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Viewer–character information asymmetry as a cultural-creative strategy in global cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article examines narrative asymmetry as a screen production strategy in contemporary global cinema, focusing on the technical and creative methods filmmakers employ to establish, maintain, and resolve information disparities between viewers and characters. While existing scholarship has predominantly approached it through psychological or cognitive frameworks, this study positions information asymmetry as a craft-based screen storytelling technique with significant implications for narrative tension, emotional engagement, and thematic development. Through practice-based analysis of three acclaimed international films—*Anatomy of a Fall* (Justine Triet 2023), *The Salesman* (Asghar Farhadi 2016), and *Brooklyn* (John Crowley 2015)—and drawing on interviews with creative teams, I analyse specific production choices that create instances where either viewers possess knowledge unavailable to characters or characters hold information concealed from the audience. By comparing diverse stylistic approaches to asymmetry across different cultural and production contexts, I situate these techniques within evolving transnational cinematic practices. This study argues that viewer-character information asymmetry represents not merely a narrative device but a cultural-creative strategy—a form of cinematic authorship—that fosters viewer speculation, interpretive co-creation, and ethical engagement with the film. The analysis would be valuable to screen and media scholars, students and industry practitioners engaged in crafting films across cultural and transnational contexts.

KEYWORDS

Information asymmetry; film; transnational cinema; creative strategy; production

Information asymmetry beyond narrative theory

Narrative asymmetry – the deliberate structuring of differential knowledge between viewers and characters – constitutes one of cinema’s most powerful production strategies. Long recognized within narrative theory for its capacity to generate suspense, surprise, and curiosity (Bordwell 1985; Sternberg 1978), and increasingly invoked in analyses of individual filmmakers’ practice (Ogrodnik 2014), on ‘narrative asymmetry’ in Cuarón; Blumenthal-Barby (2024), on the ‘asymmetric gaze’ in Haneke), information

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asymmetry has typically been theorized as an experiential or psychological effect rather than as a practice grounded in filmmaking decisions. While cognitive and narratological approaches have illuminated how unequal distributions of information shape spectatorial engagement, this study shifts analytical focus to the production processes through which filmmakers construct, sustain, and resolve viewer – character information gaps.

Through close analysis of three critically acclaimed international films – Justine Triet’s *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), Asghar Farhadi’s *The Salesman* (2016), and John Crowley’s *Brooklyn* (2015) – I identify key production strategies used to establish and manage viewer – character asymmetries, and examine how their resolution (or refusal of resolution) functions as a decisive creative act. Drawing on the available screenplays, production contexts and interviews with key creatives, this article conceptualizes information asymmetry as a deliberate creative strategy, a mode of authorship, realized through concrete production choices and shaped by cultural and historical conditions. Rather than treating asymmetry as a narrative device, the study reframes it as a practice-based mode of filmmaking that can define a film’s aesthetic logic, structure spectatorship, and serve ethical and cultural purposes. It argues that asymmetry mobilizes viewers as active interpreters – inviting speculation, moral evaluation, and interpretive co-creation – while remaining inflected by local storytelling traditions and industrial constraints. Through case analyses including Triet’s insistence on ambiguity, Farhadi’s commitment to open-ended moral inquiry, and Crowley’s calibrated narrative restraint, the article positions information asymmetry as a culturally embedded creative strategy.

Classical film theory has long noted that the distribution of knowledge between audience and characters crucially shapes viewer experience. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell (1985) describes how a film’s plot can range from ‘omniscient narration’ (the audience knows more than any character) to ‘restricted narration’ (the audience knows only what a particular character knows), creating a dynamic ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ between characters and spectators (103–105). Branigan (1992) refines this hierarchy through the concept of focalization, distinguishing the levels at which narration is filtered through a character’s external behaviour or internal perception – a distinction taken up below, since several of the devices analysed in this article are scripted shifts between these levels. By manipulating this hierarchy, filmmakers modulate viewer expectations and emotions: ‘the plot’s range of story information creates a hierarchy of knowledge’ that shapes the curiosity, suspense, and surprise we feel (Bordwell and Thompson 2011, 84). This reminds us of Alfred Hitchcock’s famous example illustrating the principle: if the audience alone knows a bomb is under a table, suspense is heightened; if both audience and characters are unaware until it explodes, it is a surprise; if the audience knows less than characters (e.g. a detective withholding clues), a mystery unfolds. These distinctions underscore that unequal knowledge is not merely a narrative effect but a potent device to engage the viewer’s mind and emotions. Notably, both Bordwell’s and Branigan’s accounts of how narration solicits the viewer’s inferential activity draw on Umberto Eco’s framework of the open work (Eco 1989 [1962]) – a text whose gaps are constitutive invitations to the reader’s collaboration – a lineage that underpins this article’s claim that unresolved asymmetry positions viewers as interpretive co-creators.

Much of the extant theory on information asymmetry stems from cognitive and narratological perspectives. In classical study, Sternberg (1978) identifies suspense,

curiosity, and surprise as the ‘master effects’ of narrative, each rooted in strategic information gaps (65–66; Carroll 1996). Suspense arises when viewers anticipate outcomes knowing more than the characters, curiosity arises when viewers seek to fill in omitted past events, and surprise arises when assumptions are overturned (Carroll 1996). Similarly, in his 2022 edition on character engagement as a structure of spectatorial response, Murray Smith identifies the spectator’s knowledge relative to characters as a key ‘element of narrative film structure’ (2022, 10).

Cognitive film theorists emphasize that viewers resolve gaps by attributing mental states to characters’ beliefs, desires, and intentions. Seeley and Carroll (2014) argue that this mental-state attribution opens narrative possibilities and also reframes past details retrospectively – guiding both forward and backward structuring of the story and emotional engagement. They describe mainstream film narration as ‘erotetic’ – organized around the generation and resolution of questions like ‘why did she react like that’, ‘did he kill her?’ (Seeley and Carroll 2014, 41–44). These questions arise, as this article argues, from strategically and creatively authored gaps in information, produced by filmmakers at specific moments in the film. Recent narratology has begun to systematize the deliberately disruptive end of this spectrum: Schlickers and Toro (2017, 230) group strategies of deception, paradox, and ‘empuzzlement’ under the heading of perturbatory narration – designs whose disturbing effects (confusion, doubt, disappointment) suspend immersion rather than serve it – a framework directly relevant to the contradictory, character-anchored reconstructions of the central event in *Anatomy of a Fall* discussed below.

Cognitivists’ most consistent focus is on the viewer’s ongoing experience – how narration organizes attention, inference, and emotion (C. Plantinga 2009, 2018; Smith 1995). These accounts often treat knowledge disparity as a narrative effect explaining how viewers engage fictional characters and less as a cultural-creative strategy embedded in production process and practices. The practice-based analysis (see Zalipour 2022) that follows demonstrates how deliberate filmmaking choices organize viewers’ positioning in relation to characters, actions, and events, while situating character- and viewer-based information gaps within the cultural and historical contexts of production and story-telling traditions.

