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***Multiform and Multistrand Narrative Structures in
Hollywood Cinema***

A dissertation submitted by

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Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

Multiform and Multistrand Narrative Structures in Hollywood Cinema

In the last couple of decades there has been a growing realisation that an understanding of screenwriting based on traditional Aristotelian notions of dramatic form falls short of explaining the rising popularity of a body of work represented by films such as *Pulp Fiction* (1995), *Magnolia* (1999), *Donnie Darko* (2000), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Syriana* (2005), *Babel* (2006), *Shutter Island* (2010), and *Inception* (2010). These films have more in common with European art cinema than with traditional Hollywood. This thesis ties the growth of these forms to the rise of digital media, which it sees as an expression of a postmodern ethos. It suggests that the habits and practices arising from a pervasive engagement with video games and the Internet in general has contributed to a state of *ontological confusion* in the common understanding of time, space, identity, and agency, due in part to the habitual and widespread transgression of the virtual/real world boundary. This confusion finds aesthetic expression in formations that this thesis defines in relation to the categories of *multiform* and *multistrand* narrative, categories within which films such as those mentioned above are subsumed. These categories exist at a deeper level than that of conventional *genre* and are fundamental to the selection, placement, and overall balance of more traditional narrative elements within a screenplay. Additionally, the thesis proposes four major subcategories, namely, *open* or *closed* multiform and *simple* or *complex* multistrand narrative. Multiform narratives tend to be somewhat sci-fi inflected, employing multiple spatio-temporal frameworks to convey the sense of ontological bewilderment. For this reason, much of the work in this category involves explaining how the fabula, as distinct from the syuzhet, creates referential or denotative meaning by exploring the spatial and

temporal underpinnings of the narrative. Multistrand narratives, by contrast, typically spring from a single spatio-temporal framework. This category portrays the dizzying multiplicity and frenetic busyness of contemporary life from a human-drama perspective by employing multiple protagonists of equal weight. If these protagonists often fail to relate to each other in any causal way, they nevertheless cohere in a tapestry of shared complexity and verisimilitude. Here, the thesis explores how the use of symbol, theme, and the philosophical and moral frameworks operating from within the syuzhet marshal the fabula to create an overall story spine – a *metastory* – from individual strands through the use of parallels, contrasts, and other cues provided by the syuzhet. Lastly, the thesis identifies features from each category drawn from an in-depth analysis of nine case studies, and arranges them into a series of indicative schemas to assist in the writing of multiform and multistrand screenplays.

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