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# *Are You Watching Closely?: Cultural Paranoia, New Technologies, and the Contemporary Hollywood Misdirection Film*, by Seth Friedman. SUNY Press, 2017, 278 pp.

Jordan Lavender-Smith

In the spring of 2019, the website *The Ringer* launched an ongoing series of articles and podcasts to mark the twenty-year celebration of what is popularly recognised as one of the greatest years in US film history. That same spring, Simon & Schuster released Brian Raftery's bluntly titled *Best. Movie. Year. Ever.: How 1999 Blew Up the Big Screen*. Raftery and *The Ringer* presented extended treatments for the usual suspects—*The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan), *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez), *Fight Club* (David Fincher), and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson), all released in 1999. What these and other "classics" from the era have in common is pretty clear: they bend, some would say break, key classical principles of narrative film. Academics took note. These were "puzzle" films or "narratively complex" films or "mind-game" films. Many of the scholarly discussions centred around whether or not these movies represented a new, "postclassical" age for popular US film. What makes these movies different? Why did they arrive when they did? What does it mean? What caused it? There's no smoking gun, but Seth Friedman's *Are You Watching Closely?: Cultural Paranoia, New Technologies, and the Contemporary Hollywood Misdirection Film* goes as far as any single text identifying the fertile cultural, technological, and industrial grounds that allowed a particular subset of narratively complex films to flourish at the turn of the century.

Perhaps the key scholarly work on these films is Thomas Elsaesser's chapter "The Mind-Game Film" in Warren Buckland's 2009 edited collection *Puzzle Films*. Elsaesser makes a persuasive case that mind-game films promote new forms of spectator address for a Deleuzian society of control: audiences must remain "flexible, adaptive, and interactive, and above all, to know the [changing] 'rules of the game'" (16). Though *Are You Watching Closely?* can be read as a valuable extension of and response to Elsaesser's chapter, Friedman, unlike Elsaesser, draws a strong distinction between narrative films that trick audiences (the films that Friedman considers) and films in which characters merely trick other characters, such as *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995) and *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998). Friedman offers the name "misdirection film" for the movies he analyses, a term that "captures how these films are often created and promoted as contests of wits between filmmakers and audiences" (3). Further still, in a nod to David Bordwell's

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cognitive film theory, *direction* "intimates how filmmakers working in the genre encourage initial misapprehensions of narrative information" (3). Indeed, the twists in these movies depend for their full effects on audiences having been conditioned by the conventions of classical Hollywood storytelling and to be misdirected by those expectations.

Friedman identifies two sorts of misdirection films: the "changeover" and the "master key". The name changeover comes from *Fight Club*. Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) uses the term as a projectionist's shorthand for the act of changing the film reel; the narrator (Edward Norton) uses it when he discovers that he and Tyler are the same person. Like so many films from the time, *Fight Club* contains a scene near the film's end (the changeover scene) in which a majority of the narrative information up to that point must be completely reappraised: this character is actually dead (*The Sixth Sense*); this one has had a twin the whole time (*The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, 2006)); this one is suffering from a psychotic break (too numerous to count). On the other hand, while the master key film also calls for a near-total reappraisal of the narrative, there's no proper changeover scene. Instead, these movies often include strikingly ambiguous or initially unintelligible moments—the unidentified shining contents of the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), or the raining frogs in *Magnolia*. It's up to audiences, then, to figure out the hidden subtext or logic of the narrative, to generate a theory that will clear up the mysteries.

Friedman charts the industrial history of misdirection films, explaining how indie studios and mini-majors in the mid-1990s produced sleeper hits in the narrative style (*Pulp Fiction* and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995)) before the major studios began to produce misdirection films consistently around 1999, generating an unexpected blockbuster with *The Sixth Sense* and a Best Picture Oscar with *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001). Friedman's study focuses on the years 1990–2010. During this stretch, Hollywood had a hand in forty films that asked audiences to completely reappraise narrative events near the end of the film (the changeover) or after the credits roll (the master key), making it "the most fertile period for such films in history" (1). It is no coincidence that this period also marks the rise of the web and the new primacy of the post-theatrical market. Friedman examines the vibrant virtual communities that emerged to interpret the byzantine narratives of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001). Unlike the VHS format, Hollywood positioned the DVD as a sell-through product—movies should be purchased, not just rented. Misdirection films call for repeated, investigative viewings. This was the perfect narrative style for the crystal-clear freeze-frames and lossless repeatability of DVD. Though other writers have made these connections, Friedman's work provides the most thoroughgoing attempt at tying the rise and decline of these movies to the history of the DVD format. By the late 2000s Hollywood had developed enough confidence in misdirection films to invest big budgets and A-list talent. Friedman's chapter on the 2010 films *Inception* (Christopher Nolan) and *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese) showcases Hollywood's confidence in the genre. Interestingly, though, 2010 also marks the year of the DVD format's collapse, and Friedman explains how Paramount repositioned *Shutter Island*'s theatrical release to account for this downturn.

