man named Jimmy. He went to meet Teddy and never came back. Natalie says, “When you meet this guy, this John G., what are you going to do?” He says, “I’m going to kill him.” Natalie says, “Maybe I can help you find him.” We cut to Natalie asleep in bed with Lenny who is awake and missing his wife. He says, “How am I supposed to heal if I can’t feel time?” Lenny wanders to the living room and writes on the back of Natalie’s picture under a crossed-out part, “She has also lost someone. She will help you out of pity.” He crawls back into bed with Natalie.</td>
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<th>Q (Color)</th>
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<td>Lenny wakes up in bed next to Natalie, not knowing who she is or where he is. She looks at his tattoos and says, “That’s pretty weird.” She explains that she will have a friend look up John G’s license plate. Lenny looks at Natalie’s picture and reads on the back, “She has also lost someone. She will help you out of pity.” They arrange to meet at the restaurant. As Lenny starts his car, Teddy runs up and says, “Yo Lenny, I thought you split for good!”</td>
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As Lenny starts his car, Teddy runs up and says, “Yo Lenny, I thought you split for good!” Teddy invites him to lunch. As they eat together, Teddy warns Lenny to be careful: “You can’t trust a man’s life to your little notes and pictures. Your notes could be unreliable.” Lenny responds, “Memory’s unreliable. Memory’s not perfect. It’s not even that good. Ask the police. Eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don’t catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts. They make notes and they draw conclusions. Facts, not memories—that’s how you investigate. . . . Look, memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They’re just an interpretation. They’re not a record and they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.” Teddy learns where Lenny is staying. Lenny goes back to the Discount Inn and discovers that Burt has checked him into two rooms. He discovers a note on a bag, telling him of an appointment to meet Natalie at a restaurant at 1:00. Lenny pulls up to the restaurant and goes inside to meet Natalie, although he doesn’t remember who she is.

Lenny pulls up to the restaurant and goes inside to meet Natalie, although he doesn’t remember who she is. She explains that she had a friend trace a license plate number to “John Edward Gammell, John G.” She gives him a copy of the license plate. Lenny tells her a little about his wife and the film shows us brief flashbacks that can be put together “to get the feel of a person.” Natalie gives him the address of an abandoned place which Lenny could use to kill John G. Lenny washes his hand in the restaurant bathroom and notices the note, “Remember Sammy Jankis.”

Lenny washes his hand in the restaurant bathroom and notices the note, “Remember Sammy Jankis.” A restaurant worker hands him the documents from Natalie, including a picture of the Discount Inn, which he drives to. In his room, he puts pictures back on the map on the wall. With the copy of Teddy’s driver’s license, and the title of the car which lists the license plate as “SG137IU,” as well as the tattoos on his own body, he concludes that Teddy is John G. On the back of Teddy’s picture he writes, “He is the one.” Then seeing the tattoo that says, “John G. raped and murdered my wife,” he also writes “Kill him.” He loads the gun.

Lenny writes “Kill him” on the back of Teddy’s picture. He loads the gun and takes it with him to the hotel lobby. He explains to Burt, the hotel clerk, “I have this condition. . . I have no short-term memory. I know who I am . . . I can’t make new memories. Everything fades.” Teddy walks into the lobby and announces, “Lenny!”

Teddy walks into the hotel lobby and announces, “Lenny!” They go together, in a car with a broken window, to an abandoned building. Lenny looks at a Polaroid picture of Teddy which says on the back, “Don’t believe his lies. He is the one. Kill him.” Lenny shoots Teddy.

