The Cinema of Disorientation
This book is dedicated to the memory of Sean Bonney (1969–2019),
a master of revelatory disorientation and incisive confusion.
The Cinema of Disorientation
Inviting Confusions

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‘Cinema is the art of surprise and disorientation, the art that creates constant confusion.’

Adrian Martin, *Mysteries of Cinema*

‘Confusion – yeah!’

Prince, ‘It’s Gonna Be A Beautiful Night’
You kind of get lost. And getting lost is beautiful. (David Lynch, in Barney 2009: 225)

John Boorman’s 1972 film *Deliverance* is preoccupied with being lost. Before he and his three companions embark on their fateful trip down the Cahulawassee River, Lewis (Burt Reynolds) announces with bravado, ‘I never been lost in my life’. When he eventually manages to find said river, however, Lewis gives the lie to his earlier comment by admitting that ‘sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find anything’. Between these two remarks Drew (Ronny Cox) bows out of a guitar and banjo duel with a local youth, happily declaring ‘I’m lost!’ He has lost his place in the music, which is a spatial metaphor for a non-spatial phenomenon. The boy has shown greater mastery than Drew, who is forced to admit to having become disorientated, but entering this state proves to be a joyful and exuberant experience, one that, as David Lynch says, can even be beautiful. Not that this is always the case; as the film continues, being lost comes to take on increasingly nightmarish dimensions. In fact, although we certainly could say that *Deliverance* is about four men getting lost on a river, it might be more accurately described as being about disorientation and confusion. Ami Harbin has suggested that ‘[t]o become disoriented is, roughly, to lose one’s bearings in relation to others, environments, and life projects’ (Harbin 2016: xi). All three of these features can be seen in Boorman’s film. Its final section, for example, follows its protagonists as they lose their bearings in relation to their ‘life projects’ in attempting to cover up what happened on the river. Their relation to others becomes, at times, fatally confused: Ed (Jon Voigt) kills a man because he mistakes him for somebody else. And the film ironically explores the relationship between environment and disorientation by indicating a way in which the men could be said not to get lost. Their confidence in their spatial location is undermined by two local mountain men who tell them, before brutally assaulting them, that ‘this river don’t go to Aintry’. In fact, as it turns out, it does. The protagonists, in a sense, knew where they were the whole time, but this realisation only goes to show quite how profoundly disorientated they have become.
We might have assumed that as long as we have some idea of where we are, we can’t – strictly speaking – be lost: ‘I’m not lost, I just don’t know exactly where I am.’ It is, however, perfectly natural, on finding yourself, say, in a city you don’t know very well, to say to yourself, or to someone that you stop to ask for directions, ‘I do have some idea of where I am, but I’m a little bit lost.’ That this is the case must have something to do with the fact that having a rough idea of where one is can sometimes be very helpful (if, say, I need to get north of the river and all I know is that I’m currently south of it) but is in other situations of almost no help at all. If I don’t know where the street I’m on lies in relation to the street I need to get to, then knowing that both streets are on the same side of the river does nothing except to reassure me that at least things could be worse – I could be even more lost! From the fact that there can be degrees of being lost it does not, therefore, follow that the closer one is to being on track, the less lost one is, as the example of Deliverance indicates. The questions of where one is and of what one knows about where one is, although intimately related, are distinct.

Deliverance is not a film that this book will be returning to, but it serves neatly to indicate a number of the central concerns of The Cinema of Disorientation: Inviting Confusions. Focusing on critical accounts of some profoundly disorientating films, but also including theoretical and methodological reflections, The Cinema of Disorientation aims at exploring something of the variety of ways both characters in films and we, a film’s viewers, can become confused and disorientated. It discusses both cognitive and affective aspects of disorientation (what we ‘know’ about where we are and how it feels when we know less about it than we might like), but its focus is consistently critical and hermeneutic. How might a focus on disorientation and confusion help us to understand better – to do critical justice to – films and the experience of watching films? The Cinema of Disorientation hopes, in attempting to answer this question, to demonstrate the interest and attraction of cinematic disorientation and confusion. While by no means arguing that they are always valuable or interesting in and of themselves, the book does claim that our understanding of film is enriched by coming to terms with those occasions in which, as Lewis says, ‘you have to lose yourself before you can find anything’.1

