Between two Worlds

Grasping ambiguity and the narrative steps of JACOB’S LADDER

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“It’s just a matter of how you look at it, that’s all”
Louis Denardo in JACOB’S LADDER

Introduction

In Adrian Lyne’s JACOB’S LADDER (USA, 1990) we follow the protagonist Jacob Singer, who is beginning to suffer from horrible flashbacks and has the sense he is being chased by demons. We as spectators learn that these events are somehow connected to Jacob’s past as a soldier in the Vietnam War, but cannot decide on his status as being sane or insane. He is actively and intelligibly trying to come to grips with these strange events and phenomenon he encounters.

As spectators we are left with a high sense of ambiguity about the exact meaning. At the end of the film however, this ambiguity is resolved when we learn that the world of the present in the film is actually a figment of Jacob’s imagination. He was fighting an inner psychic battle to come to terms with himself as he is about to die, and as such letting the earthly matters go to be able to ascend to heaven.

Not only are the nature of the visions and various diegetic levels contributing to the ambiguity in the film, also the way the story is told is of importance here. The combination of the plot structure and the specific themes makes this film a very interesting case-study. The main question in this essay will be: How can the film be comprehended on the basic level of its story structure, how does the film’s narration convey the story to the spectator and how can this be seen as functional in relation to the traumatic experience?

To answer the main question sufficiently, I have formulated the following sub questions that will contribute to the main answer in this essay:

• What is the specific structure of the plot in the film and what is (un)usual about it in relation to the ‘canonical story format’?
• In what way does the film violate the chrono-logical or causality of events, and how does this relate to specifically to the story?
• What are the characteristics of the diegetic world and what are the various points of view and narrative levels in the film?
• Are there clues given in the film itself on how to read its own construction?
• To what extend can we speak of an unreliable narrator in this film?
• What are the various aspects of the traumatic experience (in general) seen within a narrative framework?
How can we explain the various events or logical breaks in the film as being symbolic for the experience of the protagonist?

This essay will be a close reading of the filmic text along two broad lines that come together at the middle covering the ambiguity in the film. The first line will be a description and analysis of how we as spectators are able to understand the film by applying cognitive schemata. The way we make meaning depends on how the construction of the film forces the direction of ‘reading’ the film. I will give an analysis of several key scenes in order to show how we make certain connections between scenes, shots and other filmic devices. This will give us insight in the way the narrative (the combination of plot and style) withholds crucial information and enforces ambiguity. This will be done mainly by use of cognitive/narratological theories of David Bordwell and Edward Branigan.

The second line consists of a more semantic interpretation of the story structure as a representation of the traumatic experience (in general). In my opinion this traumatic narrative can be seen as a big part in the way the narrative complexity in the film is made functional. Our knowledge of the traumatic narrative can integrate the ambiguity on a higher semantic level. It should however be noted that this analysis isn’t meant to straighten out the ambiguities in this film and uncover a hidden meaning: it simply creates an extra functional frame for the analysis. Because the traumatic rather deals with the unknown and the repressed, this second line could give some insight in how trauma is represented in this film through its plot structure and thematics. The essay will therefore primarily be a cognitive/narrative analysis of ambiguity.

By imposing an interpretative framework concerning the traumatic experience, I will be applying it in the specific literary (i.e. narrative) way (instead of, for example a clinical/neurological explanation). These two aspects can be viewed as the key to untangling the various ambivalences in JACOB’S LADDER. For the analysis of the traumatic experience I will be borrowing extensively from the writings by literary scientist Cathy Caruth. Although there is surprisingly little written on the representation of the traumatic experience in cinema, with exception of the film theories within the psychoanalytic paradigm, I believe her primarily literary examples can give fruitful insights in the way this film can be read as such. I will try to make these various theoretical concepts as clear as possible by accompanying them with illustrative examples from the film. This way we could avoid the ambiguity, like Jacob’s visions, only on a more theoretical level.

Note here that in this paper I tend to avoid psychoanalytic film theory when it’s not helpful as a hermeneutic device.
§ The narrative structure and ambiguity

When we look at the way JACOB’S LADDER conveys its story to the spectator, we could say that it is a fairly complex film or even puzzle. Film theoretician Thomas Elsaesser states that the film can be seen as a particular ‘mind-game film’. These films play games on two levels: they focus on a character that is being played games with, without knowing it or without knowing who is it that is playing these games with him, or the film plays a game with the audience because certain crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented. (The Mind-Game Film, 14) Another prominent feature in these films is the fact that they address, next to their genre specific characteristics, certain epistemological problems (like how do we know and what do we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds or minds) that are focused on the bounds of philosophical inquiry, on human consciousness, the mind and the brain, multiple realities or possible worlds. Also these films use frequent plot twists and trick endings. (ibid. 15) These features are all presented in JACOB’S LADDER and contribute to the disorienting effect the film has on the level of the characters experience of their world, as well as on the level of the spectator when watching the film. We need to understand how this film works as a puzzle to be solved by the spectator.