While cognitive film theory tends to privilege Western and European narrative models, some scholars have begun to examine a wider range of cinematic traditions and styles. Barratt (2014) distinguishes between relatively universal perceptual mechanisms and culturally influenced forms of non-modular viewer cognition (146–149). While basic capacities for tracking agents and events may be shared, Barratt argues that how viewers interpret incomplete information, especially regarding motives and causes can vary systematically across cultures (152–156). Work beyond Western cinemas reinforces the point: Chattopadhyay (2021) shows how culturally specific listening practices shape what environmental sound is allowed to disclose or withhold. As a few scholars have cautioned, even seemingly ‘universal’ narrative devices like suspense can have different valences in different cultural contexts. Carroll (2003) warned that emotional responses to narrative devices like suspense cannot be presumed universal: ‘we will not be able to depend on our emotional responses to a film because we do not have the appropriate cultural background’ (73). In shifting focus to production choices rather than viewer psychology alone, this article also recognizes that what is taken for granted as effective

screen storytelling in one culture may carry distinct meanings for audiences outside the culture and context of the characters in the film. The concept of information asymmetry, while rooted in cognitive universals (our human inclination to know ‘what happens next’), may be executed differently in, say, an Iranian context of censorship and allusion versus a French courtroom drama steeped in open-ended realism. By drawing examples from three production contexts, this article illustrates how asymmetry as a technique is adapted to local production contexts, cultural storytelling traditions, genre conventions, and audience expectations. This analysis pays close attention to production techniques, cultural and historical specificity, and to the creative aims of filmmakers within particular contexts.

This article seeks to bridge theory and practice, acknowledging the foundational ideas from narrative and cognitive theories while showing how filmmakers on the ground make creative decisions. As we will see, Triet, Farhadi, and Crowley each leverage asymmetry in distinctive ways to engage viewers in the screen storytelling process. Their approaches underscore that information asymmetry is inscribed at the writing stage – a screenplay is already a specification of what will and will not be seen and heard (Maras 2009) – and is then realised, and sometimes reworked, through subsequent production choices.

The analysis shows a distinction between three overarching forms of asymmetry: (i) viewer – character asymmetry, (ii) character – character asymmetry, and (iii) viewer-character-character asymmetry – a multi-layered information asymmetry such as viewer vs. character+other characters asymmetry, or viewer+character vs. other characters asymmetry. The analysis refers to examples of these asymmetries, showing how their functions are culturally and historically contingent and shaped by specific production contexts. Production cultures, censorship regimes, cultural traditions, and audience expectations influence how asymmetries are constructed in practice.

The article is structured around key production strategies – screenwriting, visualising perspective, sound design, temporal structure, and editing – each examined across three case studies, followed by two sections that discuss more closely how cultural context shapes these formal strategies and how asymmetry operates as an authorial mode.

Crafting asymmetry through screenwriting and story structure

Following Maras’s (2009) distinction between *screenwriting*—the production of a script as a discrete development document – and screen writing as the broader, distributed practice of writing for the screen, this section treats the screenplay as the site where asymmetry is first inscribed before being realised, and sometimes transformed, in production. Two of the three case studies can be examined at the page level: Triet and Harari’s final draft of *Anatomy of a Fall* (dated 16 February 2022, released by Neon in 2023) and Nick Hornby’s ‘Yellow’ revised draft of *Brooklyn* (24 April 2014, released by Fox Searchlight). Farhadi’s screenplay for *The Salesman* remains unpublished; that case study therefore draws on the finished film’s narrative design and on Farhadi’s documented writing practice, and the terminology below marks this distinction.

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, Triet and co-writer Arthur Harari structured the story around a mysterious death – the fall of Sandra’s husband from an attic window – and notably never show the incident on-screen. Triet (2023) says, ‘This obsession with falling is

a recurring motif throughout the film, initially in a literal sense. I have long been fascinated with the sensation of “body weight” and what it feels like to fall, which was sparked by the opening credits of *Mad Men*, where a man keeps falling’. The screenplay’s opening sequence ends with the student Zoé driving away from the chalet; the next scene begins not with Samuel’s fall but with a one-word scene direction, ‘Ellipse’. (Trans. ‘Ellipsis’) – before describing Daniel’s walk in the woods (Triet and Harari 2022, 6). Samuel dies inside this scripted gap: the following scene has Daniel stumble against something on the ground, and the action lines record only what the boy’s hands encounter – clothing, hair, a face, and blood in the melting snow (7). Even the screenplay’s reader is denied the event; the writers do not narrate the fall in scene text, they excise it, and the scene closes with the camera moving into Daniel’s dark glasses until the screen goes black, an action line that places narration momentarily inside the sightless child’s perception (7) – internal focalization in Branigan’s (1992) sense. The screenplay’s draft then writes undecidability into the fiction’s own forensic discourse: the pathologist’s dialogue in the autopsy scene (page 9) concludes that it is impossible, on the evidence of the wound, to distinguish an impact sustained in falling from a deliberately struck blow. Crucially, the screenplay does not privately know the truth and conceal it from the reader; it distributes hypotheses. In the trial sequences, both the prosecution’s and the defence’s scenarios are scripted as visions: the blood-spatter expert’s testimony triggers written images of Sandra threatening Samuel with a chisel on the balcony, while the rival expert’s testimony generates the counter-image of Samuel climbing over the attic window ledge, the vision halting an instant before his skull can meet the shed roof. Each vision is anchored by close-ups of Daniel listening, so the script assigns these contradictory images to a character’s mental staging rather than to authoritative narration. Triet has revealed that during writing, she and Harari decided on a version of the truth, but ‘it was really important to not speak about this on set and with the actors because it’s not the point of the movie and it’s ambiguous’ (Triet in Lenker 2024). The script thus treats the central event as a missing piece – the film’s narrative is essentially a trial that probes this missing piece through evidence and testimony, without ever definitively filling it in. This deliberate gap forces the audience into the role of a juror sifting incomplete evidence. As Triet notes, ‘maybe she didn’t kill him, but she could have pushed him to commit suicide. There’s a lot of possibilities. It’s not so black and white’ (Triet in Lenker 2024).

Farhadi’s screenplay for *The Salesman* is not publicly available, so this analysis concerns the finished film’s narrative structure, read alongside his documented compositional practice: he is known to shoot from complete, locked screenplays with no improvisation, and *The Salesman* won Best Screenplay at Cannes in 2016—indications that the design analysed below was settled at the writing stage. The attack on Rana in the couple’s apartment falls within a temporal ellipsis; the narration cuts from Rana buzzing open the apartment door for an unseen visitor to the aftermath of the attack, and the elided interval is never dramatized or verbally reconstructed in full. From this gap forward, narration is restricted to what Emad and Rana know or choose to disclose – to each other as much as to the viewer, since Rana’s reluctance to describe the event creates a second, intra-couple asymmetry layered on the first. The identity of the intruder is withheld until the final act, sustaining a viewer-and-protagonists-versus-perpetrator asymmetry for most of the runtime; yet when the factual gap closes, the ethical one opens. Farhadi has said he wants viewers to leave asking ‘which character was doing the right thing?’