Opening credit sequence where Lenny kills Teddy, which is literally played backwards. A Polaroid picture “undevelops” and then goes back into the camera. Blood flows backwards. A gun leaps into Lenny’s hand. A bullet rises from the floor, goes through Teddy’s head, and back into the muzzle of the gun.
APPENDIX E

da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*

[with orthogonals that converge to a single, central vanishing point]
APPENDIX F

Ippitsusai Bunchō’s *The Actor Sanogawa Ichimatsu as the Dancer Chūshō in Imayō dōjōji*
APPENDIX G
The Breakdown of the Metaphoric Space in Sean’s Hallucination
with his Mother in SLC Punk

Sean explains, “Satan is in the house. He killed my mom and he turned her into a bull.” [10:08] We see Sean with a knife behind his back as his mother enters the kitchen. As he chases her around a counter, we have fourteen very fast, yet still jarring frame removals. The syuzhet then proceeds as follows:

- Cut to Sean holding a knife to his forehead.
- Cut to Sean chasing his mother around the counter.
- Cut to Sean holding a knife to his forehead.
- Cut to Sean chasing his mother around the counter.
- Cut to Sean holding a knife to his forehead.
- Cut to Sean chasing his mother around the counter.
- Cut to Sean sticking the knife in his mouth.
- Frame removal as Sean chases his mother around the counter.
- Frame removal as Sean chases his mother around the counter.
- Frame removal as Sean chases his mother around the counter.
- Cut to close up of frightened mother.
- Cut to Sean running up to the camera and screaming wildly.
- Cut to close up of frightened mother as the camera moves to the left.
- Frame removal as the camera continues panning to the left.
- Frame removal as the camera continues panning to the left.
- Frame removal as the camera continues panning to the left.
- Frame removal as the camera continues panning to the left.
- Cut to close up of Sean with the knife.
Frame removal of Sean with the knife.
Frame removal of Sean with the knife.
Cut to Satan, in red light in the next room, as seen through the kitchen doorway.
Frame removal of Satan, in red light in the next room, as seen through the kitchen doorway.
Frame removal of Satan, in red light in the next room, as seen through the kitchen doorway.
Dissolve to Sean with the knife.
Dissolve to Satan who ducks out of the bottom of the frame and then jumps amazingly high.
Dissolve to Sean looking incredulous.
Dissolve to extreme close up on the head of a bull.
Cut to a few frames of Mom’s head.
Cut to a few frames of the head of a bull.
Cut to a few frames of Mom’s head.
Cut to a few frames of the head of a bull.
Cut to a few frames of Mom’s head.
Cut to a few frames of the head of a bull.
Cut to a few frames of Mom’s head.
Cut to close up of Sean screaming in terror and turning to run.
Frame removal as Sean runs out the kitchen doorway.
Frame removal as Sean runs out the kitchen doorway.
Dissolve back to Bob in the snow hearing this story. [10:37]

In these mere 29 seconds of screentime, the syuzhet has presented us with 54 instances of cuts or frame removals.
APPENDIX H
The Breakdown of the Unsteady Space Created by a Swirling Hand-Held Camera
Inside a Circle of Teenagers in Bully

Lisa
[The camera begins moving from her face, turning to the left as she says:] “We need to know if you can get those guns for us.”

Hitman
[The camera is not on him for any of this line, instead swirling around to show Derek, Heather, and Donny, who aren’t speaking.] “You know you need to give me a little time. You can’t just snap your fingers and shit.”

Hitman
[Cut to Hitman. The camera immediately moves off him.] “Guns are hard to come by.”

Lisa
[Camera shows Lisa as it swirls past her.] “I can get you some money.”

Hitman
[Camera not on him.] “Oh yeah? Whose piggy bank you going to rob?”

Ali
[Camera on her as it keeps swirling. It moves to Hitman who doesn’t have a line. It cuts to Donny who’s drinking but doesn’t have a line.] “Hey, c’mon, you know you can trust us.”

Hitman
[Camera on him as it continues its swirling movement.] “What do you want to do it with a gun for?”
Lisa
[Camera continues swirling, moving off her face for the last part of her line.] “I don’t know, it just seemed like the easy way to do it.”

Hitman
[Camera not on him at all, instead swirling past Derek and Heather who have no lines here.] “I think you need to chill out and plan this out a little better.”