Film theoretician David Bordwell developed a cognitive theory that explains the way in which the viewer understands the film by ‘inference making’: a non-conscious processing of sensory data that leads to a construction of perceptual judgment. Perception becomes a process of active hypothesis-testing that is guided by organized clusters of knowledge that are called schemata. (Narration, 31) These schemata are fundamentally grounded on our perceptual capacities (our ability to see color, register light etc.), derived from our prior knowledge and experience of our transactions with our everyday world and other artworks, but also structured by the information and material the film offers itself. (ibid. 32-33) An important aspect in his theory is that the film is necessarily incomplete and must be made into a coherent whole by the perceiver. The film itself is on the other hand constructed in such a way that it limits the spectator in his hypothesis-making. It encourages the application of certain schemata, even if these have to be altered in the course of the film viewing. (ibid 32) In order to show how the these schemata are at work in the narration of a film, Bordwell focuses on the relation between, what he calls, the fabula (story) that is the signified in the causal and chronological order of events, and the syuzhet (plot) the particular order and presentation of the fabula information in the film. (idem. 49-50) The fabula is not something that can be found ‘in’ the film itself, it should be understood as a mental, dynamic construct
the spectator makes out of causal, spatial or temporal links, in a progressive as well as retroactive manner, during his viewing. A third major component or system in narration that Bordwell discerns is style: the systematic use of cinematic techniques such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound. According to Bordwell, the syuzhet and style treat different aspects of the same phenomenal process. The former deals with the dramaturgical aspects, the latter with the technical. (ibid. 50) The distinctions in narration can also be typified along the horizontal axis that involves the relation between the syuzhet and fabula, and the vertical axis that deals with the relation between syuzhet and style.

A fundamental assumption about narratology that his colleague Edward Branigan makes, is important here for the semantic interpretation in the second chapter. He states that “narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience.” (Narrative Comprehension, 3) Seen this way the particular arrangement of the syuzhet elements can be interpreted as a representation of a particular human experience. In order to unravel the way in which the film sorts this effect, I shall give an overview of the narrative structure so that we will have a clear view of several important hypotheses the spectator makes, and also if these are resolved in a rounded out story. To understand the complexity and, above all, ambiguity in the film, I will describe the narrative along the schema for recognition of narrative patterns that Branigan gives (also known as the canonical or classical story format). (ibid. 14) Branigan discerns:

1. The introduction of setting and characters
2. The explanation of the state of affairs
3. Initiating event
4. Emotional response or statement of a goal by the protagonist
5. Complicating actions
6. Outcome
7. Reaction to the outcome

Seen form an overall perspective, the film does provide closure to the informational gaps that are created by the particular syuzhet order. The film can therefore be seen as fitting in the canonical format. The peculiarity of the film is however, in my opinion, created by the ambiguous way the gaps can be filled in by the spectator during the viewing. To explain how these ambiguities come about, I will make an analysis of the opening of the film.
Openings often give important information about the way the film is constructed. Elsaesser states that the opening, within classical storytelling, can be seen as a manual on how to read the whole filmic text. It is a meta-text that introduces the filmic system, how it wants to be read and understood. (*Film as System*, 13)

The opening of the film is therefore also of importance for the hypotheses the spectator makes. It gives us information about what aspects need to be cleared in order to have a round up story at the end of the film. Although *Jacob’s Ladder* elicits many varied questions along the unfolding of the fabula (so called micro questions), it is beyond the scope of this essay to attend to every question the film calls forth. Therefore I will focus on four macro questions/hypotheses that the film has to resolve.

In the opening scene we see two army helicopters flying through the air. These images are crosscut with images of the ground where Jacob Singer is among other soldiers whom are eating or are dozing off to sleep. A subtitle reads “Mekong Delta 6 Oct. 1971”, we know that the Vietnam war is in full progress. When the helicopters arrive at their site, they are suddenly attacked. At this exact same moment a lot of soldiers start to feel ill, vomit, start having seizures or go raving mad (see figure 1). Mortar fire start to come in around them. This raises the first question: *how come the soldiers are sick?* Jacob manages to escape the line of fire and flees into the jungle. Suddenly we see, in a point-of-view shot, somebody moving rapidly towards him, and at that moment Jacob is stabbed with a bayonet by a soldier whom is not seen by the spectator (see figure 2). As he pulls out the bayonet, blood splashes out of Jacob’s chest (see figure 3). Jacob’s eyes are stunned and full of disbelief when he looks into the camera/eyes of the soldier who attacked him. This brings forth the second question: *who stabbed Jacob?* At that moment the film cuts to the present where Jacob wakes up with a start on a subway reaching for his chest. A third question is raised: *was Jacob just having a nightmare?* The spectator makes an inference about the specific relation to the present and the past: since Jacob is alive, he survived the attack (If the flashback signified something that really happened).

As Jacob walks around the subway to ask where he is exactly on the railway, the previous relation between past and present gets more complicated when he sees a strange woman who won’t answer him and then a monstrous creature. This brings forth the fourth question: *what is the ontological status of these beings Jacob is seeing?* (see figure 4)
This unclear relation between the past and the present, and the ontological uncertainty that is created in the mise-en-scene, are the basis for the ambiguity throughout the film that needs to be resolved. Elsaesser notes that in an opening scene, we often find a privileged image or composition which in a sense gathers together diverse and heterogeneous elements (narrative motifs) in a single shot, whose meaning will become apparent in retrospect. (ibid. 15) The hard cut between past and present becomes enigmatic here, because it draws attention to the opposition of Jacob being harmed and him being well. This opposition has traces in the past (soldiers falling ill, Jacob being alright), and in the future (the monstrous creature looks threatening to Jacob). These three enigmas are therefore centered around the issue/paradox of wellbeing, which position can endlessly be reversed (Jacob seeks but is also being chased).