It is certainly true that films can disorient or confuse as the result of carelessness – poor editing that leaves an audience pointlessly muddled about spatial relationships, for example – but this book focuses on situations in which the experience is productively occasioned, giving rise to aesthetic and phenomenological richness.2 Let me illustrate this with two tiny examples from Carl Th. Dreyer’s Vampyr (1932). Early in the film, the Lord of the Manor (Maurice Schutz) appears to Allan Gray (Nicolas de Gunzburg). Gray is in bed (the previous intertitle refers to ‘his restless sleep’ [‘seinen unruhigen
Schlaf’)], and the Lord enters his room by unlocking – from the outside – a door that has been locked from the inside. The Lord leaves Gray a package, then departs. The whole scene unfolds like a dream. Later, however, we see that Gray really does possess the package that the Lord left him. How can this be possible? The film’s opening titles tell us that Gray’s ‘preoccupation with the mad ideas of bygone centuries’ has turned him into ‘a dreamer and visionary for whom the boundary between reality and the supernatural has been lost’ (my translation). The film makes the viewer, also, lose their clear sense not only of this boundary but of others including (but not limited to) the boundaries between sleep and waking; past and present; fantasy and reality; and even the living and the dead. Gilberto Perez describes how, in Vampyr, ‘everything appears eerily blurred in a no man’s land between life and death’ (Perez 1998: 124).

The film does not, however, confuse viewers only through its fantastical narrative; more localised devices also create subtly disorientating effects. In the scene immediately after the Lord of the Manor’s arrival, we see Gray set off purposefully from the inn where he is staying. Dreyer cuts to a weathervane (a silhouette of an angel) and then to a shot of a river running horizontally across the centre of the frame, bounded above and below by its tree-lined banks. A reflection in the water picks its way from left to right on the far bank: Gray, we surely assume. But we only just have time to realise, with a jolt, that there is no body giving rise to the reflection before Gray appears at the bottom of the image, entering the frame also from the left, but on the near bank (see Figure I.1; the next scene shows that the impossible reflection is one of a number of shadows that are supernaturally able to act independently of the bodies that give rise to them). A comparable disruption of time, space and identity occurs later when Gray emerges from a trapdoor, looking intently to his left (screen right – see Figure I.2). The camera tracks
right to reveal a coffin. In so doing it is, we assume, directing our attention to match Gray’s. But then the camera suddenly pans left and catches Gray in the middle distance already departing, walking away from the coffin through a doorway. These examples are not in accordance with ‘classical’ practice as it is usually understood, which is constructed in such a way that it ‘passes relatively unnoticed’ (Bordwell 1985: 164), but neither are the techniques deployed here designed to be clearly visible.

In fact, until we re-watch and analyse such sequences, we are likely to notice ‘something wrong’ but unlikely to be very clear as to why we feel this way. Whether the disorientation has been produced by disrupting the connection between what a character appears to be attending to and what the film attends to (as in the second example, with the coffin), or by fantastically disrupting the laws of physics (as with the riverbank example), in both cases we notice that our expectations – or, perhaps better, our assumptions – have been subverted, but doing so takes precedence over noticing how, or even noticing what, those expectations or assumptions were. Stanley Cavell observes that ‘facts of a frame, so far as these are to confirm critical understanding, are not determinable apart from that understanding itself’ (Cavell 1979a: 224). That is to say that it is not possible to determine which aspects of a film (‘facts of a frame’) are pertinent to our understanding of it before we understand it. We almost always understand, or think we understand, something, however partial, provisional or ultimately mistaken this understanding may turn out to be; disorientation is rarely, if ever, total. These two moments in Vampyr (and many more like them) disorientate us by playing with – even, we might say, by taking advantage of – the assumptions we use to make sense of films. My interpretation of these moments is therefore at variance with Mark Nash’s attempt to read the film exclusively in terms of Tzvetan Todorov’s notion that hesitation between possible explanations is what characterises the fantastic (Nash 1976). Although some disorientating effects elsewhere in the film do rely on hesitation (or on something even stronger, a kind of undecidability), it is not hesitation that is decisive here but the realisation that one has
already formed an interpretation but has done so erroneously: our disorientation is caused by the fact that we do not hesitate. Our understanding of a film is not merely the prosaic basis on which we build interpretations (V. F. Perkins powerfully argues this in Perkins 1990), nor is it essentially retrospective, a way of accounting for our experiences after the fact. Understanding is always operative and always under negotiation, continually shifting and developing; examining disorientating films can help bring this process clearly into view.

