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The Thin Line between Fact and Fiction in *Shutter Island* (2010)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Shutter Island is a 2010 film directed by Martin Scorsese. It is a psychological thriller that tells the story of Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio), a U.S Marshal, and his associate Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) who arrive at Shutter Island, where Ashecliffe Hospital (a facility for people with dementia) is located. They travel to the hospital to figure out what happened to Rachel Solando (Emily Mortimer). The woman appears to have vanished from a locked room, and there are hints of terrible deeds committed within the hospital walls. The film is an adaptation from the 2003 novel *Shutter Island* by Dennis Lehane.

After its release on February 19, 2010, the film was met with mixed reviews. Some critics disliked the narrative structure and general melodramatic tone of the film. Writing for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw states that "the performances are solid and the directing is inspired. But Martin Scorsese's grand ambitions sit uneasily on what is essentially an old-fashioned melodrama" (2010). For A.O. Scott, from the *New York Times*, the film is "a jumbled mess of red herrings, pretentious special effects and plot distractions that wear viewers down and ultimately bores them" (2010). Yet, the film was a box-office success. The initial revenue expectations were exceeded, as the $295 million worldwide profit was overcome by more than the triple the initial $80 million budget.

This essay will explore the narrative structure of the film, especially focusing on how it makes use of a series of puzzle film techniques in order to manipulate the narrative structure and spectators' engagement with the film. The two main characters, Teddy Danniels and Chuck Aule, will be explored in detail. This section will be preceded by a theoretical framework elaborating on the concepts of puzzle films and how this concept has developed throughout history.

2. PUZZLE FILMS

Warren Buckland uses this term to describe a category of films characterized by their narrative complexity and innovation and disruption in linearity. Puzzle films separate from what has been, for a long time, classical Hollywood narration, a model that, for scholars such as David Bordwell (1984), goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. (Aristotle, 1996)

For Aristotle, "plot" refers to the "distribution" of events. For a narrative to be successful, the events chosen and combined must occur in a possible way. Simple plots are organized into a beginning, middle and end. They are considered easy to follow and to comprehend. Complex plots add two elements: "reversal" and "recognition". A reversal is an event that contradicts both a character's circumstance and the audience's expectations. Recognition is the moment when spectators (and sometimes characters) realize the reversal. Reversal and recognition are not imposed by characters but on them, so their destiny is altered. These two elements make spectators (and characters) reconsider what they have seen. Aristotle uses the term *peplegmenos* for "complex," which means "interwoven" (Aristotle, 1996). Aristotle's use of "interwoven" suggests that, although this second plot initially disrupts the main one by drastically changing the hero's fate, in the end, it fuses with it. This combination restores a unified, classical structure where reversal and recognition seem likely and inevitable. Still, contemporary puzzle films expand and complicate these principles introducing other elements such as unreliable narrators, fragmentation and different perspectives, as will be seen below (Buckland, 2009).

Warren Buckland, in his book *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, examines how puzzle film deviate from classical storytelling by creating narrative challenges that encourage the audience to interact with and analyze the

film (Buckland, 2009). Unlike Aristotle's complex plots, puzzle films create states of uncertainty where anything can occur.

To understand better how modern spectator perceived this topic, it is important to take into account the work of David Bordwell, especially his influential book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). Bordwell proposes a cognitive and formalist concept of film narration that changes the focus from characters to the viewer. He makes a clear distinction between the concepts of syuzhet (the way events are told that does not need to be chronological) and fabula (the chronological ordering of events that the viewer reconstructs once the film is over). Puzzle films, according to Bordwell, manipulate the plot by, for instance, delaying events, which places spectators in a "problem-solving" position. Bordwell also states that narration can vary depending of the range of knowledge, how much information is provided, and the depth of knowledge, how deeply we can have access to characters' thoughts or emotions. These elements are used in puzzle films, creating gaps, ambiguities and mental challenges that lead the viewer to infer things, detect patterns and rethink what they have seen in the film. Buckland builds on Bordwell's cognitive theory remarking how puzzle films give a role to the audience, making them think in a coherent way and keep that coherence throughout the film.