After viewing the entire film we have knowledge, in hindsight, about the narrative form fitting into the canonical structure. It is now easier to understand that the specific enigmatic/ambiguous character the narration has, is most problematic in this film and has to be, in Elsaesser’s terms, ‘neutralized’. (ibid.16)

What makes the film so problematic, in my opinion, is the fact that there are certain gaps in the sequences that are outside of the Vietnam-storyline/diegetic level. To the spectator
these gaps are cues that he has to make inferences about (i.e. fill in). This is however not an easy task because of the ambiguity in the scenes produced by the resonance of parts in the other two storylines that mirror each other. These forms of repetition, resonance and mirroring could be seen as deviant to the classical format. During the viewing we have to find clues for a favored way of reading the meaning in the filmic text.

Although the narration offers closure to the main questions, it calls forth new specific questions concerning the ontological status of the diegetic world(s). There still remains a feeling of ambiguity about how these different levels relate to each other. The diegetic world of the film consists mainly of three diegetic levels (See Appendix II), each with its own spatiotemporal structure:

1. The Vietnam war (the past)
2. Jacob’s life with Sarah and his three/two children (the recent past)
3. Jacob’s life with Jezebel (present)

Seen from the Vietnam component, the time told is about one or two days (the day of the attack, Jacob being wounded and found during the night and his evacuation by the helicopter to the military medical facility). The second component is less clear. The time told is only one night (Jacob in bed with Sarah and bringing Gabe to bed). We assume that this scene is after Vietnam because Jacob is still alive. Its relation to the third level (the present) is however less clear since his youngest son Gabe is still alive. The third component takes up most of the telling in the film (it takes place after the break up between Jacob and Sarah). The time told is about three weeks in which Jacob is undertaking his quest. When we look at the way the fabula is created by the ordering of the syuzhet, we see that the Vietnam component has eight scenes, the recent present only one scene, and the present twenty-four. (see appendix II).

What is remarkable when describing the relation between these diegetic levels is that making a distinction between them is increasingly difficult to make when the film progresses. The relatively sudden break between the past and the present directly after the opening is rare in comparison to the more ‘soft’, motivated, embedded and highly ambiguous breaks.

The scene where Jacob is put into the bathtub with ice in order to lower his body temperature, is the only scene where the three diegetic levels are connected. When the ice is poured over Jacob, he shouts that they are killing him (see figure 5). When he passes out, the cold of the ice triggers a memory of his life with Sarah and his three children (see figure 6). In this diegetic level of the recent past, Jacob puts Gabe to bed, tells Sarah he loves her and looks towards the camera as if he remembers something (see figure 7). Then we cut to a
flashback of the past in Vietnam where we see the trees from underneath and against a blue lit sky (see figure 8). This shot can be identified as Jacob’s point-of-view as he is being rescued. Then we cut back to a shot that is 180° turned from the previous perspective, where we see Jacob with closed eyes lying in the bathtub again (see figure 9). Because of this embedment, the fragments can be identified as two flashbacks. The ambiguity is however increased by contradictory fabula information when Jacob states in his flashback that he had a dream about himself living with Jezebel. This undermines our understanding of the previously shown scenes as being real. When it was ‘just a dream’ the ontological poles of dream and reality (i.e. subjectivity and objectivity) are reversed: the spectator can read the syuzhet information in two contradictory ways. We cannot, like Jacob, decide on the right way to read this scene/dream because we create two competing, nonexclusive hypotheses about the status of these worlds or tenses.

Figure 5. Jacob is being cooled down          Figure 6. Flashback to his life with Sarah

Figure 7. End of flashback                 Figure 8. Cut to the sky in Vietnam (Jacob’s POV)

Figure 9. Cut to Jacob lying in the bathtub (view turned 180°)
The narrative in JACOB’S LADDER can be called, to a certain extent, modular. Film researcher Allan Cameron describes these narrative forms, that began to be more popular in the mainstream films from 1990 onwards, as ‘those narratives that foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling.’ (Modular, 1) Although the film deploys some flashbacks, that can be seen as being fairly compatible with the classical format as well, its intermingling of past and present (on the level of editing as well as on the level of the mise-en-scene) contributes to the destabilization of the relationship between these two tenses. In the bathtub scene the hierarchy between first narratives and second is destabilized, so that no one temporal thread is able to establish clear dominance. (ibid. 6)

§ The ambiguity of point-of-view

As we have seen from the particular narrative layers and ambiguous visual information, a major narrational (informational) gap exists because of the lack of certainty with which we approach Jacob Singer’s particular perspective or point-of-view. It is therefore essential to know how the spectator perceives the various points-of-view in the film upon which he evaluates these as being subjective (taking a specific perspective of a character) or objective (as the ‘camera eye’ or omniscient and disembodied perspective).