**Other Takes on Disorientation**

Insofar as this book is about film criticism as well as about films its proposals for the practice of film criticism are conducted for the most part implicitly, by exemplification. The hermeneutic traditions that most interest me are united by their shared interest in, and respect for, the film as text, as unfashionable as such an approach may be in some quarters. They attempt a responsible engagement with cinema which does not deny the contribution of personal response, but which attempts to ground such responses in the details of the film, arguing for a position in such a way that others can return to the film and decide whether or not they are persuaded by an argument. After this Introduction I offer a more detailed Prospectus of *The Cinema of Disorientation: Inviting Confusions*, detailing the book’s main subjects (confusion and disorientation), the body of work on which it concentrates (which I refer to as the contemporary cinema of disorientation) and the means by which I will conduct my examinations (which centre upon a critical focus on figuration). Before this, however, I will close this introduction by briefly distinguishing my approach from three related, but distinct, strands in contemporary film studies: certain forms of cognitivism, phenomenology and neo-formalism.

Cognitive studies of film have taught us a great deal about the different ways we understand and engage with disorientating films, clarifying what viewer disorientation can tell us about the cognitive processes involved in film viewing. David Bordwell, for example, has explored the role of schemata in our comprehension of films, drawing on sources such as Constructivist psychology and the art historian E. H. Gombrich to make the important point that we do not watch films as if we were empty vessels waiting passively to be filled with data but organise our perception and comprehension according to structured expectations: ‘organized clusters of knowledge guide our hypothesis making’ (Bordwell 1985: 31). This is certainly an important insight; my accounts of two moments from *Vampyr* above could be described in terms of the film’s subversion of schemata. My divergence from some cognitivist film studies that have followed in the wake of work by Bordwell and other scholars such as Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie is to some extent
a matter of emphasis and focus. In some of these accounts disorientation and confusion appear mainly as obstacles to viewer engagement, whereas I do not make any such assumption. In this I depart somewhat from the work of psychologist Paul J. Silvia, who argues that in a ‘functional sense, interest and confusion are opposites. Interest motivates learning, exploring, seeking information, and engaging with new things . . . confusion presumably motivates withdrawing, avoiding, and shifting to something different’ (Silvia 2010: 79). Although Silvia by no means argues that confusion is without value, he sees this value as residing chiefly in confusion’s potential for signalling to us that something needs fixing; confusion ‘informs people that they do not comprehend what is happening and that some shift in action is thus needed’ (Silvia 2009: 49). In a pedagogical context, for example, ‘[i]f people learn that confusion is a signal that something is awry cognitively, then they can use it as information about the effectiveness of their learning strategies’ (Silvia 2010: 79). The fact that Silvia construes interest and confusion as ‘opposites’, even if only in a ‘functional sense’, does not readily allow for the possibility of becoming intrigued by something precisely because it is confusing. He allows for confusion to lead to interest, but not for it to be interesting (except, of course, to a psychologist). I concur instead with Niall Martin and Mireille Rosello’s desire ‘to separate the idea of an affective reaction [to disorientation] from the assumption that the affect will always be negative’ and endorse their claim that such a reaction ‘could vary from curiosity, wonder or enchantment to aggressive rejection’ (Martin and Rosello 2016: 2).