Do these films constitute a genre, though? In his influential book *Genre and Television*, Jason Mittell argues that Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic model of studying genres places too little emphasis on pragmatics. In other words, the academic who categorises and studies genres ought to step away from the text to look primarily at how genres are defined and redefined

by discourse. The approach is inspired by Foucault's work (discourse *creates* "natural" categories), and the goal is to better understand the "cultural operation of genres" (Mittell 4). Thus, academics probably shouldn't be in the business of branding new genres, according to Mittell. Friedman finds Mittell's approach too dogmatic. According to Friedman, the scholar who applies Mittell's method relies on luck: What if the scholar misses a group of critics or fans who speak about a certain genre in much different terms than the discourses the scholar is familiar with? Further still, how much weight should be given to outliers and "atypical utterances" about certain genres (29)? Friedman balances his mostly discursive approach to these films with a light intervention: audiences, critics, and Hollywood treat misdirection films uniquely as their own category, even if they haven't branded the movies with a specific, agreed-upon label. Friedman supplies it.

Indeed, Friedman's analysis of the discursive contexts of misdirection films—how online communities responded to the movies and how Hollywood positioned them—is the great strength of *Are You Watching Closely*? How do you market a film, or a genre for that matter, that depends for its full effects on tricking the audience? One of the pleasures of Friedman's book is his insightful analyses of promotional artefacts—taglines, TV spots that change over a film's run, DVD inserts and menu features, and so on. For instance, the misdirection movie *Fight Club* was a theatrical box-office bomb. It became a classic on DVD, though, and Friedman attributes this (in part, at least) to the ways in which the DVD was promoted differently than the theatrical release. TV spots for misdirection films often present the film as a stable representation of a traditional genre. A TV spot for *The Usual Suspects*, for example, cites a review calling it "The best crime film in years". But, crucially for Friedman, these ads also typically point to the fact that there is a central narrative secret of some sort. Another review snippet for *The Usual Suspects* highlights the word "twist" as the narrator says the film contains "a whopper of an ending" (33). The theatrical advertisements for *Fight Club*, however, completely elided the film's narrative twist, or its changeover. Expectations for the film were thus poorly set. All of this creates a strange dilemma for Hollywood, as they had to market misdirection films as belonging to familiar genres, but also as films with secrets, secrets they can't give away. 20th Century Fox course-corrected for the DVD release, which features on its case a review snippet from *The New York Times*: "[*Fight Club*] just might require another viewing" (40). Friedman does an excellent job throughout the entire book of analysing how the major studios continued to refine their approach to marketing these strange new films.

Who purchased these DVDs? Who wrote on these message boards? Friedman believes that the digital divide of the 1990s and 2000s maps onto the targeted audience and the cultural politics of many of these misdirection films: "young, white, middle- and upper-class men were most likely to possess the financial wealth and technological knowledge required to participate in the new communication technology" (130). Friedman concludes from avatars and usernames that most of the participants on message boards for *Mulholland Drive* and *Memento* were probably male. The misdirection trope in this era usually appeared in brooding psychological thrillers, crime movies, and horror films; they almost always featured a male protagonist. According to Friedman, the complicated films (and their associated DVDs) "satisfy a desire for mastery, a yearning often associated with young, tech-savvy, male film collectors who also consider themselves discerning Hollywood cinephiles" (22). Extending Susan Jeffords's work on depictions of masculinity in 1980s and 1990s films—and how those depictions aligned with the Reagan Revolution—Friedman argues that many misdirection films forward a conservative definition of gender, but one that has