Puzzle films oppose some of the principles of classical narrative structures. Puzzle films are created with a set of characteristics that confuse the viewer and create engagement during the narrative's development. According to Buckland, these films are not only complex in relation to the story but complicated in the way they are told (Buckland, 2009, p. 6). The syuzhet of a puzzle film takes spectators into a narrative labyrinth, with devices such as unreliable narrators, conflicting perspectives, fragmented timelines and controversial realities.

One of the most relevant characteristics of puzzle films is their use of unreliable narration, which makes the spectator think about what is being told and shown. In contrast to Aristotle's narrative model, puzzle films hide key information from viewer, making spectators rethink the story they have just been told once it is over. David Fincher's *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) is a good case in point. At the beginning, we think that Edward Norton and Brad Pitt play two different characters. Later on in the film we realize that they are the two sides (or conflicting personalities) of the same character. The film develops its narrative around the perspective of a subjective and fragmented identity, creating false expectations on the audience about a constructed reality which is deconstructed at the end of the film. Buckland would argue that this plot twist or revelation is the example of how puzzle films work: the viewer does not only have one moment of revelation as in Aristotle's logic so they are forced to reinterpret the whole narrative (Buckland, 2009). By this, recognition is transformed into a cognitive process exteriorized to the audience (Barratt, 2009).

In a similar way, *The Sixth Sense* (1999), directed by M. Night Shyamalan, is structured around a plot twist that, by the film's end, changes spectators' understanding of the entire film. Dr. Malcolm Crowe's (Bruce Wills) journey with the young boy Cole (Haley Joel Osment) seems to be real until the final scene when Crowe is revealed to be dead from almost the beginning of the film's syuzhet. First-time viewers rarely detect the twist because it is carefully embedded in the film's structure, an effect that Daniel Barratt calls "twist blindness"; which can be described as a phenomenon caused by cognitive priming and selective attention (Barratt in Buckland, 2009, p. 4). Like *Fight Club*, the plot twist in *The Sixth Sense* creates surprise and makes spectators reconsider their understanding of the events. This follows Buckland's statement that puzzle films exteriorize recognition, changing it from the character to the audience. Instead of a

character discovering the reversal, it is the viewer the one who is shocked into recognition, having to think again about the whole meaning of the film (Buckland, 2009; Bordwell, 1985).

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) is another example of the puzzle film genre. The story follows Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), a man suffering from amnesia, who is searching for his wife's murderer while he is not able to create new memories. *Memento* starts following Aristotle's definition of a complex plot, particularly the concepts of reversal and recognition. However, what differentiates *Memento* from Aristotle's theory and brings closer to Warren Buckland's theory of puzzle films is its use of narrative entanglement. The film's chronology is deliberately fragmented into two parallel timelines: one in black and white that moves forwards, and another in colour that moves backwards. This transforms the viewing experience into a narrative puzzle, in which the spectator is forced to mentally reconstruct the fabula from a disconnected syuzhet (Bordwell, 1985). As David Bordwell explains (1985), narration is the regulation of story information to the viewer, and *Memento* manipulates this by consistently withholding or reversing causal information. The film's reversing structure exemplifies Bordwell's concept of restricted narration, as viewers are denied access to key information until the final scenes, mirroring Leonard's own confusion and memory loss. This alignment between the narrative structure of the film and the character’s psychology enhances the puzzle film effect, making the act of viewing an exercise in interpretation and deduction.

Buckland (2009) claims that puzzle films often externalize recognition, transferring it from the character to the viewer. In *Memento*, Leonard appears unaware of the full truth even at the end (or rather, the chronological beginning), while the audience experiences the revelation of his moral ambiguity and self-deception. The final twist, that

Leonard has chosen to manipulate his own memory in order to maintain a purpose for living, undermines the classical cathartic function of recognition, replacing it with epistemological uncertainty and ethical ambiguity. According to Buckland (2009), this is a key characteristic of puzzle film logic, where causality is no longer fixed and meaning is unstable. Rather than leading to resolution, *Memento* leaves the viewer with doubts about identity, morality, and truth. Through its use of non-linear structure, unreliable narration, and cognitive engagement, *Memento* becomes not just a narrative about memory loss, but a narrative about the instability of storytelling itself, precisely what Bordwell and Buckland identify as central to puzzle cinema.