According to Branigan the terms objective and subjective can both be applied to point-of-view. It is therefore necessary to discern between, on the one hand, what he calls the point-of-view as sense perception, that has its particular formal form (the point-of-view shot), and on the other hand the point-of-view as attitude, which is more a matter of belief, ideology, tone, mood, self-consciousness, emotion, psychology and/or identification. (Projecting, 39) Point-of-view implicates more than simply the location of the camera: the relative distance to an object. It also holds information that designates the way this is shown other than in spatial terms. A point-of-view can be, for instance, ironic, emphatic or misleading. What is also important is that the status of the point-of-view shot can change during the course of the shot or not at all across several shots. (ibid. 42)

A key scene in the film that is highly ambiguous in its subjective or objective status of what is shown, is when Jez encourages Jacob to go out more instead of staying inside reading books. During this scene the types of shots that are used rapidly change, so that the spectator can’t decide on its exact status. In order to make this scene clear, I will draw upon Branigan’s vertical way of narrational analysis that pays special attention to the embedment of the
narrative levels and the repetitive elements. We could state that Bordwell focuses more on the cues the syuzhet gives (on the surface of the text) to create the fabula and Branigan on cues that delimit the possibilities for the spectator to read the text on different narrative levels.

The narrative level of focalization is broadly elaborated by Branigan in his theory. It encompasses those aspects of a particular’s awareness or experience of the diegetic world. It always expresses a form of subjectivity and is aligned with a relative close camera distance to the character. The point-of-view shot can in this light be seen as the character’s embodiment of the particular perspective. Branigan makes a distinction between three types of focalization: external, internal on the surface level and internal on a deep level. Important here is to keep the objective shot separated from one that is an externally focalized. The former is motivated by a narrator (by Branigan’s definition not a character) and can’t be attributed to the awareness of a specific character. The latter shows an awareness of diegetic events by a character that is manifested by devices as the eyeline match and the over-the-shoulder-shot. (Narrative, 112-113)

The way these various shots are related to the ambiguity they convey in this particular scene has, in my opinion, a lot to do with the implicitness of the narration. This implicit narration can exist, according to Branigan, ‘only under a particular description of the text’ (the inscribed context). (ibid. 91) Seen this way the previous scenes provide a framework that provides fabula information about Jacob (he is mentally unstable) that makes the objective mirror shots implicitly ambiguous (see figure 11). We could say that the narrative position of this shot is authorial or extra diegetical (it can’t be attributed to either Jacob or Jez). The deformation of Jez in the mirror can therefore be seen as a perspective that is objective but plays with our ambiguous perception of Jacob, that is also strongly underlined verbally by Jez in the same scene. The deformation of Jez’s image can be read in two ways: she is human or demonic but the attribution to whom sees this in unclear. Stated differently, a clear distinction between point-of-view as sense perception or as attitude isn’t clear.

Branigan states that narrators exist outside of the diegetic world and are able to determine the way the narrative takes shape. (106) This is definitely the case when we look at this objective shot in the mirror. During normal viewing, we as spectators don’t grasp these sudden shifts from character consciousness to this ambiguous authorial ‘objectivity’. We experience the experiential borders (i.e. Jacob’s perspective) as vaguely outlined and therefore more ambiguous.

Note here that a point-of-view shot is a form of internal focalization but internal focalization is not restricted by the point-of-view shot.
In general the narration in the film is on the surface level: the spectator constructs the fabula mainly by information from character behavior and what they tell. This way the verbal characterization also adds to the ambiguity. Jacob’s explanation of the state of affairs in his (present) diegetic world is disputed by Jez and other characters, whom repeatedly point to the irrationality of his statements. This information is then countered by Jacob’s experience, who also holds the perspective with which we identify most. Without the protagonist and the spectator knowing it, the surface knowledge has shifted however between the Vietnam-
sequence to a deeper level in the present which is, again in hindsight, a representation of his mental life (see figure 2/3). The ellipsis in time can be seen as a diffused informational gap that becomes more focused as the story progresses (Jacob’s goal to understand his situation is tied to the filling of this gap).

§ Resolving ambiguity

The order of the syuzhet, the various levels of the diegetic world and the various narrational perspectives all contribute to the ambiguity in the film. The plot however also provides a way to deal with these various ambiguities. I shall describe some of the most important clues in the film that provide a way to solve the enigma and direct the reading. These clues also pave the way for a hermeneutic framework that can provide description of the particular syuzhet order as being traumatic.

The most important part of the film in bringing closure to the fabula (and make the film fit into the canonical format) is the last scene where we find out that Jacob is actually still in Vietnam lying on a operating table as the medics try to revive him. This scene frames the two other diegetic levels as existing only inside Jacob’s mind and are related to the result of his final state as “peacefull”, as one medic describes Jacob’s final expression. The spectator can then, in hindsight, connect other cues given in the syuzhet that have led up to this situation.