There has in recent years been an upsurge of cognitivist interest in what are referred to as ‘puzzle films’, including some of those films on the margins of the Hollywood mainstream that overlap with my objects of study in this book, such as INLAND EMPIRE. Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen’s book Impossible Puzzle Films is a prime example. While I am in full agreement with their claim ‘most contemporary complex narratives are in some ways dependent on principles and conventions of classical film narration’ (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 22), I situate myself at some distance from their intention to employ ‘naturalistic, evidence-based inquiries [which] also need to be evaluated and interpreted in light of traditional film-scholarly concepts and expertise’ as part of a ‘cognitive-based approach to film [which] can thus be summarised as a science-based mode of observing, describing and interpreting how the relation between artworks and viewers “works”’. (ibid.: 29). To begin with, such studies are potentially problematic when, as is the case with Kiss and Willemsen’s book, they do not deal with a sufficiently large body of data from which to draw robust ‘science-based’ conclusions. I also do not believe that there is such a thing as the ‘value-free’ approach at which the authors aim (see ibid.: 3). All studies of film involve presumptions of value
(such as hierarchies of significance) just as much as the viewing of films does (see Perkins 1993: 191 for an excellent expression of this point); we might even refer to such presumptions as evaluative schemata. The phenomenological aspect of *The Cinema of Disorientation* aims to explore our experience of disorientating films with a view to gaining a better grasp of our values and presumptions rather than attempting to do without them.7

My chief reservation about these kinds of cognitivist study, however, concerns the richness of the critical accounts they generate. The intention to account for 'how the relation between artworks and viewers “works”' risks rendering individual films merely as instantiations of cognitive processes rather than as critical objects in their own right. Gregory Currie, for example, explicitly declares that his book *Image and Mind* 'aims at conclusions of maximum generality rather than a concentration on particular works, schools or genres' (Currie 1995: xi). Such conclusions are without doubt valuable and necessary, but it is also true that any claim that some observation, feature or property $x$ pertains to all films can be – strictly speaking – falsified simply by finding one film to which $x$ does not pertain. I am tempted to claim that this book aims to supplement studies aimed at 'conclusions of maximum generality' by focusing on 'confusions of maximum specificity'.

The laudable goal of theoretical clarity can sometimes lead to critical distortion. Kiss and Willemsen, for example, chastise a piece by William Brown (see Brown 2014) because it 'confuses the cognitive effort of narrative comprehension (that is, the construction of referential and explicit narrative meaning) with the variety and richness of simple or complex perceptual and interpretive responses to these films (also involving more implicit and symptomatic meanings)' (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 45). The possibility that films themselves might productively ‘confuse’ these different dimensions is not even entertained, because a rigid distinction between ‘narrative comprehension’ and ‘perceptual and interpretive responses’ is assumed to hold a priori.

The very generality that is one of the cognitivist approach’s chief virtues sets up pitfalls whenever such enquiries intersect with the detailed interpretive study of individual films. This is demonstrated by the article ‘Towards an Embodied Poetics of Cinema’ by Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, which shares much of Kiss and Willemsen’s cognitivist framework. The authors read a leftwards panning movement in Antonioni’s *The Passenger* (1975) that passes from Jack Nicholson’s character, David Locke, alone in his hotel room, to a conversation that took place at a diegetically earlier point between Locke and the now-dead David Robertson (Charles Mulvehill) as an instance of the metaphor ‘passage in time is motion in space’ (Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012: 5ff.). The viewer does not, however, know that the movement is back in time until, through an open door, we see Locke and Robertson in
conversation. (The fact that we can hear the conversation has until this point been explained by the fact that Locke is replaying a tape he made of the two men talking.) There is therefore a disorientating surprise for the viewer not at the point when we first hear the men’s voices, but only when we also see them, something the idea of a direct mapping between space and time has difficulty in accommodating.⁸ Fully exploring both the nature and the consequences of this disorientation would require, as in the examples from Vampyr above, an exploration of the disruption of the viewer’s initial interpretation (or hypothesis, to use Bordwell’s language), in which there is movement in space but no movement in time.