Lisa
[Camera not on her, instead swirling past Heather, Donny, and Hitman, finally reaching her as her line ends.] “No, I want it done now, God damn it. I want the son of a bitch dead. I want his sorry ass dead tonight. Do you understand me?”

Hitman
[Camera not him, instead swirling past a non-talking Derek, Heather, Donny, and Ali as he says] “All right, look. Maybe I can help you out, but I don’t know.” [Camera swings past him for:] “You know, first you guys need to get some weapons and shit.” [Camera not on him for any of this, as it circles past Lisa, Derek, Heather, and Donny.] “Maybe you think about planning this out a little better. Then, when you get all that done, then you can come see me. I have a window around the rear. So just come by and rap a little lightly, you know?” [The camera finally reaches Hitman for the last three words of this speech:] “I’ll be there.”

Donny
[Camera not on him, swirling instead past Lisa, Derek and Heather. It finally reaches Donny once his line is over.] “Like a signal, right? Like, um, like in Tom Sawyer.”
Hitman

[Although the camera originally showed Hitman, it swirls past him before he begins this line. Thus, none of these words are shown coming out of his mouth. Instead, the camera is swirling past Lisa, Derek, Heather, Donny, finally returning to Hitman once this line is over.] “Now my normal suppliers, they, they don’t want to help out with this shit. So maybe I’ll just come and supervise. I don’t know. But either way, you still got a weapons problem.”

