# Book Reviews

Nitzan Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice: Optional Thinking and Narrative Movies.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012, vi + 189 pp., $70.00 (hardcover).
by **James J. Fiumara**

Most of us have at one time or another participated and taken pleasure in the game of "What if?" We imagine how our lives may have followed an alternative path if we had made a different choice in the past ("What if I had moved to Hollywood to become an actor instead of pursuing a PhD?"). Similarly, we may also evaluate forthcoming decisions by constructing possible alternative outcomes ("If I decide X, then Y. But if I decide W, then Z."), which we can then compare before deciding a course of action. Of course, alternative paths and "what if" scenarios are not only a way for us to imagine "what might have been" or to assess possibilities for "what might come to be," but these creative processes have also informed experiments in fictional narratives. Literary fiction has long mined the possibilities of both optional narrative paths and alternate worlds, from Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which is set in an alternate world where the Axis Powers won World War II, to Argentine writer Julio Cortázar's 1963 "antinovel" *Hopscotch,* which can be read sequentially or by "hopscotching" across the book's 155 chapters. Even popular fictions geared toward adolescents have experimented with multiple narrative paths. The popular and long-running children's series of *Choose Your Own Adventure* books contained a limited number of possible narrative threads based on reader choices ("If you enter the cave, turn to page 21."), and comic books have also frequently presented alternate narrative paths and complex "multiverses," such as in the Marvel Comics series *What If*—the first issue of the series speculating "What If Spiderman Joined the Fantastic Four?" (February 1977). Most famous, of course, is Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (written in 1941 [1994]), which reimagines the literary narrative as an infinite, bifurcating maze in time: a symbolic "garden of forking paths." Borges story inspired not only literary experimentations with alternative narrative paths such as mentioned above, but also serves as a primary forerunner to contemporary new media hypertext and theory.

Nitzan Ben Shaul's recent book, *Cinema of Choice: Optional Thinking and Narrative Movies,* intriguingly explores these notions of narrative choices and

alternative paths as found, or not found as the case may be, in cinema. Ben Shaul is no stranger to these issues as he has previously written on the challenges (such as cognitive overload) of interactive cinema in *Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions* (2008) and has also produced an interactive film *Turbulence* (2010), which uses scene sequencing strategies and touchscreen technology to allow a viewer to choose the progression of the film's plot at key narrative crossroads (essentially, an audio-visual version of *Choose Your Own Adventure* perfectly geared toward the iPad crowd). With its discussion of "shifting narrative" films such as *Sliding Door*s (1998), *Run Lola Run* (1998), and *Memento* (2000), Ben Shaul's volume joins the ranks of other recent scholarship on "forking-path" films, "puzzle films," and "database narratives" by scholars such as David Bordwell (2002), Warren Buckland (2009), and Lev Manovich (2001). However, Ben Shaul's book charts its own path (albeit a narrower one) by providing a unique argument on how narrative cinema has the potential to encourage what he calls "optional thinking." He defines optional thinking as the "cognitive ability to generate, perceive, or compare and assess alternate hypotheses that offer explanations for real or lifelike events" (2). According to Ben Shaul, this creative process of imagining alternative hypotheses such as in "what if?" scenarios is one that is rarely evoked by the movies. In fact, most films do just the opposite by encouraging "a closed state of mind, biasing our cognitive processes toward a reductive and selective attention to incoming data" in a manner that actually blocks the process of optional thinking (1). As Ben Shaul is interested in optional thinking as a means of acquiring knowledge about the world, he supplements his definition of optional thinking with psychologist Arie Kruglanski's theory of a "lay epistemic process of knowledge construction and acquisition" (5). The strength of Kruglanski's theory, according to Ben Shaul, is that it integrates both cognitive processes and epistemic motivations such as "need for closure" and "fear of invalidity." The main analytic strategy for the book then is to use Kruglanski's theory as a means to identify the ways in which narrative films may encourage closed-mindedness or, conversely, optional thinking in viewers.

*Cinema of Choice* is organized into five chapters, which succinctly and logically present Ben Shaul's argument. The first chapter (or introduction) lays out Ben Shaul's definitions of a number of key concepts (e.g., "optional thinking" and "closed mindedness") and provides a summary of the book's central argument, while the short conclusion points to avenues for future research. The three chapters in between present the heart of his argument and analysis: chapter 2 explores the relation between closed mindedness and popular narrative movies from a cognitive perspective. Chapter 3 provides insightful critiques of what Ben Shaul calls "failed alternatives to the encouragement of optional thinking," including formalist, neo-Marxist, and post-modernist approaches to film (54). And chapter 4 presents his case for narrative film's abil-

ity to encourage optional thinking through the very same narrative strategies that popular films typically use in a manner that leads to closed mindedness.