The Cinema of Disorientation aims at greater critical specificity because this will deepen our understanding of the particular films in question with no serious damage to generality (every demonstrated achievement of a film is, necessarily, a possible achievement within the medium of film). In addition, such an approach will facilitate an attention to context and its consequences, which is absolutely crucial in studying disorientation and confusion because they are phenomena fundamentally bound up with relationships of different kinds. As Andrew Klevan writes in his Aesthetic Evaluation and Film:

> The meaning or effect of a word or thing shifts depending on the context – the particular sentence, speaker, and situation – in which it appears. The same principle applies to an image, a gesture, a cut, or a camera movement within a film. They are not equivalent to images, gestures, cuts, and camera movements in other films. This is why the critic needs to be phenomenologically responsive to the particular case. (Klevan 2018: 77)

But what kind of phenomenological responsiveness, exactly, is required? By introducing a version of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology into film studies with her book The Address of the Eye, Vivian Sobchack both initiated a valuable debate and drew the attention of scholars to unfairly neglected aspects of the experience of film viewing. Unfortunately, however, her version of phenomenology tends to be as insensitive to the details of individual cases as the kinds of cognitive approach just discussed. When Sobchack writes, for example, that ‘[t]hrough the address of our own vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient “other”’ (Sobchack 1992: 9), her approach does not readily open up further avenues for critical exploration because it simply posits the film as ‘that anonymously present, sensing and sentient “other”’. Sobchack’s phenomenology does not appear very open to questions such as: ‘What distinguishes films that do seem to express the experience of some kind of ‘other’ from those that don’t?’; or,
‘In what circumstances does our vision seem more or less “tactile”?’ If her account applies to all films equally, then any film is as amenable to phenomenological study as any other. In a certain sense this is of course true, but there also is also both the room and the need for a more phenomenologically evaluative criticism. Daniel Yacavone points out that such was in fact Merleau-Ponty’s own practice:

Sobchack’s overriding focus on what are presented as fundamental visual, spatial, and affective features of all live-action films, as tied to perceptual conditions of the film medium and its technology, stands in sharp contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on variable artistic form, style, and expression in cinema, together with temporality and rhythm. (Yacavone 2016: 160)

Writing recently about films that could certainly be seen as fitting into the cinema of disorientation – Terrence Malick’s To the Wonder (2012) and Shane Carruth’s Upstream Color (2013) – Sobchack makes the excellent observation that the films ‘compelled our attention to their every frame and gesture, and yet, even after multiple viewings . . . also continued to refuse us’, leading her to ask: ‘How does one resolve the paradox of an experience that was both immersive and alienating?’ (Sobchack 2014: 50). This question resonates very closely with the issues I want to explore in this book, addressing as it does not only the vast range of affective possibilities that disorientation can generate (as we saw earlier in the way that being lost in Deliverance produces joy at one point and murder at another) but also the way that such contradictory outcomes can become ‘confused’ with one another: ‘both immersive and alienating’. However, after referring to conventions of narrative film such as the ‘cognitive and cumulative enchaining of events through cause and effect’ (ibid.), Sobchack goes on to say that both Malick’s and Carruth’s films

. . . refuse all these established conventions, however – as well as our usual ways of experiencing and making sense of them. Instead of cognitive, reflective, and after-the-fact sense-making, they make sense – if we let them – in the phenomenological ‘now’ of seeing, hearing, and touching (if always also at a distance). (ibid.: 51)

A consequence, or perhaps a corollary, of Sobchack’s brand of phenomenology seems to be an understanding of meaning in which bodily, non-discursive meaning becomes something more precious, more genuine, than cognitive or linguistic meaning. The Cinema of Disorientation aims at resisting this dichotomy between the ‘cognitive’ and the ‘phenomenological’. I think it is at best misleading to say that these films, and others like them, ‘refuse’ all ‘established conventions’. Perhaps they ‘resist’ them, ‘obstruct’ them, ‘obscure’ them, or even (ugly word) ‘problematisé’ them – but to say any of these things is
not to say that such conventions are simply irrelevant in cases like these. As my earlier examples from *Vampyr* aimed at demonstrating, we make use of what Sobchack calls the ‘cognitive . . . enchaining of events through cause and effect’ (*ibid.*: 50) not only afterwards but also during viewing — otherwise the effect could not be ‘cumulative’. (To reiterate, one of the chief strengths of cognitivist film studies is what it has taught us about how this process works.) Surely these cognitive processes must also be part of any phenomenology worth its salt; otherwise phenomenology — in its (laudable) interest in ‘seeing, hearing, and touching’ — is in danger of becoming a kind of anti-intellectualism.9