adapted to a cultural context in which Conan the Barbarian-style depictions of masculinity had become the subject of intense scrutiny or outright parody. In fact, a central theme of *Are You Watching Closely?* is that misdirection films often gesture toward a progressive, performative definition of gender, only for the changeover to reveal a "cloaked male quintessence" buried under the surface (95). Friedman presents compelling readings of *The Usual Suspects* and *Unbreakable* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000) in these terms. Both films feature prominent male characters who weaponise gender by deliberately coding themselves in traditionally nonmasculine terms. The myth of the self-made man is increasingly difficult to maintain in an era of neoliberal policies that have destroyed the middle class. For Friedman, these movies suggest that "other tactics" are now "necessary to maintain male authority" (100).

Still, the cultural politics of these films are far from monolithic. A strength of *Are You Watching Closely?* is Friedman's insightful analyses of the ways in which online fans often reambiguate misdirection films. What if Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) is also—like Tyler Durden—a figment of the narrator's imagination? There are enough clues to sustain this reading. Why do we see a new lighthouse at the end of *Shutter Island*? It might be a continuity error, but it might also support the reading that Teddy (Leonardo DiCaprio) is actually a guinea pig in a vast mind-control experiment. More to the point, interpretations of the gender politics of misdirection films often hinge on a reading of the changeover. In *Fight Club*, does the recognition of the narrator's mental instability underline the sick misogyny of Tyler Durden's monologues? Or does the changeover shine a light on a feminised society that forces men to bury their inner masculine essence? These questions begin to pile up in *Are You Watching Closely?*, showcasing for Friedman and his readers how misdirection films align with the flexible politics of classical Hollywood filmmaking. Hollywood movies, according to David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, are "strategically ambiguous about political and social matters. This maneuver helpfully disarms criticisms from interest groups ('Look at the positive points we put in') and gives the film an air of moral seriousness ('See, things aren't simple; there are gray areas')" (Bordwell and Thompson 8). In this sense, the misdirection film is hyperclassical: the changeover simply multiplies the number of textually supported interpretations of the film's ideological stance. For instance, in one of the standout chapters of *Are You Watching Closely?*, Friedman analyses the misdirection films *Arlington Road* (Mark Pellington, 1999) and *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990) through the lens of Timothy Melley's concept of "agency panic and the culture of conspiracy" (70). Like many other misdirection films, these two movies showcase a relentless scepticism about the veracity of official narratives and a "nervous concern over the authenticity of individual autonomy" (74). Like the narratives of so many conspiracy theories, however, the films don't replace the official narratives with a postmodern epistemology. Rather, they assuage cultural anxieties "with the fantasy that it is possible to determine what 'actually' occurred and who was 'really' responsible for events" (8). Likewise, though these movies point to new modes of storytelling—a film might not be completely legible on its first viewing, events are out of order or obscured in seemingly radical ways—they finally bank on a hyperclassical sense of cause-and-effect. This is what *really* happened: he was actually a ghost, he had a twin, he had a mental breakdown. The films rely on our classically conditioned responses to narrative events. They adapt those principles of narration for contemporary audiences, or at least for those viewers who have the time, resources, and inclinations to own and master a narratively complex film.

*Are You Watching Closely?* is theoretically informed; it is fully accessible to graduate students and advanced undergraduates. Chapter 1 identifies how, according to Friedman, misdirection films constitute their own genre. Chapter 2 links the misdirection film with conspiracy theory narratives by drawing on the work of Mark Fenster, Fredric Jameson, and Timothy Melley in an analysis of *Arlington Road* and *Jacob's Ladder*. Friedman then applies the work of Judith Butler, Steve Cohan, and Susan Jeffords in Chapter 3 to examine the conservative gender politics of *The Usual Suspects* and *Unbreakable*. Extending the work of Henry Jenkins and Barbara Klinger, Chapter 4 investigates the online fan communities for the films *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive*. Friedman follows this with a lively comparison of the contrasting career trajectories of M. Night Shyamalan and Christopher Nolan. Chapter 6 applies many of the concepts developed throughout the book to an analysis of the films *Inception* and *Shutter Island*. Seth Friedman's *Are You Watching Closely?* is a valuable contribution to any conversation about the cultural, technological, and industrial contexts of turn-of-the-century Hollywood.

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