After Louis (the chiropractor) quotes Meister Eckhart about the relation between heaven and hell, which could be read as a parable or meta-textual sign on how to read the filmic text, he says: “it’s all a matter of how you’re looking at things that’s all” (another key sentence to understand the way the film is constructed). This information explains the juxtaposition or mirroring of events and characters. For example, Jezebel functions as an angelic helper figure that literally burns Jacob’s memories/attachments (the photographs) away, or as a demon. This depends on whether Jacob is able to, or willing to ‘let go of his life’. She is trying to make him free from his past with Sarah as a stand in for her. She is also indifferent (or mildly supportive) of Jacob’s quest to understand what happened to the soldiers. Important here is that once Jacob knows about the experiment with ‘the ladder’, he doesn’t see Jez anymore: her role is fulfilled. Louis characterization is also important in this light. Jacob states that he looks like an angel and is a lifesaver, something that is also resonated in the end when Jacob understands his situation and we hear the Eckhart quote in voice over for the second time.
One particular key scene deserves special attention in the way it gives information on how to read the film. After Jacob gets a needle inserted in his brain by the doctors that tell him that he is dead, he is lying in a hospital where he is visited by Sarah and his two children. After he tells Sarah, “I’m not dead, I’m alive”, we hear an anonymous voice saying “Dream on” (see figure 15/16). This voice and it’s place of origin are unknown (we could call this a fourth diegetic level). The blurring of the ontological boundaries causes the narrative to hold in favor of a more database structure: an ontological mixture of elements. Cameron describes this structure, in Marsh Kinder’s words, as emphasizing the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales’. (Modular, 10) In my opinion we could call this a diagonal dimension in the story that is presented in a temporal linear way (that is inherent to the filmic medium), but links elements (memories and other psychic phenomena) that are experienced diachronically. The internal focalization of Jacob is in this important scene reversed in that sense that the origin of experience is diffused (we might call this state particularly schizophrenic).

The distinction between the syntagmatic axis in the film, the specific order of the syuzhet, and the paradigmatic axis, the possible fabula elements that can be selected for representation in the syuzhet, are here represented in a single experiential framework of Jacob and within one scene. According to Branigan, the database (or catalogue) is a non-narrative structure in which the paradigmatic objects are related to a ‘center’ or ‘core’ (Narrative, 19) This scene can, in my opinion, be viewed as a database of the identity- or experiential structure of Jacob’s mind. Sarah, his children and his utterance ‘help me’, are here elements of the paradigmatic axis of attachments, that are projected onto the syntagmatic axis of experience in time (their visit). The “Dream on” can in this instance be read as a deeper experience of the real/Vietnam reality that is (inauthentic) acted upon this memory database from ‘outside’ to correct his mind. Seen within this scene, the representation is, in Cameron’s terms, the manifestation of the paradigm, so that the various narrative possibilities are allowed to confront one another in the body of the text (i.e. scene). (Modular, 10) The anonymous voice thereby informs Jacob (and the spectator), in a diegetically/extradiegetically ambiguous level, that the ‘dream’ (his reality) isn’t real. The voice exists within as well as beyond his mind. This is also acknowledged by the fact that Jacob is looking beyond his diegetical level towards the voice (which is aligned to the perspective of the camera). This implicates that if there is a ‘beyond’ that Jacob is not there (Jacob is not awake). The authority of this voice is constructed in the relation to the previous scene, where Jacob is in the hellish
hospital being told that he is actually dead through a strange paradox: “if you’re not dead, then why are you here.” With these various clues and complex diegetical interactions, the topography of Jacob’s mind becomes a bit more clear. When Jacob finally finds his peace, and hence solved the puzzle, the narrative force behind the film is dead along with Jacob. Therefore the narrative drive and Jacob’s personal struggle are inextricably linked to each other.

The spectator might say that Jacob is an unreliable narrator, or that the film ‘lies’ (it’s not clear to what agency we can ascribe this to) because Jacob explicitly asks Jez if he is dead, but she says he just hurt his back. In a later scene he is being told he is dead by strange doctors (which one of them is Jez) in a hellish hospital, but Jacob thinks he is alive. Seen from the end perspective of the film, these scenes all refer to Jacob’s state as being in limbo or in purgatory (this reading is also enforced by the reference to Dante’s *LA DIVINA COMEDIA*). Therefore Jacob is not yet dead but *dying*. These changing oppositions can therefore rather be seen as expressions of the *fallibility* of Jacob’s knowledge of his situation: he unknowingly creates these oppositional shifts by ‘holding on’. The fact that Jacob is fallible and not untrustworthy is important here. Following literary scientist Greta Olson’s distinction of these two phenomenon, the general limitation of Jacob as a homodiegetic narrator/focalizer is that he can’t have metatextual or omniscient knowledge. He is therefore subject to the epistemological uncertainty of lived experience. Because we as spectators have the same knowledge of events as the protagonist, *JABOB’S LADDER* is therefore also a *mystery film*. Jacob reliably reports on whatever informational puzzle he is trying to solve at that time. *(Reconsidering, 101)* This new understanding explains the fact that the events are ambiguous, though not why they are particularly presented the way they are.
§ The traumatic experience

As we have seen, there are several important textual clues given by the film itself about how we have to read the narrative and how to deal with the ambiguity and discrepancies. After the spectator detects these clues, he can create a framework for interpretation to integrate these abnormalities in a harmonious larger perspective. Literary scientist Tamar Yacobi argues that one way the reader (i.e. spectator) can ‘naturalize’ these deviances is to integrate them by means of viewing them as being functional on a higher level. The strange visions of Jacob and the various ambiguities could be seen as pointers or as a key to the film’s ‘functional design’, as being motivated by the work’s purpose. (Heinze, 284) I will argue here that the specific construction can be read as a narrative of the traumatic experience, and that this gives the film it’s aesthetic function. Knowledge of trauma in a more general way, could provide us insight in the way JACOB’S LADDER communicates via it’s structural design. The film gives us insight, on a more philosophical and psychological level, how the traumatic experience is structured.

