CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses, by Simin Nina Littschwager
Authors	Antunes, Luis
Publication date	2020-07-24
Original Citation	Antunes, L. (2020) 'Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses, by Simin Nina Littschwager', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 19, pp. 276-280. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.29
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.19.29
Rights	© 2020, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-07 04:56:15
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10274



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 19, 2020, pp. 276–280
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.29

Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses, by Simin Nina Littschwager. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 241 pp.

Luis Antunes

Simin Nina Littschwager's *Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses* offers a phenomenological approach to the concept of complexity in film. Littschwager develops her arguments and analysis around a set of six films, namely, *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2000), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *Possible Worlds* (Robert Lepage, 2000), and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011). Littschwager's main thesis asserts that mind-game films—a term introduced by Thomas Elsaesser in his 2009 essay "The Mind-Game Film"—need to be understood from the perspective of embodied experience, and beyond the predominantly visual and cognitive approaches that have so far been used to address the topic in film scholarship. Littschwager believes that complexity in film has been understood mainly as a brain-teaser effect where "the body and the senses play only a marginal role" (3). Mind-game films are part of a wider group of complex-narrative films and display "multiple and non-linear timelines, ontological and epistemological twists, parallel worlds, temporal loops, subjective plots, unreliable narrators, mentally deviant characters, and often ambiguous endings" (4). The complexity of mind-game films at the levels of narrative, themes and space representation has led scholars and critics to approach these films as "narrative puzzles whose main appeal lies in putting the pieces into the correct causal and linear order" (199). Instead of mere pieces of a puzzle that viewers put together and make sense of using purely their brainpower and intellect, Littschwager argues that mind-game films are always a matter of "embodied activity, informed by the body and the senses as much as by the mental faculty" (199). For the purpose of describing the ways in which the six mind-game films in the book offer forms of embodied and sensory experience, Littschwager draws from so-called textural analysis, an approach derived from Jennifer Barker's *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. According to Barker, textural analysis seeks to unveil meanings at deeper levels in the materiality of a film hidden by a focus on "visual, aural, and narrative aspects" of a film (25). Textural analysis follows a line of thought that goes back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work (*Film*; "Eye"; *Visible*; *Phenomenology*), and connects the phenomenological approach of Vivian Sobchack to the phenomenologically informed work of Laura Marks. For film phenomenologists, seeing cannot be separated from the body and from a personal, private experience of film that is unique to each viewer, and, although the essential nature of the film medium is primarily made of images, the images of a film should not be conflated

© *Luis Antunes*
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

exclusively with the spectators' modes of visual perception but with other realms of sensory experience.

In her analysis of the six mind-game films in her book, Littschwager describes how the body and the senses are key, not only for viewers to understand different levels complexity related to narrative, themes and character identity, but also for the characters themselves in those films to be who they perceive themselves to be. In *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, the materiality of the characters' bodies give them an illusion of reality and existence in the world of the living and tricks them, as well as the viewers, into perceiving themselves as beings that exist in the world of the living. Despite the materiality of their existence, the characters' experiences are dominated by their senses of touch and hearing. In that way, touch and hearing, rather than vision, become the prevailing epistemological senses in those films, the gateways to reality and meaning-making.

In *Memento* and *Fight Club*, the elusiveness of memory (*Memento*) and the unreliability of narration (*Fight Club*) cannot be solved solely by putting together the complex web of facts laid out by those films, but by using the body as a site of memory and using haptic experience and pain as ways to remember and know reality. Viewers can make sense of a mind-game film like *Memento*, which plays with contradiction and ambiguity, by engaging with the film in a haptic manner much like the main character in the film, Leonard (Guy Pearce), does when he tries to make sense of reality without being able to recollect his memories. In that context, Littschwager argues that touch can be more reliable than vision both for the characters and for the viewers alike. Finally, in *Possible Worlds* and *Source Code*, complexity is created and experienced through a sense of bodily, proprioceptive disorientation and being lost that results in the creation of multiple spatial layers that assign complexity to the two films.

The originality of Littschwager's approach lies at her intersecting complexity in film and phenomenology with a focus on sensory experience and a rich stylistic analysis of the six films in the book. Littschwager traces a solid overview of previous approaches to complexity in film which will prove useful for anyone exploring related subjects. Littschwager describes how the complexity and mind tricks posed by mind-game films have been explained predominantly as an activity of and for the mind and intellect of spectators, as in Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen's book *Impossible Puzzles* or in Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*. Littschwager's thorough and in-depth review of the scholarship produced on the subject of complexity in film is not only valuable for readers to assess the critical approaches to the subject but also helps to contextualise and position Littschwager's approach and its originality. Similarly helpful is Littschwager's definition of the concept of complexity in film, and the variety of film examples that fall into different categories of complexity offering a solid lineage of mind-game films.

Littschwager's analysis of the six films has a formal nature, almost appearing to be more of a neoformalist approach in the likes of David Bordwell than a more personal, direct description of experience that is often found in the work of film phenomenologists. That fact makes Littschwager's approach even more unique and, in my view, more interdisciplinary and rich for the reader. Nonetheless, Littschwager delineates a solid connecting line to Sobchack's, Marks's and Barker's phenomenological approaches, distancing herself from cognitive film theory, with which Bordwell is associated. Cognitive film theory has been strongly connected to Bordwell's

idea of film comprehension based on human narrative as a matter of cognition and mental decoding in a way that can be considered somewhat dualistic (mind vs. body) and disembodied by not always weighing in the role of the senses in the experience of a film. Although Littschwager's distantiation from cognitive film theory is relevant to a certain point, it becomes a permanent, and somewhat distracting effort throughout the book. Littschwager's attempt to delineate the territory of her own approach may be perceived by readers as a detour from her argument. Instead, Littschwager could have been predominately phenomenological and still benefitted from arguments made by cognitive film theory when appropriate, such as in Daniel Barratt's helpful analysis of *The Sixth Sense*.