(Weston 2017), designing films that ‘continue inside the viewer’ (Dehghan 2011) – an ethics of withheld judgment that aligns with recent arguments for treating ethical engagement as a screenwriting problem rather than a reception effect (Maras 2016).

Brooklyn presents a classical surface, yet Nick Hornby’s screenplay (adapting Colm Tóibín’s novel) manages knowledge with unusual precision. The script first constructs a viewer-knows-more asymmetry through scene arrangement: Rose’s death reaches the viewer before it reaches Eilis, as Eilis’s cheerful voice-over letter – reporting that she is happy for the first time in America – continues over intercut scenes of her mother finding Rose’s body in Ireland (Hornby 2014, sc. 87–93). The marriage plot then inverts the design. Tony’s proposal is scripted as a secrecy pact – he asks Eilis to marry him before she sails and suggests they tell no one (sc. 101) – and the City Hall wedding is witnessed by the viewer but by no family member on either side (sc. 106–107). Back in Ireland, concealment is written as physical business: at Rose’s grave, an action line closes on Eilis’s hands as she ‘takes her wedding ring out of her pocket, slips it on’ (sc. 110), the pocketed ring implying its removal in public; her graveside monologue then confides the marriage to the one character who can never repeat it, making the viewer and the dead sister the secret’s only custodians. Her scripted evasions – deflecting her mother’s pointed remark about an air-mail letter from America (sc. 117) – prolong the viewer +character versus other-characters asymmetry as Jim’s courtship proceeds, and the draft withholds Eilis’s decision until the exposure of the marriage collapses the knowledge gap for every character at once, resolving the design in the full-disclosure ethos of classical melodrama.

Anatomy of a Fall withholds the event entirely (maximal ambiguity); *The Salesman* withholds the event but eventually reveals the culprit (mystery to partial closure); *Brooklyn* stages the event to viewers while scripting its concealment from other characters (dramatic irony resolved by full disclosure). In each case, the balance between confusion and understanding that keeps viewers speculating is set, wholly or first, at the writing stage.

Visualizing perspective

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, Triet and cinematographer Simon Beauvais adopt a visual style that closely follows Sandra’s experience. Notably, the film refrains from any omniscient flashbacks or dramatic re-enactments of the fatal fall. The courtroom sequences often play out in extended medium shots and close-ups of testimony, captured in long-lens zooms and abrupt reframings that mimic broadcast coverage of a trial – a camera that behaves like an observer discovering testimony in real time rather than an author who knows in advance where to look. This approach keeps viewers fixated on what the jurors (and thus viewers) *can* know – the evidence at hand. By never shifting into a third-person flashback of ‘what really happened’, the camera maintains the same epistemic limits as the courtroom. As editor Laurent Sénéchal explained, deviating from Sandra’s perspective or introducing an external viewpoint could have undermined the film’s careful ambiguity: small visual details, if misjudged, could turn the character of Sandra to ‘become completely manipulative or completely innocent, and we could lose the ambiguity [...] The ambiguity is really what we had to maintain’ (Sénéchal 2024). One example is the handling of the evidence that comes late in the film – an audio recording

of a prior argument between Sandra and her husband. The audio is played in court; both the jury and audience can hear the recording. The clerk displays the French transcript of the argument on the computer screen. After a few seconds, Triet shows the argument scene only to viewers while no other characters can see it. Crucially, the image is granted only up to the point at which it would adjudicate: when the argument escalates into physical violence, the film cuts away from the flashback and returns the court and the viewer to sound alone, so that the one fragment of the past we are permitted to see stops precisely where guilt or innocence would become visible. The camera watches the characters react to the audio rather than editorializing with any clarifying angle. This means the audience's visual access, the impaired child's visual access, the jury's visual access, and the visual access of characters in the court are at different asymmetrical levels (viewer vs. character+other characters), reinforcing the asymmetry whereby no one (except perhaps Sandra) has a privileged view of the truth.

Triet starts the film almost like a thriller – the initial discovery of the body, the forensic examination of the attic – but then pointedly shifts into a chamber drama mode. The film resists the temptation of Hitchcockian visual omniscience. As Sénéchal noted, it could have been easy to cast Sandra as a typical mystery-film enigma, a 'blonde-haired, strange woman' viewed from an external, suspicious perspective; instead, Triet's direction treats Sandra and her son empathically, 'as if they were in a John Cassavetes movie. We're with them. We're not looking *at* them [as specimens] ... They're human beings' (Sénéchal 2024). If Sandra ever gazes at something that might hint at guilt or innocence, the camera withholds it or presents it ambiguously. As Triet explains, she deliberately pursued a 'raw, unembellished tone' without added music, blending a near-documentary realism with emotional depth to maintain ambiguity and emotional complexity (Triet, 2023).

In *The Salesman*, Farhadi and cinematographer Hossein Jafarian employ a restrained, realist visual style – a locked-off eye-level framing with occasional use of a controlled, steadied handheld camera, available-light interiors shot in real locations, staging in depth through the doorways, windows, and half-open frames of the apartment, and an almost complete absence of non-diegetic score. This style often limits the camera to Emad and Rana's vantage points, thereby aligning viewer knowledge tightly with theirs. For much of the film, viewers see and learn things simultaneously with Emad. For example, when Emad discovers clues to the intruder's identity (a set of keys left in the apartment, or the mention of a pickup truck seen nearby), the camera presents these clues plainly as Emad finds them – viewers don't get an earlier shot of the keys before Emad notices them. The film's visual storytelling is rigorously subjective; even moments of potential tension are shot from the character's eye-level perspective – external focalization, in Branigan's (1992) terms, that never exceeds what the focalizing character could witness. A striking sequence is Emad's investigation of the previous tenant's contacts to track the mysterious visitor. The cinematographer keeps Emad in frame as he interviews people; when he finally lures the elderly culprit to the apartment under false pretences, the camera stays mostly with Emad and Rana's reactions, not giving the audience any superior viewpoint on the old man beyond what the protagonists see. In the final confrontation scene, as Emad locks himself and the old man in a room, Farhadi withholds a clear view of what Emad plans. The camera, aligned with Rana standing outside the door, leaves us uncertain and concerned, hearing raised voices but not immediately seeing Emad's actions. This visual withholding places the viewer in Rana's shoes, anxious about what

is transpiring out of sight. For instance, in one shot, Emad sits in the dark in ambush for the intruder, and we share his limited field of view – the doorway in dim light. The intruder enters unrecognized; only later, in full light, do we as viewers identify him alongside Emad. This mirroring of the characters' visual (dis)advantages is itself the product of exacting camerawork: withholding through off-screen space, fixed setups, and calibrated depth of field demands more planning than conventional coverage, since each choice of focal length and staging determines exactly what the viewer is permitted to resolve at any moment. There are no cutaways to an omniscient culprit's perspective; viewers never see the attack on Rana, even in flashback, because Emad did not see it. This technique of visual restriction aligns with what Bordwell and others call 'rigorously restricted viewpoint' to heighten curiosity and eventual surprise (Bordwell 2017). When Emad finally learns the intruder's identity and confronts him, the camera at first still conceals the old man's face from viewers, heightening curiosity, until the scripted moment of revelation.