Temporal fragmentation and non-linear storytelling are also two crucial characteristics of puzzle films. These narrative strategies regularly disrupt chronological order with narrative loops or flashbacks in order to make the spectator doubt about the passing of time. *Pulp Fiction* (1994), directed by Quentin Tarantino, is a paradigmatic example because the film's events are intentionally mixed, creating a narrative that can only be understood after viewers reconstruct the timeline in their mind. For Buckland, these techniques define the puzzle film logic; *Pulp Fiction* "obliges the spectator to piece together the diegetic events in their correct chronological order, making them an active participant in the creation of meaning" (2009, p. 4). Puzzle films, in contrast with classical plots where there is a logical progression with temporality, offer disorientation at first but coherence in the end (Bordwell, 1985).

Apart from non-linear storytelling, flashbacks and unreliable narration, the use of multiple perspectives can also be a feature of puzzle films. These films present dual or conflicting perspectives, making the audience decide which character they should trust (if any). In *Gone Girl* (2014), David Fincher manipulates the narrative structure using

two narrators: Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) and her husband, Nick (Ben Affleck). The first part of the film revolves around Nick's suspicious behaviour, positioning him as the murderer of his wife. However, the second half shifts to Amy's perspective and narration, which shows us how she prepared her own disappearance to make Nick look as a murderer. This moment could be seen as similar to the recognition moment when characters in Aristotle's definition of narrative structure are aware of the reversal of events, but instead of resolving it, a new cycle of doubt is created. Amy's narration can be considered to be manipulative and unreliable. The use of two narrators in *Gone Girl* forces the spectator to be in a constant state of reassessment. It is an example of Buckland's statement about puzzle films not being unified or linear, but rather non-classical, fragmented and ambiguous.

Another characteristic that differentiates puzzle films from traditional narratives is how we avoid closure and definitive interpretations. While for Aristotle any narrative should have closed ending with no room for interpretation, puzzle films often end with open-ended scenes to create ambiguity. Although *Pulp Fiction* ends with a scene of Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) leaving the diner, the event that follows this moment (in the film's fabula since this scene is the ending of the syuzhet) has already been shown, including Vincent's eventual death. Through this a looping structure is created avoiding a single narrative cycle. In a similar way, *Gone Girl* ends without a clear resolution or justice for the supposed crime but with Amy returning home and going back to "normal" life and fake marriage. So we can state that puzzle films are more concerned with creating questions rather than answering them, in contrast to classical films where everything usually has a meaning and an answer.

Buckland states that puzzle films are created so spectators have to "bind sequences together in the most plausible way in terms of time, space and causality" (2009, p. 4). They force the audience to use their cognitive habits, in order to watch patterns and solve ambiguities. In contrast with classical films that guide the viewer in a more or less direct way towards a closed ending, puzzle films mislead spectators in different ways, which makes puzzle films not only cinematic texts but interactive experiences where the meaning has to be deduced by the spectator with the film's structure and narrative. As Warren Buckland puts it, the characteristics of puzzle films confirm a significant process of evolution and shift from Aristotelian model of complex plot. By using narrative ambiguity, non-linear narratives, unreliable narrators and open endings, puzzle films change from traditional narrative structures and force the audience to use their cognitive and interpretative abilities. This change is explained in Bordwell's cognitive theory and Buckland's narrative analysis to help us fully understand. *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, *Gone Girl*, *Memento* and *Pulp Fiction* are some films that perfectly exemplify the shift, creating narrative structures that transform the act of viewing a film a problem-solving act. By doing this, puzzle films reformulate the function of narrative, moving from close structures with no room to imagination toward an approach where being reflexive, interactive and engaged with the film is the more important issue.

3. *Shutter Island*

In *Shutter Island*, Martin Scorsese creates a narrative that crosses constantly the line between fact and fiction, constructing a psychological labyrinth where reality changes all the time. The film examines the human mind particularly how trauma and guilt can provoke psychological instability. As Teddy Daniels' investigation develops, the audience is forced to think about all the unreliable movements of the main character, shifting between what is real and what is imagined. The ongoing interaction between reality and imagination is not only a narrative device but a central theme of the film. Through the use of several cinematographic devices, the film manipulates its narrative structure, reaching a point where it's complicated to distinguish between what is real and what is not.