Although Ben Shaul's overall approach to film narrative relies generally on theories in cognitive and social psychology, he also presents a critique of some current cognitive approaches to popular narrative film. According to Ben Shaul, cognitive approaches to film by researchers such as Bordwell (1985), Noël Carroll (1985), and Ed Tan (1996) suggest, albeit in different ways, that a "major explanation for [the] widespread popularity and engagement [with popular movies] stems from the way the narrative construction of these movies engages our cognitive faculties" (19). In this view, popular films (essentially, the classical model of film narrative as exemplified by Bordwell et al. [1985]) are appealing as they engage our ingrained processes of knowledge construction and, furthermore, provide a satisfying closure often not found in the real world through their narrative organization of audiovisual information into a cause-and-effect chain that presents definitive answers to previously raised questions (19–21). Ben Shaul does not deny that this satisfaction of the desire for resolution and closure can be a source of pleasure. However, he criticizes cognitive approaches for not recognizing how popular film narratives use these same strategies to encourage closed mindedness. Ben Shaul's specific argument in relation to the activity of film viewing is that the forward audiovisual flow of film narration in popular cinema, as well as the use of "suspense/surprise constructs," the interplay between cataphora (early cue) and anaphora (later recall), and the "evocation of empathy for characters," creates unpleasant uncertainties and, therefore, a heightened need for closure in the audience and, in doing so, typically blocks the potential for optional thinking (25). These techniques work in such a way that even though a narrative film presents a "loose probabilistic causality" that leaves open the possibility that at any given point events could go in a variety of directions, there is a "retroactively reasoned strict reduction of options that leads to a single resolution and closure" (26). In other words, the design of popular film narratives discourages the contemplation of alternate hypotheses and promotes the notion that the direction of the narrative is the one true and inevitable outcome.

The belief that classical narration leads to something like closed mindedness is not a new idea and, as Ben Shaul points out, itself leads to the idea that to dismantle aspects of classical narration (e.g., continuity, closure) is to likewise dismantle viewer closed mindedness. Three prominent approaches to film that follow this general idea are found in formalism, neo-Marxism, and postmodernism. However, Ben Shaul argues that each of these approaches fails to promote optional thinking. Rather, he argues, in their dismantling of narrative coherence and closure, these approaches cue "split-attention, confusion, distraction, or frustration in viewers" (14). Ben Shaul makes a number of very valid and useful critiques of these approaches. He critiques the formalist

notion that the aesthetics of "defamiliarization" necessarily prompts viewers to reflect on their own "perceptual and cognitive processes" (61). He makes similar arguments against neo-Marxist strategies of deconstruction and the split-subjects and narrative paradoxes found in postmodernism. Ben Shaul's critique of deconstruction serves as a useful counterargument to the frequent tendency of some scholars to assume that a "rupture" in the formal structure of a film narrative equates to a deconstruction of the presumed underlying ideological apparatus. According to Ben Shaul, rather than promoting a specific viable alternative, the process of deconstructing narrative continuity and coherence "simply undermines the necessary narrative conditions for any process of knowledge construction and acquisition to ensue" (83).

Ben Shaul's arguments regarding both the encouragement of closed mindedness in popular narrative film and the failure to promote optional thinking in a variety of alternatives to popular narrative film are well reasoned, but they do present a number of issues. One primary weakness is that they depend on his proposed narrow definition of optional thinking. For Ben Shaul, optional thinking is only achieved when the film cues multiple viable alternatives complete with their own defined causal chains. If one accepts Ben Shaul's definition, then all is well. However, I found his definition overly restrictive. Although he discusses a number of strategies that may result in optional thinking (such as optional narrative tracks, overlapping character perspectives, and narratives that present alternate histories), the actual films that ultimately meet his specifications seem quite limited. *Run, Lola, Run* makes the cut, but *Mulholland Drive* (2001) does not. The alternate history of *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) makes the cut, but *Downfall* (2004) does not. Ben Shaul's definition excludes films that promote what he calls "loopy thinking" such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* and *Inception* (2010) or David Lynch's "mobius strip" films, which he argues present irresolvable alternatives and narrative mental mazes rather than viable options. Although Ben Shaul does not make this explicit, his criteria would also seem to exclude, for example, the ambiguities found in "Art Cinema" (Bordwell 1979), the "New American Cinema" of the 1970s (e.g., *The Conversation* [1974]), and narratives that Todorov (1975) describes as "fantastic" (e.g., *The Innocents* [1961]). Although these films may not provide definitive cause-and-effect chains for assessing narrative alternatives, it does not follow that audiences are simply left in a state of suspended confusion, rather than actively assessing and even arguing for alternative narrative outcomes and explanations (in fact, Internet forums and chat rooms are full of these detailed arguments).