Brooklyn offers a contrast, as its visual style under John Crowley and DP Yves Bélanger is classical in its scene coverage – establishing wides, medium two-shots, and shot/reverse-shot dialogue bound by eyeline matches – and transparent in the precise sense of classical continuity: framing motivated by story information rather than authorial commentary, a stylistic self-effacement that conceals how strictly the camera rationed knowledge. Yet it subtly works to keep the viewer aligned with Eilis's subjective experience, thereby maintaining viewer+character vs. other characters asymmetry. This means the audience does not get any sneaky peeks at, say, what Tony is doing back in New York while Eilis is in Ireland, or what her Irish suitor Jim is thinking privately. *Brooklyn* often uses shallow-focus close-ups on Saoirse Ronan's face, emphasizing Eilis's interiority. Because we as viewers know her secret, these close-ups invite us to search her subtle expressions (a performance element) for traces of conflict or guilt that other characters in the scene might not detect. In the scene where the local busybody Miss Kelly hints that she knows Eilis has married, the camera lingers on Eilis's startled, panic-stricken face – an image only the viewer appreciates fully, since Miss Kelly simply proceeds to blackmail her. The visual emphasis on Eilis's reactions and her performance, rather than an external view of the conversation alone, is a way the film privileges the audience with emotional knowledge that other characters lack. Crowley avoids any overt visual nudging to the audience about the secret; rather, he lets the performances and the narrative context do the work. Crowley has remarked that he 'never wanted the viewer to necessarily feel that there was an overt scheme at play' and that the key was to place details such that 'a discerning viewer could find [them], should they wish to', without being prodded (Crowley in Saito 2015). In *Brooklyn*, those details include meaningful performances, lingering shots on Eilis's wedding ring (which she hides while in Ireland), and parallels in staging that underscore her double life. But Crowley's camera does not announce these with bombast; it gently places them. The cinematography is warm and straightforward, mirroring the film's emotional tone, yet it quietly enforces asymmetry by seldom shifting from Eilis's side of the story. This means the cinematography – as distinct from this system of coverage – enforces the asymmetry chromatically: Bélanger's soft, available-light look warms or drains each world according to its hold on Eilis, from the drab, desaturated Enniscorthy of the opening act to the newly golden Ireland of her return, so that the palette itself registers the pull of the life her secret forbids. Only the audience sees

both sides of Eilis's dilemma (her life in Brooklyn and her life in Ireland), but at any given moment, the camera sticks with her present perspective. While *Brooklyn*'s style is not flashy, the visual system aligns viewers with a protagonist who withholds information from other characters, and the camera never betrays her secret until she is ready to reveal it.

By aligning with or withholding from characters' viewpoints, directors shape whether audiences know more, less, or the same. *Anatomy of a Fall* uses observational framing to sustain ambiguity; *The Salesman* applies restricted realism for gradual discovery; *Brooklyn* uses classical shots, that is, scene coverage, to build a multilayered asymmetry.

The role of sound and silence in information control

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, sound is almost a character unto itself, especially the use of music and noise in the lead-up to the husband's death. The blaring music Sandra plays (a 50 Cent rap song) in the attic shortly before the fatal incident, serves a dual narrative purpose. First, within the story, it prevents the hearing of whatever struggle or moment occurred between Sandra and her husband – the couple's son, who is downstairs, is unable to hear any commotion clearly because the music drowns it out. The sound design substitutes one stream of information for another; what the viewer is given to hear displaces what they are prevented from hearing. Thus, for the character Daniel, a key witness, his knowledge is limited by diegetic sound. The audience, too, hears the thumping music and nothing else during that crucial period; we are placed in the same sonic position as the son. As Chattopadhyay (2021) argues, the 'auditory setting' is never a neutral backdrop but a constructed layer through which narrative and a sense of place are produced; what a soundtrack admits of an environment – and at what level relative to dialogue and foregrounded effects – is therefore itself an information decision, and the distribution of the audible is as deliberately authored as the distribution of the visible. As editor Sénéchal (2024) recounted, 'small details could derail the entire movie' and maintaining ambiguity was paramount – the decision to have loud music covering the potential sounds of a fight or a fall is exactly such a detail. It means that neither the character nor the audience can be sure if there was an argument, a scream at the moment of the fall. This use of sound to obfuscate is a conscious strategy to bolster asymmetry; a silent house might have allowed the son (and viewer) to overhear an incriminating shout or crash, whereas a noisy soundtrack ensures we share the characters' uncertainty.

Moreover, the absence of a traditional score throughout most of *Anatomy of a Fall* – Triet notably includes almost no non-diegetic music – contributes to the film's objective sound environment; viewers only hear what the characters in the scene would hear. This sound design leaves interpretive space: viewers are not sonically cued to distrust or sympathize beyond what dialogue and acting provide. It is telling that in Triet's Golden Globe acceptance speech, she joked about the film having 'no score ... a dog vomiting ... I mean, come on' (Lenker 2024) – an ironic nod that the film denies viewers the usual dramatic musical cues, offering instead mundane or disruptive sounds. Even the dog's presence (and its sudden loud vomiting in one scene) serves to keep the audience on edge and grounded in the unvarnished reality of the moment, rather than slipping into a clearly signaled mystery-solving mode.

In *The Salesman*, sound design is pivotal in at least two ways. First, Farhadi uses sound to hint at unseen events, and second, he thematically uses the diegetic theater production's dialogue to mirror and comment on the characters' situation. When Rana is attacked, we – like her – hear the buzzer of the apartment door and the intruder entering, but we do not see it. Rana assumed it was Emad buzzing, so she buzzed the door open – this detail is conveyed through dialogue afterward, but in the moment of the attack scene, what the audience experiences is the sequence of sounds: the buzzer, water running (as Rana is in the shower), a scuffle, a thud. Farhadi and sound designer Mohammad Reza Delpak present these as muffled, partial sounds. This use of acousmatic sound – hearing an event without seeing its source – is a classic suspense technique that Farhadi employs to keep both the audience and Emad in the dark. Rana's scream draws the neighbors, and through their overheard chatter we glean some information (e.g. the intruder fled). The intruder's identity remains literally voiceless until the final confrontation, when we hear the old man speak for the first time. His voice, frail and remorseful, suddenly personalizes the 'villain' we and Emad had imagined; this auditory reveal is striking. We hear him apologize and beg, an unexpected sound that flips our emotional alignment as much as any visual reveal could.