The term trauma literally means ‘a wound’ in ancient Greek, and refers, in its original sense, to a physical wound. The term was later used in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud to signify a particular psychological phenomenon. According to literary theorist Cathy Caruth, a trauma can be defined as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena. (Unclaimed, 91) A key term here is the ability of grasping an event that involves the particular individual. In the film the infliction of the trauma is represented physically as well as psychologically in the opening scene. Jacob is literally wounded by one of his own men. The fact that he is stabbed and particularly by someone that is ‘friendly’, causes him not to grasp the event (which is repressed and is only grasped at the end). This is seen as his bewildered facial expression (see figure 17). The psychological trauma is also always paradoxically indirect: it doesn’t occur in the direct physical threat (Jacob being stabbed), which is too direct, but manifests itself through its inherent indirect structure. (ibid. 60) The ambiguity that rises from the intermingling of the various diegetic levels can be read in this way. What Jacob’s present and the recent past both entail, is his fixation on this traumatic event. The

Figure 17. Jacob’s bewildered expression

 trauma
present with Jez is thus a paradoxical temporal shift to cope with something that occurs now in the reality (which is the present in Vietnam) because it is not directly available to Jacob’s experience. This splitting of the temporal structure in the film can be explained in relation to this trauma as well. As Caruth notes, ‘what causes trauma is a shock that appears very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time. It is an attempt of the psyche to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.’ (ibid. 61. Italics mine).

The mechanism of the traumatic is in essence repetitive because the passage beyond the violent event is always interrupted by reminders of it. As Caruth observes, the repetitions of the traumatic event suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (ibid. 91) This belatedness, deferred action, or Nachträglichkeit as Freud called it, covers the gradual attribution of meaning to the traumatic event through repetition, which structures the experience in a narrative or coherent picture as it is actively reworked by the subject’s memory. (Williams, 16) Fantasy plays a great part in this active psychic reworking of events and provides an interesting view on the film. The demonic visions, as well as the drug-experiment with ‘the ladder’ on the soldiers, can be read in this way as fantastic reworkings of the traumatic event. Although the storyline of the experiments with soldiers seems plausible from the spectator’s worldview, it is very unlikely that Jacob comes to know this while struggling for his life in Vietnam (it would simply be impossible from our understanding of time). This uncertainty is, for example, ambiguously underlined by one of the governmental agents whom abducts Jacob and says: “you’re in over your head mr. singer, men drown that way. The army was part of another life, let it lie.”

We can see this construction of the present by Jacob as a wish fulfillment; in order to for him to be alive he has to dream (or be in some other state then waking), because if he was awake he could be confronted with the horrifying traumatic reality of his own death. He cannot face the knowledge of this event (yet) so he has to keep on dreaming (or better be in limbo). This fact is actually being confirmed by the “dream on”, or “if you’re not dead, then why are you here?” This traumatic reality thus occasionally seeps through (what I call in a diagonal manner) into his consciousness. In order to repress this reality, the storyline that includes ‘the ladder’ and the cover up by the army works in a twofold way. First we have the (real) experiment that caused Jacob to be a victim of it, and second, the sub conscious cover up that is projected into the film’s present. This second line is a delayed knowledge, presented in a fantasy that, in Caruth’s words, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death
and the desire that cannot overcome it, except in the fiction of a dream. (ibid. 95) Because he imagines this, it can be said that Jacob communicates a deeper knowledge through his fantasy, but resist this knowing at the same time. Stated differently, Jacob wants to know what happened, but paradoxically his mind is resisting this immediate flow of information: it would be too traumatic. After the opening scene the film can be read as a gradual healing/mourning process that represents this gradual flow of reworking the traumatic event into experience. He must also overcome the trauma of losing his son at the point of his own departure. Seen this was, his search for knowledge of what happened in Vietnam is tied to come to terms with his son’s death, which is for example resonated by the death of Paul in the mysterious car explosion.

The bathtub scene also deals with the paradoxical nature of the trauma. When the ice is “killing him”, Jacob actually delves into a deeper memory that confronts him with his happiest time with Sarah and all three children. The “killing” refers to a painful reminder of his previous life that he can’t let go of. It is then more what Caruth calls a paradoxical awakening from a dream by the dream itself, which ‘discovers’ and extends the specific meaning of the confrontation with death that is contained within Freud’s notion of trauma. (ibid. 100)

However, the fabula and the syuzhet order in the film lay out a more peculiar template on this traumatic structure. The functionality of the traumatic structure is combined with another structure that could be seen as more spiritual. The mechanism of trauma is, in my opinion, used to make Jacob come to grips with the event, but also to ‘let go of his life’. We can say that the traumatic is experienced on a even more deeper spiritual plane of Jacob’s existence: he is in fact, after all, dying (see figure 18.).

Figure 18. In the last scene Jacob finds his peace
Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to find an answer to the question _how the film can be comprehended on the basic level of its story structure, how its narration conveys the story to the spectator and how this can be seen as functional in relation to the traumatic experience._

At the vanguard of the new ‘puzzle film’ trend in mainstream cinema, we can call JACOB’S LADDER an example par excellence of this new elaborate way of storytelling. The film bears witness to the fact that very conventional/canonical structures are not to be seen as worn out: the key is the manner of how the seven elements relate to each other, which can be done in an almost infinite amount of ways.