During the 228 spoken words in this sequence, the swirling camera only shows the speaker during 51 of those words; during the other 177, it is randomly swinging around on other faces.
Phyllis: There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour.
Walter: How fast was I going, officer?
Phyllis: I’d say around ninety.
Walter: Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.
Phyllis: Suppose I let you off with a warning this time?
Walter: Suppose it doesn’t take?
Phyllis: Suppose I have to whack you over your knuckles?
Walter: Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder?
Phyllis: Suppose you try putting it on my husband’s shoulder?
Walter: That tears it! 8:30 tomorrow evening, then?
Phyllis: That’s what I suggested.
Walter: Will you be here too?
Phyllis: I guess so. I usually am.
Walter: Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?
Phyllis: I wonder if I know what you mean.
Walter: I wonder if you wonder.
We see Juliet sitting down in the living room. Cut to the strange, unexplained-as-yet, top of a tent coming toward us. Cut to Juliet in the living room. Cut an outside, nighttime shot of the private investigator who had discovered the affair, dressed in red. Behind him, the tent is being moved forward. Cut back to Juliet who shuts the windows of her living room and then weeps. Juliet hears her friend Laura, who has drowned [and they syuzhet shows us Laura’s body under the water] say: “Juliet, do you remember me? Do what I did. Here everything is gray, still, silent. Come with me, Juliet. Just a long sleep, no more suffering.” We see a group of black hooded figures in Juliet’s living room. Cut back to Juliet’s face. Cut to an old woman looking at the curtains in Juliet’s living room. Cut to a row of black hooded figures in Juliet’s house. Cut to a man dressed in purple entering the living room. Cut to Juliet’s face, with fear and wonder in her eyes. Cut to a shot looking out through a window to two eerie figures dressed in black raincoats walking side by side (we don’t know who any of these people are.) Cut to Juliet’s face. Cut to a handsome young man in white clothes (whom Juliet almost slept with out of contempt for her husband’s infidelity, earlier in the film), standing in Juliet’s living room in front of the black hooded figures. Cut to a man who earlier had said that he wanted to be with Juliet, sitting down on the mantle of the living room in front of the black-hooded figures. Cut to Juliet’s face as she says: “This isn’t true. You don’t exist. Go away.” Suddenly the strange non-diegetic percussion sound stops. We see another shot of the living room and all the figures are gone. Shot of the dining room and all the figures are gone. Cut to another shot and all the black hooded figures are back, along with three women in the lower right of the screen. Juliet’s friend is lowered from Juliet’s ceiling in a little basket (reminiscent of the earlier scene when she was taken up into a treehouse.) Cut to Juliet’s awe-struck, ever-maddening face. Close up of Juliet’s friend twirling in basket. Cut to team of private investigators eating in Juliet’s house and saying: “Great!” Cut to Juliet’s face who says, “You’re not real. Go away! Go away!” Cut to a figure in black and purple riding in a wagon that’s moving without horses. Cut to a shot of Juliet’s friend who says, “It’s Laura, your friend who died for love.” Laura’s casket drives by on the horseless carriage. Cut to man who says, “Buy a horse and go
swimming.” Cut to a lot of people in the living room of Juliet’s house, including a horse, and a man who says, “Is there hope for me, Juliet?” One of Juliet’s friends lying down in the floor in front of a group of black-hooded figures says, “Without him, you’ll live and breathe and become yourself again.” A voice (perhaps Giorgio’s?) whispers, “She stayed with me all night, but no way.” Some ancient soldiers with swords and spears walk up and bang their spears on the floor. Cut to extreme close up on Juliet’s eyes. Cut to a flying machine in the air. Giorgio’s voice whispers, “I can’t come down. I can’t land. It’s your fault. It’s up to you. A long sleep.” The syuzhet moves strangely through the blackness of a long coat while we hear the sound of wind blowing. The syuzhet pans up to a bannister where the black coat is on a man with surreally bright red hair and beard. Cut to the back of Juliet, who stands up. Cut to the woman in the basket, who smiles, in front of the black hooded figures. Cut to the back of Juliet, who walks a few steps. Cut to the living room full of mysterious figures, and the horse. Cut to Juliet who walks out of the room and shuts the door. She goes in her bedroom. Cut back to the room full of figures, one of whom is leaping over and over. Cut to Juliet who sits down on her bed. Cut to a bizarrely-dressed woman, in a veil, in her bedroom. Cut to Juliet in her bed, who turns on the light and gets a book. Cut to a shot of Juliet’s mother still dressed in a very frightening, colorful wedding dress and veil in her bedroom. Cut to Juliet: “Mother, help me. Help me, mother.” Cut to and eerily made-up-as-a-bride mother, with wide, glaring eyes. Cut to Juliet: “Someone’s crying.” Mother responds: “It’s the wind.” Juliet: “They’re calling me!” Mother: “Don’t go! Obey your mother!” Juliet: “I must go!” Mother: “Don’t move!” Camera zooms in on doorway. Juliet tries to open it, but can’t. Juliet: “Open up!” Mother: “You mustn’t!” Close up on Mother’s eyes with big, blue eye shadow: “Obey!” Juliet: “You don’t scare me anymore!” Door that she’s been trying to open, opens. Shot of a figure on the bed with bright red things blowing, like fire. Cut to two shots of the group of figures (e.g. black hooded figures, etc.) gathered in Juliet’s living room. Cut to Juliet untying this sacrificial figure on bed with bright things blowing like fire. All the figures in the living room begin to disappear. Juliet hugs the little figure on the sacrificial bed, a little blonde girl. The veiled mother turns around. The little girl runs past a plane to her dad. The figures under a circus-like tent, leave. The man and the little girl wave good bye to the figures. Cut to Juliet, smiling. Cut to the figures, who depart. A man in a flying machine says: “You don’t need
me anymore. I'm another of your inventions. But you are alive! Goodbye, child!” The little girl waves and disappears. Juliet opens the front gate of the house she shared with Giorgio. She looks out everywhere. She looks back at the house. A voice whispers: “Juliet! Juliet!” Juliet: “Who are you?” Whispered voice: “Friends. Real friends. If you want us to, we can stay now.” Juliet turns around. Voice: “Do you want us to? Listen carefully.” The film ends with Juliet, in an extreme long shot, leaving the fence of the house and walking by herself out into the unknown trees, no longer dependent on her cheating husband.