Littschwager's approach to issues of cinematic complexity through film phenomenology and formal analysis makes this book an original and valuable study of the subject. Nonetheless, while making her point about the role of the senses and embodiment in the experience of complexity in film, Littschwager tends to consider visuality and sight as somewhat disembodied levels of experience. Littschwager often connects vision to disembodiment given that vision is considered a distal sense that does not require the involvement of the viewer's body as much as a proximal sense as touch does. Drawing on Marks' notion of haptic visuality and referring to *The Sixth Sense*, Littschwager discusses a Cartesian notion of vision and knowledge where vision offers a detached and observational knowledge of film rather than a proximal and multisensory experience that touch offers. However, vision is as embodied as any other sense and is a gateway to embodied experience and to other senses. Spectators can perceive textures in a film primarily through visual and aural sensory information. Certainly, textures are not just a matter of touch but are intricately connected to multiple senses. Sight also modulates embodied startle responses to film, and shapes the viewers' awareness of space, movement, or even pain, as Littschwager points out (134). Although an author like Stanley Cavell will refer to a primarily ocular mode of access to a filmic world, that does not necessarily represent a detraction from the experiential and embodied dimensions of a film. Cavell is not so much denying the experiential nature of film by referring to film's visual nature, but is, in fact, pointing out that access to a film's experiential world is primarily through visual and aural sensory information. Experiential access can be visual and the cumulative filmic experience can still be multisensory and belong to different realms of sensory experience. On that point, Cavell's idea of sensory access does not, contrary to Littschwager's assertion, seem inaccurate. Neither does it appear necessary for Littschwager to consider vision to be disembodied nor vision to be oppositional to other senses in order for one to find validity in her main ideas. On the contrary, the opposition of sight with the other senses throughout the book feels more like a distraction from Littschwager's main ideas rather than a useful artefact.

Despite her conception of sight as disembodied and sight as not offering a haptic mode of knowledge of a film's world, Littschwager's book is an undeniably valuable addition to the scholarship on the subject of complexity in film, and is, moreover, an original contribution to film phenomenology for its detailed formal analysis of film's sensory appeal based on a stylistic analysis of camera movement, framing and other audiovisual elements that are not usually as closely explored by film phenomenologists. Littschwager delineates important layers of the mind-game film that go beyond narrative complexity and shows us that knowing and experiencing a film exceeds intellectual and mental activities. Sensory experience is not just a coating layer of film but an essential way to understand film's materiality and human experience. Littschwager's book shows that film cannot be understood by mere textual or even cultural analysis and, ultimately, the

role of sensory experience should not be only an alternative component of film scholarship but a core component traversing the field of film studies.

References

Barker, Jennifer. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. U of California P, 2009.

Barratt, Daniel. "'Twist Blindness': The Role of Primacy, Priming, Schemas, and Reconstructive Memory in a First-Time Viewing of *The Sixth Sense*." *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland, Wiley Blackwell, 2009, pp. 62–86.

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. 1971. Harvard UP, 1979.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Mind-Game Film." *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland, Wiley Blackwell, 2009, pp. 13–41.

Elsaesser, Thomas, and Malte Hagener. *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*. Routledge, 2010.

Fight Club. Directed by David Fincher, Fox 2000 Pictures, 1999.

Kiss, Miklós, and Steven Willemsen. *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.

Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke UP, 2000.

Memento. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Newmarket Capital Group, 2000.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Film and the Psychology." 1948. *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated by Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus, Northwestern UP, 1964, pp. 48–59.

---. "Eye and the Mind." *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie, translated by William Cobb, Northwestern UP, 1964, pp. 159–90.

---. *Phenomenology of Perception*. 1945. Translated by Colin Smith, Routledge, 2002.

---. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Followed by Working Notes. Translated by Alphonso Lingus, Northwestern UP, 1968.

The Others. Directed by Alejandro Amenábar, Cruise/Wagner Productions Sogecine, 2000.

Possible Worlds. Directed by Robert Lepage, East Side Film Company, 2000.

The Sixth Sense. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1999.

Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of the Film Experience*. Princeton UP, 1991.

Source Code. Directed by Duncan Jones, The Mark Gordon Company, 2011.

Suggested Citation

Antunes, Luis. "*Making Sense of Mind-Game Films: Narrative Complexity, Embodiment, and the Senses*, by Simin Nina Littschwager." Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 19, 2020, pp. 276–280, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.29.

Luis Antunes is passionate about topics of experientiality, nonverbal communication and the perceptual engagement created through the relationship among sensory modalities and audiovisual style manifested in media history. These interests have been translated into a book entitled *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Experiential Film Aesthetics*, as well as numerous journal essays, book chapters and conference papers. His most recent publications explore issues of identity and aesthetics in televised series such as *Fleabag*, as well as television and radio history related to CBS and Edward Murrow.