3.1 Fabula and Syuzhet in *Shutter Island*

The differences between fabula (story) and syuzhet (plot) can be a useful starting point to explore the structure of a puzzle film like *Shutter Island*. As was mentioned above, while a film's fabula refers to the chronological order of events, syuzhet represents how these events are presented to the audience and organized throughout the film, in a way that does not need to be chronological This section will focus on how the film uses the interplay between fabula and syuzhet in key scenes throughout *Shutter Island.*

One of the main functions of syuzhet is to control the flow of information givem to spectators. The syuzhet of *Shutter Island* manipulates fabula information the syuzhet to create curiosity, suspense and surprise. The syuzhet of the film uses flashbacks, and hides relevant pieces of information. The story tells U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels investigation about the disappearance of a patient from a mental institution. However, as Daniels investigates, we become aware of his own mental instability. The syuzhet of the movie is nonlinear, disrupting the chronological flow of events and adding flashbacks,

hallucinations and perspective changes that make audience doubt about their understanding of the fabula. The investigation is interwoven with Daniel's memories from World War II, his wife's tragic death and his internal conflicts with guilt and trauma, so a fragmented and layered narrative is created. Manipulation of time is essential to the film's exploration of memory and mind, which gains importance as the film develops. This forces the spectator to question which elements of the *syuzhet* actually happened in the fictional world of the film and which are products of Daniel's mind. The *syuzhet* becomes unreliable since it, conceals key events to mirror Daniel's increasing mental instability.

Figure 1

The film starts with Daniels and Chuck's (fig. 1) trip to the island. They are presented as two U.S. Marshals and there is no reason to think that they are not. It presents the narrative in such a way that the spectator is initially led to believe the investigation of the disappearance of Rachel Solando is the central focus of the film. Yet, as the plot of the film unravels, it becomes visible that the film is playing with ideas of mental illness, guilt, and trauma. On the other hand, as the film develops, we also start to reconstruct the fabula and learn about some events that happened before Daniel's trip to the island Through a medium long shot we can see both characters standing on the edge of the ferry

staring at Ashcliffe Hospital. This perspective places the characters in the foreground while at the end there is the vast ocean and a storm coming towards the island (a relevant element later on in the film). By framing the characters in such a way, their vulnerability is emphasized and they are portrayed as weak characters against the uncertainty and ambiguity of the dangers from the island. The fact that the ocean lengthens endlessly creates an atmosphere of solitude and increases the suspense of the scene connecting with the thematic motif of the unknown.

Figure 2

A moment where the interplay between fabula and syuzhet becomes crucial is during the meeting between Teddy Daniels, Chuck Aule, Dr. Cawley and Dr. Jeremiah (Max von Sydow), (fig 2.). At this point, the spectator keeps the illusion that the narrative is centered on a professional investigation led by two U.S. Marshals. The fabula so far suggests that Daniels and Chuck have been assigned to solve the case of the missing patient and their meeting with Dr. Jeremiah is part of this process. However, manipulations in the syuzhet already start to create an atmosphere of doubt. This scene acts as a turning point within the film's structure because of the evidences that start to undermine the audience's perception of reality.

Visually, the scene maintains formal balance, with Daniels and Chuck standing on one side while Cawley and Naehring are on the other. The wide shots frame the investigators against the furniture and dim lighting of the office, creating an atmosphere of formality but also entrapment. The mise-en-scène subtly suggests that Daniels and Chuck are isolated within an environment controlled by others, a visual metaphor for Daniels' increasing psychological alienation.