These bizarre images explode upon the spectator like fireworks. But there is almost nothing by which the spectator is able to connect them to any sort of reality. All one can do with them is to allow that they are part of strange mix of internal and external for Juliet on her journey to self-dependency.
APPENDIX K
Bergman’s Journey from Faith to Existentialism
in his “Faith Trilogy”

Ironically, what has been called Bergman’s “Faith Trilogy” (Through a Glass Darkly [1961], Winter Light [1962] and The Silence [1963]) could more readily be called Bergman’s “Loss of Faith” trilogy. The three films comprise a journey from faith to existential despair at the loss of the absolute of God.¹ In Through a Glass Darkly, Karin is a schizophrenic who was recently released from a mental hospital to spend the summer on an island with her father, brother, and husband. David, her writer-father, studies her condition coldly and intellectually, making things worse. Martin, her concerned doctor-husband, is powerless to help her. Minus, her sexually awakening brother, is the only one who seems to offer any humanity at all. Karin’s condition begins to worsen and she soon has seizures and hears voices telling her that God will come and save her. At the end of the film, however, God has done no saving. Karin says that she has seen God and he looks like a hideous spider who tries to violate her.² When questioned about the view of God that Karin presents, Bergman responded: “As far as I recall, it’s a question of the total dissolution of all notions of an other-worldly salvation. During those years this was going on in me all the time and being replaced by a sense of the holiness—to put it clumsily—to be found in man himself. The only holiness which really exists. A holiness wholly of the world” (qtd. in Lauder 68).

¹Ketcham explains that in the trilogy “Bergman is really describing the spiritual struggle of contemporary man who, bereft of transcendent certainty, is threatened by isolation, meaninglessness, and death” (Ketcham 113).

²Karin says, “I was frightened. The door opened. But the God who came out was a spider. He had six legs and moved very fast across the floor. He came up to me and I saw his face, a loathsome, evil face. And he clambered up onto me and tried to force himself into me. But I protected myself. All the time I saw his eyes. They were cold and calm. When he couldn't force himself into me he climbed quickly up onto my breast and my face and went on up the wall. I’ve seen God” (in Lauder 68).
Here we see Bergman on an existential path—he’s beginning to realize the loss of the absolute of God.³

This loss becomes even more profound in the second film of the trilogy, *Winter Light*. Here a doubting priest, appropriately named Tomas, is troubled by “God’s silence.” He begins to experience “existential dread” by wondering what life would be like without a God (Ketcham 154). He tells an emotionally distraught fisherman named Jonas his doubts about God: “If there is no God, would it really make any difference? Life would become understandable. What a relief. And thus death would be a snuffing out of life. The dissolution of body and soul. Cruelty, loneliness and fear—all these things would be straightforward and transparent. Suffering is incomprehensible so it needs no explanation. There is no Creator. No sustainer of life. No design.” Jonas, who came to see the priest for spiritual guidance, is clearly troubled by this response and leaves quickly. By himself, Tomas says, “God, why have you forsaken me?” echoing Jesus’ statement on the cross. The mise-en-scene creates a space where Tomas is suddenly bathed in light, secularly awakened, as it were, to his realization of being alone in the universe. Tomas walks to his mistress, Marta, coughs horribly, and says, “Now I’m free. Free at last.” He drops to the chapel floor in a coughing fit and is picked up by Marta. He says, “I had this fleeting thought that everything wouldn’t turn out to be illusions, dreams and lies.” He weeps uncontrollably while Marta holds him. A woman enters the chapel with news that Jonas has just shot himself in the head and died. Seemingly without feeling, Tomas rejects Marta, explaining that he despises her but didn’t tell her sooner because he had been brought up to believe that women were higher beings; that gone, he can just tell her the truth. Unemotionally, Tomas then goes to Jonas’ pregnant wife Karin to inform her of her husband’s suicide. She responds, “Now I am all alone,” just like all residents in a world of existentialism. Back at the church, Tomas’ hunchbacked assistant, Algot, discusses the passion of Christ with him, believing that Jesus’ real suffering was not on the cross, but because he was alone in an unkind world: “[The disciples] never grasped what he meant. They abandoned him, down to the last man. He was left all alone. That must have been painful. To know that know one understands. To