Furthermore, Farhadi interweaves the soundtrack of the *Death of a Salesman* stage production with the film's narrative. There are moments where we hear lines from the play (which Emad and Rana perform) echoing the film's themes. For example, Emad's character in the play, lamenting betrayal or lost dignity resonates with Emad's real predicament. They create a sort of diegetic commentary track – the audience hears Arthur Miller's words about pride and punishment, which in turn frames our understanding of Emad's actions. The climax's sound design is notable for what it omits. Farhadi chooses not to score the confrontation with any suspenseful music. The tension arises purely from performance and diegetic sounds (the old man's labored breathing, the family pounding on the door). Farhadi said: 'The important thing is to . . . give the viewer the opportunity to think' (Dehghan 2011).

Brooklyn's musical score by Michael Brook is lyrical and often reflective of Eilis's inner feelings. Interestingly, during the period when Eilis is concealing her marriage, the score becomes more melancholic and subdued whenever she is alone – indicating to the audience her sense of dislocation and conflict. The Irish scenes are filled with diegetic sounds of familiar home life (church bells, village chatter) that comfort Eilis but also, to the viewer attuned to the story, signal a kind of seductive lull that might 'deafen' her to her Brooklyn life. When Tony's letters arrive, the sound of Eilis opening and reading them is often not heard – either she reads in silence (with only the non-diegetic, musical score heard) or the scene is skipped – suggesting her psychological distance. For the audience, this increases the worry that Eilis might indeed abandon her marriage, because Tony is rendered voiceless (and faceless) until the very end. When Miss Kelly confronts Eilis, sound again plays a key role: we hear the sharpness in Miss Kelly's tone and the ticking clock in the room, heightening the tension of the revelation. After this, the sound mix brings back elements from Brooklyn: as Eilis makes her decision to return, we hear a swell of the main theme and the bustling noise of the ship dock, reconnecting us auditorily to Brooklyn (even before we visually see it again). Finally, in the closing moments when Eilis and Tony reunite on the street, the film allows ambient sound (traffic, distant voices) to fall away, swelling the music – an indication that their private

reunion is what matters; here sound actually unites the viewer's and characters' emotional knowledge.

Across the three films, we see divergent but deliberate approaches to sound in service of narrative strategy. *Anatomy of a Fall* wields diegetic sound as a curtain to hide truth and refuses non-diegetic cues, *The Salesman* uses realistic sound to maintain mystery, then voice and silence to pose moral questions, and *Brooklyn* employs score and selective silence to guide the audience through dramatic irony to resolution. These choices underscore that what viewers hear (or do not hear) crucially affects what we know (or do not know).

Temporal structure and editing: maintaining gaps and reveals

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, the editing by Laurent Sénéchal is paced in two distinct registers – measured, long-held scenes in the chalet, where information emerges in real time, against markedly quicker, reaction-driven cutting in the courtroom – befitting a procedural drama where information unfolds primarily through dialogue and testimony. The founding ellipsis around the central event is not, however, an invention of the cutting room: the screenplay itself marks the gap with the one-word scene direction ‘Ellipse’ (Triet and Harari 2022, 6). and the edit executes what the page prescribes, cutting the build-up to the aftermath (the son finding the body). This major gap in the temporal continuity is never filled with a flashback later. Within scenes, Sénéchal's editing maintains ambiguity by often cutting before a definitive reaction or lingering after an ambiguous line. For example, when Sandra testifies, the edit oscillates between her and the jurors' faces without verifying her account. The film could have cut to a hypothetical flashback of the couple's argument, but it does not – it stays on Sandra's face as she speaks, then cuts to the skeptical expressions of prosecutors. Sénéchal (2024) mentions that during the 38-week edit, a constant concern was to avoid tipping the scales: ‘it was really hard to create the right level of empathy for Sandra’ without losing doubt, and small editing choices could make her seem ‘completely manipulative or completely innocent’. One such choice is how long to hold on a reaction shot. By trimming or extending the pause on Sandra's face after a difficult question, the editors could modulate whether she appears calculating or genuinely pained. They found a ‘strange zone between empathy and doubt’ through iterative adjustments (Sénéchal 2024). *Anatomy of a Fall* devotes its final act to the son's sudden testimony and a reveal of his perspective. It strategically delays the son Daniel's full account until nearly the end so that his buried memory surfaces only after viewers have swung back and forth on Sandra's likely guilt. This late reveal functions almost like a twist, but one that still doesn't confirm the truth – it merely adds another interpretation. By placing it near the conclusion, Triet and Sénéchal ensure the audience has been kept in maximal uncertainty for as long as possible.

In *The Salesman*, Hayedeh Safiyari's editing balances the slow burn of a mystery with spurts of revelation. The editing follows Emad's investigative process linearly – we see each clue as he discovers it – until he sets a trap for the culprit. At that point, the film could have intercut between Emad preparing the trap and the unsuspecting old man approaching. Instead, Farhadi chooses not to cross-cut suspensefully but to stay with Emad's perspective until the man is caught. Once the intruder is in Emad's grasp,

however, Farhadi *does* employ cuts that temporarily keep the audience in suspense about what Emad will do. In the climactic sequence inside the locked room, the editing withholds a clear view for several beats: we hear scuffling while Rana waits outside, then cut inside only after Emad has partially undressed the old man (to shame him). This delay via editing momentarily places the viewer *behind* Emad's knowledge – we do not see what he did to the man until after the fact, a small reversal of alignment that delivers a shock (seeing the old man's state) and raises our concern about Emad's morality. Farhadi then allows a confrontation of perspectives through editing: cutting between Emad's hardened stare, the old man's humiliation and panic, and Rana's horrified face. The timing of these cuts is calibrated to eke out maximum tension and ethical discomfort. The film holds on the old man's pleading long enough for his panic to complicate viewer's judgment of Emad's course; it returns to Emad before he responds, so that his intention must be read off his face rather than his actions; and it grants Rana's horrified reaction only once both men's positions are established, making her the sequence's moral register. The ordering of the cuts, in other words, forces the viewer to adjudicate between perspectives at every juncture. By cross-cutting between Emad and the old man's family banging on the door outside (who do not know what is happening inside), the edit creates a viewer+character vs. other characters asymmetry: the old man's wife and daughter know nothing of his crime, the old man does not know if Emad will release him, Rana does not know if she should intervene – and the viewer is torn between these viewpoints. The sequence reaches its peak when Emad finally opens the door and the truths collide. In that instant, the editing aligns everyone: the family learns of the old man's disgrace as we do, collapsing the asymmetry. This editorial structural decision – whether settled in Farhadi's screenplay, which remains unpublished, or in Hayedeh Safiyari's cutting room cannot be documented, though Farhadi's practice of shooting from complete, locked scripts makes a writing-stage origin likely – to resolve the factual asymmetry (the who-did-it) before the film ends, yet leave a moral asymmetry (the who-lives-with-consequences and how differently). Emad and Rana depart with different feelings (he is grimly triumphant, she is distant), and Farhadi cuts between them in the final shot in the makeup room, sitting apart. The cut to credits at that moment preserves a gap; husband and wife have not fully shared their feelings, and the audience is left to wonder what fallout will follow. Thus, the editing closure in *The Salesman* is partial – it solves the narrative puzzle but not the relationship fracture, thereby continuing to engage viewers in afterthought.