Up to this point, the syuzhet of the film has shown, in a chronological way, the story of the two U.S. Marshals arriving at the island to solve a case. However, this scene (fig. 2) is central to the beginning of the structure's disruption. The syuzhet uses the insertion of flashbacks that disrupt the scene's linearity. Until this point, the syuzhet has maintained a coherent investigative plot, presenting Daniels as a stable protagonist in a linear mystery. As Teddy speaks with the doctors, he begins to suffer involuntary flashbacks to traumatic events: specifically, scenes from the concentration camp during World War II. At first, we may think that they emerge without justification and begin to blur boundaries between past and present. This creates the impression that Daniels' psychological state is unstable. However, these flashbacks are produced because of the music or certain words that the doctors say and that are related to Teddy' traumatic experiences. These flashbacks show dead bodies in the snow and acts of violence, however, Daniels' reactions, sharply contrast with the formal and controlled environment of the office conversation and fracture this apparent continuity. Therefore, it could be argued that these flashbacks are not involuntarily produced by Daniel's mind, but rather deliberately constructed in order to reinforce the narrative of his madness and justify practicing a lobotomy on him.

Structurally, the flashbacks alter the fabula's chronological order, leaving the current investigation on the background and focusing on fragments of a violent and unresolved past. At the same time, they provide background information that had been hidden by the syuzhet. They reveal that Daniels was both a witness and a complicit participant in what happened in the concentration camps during World War II. From this point onward, flashbacks and hallucinations become a recurring narrative device, merging Daniels' traumatic memories of the concentration camps with visions of his wife, Dolores (Michelle Williams), and the eventual recollection of the death of their children. The flashbacks not only serve as a formal disruption of narrative structure, but also as a mechanism to slowly uncover Daniels' hidden history and foreshadow the collapse of his constructed identity. Moreover, these flashbacks are used to question the reliability of Daniels' perceptions. If his mind is involuntarily showing traumatic past images back to the present, then the possibility that his entire perspective on the investigation might be compromised appears. Flashbacks function as the first major disruption in the syuzhet's presentation of Daniels as a stable investigator. They are a signal that the fabula may differ drastically from what the syuzhet has made us believe so far.

In sum, the meeting between Daniels and the doctors stands as the narrative central point of *Shutter Island*. While the syuzhet still backs the illusion of a reliable investigation up, the scene shows clues of the psychological rupture that will come to dominate the film. It is from this point that the narrative structure begins to turn its focus from the investigation to an exploration of Daniel's mind, and the viewer is pulled away from a linear structure of the objective investigation to a fragmented plot shaped by memories and delusion, a subjective psychological journey.

Figure 3

A further confirmation of the narrative's shift from external investigation to internal breakdown appears during Teddy Daniels' exploration of Ward C, where he confronts George Noyce (Jackie Earle Haley), a patient who stands out for his apparent awareness of the truth behind Daniels' situation (fig. 3). Unlike other patients, Noyce does not behave erratically but speaks with disturbing clarity, directly addressing Daniels' delusions. This clarity stems from the fact that Noyce knows Teddy not as a U.S. Marshal, but as Andrew Laeddis, another patient at Ashecliffe Hospital, and in fact the institution's most dangerous one. Andrew Laeddis, Daniels' true identity, was placed under psychiatric care after murdering his wife, Dolores, in response to her drowning their three children. Unable to cope with this trauma, Laeddis constructed the persona of Teddy Daniels, a U.S. Marshal, and reconstructed Ashecliffe not as the place of his confinement but as the site of a disappearance that he had to solve. Noyce tries to break this constructed narrative, telling him the reality: "This is a game. All of this is for you. You're not investigating anything. You're a fucking rat in a maze."

Noyce's words directly challenge Daniels' identity and, additionally, the film's structure disruption of fabula and syuzhet. The actual chronological sequence of events is revealed and contradicts the narrative illusion created by the main character. These lines reveal the truth and uncover Daniels' image of heroic investigator. However, Teddy

reacts in a defensive way, as if he has already heard this and tries to avoid reality. Noyce insists on this: “They’ve tried this before. It never works.”

This implies that Daniels has already experienced this situation and always tries to reject reality. In order to continue avoiding reality, he begins to suffer hallucinations about his wife, which interrupt the conversation between Noyce and Daniels. It is the first time she appears in the middle of a real-time dialogue, without any cue to separate her from reality. Her presence confirms what Noyce was suggesting and increases Daniels’ mental breakdown and his loss of reliability. The hallucination coincides with Daniels being forced to confront the traumatic experiences that he has repressed. It is a confirmation that the syuzhet does no longer follow chronology logic. It progresses according to Daniels’ guilt and trauma. He acts naturally, as if nothing has happened. This also confirms that Daniels has normalized his delusions.