The combination of the cognitive film theories by Bordwell and Branigan, although their slight bilateral differences, prove to be fruitful in analyzing the process by which the spectator understands the film. This understanding is crucial in JACOB’S LADDER, for the way in which the spectator is aligned with the protagonist’s experience (mainly bij point-of-view and verbal telling). Set up as a typical mystery narrative, the restricted fabula informational flow is the central factor in making the film ambiguous. This in turn sorts the effect that a spectator can read the film in two directions, until the end of the film where it frames the narrative and puts forward a favored reading direction. I think that this double-layeredness of our interpretative reading should be seen as the most important feature of JACOB’S LADDER. Both ways do not lead into a dead end semantic street, because the reading depends on its relation to the two other diegetic levels.

Adrian Lyne thereby made a very complex and interesting narrative that makes the spectator able to experience on a cognitive level that he must solve the puzzle along with the protagonist. This is done by a ingenious combination of the horizontal (arrangement) and vertical (stylistical) levels of narration to impose ambiguity.

As I have already stated, it was not my intention to give a closed reading that could straighten out all the ambiguities, but to try to show how these ambiguities come about through the film’s particular construction. The structure of the film, in combination with a larger interpretative framework, gives a rich explanation of how the puzzle of the film, its central enigma, relates to our normal world schema, and perception of conflicting ontological categories. The application of the notion of trauma as a hermeneutic device, renders great insight into the question of _why we need such a complex way of storytelling._ In the light of the
traumatic, the particular construction of the film can be seen as a strategic *representation* of a human experience. The indirect paradoxical structure of the traumatic experience shows how the repetitive phenomenon and mirrored scenes can be seen as a particular psychological manifestation of coming to terms with the impact of reality. This structure is mainly represented in the film through the ordering of the syuzhet and the layeredness (or diffusion) of the diegetic world. Although I had chosen to apply trauma as an interpretative framework upon the thematic of this film, it is not unthinkable to apply different frameworks that could yield interesting results as well. My combination of trauma with a cognitive/narratological approach could, for instance, be replaced by a more psychoanalytical approach (this could better describe identification processes or the representation of Jacob’s desire), or perhaps by a phenomenological approach that deals with the features of our (and also Jacob’s) perception, in relation to our bodily experiential/ontological ‘being in the world’. The more spiritual dimension in the film can, in my opinion, also be approached by an analysis of the intertextuality in the film (to Dante’s *LA DIVINA COMEDIA*, Camus’ *L’ETRANGER* or the Tibetan book of the dead). Interpretation is, after all, a great deal of what Louis the chiropractor aptly points to: “just a matter of how you look at it, that’s all.”
### Appendix I - Analysis of the plot-story relation in JACOB’S LADDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of the plot (numbers)</th>
<th>Causal, chronological order of the story (Alphabet + α / ζ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>A. Opening – (Past/October 1971) in Vietnam – the soldiers have to go to combat, many of them are getting sick from eating, assault on Jacob.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>K. 1 – (present/around 76/77) – Jacob wakes up on the subway and tries to find out where he is, he encounters a strange woman on and sees a monster like drifter on the subway. He gets of and finds himself trapped on a closed station, almost gets hit by a train with strange figures on it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>K.2 (present) New York City, Jacob comes home (from work) to his girlfriend Jezebel, takes a shower with her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>B - (Past) Jacob is in Vietnam at night, crawling wounded on the ground, looks up at a spider web, hears and sees fellow soldiers in the distance he mutters ‘help me’.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>L.1 (present) Jacob scares/wakes up from this ‘bad dream’ in his apartment. Jez gives Jacob a stack of photo’s that Jacob’s second son (Eli) dropped off. He talks about all the biblical names they all have. They look at the photo’s together. His first wife (that he ‘left’) was Sarah. He is remembered about his youngest son’s (Gabe) death. Jez burns all the photo’s because she doesn’t want Jacob to cry.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>L.2 (present) Jacob on this postal bus route, at the post office he brings lunch to Jez (who also works there). He sees Louis ‘again’ (the chiropractor) because of his bad back. Louis talks about what Sarah told him the other day. She still loves him and Jacob should go back to her. Louis twists Jacob’s spine.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>C (past) – flashback the soldiers find Jacob and they think he’s still alive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>M. 1 (present) Jacob’s still at Louis, asks what he just did. ‘I had to get in there, a deep adjustment’. Jacob tells about his recent flashbacks to the war, and that Louis looks like an angel and that he’s a lifesaver.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M.2 (present) Jacob’s walking home from Louis. In an abandoned street he’s being warned by Michael and chased by a car with demonic figures but escapes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>N. (present) Jacob at the psychiatric hospital to see dr. Carlson, which the head nurse doesn’t know but according to Jacob works there for years. There isn’t a record of Jacob in the hospital. He insists of seeing the doctor, he sees a strange wound on the head of the nurse and runs away. He’s being chased by security guards but arrives at Carlson’s old office. He learns the dr. had just passed away recently in a car accident.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>O. (present) Jacob’s in bed with Jez, she says the pressure (no money and the past with his wife) might be what’s causing his problems. He insists that ‘they weren’t human’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>P. (present) Jacob and Jez are at a party. He’s starting to see horrible things. A woman reads his palm and says jokingly that he isn’t even alive according to his lifeline. When he goes to the dance floor he’s seeing demonic creatures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>D. (past) - flashback- A soldier states that Jacob’s guts are hanging out, another one replies “push ‘em back in.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Q. <strong>(present)</strong> Jacob is very sick in bed after the party, Jez says Jacob is going crazy and calls the doctor after taking his temperature. Jacob is being placed in a bathtub full of ice to cool him down. He yells them to stop because ‘they’re killing him’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I. <strong>(past)</strong> Jacob is in bed asleep with his wife Sarah, he wakes up from the cold because the window is open. He tells her about his dream in which he had been living with Jezebel, that he saw demons and that her burned from ice. He brings Gabe back to bed.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>E. <strong>(past)</strong> – flashback - We see trees against a sunlit sky, we hear a soldier on a radio and a Huey chopper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>R. <strong>(present)</strong> – Jacob is in the bathtub opening his eyes, the doctor says that Jacob is a very lucky guy and “must have friends in very high places.” He closes his eyes again.</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>F. <strong>(past)</strong> – flashback – We see a chopper form underneath, Jacob is being pulled up to the chopper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>S. <strong>(present)</strong> – Jacob wakes up at his apartment where Jez is sitting. He asks her if he’s dead, she says he has a virus and has to rest.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 17. | T. **1** (present – two weeks later) Jacob is with Jez reading books about demons. She’s annoyed by his lethargic behavior. He sees her turn into a demon. He gets a phone call from his war-buddy Paul who needs to see him.  
   T. **2** (present) Jacob and Paul meet in a bar. Paul is telling he’s going to hell and that ‘they’ are coming after him and that nothing helps. Paul asks: “What happened that night?”  
   T. **3** (present) Jacob and Paul walk outside to Paul’s car, he gets in, Jacob’s sees a coin on the ground and says it’s his lucky day. The coin strangely moves toward the car that is blown up when Paul turns the key. |
| 18. | G. **(past)** Jacob is inside the chopper lying wounded on a stretcher, the pilot gets shot and others shoot at the enemy. |
| 19. | U. **(present)** Jacob gets pulled from the burning and exploding rubble by Michael who runs away in slow motion. |
| 20. | V. **(present)** Paul’s funeral, Jacob talks to the other veterans about a cover up by the government to explain Paul’s sudden death. Rob’s telling them “there’s no such things as demons,” and that they are all paranoid. |
| 21. | W. **1** (Present) the veterans are at their lawyer’s (Geary) office  
   W. **2** (Present) they are walking outside down the stairs being watched by someone in a car. |
| 22. | X. **1** (present) – Jacob is with Jez, the lawyer called and said they didn’t have a case because the rest backed down.  
   X. **2** (present) Jacob at the courthouse talking to his lawyer, who says that they never went to Vietnam.  
   X. **3** (present) Jacob is kidnapped by three agents to make a point not to interfere with their business. Jacob jumps out of the car and is being robbed by a man in a Santa costume. |
| 23. | Y. **(present)** Jacob arrives in the hospital, after being examined briefly he passes out. He is transferred to the ‘x-ray’ department while Jacob
sees strange/insane people around him and objects from his memories. He arrives in an operating room where he is being told he is dead and he gets a needle in his brain and Jacob screams.