Brooklyn's editing (by Jake Roberts) is more classical and seamless, but it quietly upholds the film's central asymmetry until the appropriate emotional payoff. Roberts exercises restraint in when to cut to certain information. During Eilis's time in Ireland, scenes of communication with Tony are omitted, sustaining tension: has she emotionally drifted from Tony? Is she deceiving him as well?; The film, through editing choices, excises these, to heighten the sense that Eilis's two worlds are siloed. Only when Miss Kelly confronts Eilis, Roberts break the pattern – we briefly see a shot of Miss Kelly recounting what she heard from a gossipy letter (acknowledging the trans-Atlantic information pipeline that had been off-screen). Once Eilis's secret is out, the editing picks up pace: Eilis swiftly tells her mother goodbye and the film cuts to her return journey. The climax of asymmetry resolution is a beautifully edited moment on the ship when Eilis counsels a new immigrant girl, implicitly reflecting on her own

growth; at that point, *Brooklyn* cuts to a vision of Tony waiting for Eilis on the Brooklyn street. By arranging this as the final reveal – Tony’s anxious face and then the joyful reunion – the editing grants the audience emotional catharsis. Roberts saved the reappearance of Tony (absent since the midpoint of the film) for this concluding beat, meaning the viewer, like Eilis, has been distant from him for a long stretch. The reunion serves to re-align all asymmetry knowledge – no secrets remain, and the audience’s longing to see Tony (and to see Eilis confront her true home) is satisfied at the same time Eilis herself makes that choice. The editing rhythm mirrors Eilis’s psychology: tentative and measured in Ireland (with longer scenes of daily life, suggesting how she ‘settles in’ and almost forgets Brooklyn), then decisively quick when she remembers who she is (rapid cuts to her packing and leaving). Thus, editing serves the narrative asymmetry by managing pacing – keeping the secret under wraps just long enough, then efficiently resolving it.

Across these examples, we see that editing choices are instrumental in constructing and dissolving asymmetries. *Anatomy of a Fall*’s editing maximizes ambiguity via ellipsis and judicious pacing, *The Salesman*’s editing creates suspense and then moral unease by revealing information at carefully chosen moments, and *Brooklyn*’s editing withholds then releases information to align with the protagonist’s emotional journey. The resolution of asymmetry – whether it occurs or not – is an editorial decision as much as a writing one. *Anatomy of a Fall* opts not to resolve its central ambiguity at all, a bold choice that defies classical expectations and thus leaves viewers with enduring speculation (an aspect I will revisit in discussing authorship and ethics).

It is not coincidental that a French Palme d’Or winner, an Iranian Oscar-winner, and a transnational period romance each utilize asymmetry within different storytelling traditions and to different artistic ends.

Cultural and historical dimensions of asymmetry in practice

While the use of viewer – character information asymmetry is ubiquitous in cinema, its construction and narrative purpose can vary across cultural contexts and filmmaking traditions.

Anatomy of a Fall emerges from a French/European milieu that often prizes ambiguity and realism. French cinema, in particular, has a lineage of intimate dramas and courtroom films that focus on character psychology and societal questions rather than clear-cut solutions (one might recall Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *La Vérité* (1960) or Claude Chabrol’s thrillers, which often leave some doubt lingering). Triet’s approach – leaving the central question unanswered – fits into this tradition of productive ambiguity. Triet’s film was celebrated for ‘relishing ambiguity’ (Lenker 2024), indicating a cultural valorization of the audience’s interpretive freedom. Moreover, the cross-national dimension of the film includes its representation of a bilingual household (French and English), which itself is a language asymmetry (Sandra is a foreigner in France, her command of language is scrutinized in court). This theme of linguistic and cultural difference may resonate in a French context concerned with identity and prejudice. Triet uses the courtroom – a very French court with an inquisitorial system unlike Anglo-American trials – to stage a universal question about truth and bias. Yet, she grounds it in a specific cultural conversation:

the film subtly critiques assumptions about a woman's role as wife and mother – a subtext legible to any viewer familiar with contemporary French debates about gender, the family, and the justice system, wherever they watch the film. In doing so, Triet's cultural context allows asymmetry to be read also as an allegory of gendered perception – how society (the viewer/jury) judges a woman without knowing the full story. The film's international reception show that its ambiguity transcended France, but local nuances like the portrayal of a child with visual impairment in a legal case, echoing real-life French trials covered in media, give it particular texture. Cross-nationally, *Anatomy of a Fall* stands at the intersection of French realism and a global appetite for suspense – perhaps why Triet insists it is not a 'game' with the audience but a reflection of life's complexity (Sénéchal 2024).

Turning to *The Salesman*, it is essential to consider how creative constraints within Iranian filmmaking shape its sociopolitical asymmetry, using off-screen space for what cannot be shown directly, due to cultural and historical sensibilities – for instance, depictions of physical intimacy and violence. Farhadi, working within this context, has acknowledged that such limits can spur creativity (Nakhnikian 2017). In *The Salesman*, the necessity to not show a violent sexual assault on screen (for both censorship and aesthetic reasons) dovetailed with Farhadi's own narrative strategy of withholding information. As Farhadi says, 'when you place an obstacle like a stone in the way of water, the water finds its way around it' (Nakhnikian 2017). The cultural context of censorship thus reinforces asymmetry: Iranian viewers are accustomed to parsing implication and subtext. There is also an Iranian storytelling tradition (influenced by classical Persian literature's love of moral fables and mysteries) of multi-perspective narrative in which revelation is conducted through dialogue, implication, and euphemism. The device itself is common to many traditions, including Western drama; what is specific here is the weight it must carry when the precipitating event cannot be depicted directly, so that speech and inference become the only channels through which the withheld can circulate. Farhadi, with his theater background, brings that sensibility – constructing suspense through conversations and late revelations, which Iranian audiences find engaging and culturally resonant.