Figure 4

Figure 5

Another scene when the clash between fabula and syuzhet becomes obvious is when Teddy finds the cave where Rachel Solando (Emily Mortimer) is hiding (fig. 4). Rachel starts telling him about what is happening on the island and how the leaders are controlling him and setting a trap to diagnose Teddy with mental illnesses in order to practice a lobotomy on him. At this point in the narrative, Daniels is beginning to question the nature of his investigation and the motivations of those around him, but the audience is still unsure of the true nature of his predicament. In the end, when Teddy reaches the lighthouse (fig. 5), we get to know that the conversation with Rachel was not real and it was product of his imagination. In this moment, Daniels faces the two doctors, who represent a sense of coherence and control over the events happening on the island. The audience was shown a plot but the doctors who appear to be reliable characters, unlike Daniels, start unveiling the truth. Throughout the film, the syuzhet's manipulation of fabula events creates a sense of disorientation, mirroring the psychological evolution of the protagonist. By mastering the use of fabula and syuzhet and using other different strategies, the film blurs the lines between reality and fantasy (in the fictional world of the film). The complexity and suspense of the film are enhanced with these techniques making the audience believe the protagonist's investigation.

3.2 Symbolism and Narrative Disruption in *Shutter Island*

Throughout *Shutter Island*, Martin Scorsese constructs an unstable narrative environment in which some elements of the film's mise-en-scène actively disrupt the viewer's ability to reconstruct a coherent fabula. Instead of working as simple atmospheric devices, these elements have a narrative purpose: to disorient, mislead, and fragment the relationship between the syuzhet and the actual chronological line of events. They also mirror the protagonist's psychological unstable mind.

The lighthouse is one of the most prominent symbols in the film and functions as a key agent of narrative disruption. Since the beginning, the lighthouse is visually framed as remote and inaccessible. It becomes an object of obsession for Teddy Daniels, who believes it holds the truth behind the conspiracy he is trying to uncover. The syuzhet reinforces this belief by visually isolating the structure through long shots. However, when Daniels finally enters the lighthouse near the end, what he finds is not a laboratory for unethical experiments but an empty office. This contrast between expectation and reality forces the viewer to reconsider all previous narrative assumptions. This is the moment when everything is explained by doctors and reality is shown to the viewer. The mise-en-scène, which had previously been related to danger and mystery, now presents an environment without threats. This implies that the conspiracy was constructed by Daniels' mind and not by the institution. In relation to the structure, the lighthouse appears to show the solution but instead it reframes the entire plot as a delusion, breaking the reliability of the syuzhet.

Cigarettes appear several times throughout the film and carry significant symbolic weight. Daniels is frequently shown smoking, particularly in moments of psychological stress, hallucination, or narrative disjunction. Cigarettes are used as mechanisms of

control from the institution. Several characters make remarks about his constant smoking, suggesting that he may be on medication without realising. The idea that even such a habitual gesture could be manipulated reinforces the sense that Daniels is not in control of his body or his mind. From a structural perspective, cigarettes become markers of instability. They are consumed in moments in which the syuzhet detaches from the fabula and enters into an unreliable, subjective territory. Basically, when Daniels start to dissociate from reality and madness takes over his head.

The storm is another important element that works on multiple levels. On the surface level, it seems like a simple way to isolate the island, making it harder to leave it or to contact if from the outside world. However, its symbolic function is deeper. The storm also reflects the chaos in Teddy's mind. It gets intensified during the key moments of emotional and psychological rupture. For example, when he enters Ward C and the hallucinated meeting with Rachel Solando in the cave, which are the moments when the story becomes most confusing. The storm signals a break in logic and order, both for Teddy and for the audience. The storm externalizes Daniels' mental chaos, and its presence often signals a break in narrative logic. It helps the film bend time and mix up events without giving clear explanations. The audience begins to lose track of when things happened or whether they happened at all.