| 24. | E’ (past) similar to E only without the chopper sounds |
| 25. | J. (past) Jacob is lying in the hospital, being visited by Sarah and his two oldest children. A voice says “dream on”, Jacob says ‘help me’ to Sarah. |
| 26. | Z. 1 (present) Louis is getting Jacob out of the hospital.  
Z. 2 (present) Louis is examining Jacob at his practice, quotes Meister Eckhart and makes Jacob walk again. |
| 27. | α. 1 (present) Jacob is in his apartment going through his Vietnam memorabilia, he watches photo’s and we see some of his memories about Vietnam and the death of Gabe. When he looks in the mirror he sees Gabe walking and then a demon. Then Jez comes in (Jacob was missing for two days). Michael (the chemist) calls to meet him.  
α. 2 (present) He meets Michael who tells him Jacob is one of the survivors of the failed experiment with ‘the ladder’. Jacob tells that no one can remember that night (just flashes).  
- (past) - imbedded flashback (during A but not shown before)- of American soldiers shooting each other in the Vietnam. |
| 28. | β. (present) Jacob gets in a cab to drive to his old home in Brooklyn.  
- (past) embedded flashback – partly A’ – Jacob gets stabbed by a fellow soldier. (crosscutting). When Jacob arrives home ‘after a long time’ according to Sam (the doorman). Inside the house Jacobs he walks around in the dark in search for his family. He looks at some family photographs and sits down on the couch. In voice over we hear Louis citation of Meister Eckhart. |
| 29. | ψ (past) a montage sequence of Jacob’s memories to the sound of a heartbeat [This sequence is quite unusual because of the 16mm footage] |
| 30. | δ (present) Jacob still sits on the couch but it’s morning, he looks up to the sunrays, hears a music box and sees Gabe sitting on bottom of the stairs. Gabe leads Jacob up the staircase. |
| 31. | H. (past) Jacob is lying on the operating table in Vietnam, the doctors say ‘he’s gone’. And state that the soldier in question in Jacob Singer. |
| 32. | ξ Title card: “it was reported that the hallucinogenic drug BZ was used in experiments on soldiers during the Vietnam war. The Pentagon denied the story.” |
| 33. | ζ End credits |
Appendix II – Analysis of the plot structure and the three diegetic levels

■ = Vietnam (past)
■ = Jacob’s life with Sarah (recent past)
■ = Jacob’s life with Jezebel (present)

Bibliography


Filmography