³Karin’s encounter with the Spider-God has been characterized as “an existential description of the religious predicament of one’s life” (Ketcham 140).
be abandoned when you need someone to rely on. That must have been extremely painful.” After this, even the Father abandons Jesus and the latter cries, “My God, my God, why has thou abandoned me?” Algot explains, “In the moments before he died, Christ was seized by doubt. Surely that must have been his greatest hardship. God’s silence.” Whereas Algot—who knows suffering as Christ did—is the one character with complete faith, Tomas is the one who doubts. This film has been Tomas’ journey from faith to existentialism, as it has been for Bergman himself. The church organist tells Marta, “Love proves the existence of God. Love is a real force for mankind.” Marta falls to his knees and prays, “If only we could feel safe and dare show each other tenderness. If only we had some truth to believe in. If only we could believe.” The film ends as they have a church service with only Marta in attendance and Tomas says, “Holy, Holy, Holy, the whole earth is full of the existence of the Lord,” by rote, not faith. Nevertheless, he does continue with the service as a way of reaching out to Marta; this may be one way that there is a tiny bit of hope. As Bergman explains of Winter Light, “Only at the end, when they’re in an empty church for the three o’clock service that has become perfectly meaningless for him, her prayer in a sense is answered: he responds to her love by going on with the service in that empty country church. It’s his own first step towards feeling, toward learning how to love. We’re saved not by God, but by love. That’s the most we can hope for” (qtd. in Lauder 158). This marks Bergman’s system as distinct from the complete nihilism of the dysphoric style, retaining the less bleak world of existentialism where at least individual choices (such as the importance of reaching out to other human beings) still matter.

Yet, by the third film of the trilogy, The Silence (which many critics take to mean “God’s silence”), the loss of God seems complete. There are three main characters in the

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4Bergman has explained that God was in all of his movies “until Winter Light. In Winter Light, I made the final cut with that strange thing I called ‘God.’ I cut off relations. Before that I still had a lot of bad conscience in accepting myself. I had a fear of my way of living, of acting, of behaving, and I had a terrible fear of death. Then suddenly—it came almost over one day, you know—Saul got to be Paul. But I think in me, Paul became Saul. So I changed almost overnight. I changed completely, and that is what I wanted to say, without symbols, very simply in Winter Light” (qtd. in Jones 58).

5As Lauder writes, “With The Silence we have a world in which God is totally absent” (Lauder 72). Bergman himself explains that he associates God with Anna and Ester’s 440-
film: Anna (who could represent the sensual side of humanity); her son Johan (who could represent the curious, innocent watcher); and her sick, lesbian sister, Ester (who could represent the intellectual side of humanity). Due to Ester’s illness, they leave their train and check into a hotel in an unnamed, unfamiliar country so that Ester can recover before resuming travel. The hotel seems deserted except for a hotel waiter and a company of performing dwarves. Anna becomes bored and goes to a cabaret show where she becomes aroused at seeing a man and woman in the audience making love. She goes to a café where a waiter flirts with her; she soon takes him to another room in the hotel and has sex, happy that they don’t know anything about each other. Ester, who likes looking at her sister, becomes angry and the two fight. Anna takes Johan, abandoning her sister to die alone in this hotel. Ester gives Johan a list of translated words, a guide for his future journey, as a sort of legacy of herself.

_The Silence_ is largely indebted to sound, or the absence thereof. It has no non-diegetic music, and very few moments of diegetic music (such as on the radio or in the restaurant.) It also has so little dialogue that at times it seems almost like a silent film. This reinforces the existentialist notion of a silence without God.