The Salesman specifically invokes theater (Arthur Miller) and Iranian notions of honor and revenge (several studies have discussed this, e.g. Ahmadgoli and Yazdanjoo 2022). The cultural layering is significant: Emad's struggle between forgiving the intruder or punishing him can be read in the context of Iranian social values (hospitality, the shame of public scandal, etc.) as well as Miller's universal themes. Iranian critics noted how Farhadi 'draws on [his] background in theater' and uses Miller's play as a mirror (Weston 2017). Farhadi explicitly admires both Hitchcock and Kiarostami, striving to combine 'drama and real life' – to make a film that is gripping yet feels authentic (Farhadi 2016). This blending is itself a cross-cultural narrative strategy: Western suspense techniques (knowledge differentials to excite the audience) merged with Iranian realism (knowledge differentials that echo real social disconnects and moral uncertainties). Thus, asymmetry in *The Salesman* is not just a gimmick but resonates with Iranian viewers' lived experiences of navigating secrets and social facades in a restrictive society. Part of its power lies in that specific moral climate of Iran, where questions often cannot be openly answered, and truth is elusive. Farhadi's penchant for open endings and lingering moral questions may

stem from working in a culture where definitive statements can be dangerous or impossible, thus elevating *questions* as the highest art; he says, ‘today’s world needs more questions than answers’ (Dehghan 2011). This is a philosophy that translates globally as artistic profundity, but it is rooted in a particular cultural strategy of indirect storytelling.

Brooklyn occupies a different cultural and historical space: it is a story of the Irish diaspora made as a multinational co-production (Ireland/UK/Canada) aiming at a broad audience. As such, it adheres more to classical narrative closure than the other two films. The cultural context here is twofold: the historical context of 1950s Irish Catholic norms and the production context of Anglo-American filmmaking. The asymmetry (Eilis’s secret marriage) is very much tied to the social mores of the time – the idea that a young woman would hide her marriage speaks to the strict expectations and limited communication methods of that era. The way *Brooklyn* resolves its asymmetry – with a heartfelt confession and reaffirmation of marital love – aligns with the cathartic resolutions favored in mainstream Western screen storytelling. One could say *Brooklyn* plays by the rules of classic cinema: secrets can cause temporary turmoil but will be unveiled to restore moral order – a structure that, as Frye (1949) argues of comedy understood not as a genre but as a narrative form, moves through disruption toward the restoration, or new establishment, of social and moral harmony. *Brooklyn*’s full-disclosure resolution is comedic in precisely this structural sense, which sharpens its contrast with the other two films that refuse the form. Yet, it is precisely within this conventional framework that the use of asymmetry is a craft choice. Crowley, an Irish director working in the UK/US industry, consciously made the film appear ‘artless’ – he ‘never wanted the viewer to necessarily feel that there was an overt scheme at play’ (Saito 2015) – which is itself a hallmark of classical style (to hide the machinery). This understatement has a specifiable source rather than a national temperament: Tóibín’s novel is built on a poetics of reticence – Eilis’s interiority narrated but almost never voiced – and Hornby’s adaptation preserves it by converting unvoiced thought into scripted silences and physical business, most economically the pocketed wedding ring of the graveside scene (Hornby 2014, sc. 110). *Brooklyn*’s most powerful moment is arguably a quiet one: Eilis silently staring out of a window after Miss Kelly’s confrontation, a montage of her memories flashing – the film’s only open stylistic flourish, which unites her two worlds in her mind. That restraint followed by release marries the source novel’s reticence to Hollywood form. Cross-nationally, *Brooklyn* can resonate with both Irish audiences (for whom the emigration story is deeply familiar and poignant) and international audiences (as a universal tale of love and identity). The decision not to leave the ending ambiguous is partly genre-driven (romantic drama demands resolution) and partly cultural – English-language prestige dramas rarely defy closure unless intentionally positioning as art-house. *Brooklyn* garnered mainstream awards attention, indicating that its balance of complexity and clarity hit the right note for global viewers. It provides a useful counterpoint: asymmetry need not always result in open-endedness or moral irresolution; in some cultural products, it is a temporary engine to generate empathy and then resolve into a comforting certainty.

Cultural and historical contexts shape both the technique and the interpretation of viewer – character information asymmetry. Triet’s France enables and prizes ambiguity, Farhadi’s Iran necessitates implication and values moral inquiry, Crowley’s transatlantic

milieu favors emotional engagement with eventual clarity. These contexts influence how far a filmmaker can push asymmetry and to what end.

Asymmetry as authorship and ethical engagement

A striking commonality in these three films is that their directors employ information asymmetry as a conscious element of their authorial voice – a signature approach to engaging the viewer as co-creator and in ethical reflection. In this sense, asymmetry operates as a means of structuring ethical and affective engagement, resonating with Carl Plantinga's account of screen stories as sites where emotion and moral understanding are cultivated through narrative experience (C. R. Plantinga 2023, 2018). Recent cognitive film theorists (Moss-Wellington 2021; Sinnerbrink 2021) have foregrounded the ethical significance of cinematic style, emphasising how films shape viewers moral and ethical engagement.

Triet, Farhadi, and Crowley differ in style, but each can be seen as leveraging asymmetry to express something fundamental about their worldview and artistic aims. Triet's refusal to solve the mystery in *Anatomy of a Fall* is an auteurial statement about the nature of truth and the spectator's role. As her editor noted, Triet 'doesn't want to give us a lesson' or push a tidy message; she 'wants to stand in front of the full complexity of life' (Sénéchal 2024). By withholding the answer of guilt or innocence, Triet forces viewers into an ethically active stance: viewers must judge Sandra without complete certainty, grappling with their own biases and the insufficiency of evidence. The courtroom proceedings enact a cinematic scapegoat mechanism (Girard 1986), whereby Sandra becomes the focus of communal suspicion despite incomplete evidence, illustrating how asymmetry can trigger mimetic dynamics among viewers. Triet ultimately undoes this scapegoating by revealing Samuel and Sandra's mimetic rivalry, framing the crisis not as a simple crime but as the outcome of mutual emotional entanglement; this framing implicates the viewer in the film's ethical scenario – much as a real jury is implicated in deciding a life without absolute knowledge. This aligns with what Wheatley (2009) describes (in the context of Haneke's films) as creating a space of 'moral reflexivity' – ambiguity used to make the spectator reflect on their own judgement (5). While Triet's style is less didactic than Haneke's confrontational approach, the principle is similar: by not answering the central question, she has made each viewer a co-author of the 'verdict' and thus invites prolonged reflection and debate. Triet even joked that she might tell the answer in 10 years (Lenker 2024), implicitly acknowledging that for now the ambiguity is deliberate and essential. As an author, she asserts control by relinquishing control over one aspect – the interpretation – thereby trusting the audience to carry the film's meaning beyond the screen. Such an approach challenges classical spectatorship models and aligns with modern theories of the 'active audience' in cinema (e.g. Rancière 2009).