For Ben Shaul, the importance of optional thinking goes beyond imaginative narrative games. Optional thinking serves as an integral component in the way we "acquire and construct knowledge" about the world, and the failure to employ optional thinking (i.e., "closed mindedness") may "result in dire

consequences" (2). Though this is an entirely reasonable claim for real-world decision making, its relevance to film spectatorship is much less obvious. Surely, there are no "dire consequences" to not entertaining alternate hypotheses to elements within a fictional movie narrative? (Of course, I'm not actually claiming that Ben Shaul thinks this either.) But, rhetoric aside, the question remains: why should optional thinking, especially as presented in the book, be a goal of popular film narrative? Ben Shaul does acknowledge this question in his introduction by stating that he is not arguing that all movies should promote optional thinking, but rather that this is a "favorable value" that a movie may have (12). Fair enough. However, whether or not this is actually a "favorable value" rather than just a narrative strategy that Ben Shaul prefers, seems to me to depend on whether or not these films have an impact on audience's decision making in the "real world." At the end of the day, I remain skeptical that the movies that Ben Shaul claims encourage optional thinking actually affect viewer's thinking habits outside of the theater any more than movies that supposedly block optional thinking. And while this does not negate the book's overall thoughtful and useful detailed analyses of film narrative, it does render the import of his underlying argument a bit toothless. The book does not necessarily *explicitly* claim that movies that encourage optional thinking are "better" for you than movies that encourage closed mindedness (which is apparently most of them), it is hard to not come away with this implicit moral framework intact. Audiences may enjoy and be challenged by these alternative narrative structures (myself included), but I'm not convinced that they really amount to anything more than an interesting twist on more traditional narration—another storytelling option in the filmmaker's toolbox like the use of flashbacks or long takes. Furthermore, films that use some of the narrative strategies that Ben Shaul outlines, such as optional narrative tracks, run the risk of quickly becoming a gimmick (I enjoyed *Run Lola Run,* but do we really want another one?). This does not negate the viability of these narrative strategies, but does question the extent of their repeatability.

Despite these reservations, *Cinema of Choice* is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on film narrative. Ben Shaul provides thought-provoking commentary on how movies construct their narratives and the process by which audiences cognitively interact with them. Ben Shaul's book should appeal to anyone interested in film narratology or cognitive studies of film, and is particularly relevant to those interested in experimental narration and interactive storytelling.

**James Fiumara** is assistant professor of film studies in the Department of English at the University of Colorado, Denver. He has published and lectured on the cinema of the Quay Brothers and is currently working on a project explor-

ing the relationship between classic horror cinema and other cultural entertainments of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (e.g., carnivals, fairgrounds, dime museums).

### References

Ben-Shaul, Nitzan. 2008. *Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions*. Amsterdam: Rodolpi B.V.

Bordwell, David. 1979. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." *Film Criticism* 4(1): 56–64.

Bordwell, David. 1985. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bordwell, David. 2002. "Film Futures." *SubStance* 31(1): 88–104.

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger. 1985. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Borges, Jorge Luis. 1994. "The Garden of Forking Paths." Pp. 89–104 in *Ficciones*. Trans. Anthony Bonner. New York: Grove Press.

Buckland, Warren, ed. 2009. *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Carroll, Noël. 1985. "The Power of Movies." *Daedalus* 114(4): 79–103.

Cortázar, Julio. 1966. *Hopscotch*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Pantheon Books.

Dick, Philip K. 1962. *The Man in the High Castle*. New York: Putnam.

Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Tan, Ed. 1996. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

### Filmography

Ben-Shaul, Nitzan. 2010. *Turbulence*. USA.

Clayton, Jack. 1961. *The Innocents*. UK.

Coppola, Francis Ford. 1974. *The Conversation*. USA.

Hirschbiegel, Oliver. 2004. *Downfall*. Germany, Italy, and Austria.

Howitt, Peter. 1998. *Sliding Doors*. USA and UK.

Lynch, David. 2001. *Mulholland Drive.* USA.

Nolan, Christopher. 2000. *Memento*. USA.

Nolan, Christopher. 2010. *Inception.* USA.

Tarantino, Quentin. 2009. *Inglourious Basterds*. USA.

Tykwer, Tom. 1998. *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*). Germany.

Lisa Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us about Popular Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, xiii + 217 pp., $29.95.
by **Ted Nannicelli**

The first thing to note about Lisa Zunshine's *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us about Popular Culture* is that it is intended to be a "crossover" book. From my perspective, this makes reviewing the book a bit

Cinema impacts our life both positively and negatively. Just as everything else in this world, cinema also has positive as well as negative impact on our life. While some movies can change our thinking for good others can invoke a feeling or pain or fear. Despite having a regulatory mechanism, movies these days display a good amount of violence and other illegal and immoral activities. While these activities don't have much effect on matured adults, it could however adversely affect children or teenagers. You can choose any Impact of Cinema in Life Essay as per your need and interest during your school/college essay writing competition or in a debate, discussion with your class mate on topics relevant to the subject. So, go through this page and select the one essay which is best for you