Lighting is also used very intentionally. Scenes that take place in the "real world" are usually lit with cold, harsh light. In contrast, the scenes that represent memories or hallucinations are filled with soft, warm light that creates a dreamlike feeling. This difference in lighting helps the viewer guess which scenes might be real and which are part of Teddy's imagination. This is clearly shown in the scene of Noyce's conversation, mentioned above (fig. 3). We could barely see Noyce if Daniels did not light the matches,

however his wife, Dolores, is clearly shown in vivid colours, creating a sharp contrast between reality and fiction in the same scene. The film blends both types of lighting throughout different scenes creating situations where it is hard to tell what is real.

All these elements prepare the viewer for the final scene, which brings the uncertainty to its highest point. After the revelation that Teddy is actually Andrew Laeddis, a patient at Ashecliffe who has created a fantasy to avoid facing a painful truth, the viewer expects the story to be over. The plot seems to make sense again, and the mystery has been solved. The calm setting, natural light, and static camera initially suggest closure. But in the closing scene, as Laeddis sits with Dr. Sheehan, he says: "Which would be worse: to live as a monster, or to die as a good man?"

This introduces the possibility that Laeddis may not have lost his memory again. Instead, he might be pretending, choosing to let himself be lobotomized so he never has to live with the guilt of what he did. The ending of the film opens up new possibilities leaving the viewer uncertain. Dr. Sheehan calls him "Teddy" again instead of Andrew, his real name, which could mean the treatment failed or that both of them are going along with the act one last time. Daniels smokes a cigarette once again before all this happens, which can also mean that cigarettes are not used to medicate the patient. The film does not answer the question. Instead, it forces the audience to decide what they believe. The ending does not confirm whether Teddy is cured or choosing to forget. This ambiguity is not a mistake; it is the film's final statement.

Through the use of repeated symbols and carefully composed visual choices, *Shutter Island* constructs a narrative world that is as uncertain and unstable as the protagonist's mind. The lighthouse, the cigarettes, the storms, and the lighting, along with other elements, mirror the ambiguity at the heart of the film. In the final scene, these

elements come together and leave the viewer confronting the same questions as the main character since we aware of multiple possible truths, yet unable to fully believe in any of them. Even when the film is over, the fabula cannot be fully reconstructed, it remains fractured, with open questions and loose ends. In this way, *Shutter Island* concludes not by solving the mystery, but by leaving it open, making sure the feeling of doubt stays long after the final frame.

4. Conclusion

This essay has explored narrative complexity and the puzzle film structure in Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010). Based on Warren Buckland's and David Bordwell's theories, the film has been analysed as a representative example of contemporary cinema that deviates from classical storytelling conventions by fragmenting chronology, using unreliable narration, and constructing a challenging narrative experience for the audience.

The essay begins with an introduction to puzzle films, defining their main characteristics and their connection to Aristotle's concept of complex plot. Making references to the theoretical contributions of Buckland and Bordwell, the first section has examined how these films require viewers to actively reconstruct the story, blurring the lines between perception and reality. This theoretical framework is followed by the body of the essay, divided into two parts. Section one is formed by an analysis of fabula and syuzhet in *Shutter Island* and the way in which the syuzhet disorients the viewer by mixing real-time sequences with hallucinations and flashbacks. The second part of the analysis concentrates on the meanings of some mise-en-scène elements such as lighting, the lighthouse, cigarettes, and the storm and. These elements reinforce the protagonist's psychological instability and contribute to the film's constant tension between reality and delusion. Particular emphasis has been placed on how visual cues guide or mislead the viewer and how these techniques are aligned with the protagonist's deteriorating mental state. As has been argued, the film's open ending never makes it clear whether Teddy Daniels has actually forgotten about his past or is consciously choosing to forget it. The final line encapsulates the film's central ambiguity and confirms its status as a puzzle film that resists clear resolution, instead inviting the viewer to participate in the meaning-making process.

In conclusion, *Shutter Island* is a complex narrative that challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction. Through its fragmented structure and symbolic mise-en-scène, it not only exemplifies the characteristics of the puzzle film but also enhances the spectator's engagement by transforming the act of viewing into an act of interpretation. The film's ambiguity, cognitive demands, and emotional intensity make it a compelling case for the study of contemporary narrative cinema.

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