Farhadi's authorship is even more explicitly tied to the idea of viewer co-creation and moral engagement. He sees the filmmaker not as a preacher but as an arranger of circumstances that compel audiences to consider multiple sides of an issue. In his works, the careful dispersion of knowledge – who knows what when – is calibrated to maximize empathy for all characters. Farhadi said, 'I don't hide answers from my

viewers; I simply don't know them' and 'when you pose questions, your film actually begins after people watch it' (2016).

Farhadi has constructed it such that 'the audience comes out ... [asking] which character was doing the right thing' (Weston 2017). This question lingers precisely because of the asymmetries Farhadi built: we see Emad's perspective more than the old man's, then at the end we see the old man's humiliation, but we never see the original assault nor fully know Rana's internal state. Farhadi's narrative omissions become a moral mirror: what the audience imagines in the gaps says as much about their values as about the film's 'facts'. This technique makes Farhadi's authorship particularly distinctive. He 'brings audiences into the creative process' (2016) by leaving narrative space for them to inhabit. This co-creative spectatorship aligns with the concept of the 'open work' (Eco 1989), where a text is deliberately incomplete or multivalent, requiring the audience to assemble or finalize its meaning.

Crowley's use of asymmetry in *Brooklyn* might seem less radical, yet it too reflects a conscious authorial intention to involve the audience emotionally and interpretively. *Brooklyn* is a comforting narrative, but Crowley uses the secret marriage to ensure the audience engages in the protagonist's ethical dilemma: should Eilis honor her marital commitment or pursue the new opportunity and romance in Ireland? Crowley's authorship here lies in eliciting empathy to such a degree that the audience experiences Eilis's choice as a real, weighty choice of their own. By the time of resolution, most viewers likely feel relief and joy that Eilis returns to Tony. As Crowley stated, he placed details for discerning viewers without overtly nudging, trusting them to perceive the 'doubleness' of Eilis's experience (Saito 2015). While *Brooklyn* does resolve conventionally, the interpretive experience – reflecting on home versus away, first love versus new love, duty versus desire – engages viewers in their own life reflections. In this way, asymmetry serves an ethical function, a moral asymmetry; it asks, what would you do in Eilis's place? Such questions arise organically from the narrative tension. Crowley's approach is a gentler form of what Triet and Farhadi do – leading viewers to step into a character's shoes. Crowley similarly achieves empathy by letting the audience in on Eilis's secret.

Broadly, using asymmetry as a creative strategy is a hallmark of a more dialogic form of authorship. Instead of dictating every piece of information (an 'authoritarian' narration, so to speak, that leaves no ambiguity), these filmmakers treat film as a dialogue between creator and spectator. It's why ambiguous or multivalent films inspire passionate fan theories, analyses, and repeat viewings – viewers become engaged co-creators. It is worth noting that this strategy carries risks and relies on craftsmanship. An ambiguously handled story can frustrate if it feels sloppy or unintentional. As Bordwell (2023) commented on American and popular films, narrational gaps and asymmetries work when they are 'rigorously' deployed with purpose, not simply from neglect. The analyses in this article have located that rigour in all three films and traced it to documented decisions of script, camera, sound, and cut.

Conclusion

Attending to information asymmetry is a way of re-centering authorship at the level of creative decision-making. Asymmetry is not merely a narrative condition; it is

a constructed effect, emerging from deliberate creative choices about what to withhold, what to disclose, to whom, and at what precise moment. It operates across writing, framing, performance, sound, and editing. By foregrounding these production strategies, this study has argued that viewer – character information gaps are not byproducts of storytelling but purposeful design mechanisms through which filmmakers shape ethical, emotional, and epistemic experience.

The ethical significance of asymmetry lies in how it positions the viewer. By compelling audiences to judge characters under conditions of incomplete knowledge – or to inhabit secrets, misrecognitions, and silences – these films demand an active ethical stance. Viewers may become aware of their own interpretive biases (Did I suspect Sandra simply because she is a stoic woman? What does that say about me?), their capacities for empathy (I felt sorry for Farhadi's old man even though he did wrong – what is the film saying about forgiveness?), or their own imagined moral thresholds (would I have the courage to do what Eilis did?). In this way, asymmetry transforms spectatorship into a site of self-interrogation. The viewer is not simply consuming narrative information but participating in an ethical exercise. These moments are created through the creative choices the filmmaker has made in placing and constructing asymmetries. Such introspection positions the viewer as a morally responsible agent in the cinematic experience. This connects with modern film philosophy that sees cinema as a vehicle for moral imagination and emotional intelligence (C. Plantinga 2023).

The contribution of this article is best stated as a shift in the question. Where narratology and cognitive film theory have asked what unequal knowledge does to the viewer, this study has asked how unequal knowledge is made – and has answered with a framework of four questions that can be put to any film. (1) Between whom does the asymmetry run: viewer and character, character and character, or the layered configurations in which alliances of knowledge form and dissolve, as when Eilis and the viewer hold a secret against an entire town? (2) Of what does it consist: facts (who attacked Rana), moral standing (who may judge whom once the facts are known), language (the French in which Sandra must defend herself, a tongue not her own), or perception itself (what Daniel's eyes cannot supply and the court cannot verify)? (3) Where in the production chain is the gap manufactured: on the page, as in the one-word scene direction with which Triet and Harari's draft opens the sequence of Samuel's death; in framing and depth of field, which ration what the eye may resolve; in sound, which substitutes one stream of information for another; or at the cut, which fixes the instant a truth is released? (4) And how is it finally disposed of: sustained past the last frame, resolved factually but left morally open, or collapsed for every character at once? These questions convert asymmetry from a property of narratives into a sequence of documented, revisable creative decisions – which is to say, into an object of production studies and a describable practice of authorship.

The comparative finding follows from the fourth question: information asymmetry does not operate in a cultural vacuum. While the structural logic of withholding and revelation may travel across borders, the ethical weight and aesthetic calibration of asymmetry are shaped by the filmmaker's cultural context, institutional conditions, and narrative traditions. In Farhadi's work, asymmetry becomes a vehicle for moral hesitation and dignity; in Triet's cinema, it sustains epistemic instability and the refusal of closure; in *Brooklyn*, it reflects the emotional restraint embedded in its diasporic subject,

its disclosure restoring harmony in the structural sense Frye (1949) assigns to comedy. Culture does not determine asymmetry, but it modulates how uncertainty is staged, how judgment is invited or suspended, and what kinds of ethical engagement viewers are asked to perform. Despite their culturally specific inflections, all three films found international acclaim, suggesting that audiences worldwide are receptive to such engagement.

The craftsmanship of withholding and revelation remains one of cinema's most enduring powers. From Hitchcock's calibrated suspense to Triet's epistemic opacity, the strategic distribution of knowledge continues to shape how audiences think, feel, and judge.

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