_The Silence_ is a purely secular film without any reference to religion.⁶ God has been replaced by war tanks moving ominously through the fictional city of Timolka (Lauder 72). Bergman has finally purged all spiritual grapplings from his system by this point, and this film is the result of the tragic loss of the absolute of God.⁷ The dysphoric style, then, seems

⁶Cook says, of _The Silence_, “For Bergman, as for Antonioni, it seems that modern alienation has reduced human communication to a series of desperate sexual encounters that can only end in chaos” (Cook 634).

⁷When Bergman was once asked if it was after _The Silence_ that he became an agnostic, he responded, “Or one might say the problem dissolves. Anyway, the crux of the matter is—the problem doesn’t exist anymore. Nothing, absolutely nothing at all has emerged out of all these ideas of faith and skepticism, all these convulsion, these puffings and blowings. For many of my fellow human beings on the other hand, I’m aware that these problems still exist—and exist as a terrible reality. I hope this generation will be the last to live under the scourge of religious anxiety” (Björkman 195).
to flow out of this later existential Bergman who stops wondering where God is and just accepts the tragic loss of his own, alienated and lonely existence. Yet the dysphoric style differs from Bergman in that while Bergman loses God, he still retains hope in the love and communication that human beings can offer each other. There is no such hope in the dysphoric style—there we are left alone in the world’s nothingness.

Besides the thematic commonalities between Bergman and the dysphoric style, there are stylistic ones as well. For instance, there is a remarkable scene in Winter Light in which Marta is pictured in front of an empty wall, speaking the words of a painfully honest letter she has written to Tomas. It is done in real time, without a cut. One critic has traced this device backwards to the New Wave when, in 400 Blows, Antoine is interviewed in an amazingly candid fashion by the social worker (Cohen 187). I trace this device forward to see how it has left a legacy on the dysphoric style. Remember, for instance, the second scene in Slacker, where the director himself, Richard Linklater, plays a young man who talks incessantly to a non-responsive taxi driver without a cut for a full three minutes and ten seconds (for a full description, see Appendix L).

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8Bergman reveals, “The only life that exists for me is this life, here and now, and the only holiness that exists is in my relations with people. And outside, nothing exists” (qtd. in Cohen 261).

9Bergman reminds us that each film of the trilogy “has its moment of contact, of human communication: the line ‘Father spoke to me’ at the end of Through a Glass Darkly, the pastor conducting the service in the empty church for Marta at the end of Winter Light; the little boy reading Ester’s letter on the train at the end of The Silence. A tiny moment in each film—but the crucial one. What matters most of all in life is being able to make that contact with another human. Otherwise you are dead, like so many people today are dead. But if you take that first step toward communication, toward understanding, toward love, then no matter how difficult the future might be—and have no illusions, even with all the love in the world, living can be hellishly difficult—then you are saved. This is what really matters, isn’t it?” (qtd. in Lauder 150). Thus, there is a type of salvation for Bergman, but it comes only through human love, not from God.
APPENDIX L

Slacker’s extended take in the taxi

In the second scene of Slacker, our protagonist, named in the script as “Should Have Stayed at the Bus Station” (Linklater 39), gets into a cab and talks endless with a non-responsive cab driver, saying:

Man, I just had the weirdest dream, back on the bus there. Do you ever have those dreams that are just completely real? I mean, they’re so vivid it’s just like . . . completely real. It’s like . . . there’s always something bizarre going on in those. I have one about every two years or something . . . I always remember them really good. It’s like there’s always someone getting run over or something really weird. Um. One time I had lunch with Tolstoy. And the other time I was a roadie for Frank Zappa. Anyway, so this dream I just had was just like that except instead of anything bizarre going on, I mean there was nothing going on at all. Man, it was like The Omega Man. There was just nobody around. I was just traveling around, you know, staring out the windows of buses and trains and cars, you know. When I was at home I was, like, flipping through the TV stations endlessly. Reading, I mean, how many dreams do you have where you read in a dream, you know? Wait. Man, there was this book I just read on the bus, well, you know, it was my dream so I guess I wrote it or something. But, uh, man it was bizarre. It was like, um, the premise for this whole book was that every thought you have creates its own reality, you know? It’s like every choice or decision you make, the thing you choose not to do, fractions off and becomes its own reality, you know, and just goes on from there, forever. I mean, it’s like . . . uh, you know in The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy meets the Scarecrow and they do
that little dance at that crossroads and they think about going all those directions and they end up going in that one direction? I mean, all those other directions, just because they thought about it, became separate realities. I mean, they just went on from there and lived the rest of their life . . . you know, and just, I mean, entirely different movies, but we’ll never see it because, you know, we’re kind of trapped in this one reality restriction type of thing, you know? And another example would be like back there at the bus station, you know? As I got off the bus, the thought crossed my mind, you know, just for a second, about not taking a cab at all but you know, maybe walking or bumming a ride or something like that. You know, I’m kind of broke right now, I should have done that, probably. But uh, just because that thought crossed my mind there now exists, at this very second, a whole n’other reality where I’m at the bus station, you know, and you’re probably giving someone else a ride, you know? I mean, and that reality thinks of itself, thinks of itself, as the only reality, you know? I mean, at this very second, I’m in that, I’m back at the bus station, just hanging out, you know? Probably thumbing through a paper. You know, probably going up to a pay phone. You know, say this beautiful woman just comes up to me, just starts talking to me, you know? Uh, she ends up offering me a ride, you know. We’re hitting it off, go play a little pinball. And we, we go back to her apartment. And she has this great apartment, you know. I move in with her. You know? And see, if I, say I have a dream some night and I’m with some strange woman I’ve never met, or I’m, you know, living at some place I’ve never seen before. See that’s just a momentary glimpse into this other reality that was all created back there at the bus station.
You know, gee. And then, you know, I could have a dream from that reality into this one. That like, this is my dream from that reality, you know? Course, that’s kind of like that dream I just, you know, had on the bus. You know, that whole cycle type of thing. Man, shit, I should have stayed at the bus station.

This monologue, which lasts a full 3 minutes and 10 seconds of screen time, occurs without any cut. This is similar to Antoine’s interview with the social worker in *400 Blows* (1959), and to Marta’s speaking the words of her entire letter to Tomas in *Winter Light* (Bergman, 1962). There also seems to be a debt to documentary filmmaking, where handheld, long takes present a different type of space from smooth, sculpted classical cinema. The words of the speech itself reveal a sort-of Slacker mind set: a passive, pseudo-philosophical search for answers in a world where there are no answers to be found.
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David C. Simmons was born on January 18, 1971 in Provo, UT. He completed his B.A. in English at Brigham Young University in August 1995. He received his M.A. in Humanities and Film Studies from that same institution in August 1997 after successfully defending his thesis, *The Suturing Power of the Moving Camera in the Literary Adaptations of Director Kenneth Branagh*. He received his Ph.D. in Humanities and Film Studies from Florida State University in April 2005. He worked closely with Mark Garrett Cooper and Karen Laughlin on his dissertation, *The Dysphoric Style in Contemporary American Independent Cinema*. With Jennifer Freeman-Bessey, he assembled and edited the textbook, *Multicultural Dimensions of Film*, sixth edition, published by McGraw-Hill in 2000. Two of his articles were published as part of that work, “Ideology and Multicultural Film” and “Is Contemporary American Independent Cinema Classical or Radical?” In addition, Dr. Simmons has written articles on films which he has presented at various regional, national, and international scholarly conferences, including, “The Apocalypse of Racial Segregation in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*”; “Bergman’s *Persona*: A Filmic Manifesto of Postmodern Identity”; “Moving-Camera Suture in *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*”; “Will the Real Corpse Please Stand Up: The Victim who Refuses to Die in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*”; “Trying to Hold onto a Piece of Pi: The Dysphoric Style’s Structuring of Narrative in Darren Aronofsky’s Film”; “Remembering to Forget: The Dysphoric Style in *Memento*”; and “The Dysphoric Style in Contemporary American Independent Film.”