Eugenie Brinkema has very bracingly reacted against this kind of cognitive/affective dichotomy, arguing in *The Forms of the Affects* that attending to affect requires *more* — not less — close reading, because affect is ‘a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics’ (Brinkema 2014: xvi). I am fully in sympathy with this argument, but once again I find that the significance of close detail sometimes gets distorted, this time by Brinkema’s dedication to the conceptual rhetoric of her arguments. For example, Brinkema makes much of the confusing encounter with something just below the eye of Marion’s (Janet Leigh) corpse in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) that *might* be a tear.

This uncertainty — is it a tear, or just a drop of water? — is transformed by Brinkema into something fundamentally undecidable: ‘Such a tear that does not drop but folds points to a subjectless affect, bound up in an exteriority, uncoupled from emotion, interiority, expressivity, mimesis, humanism, spectatorship, and bodies’ (*ibid.*: 45). If, however, we look closely at the perhaps-tear, its track indicates that it has descended *beneath* Marion’s eye — which is to say, to the left of the image as we look at it (because she is lying on the floor, on her left side, facing us). It is thicker towards the bottom than the top; I cannot see any thinning or distortion towards its right side (as we look at it) which would indicate that it has travelled diagonally down, to the left, from the tear duct in the corner of her eye. Were the drop of water a tear, it would have to have emerged from that corner and then travelled down her nose, but
it is a little difficult to imagine that in that case – even if she had shed the tear while upright, before falling – gravity and the contours of her face would have caused it to end up where it does in fact lie, with the shape it does in fact have. A reading strategy that ignores bodies – their biology and physics as much as their history and psychology – could not investigate these issues. To do so is not to conclusively demonstrate that it is not a tear, but it is to say that close reading provides reasons to think that it is not. To argue this is not to close the door to an even closer reading that finds contrary evidence, nor is it to preclude investigating the ways in which the drop is tear-like, or questioning what it is that prompts us either to believe, for a time, that it is a tear or to treat it as one. As with Coëgnarts’s and Kravanja’s treatment of the panning movement in The Passenger, Brinkema’s account has difficulty in examining in detail the progress in time of the viewer’s reaction; a more phenomenological account holds out the possibility of greater richness, as long as such an account does not, like Sobchack, think that phenomenology should have nothing to do with ‘reflective . . . sense-making’.

Such an account could, instead, emphasise the process of sense-making, which does not entail ignoring the role of the senses; it is, after all, sense-making we are interested in. There is pathos in the very fact of being caused to wonder about the distinction between a tear and a mere drop of water since, after death, a tear on a face is – in a stronger sense than applies when someone is alive – nothing but a drop of water. If we think we are seeing a tear, only to conclude that we are not, the sense of water-as-tear itself undergoes a kind of dying, or at least a coming-into-question. To examine the traces of the track of the ‘tear’ in Hitchcock’s image, as well as the temporality and sequentiality of its presentation to the viewer, and the confusion that this prompts, is to engage in a closer reading of the drop’s materiality and textuality – what Brinkema calls its ‘ineluctably specific complexity’ (ibid.: 21) – than her text in fact does. Brinkema’s eagerness to get beyond the true/false distinction seems to cause her to break her reading off early. Since reading is ‘interminable’ (ibid.: xiv), it must always be the case that we do so, but that only makes it all the more incumbent upon us not to do so too early.

By pointing to what I find to be limitations in some of the most important other ways in which film studies has investigated confusion and disorientation I by no means wish to argue for an atheoretical critical practice. On the contrary, I am interested in criticism as a praxis that can explore its theoretical assumptions in the very process of criticising; attention to detail and to the implications of detail can be both a critical and a theoretical discipline. I hope, then, that as well as offering readings of important, challenging, but still under-discussed recent films, the value of The Cinema of Disorientation:
Inviting Confusions will also lie in the ways it defends certain theoretical propositions about film and makes methodological recommendations concerning film criticism. Confusion can be valuable, both while watching a film and in writing about it, and I hope to show how.