

# The Sphinx and the Bridgekeeper: Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* as Double-Riddle

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## Abstract

An elaborate cinematic riddle that sets a series of questions concerning its ambiguities, conflicts and paradoxes, Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* (2013) elicits interpretation by challenging the viewer to impose order upon its disarray. Reading it as a dramatization of the protagonist's struggle to 'find himself' by reconciling the contradictory demands of his enemies 'without' and 'within' the finely woven web of his life, this article supplies *Enemy* with the very interpretation it elicits, thus accepting Villeneuve's challenge. Yet, in demonstrating how *Enemy*'s structure denies the possibility of there being a 'correct' interpretation to be uncovered, this article also suggests that it is not a challenge that can simply be accepted on its own terms.

Explicating *Enemy* in broad terms through the framework of Umberto Eco's notion of text as 'unlimited territory', re-conceptualizing his 'critic as an explorer' of labyrinths as the 'critic as an explorer' of *webs*, we argue that, while *Enemy*'s solicitation of what is an impossible interpretation would appear to *deny* communication, its effect, in point of fact, is to isolate and, thus, communicate the manner in which the film functions as a double allegory of itself in its offering of both an analogy between both *the protagonist (P) in the film* and *the film itself* (as riddles demanding solutions) and between *the protagonist (P) in the film* and *the viewer herself* (as riddle-solvers who desire solutions).

*Enemy*'s overlaying the 'riddle of the self' laterally across the 'riddle of the film' points ultimately both to the radical compatibility of self and film as '*textual webs*' and to the radical *incompatibility* of either with the closure of final (self-) interpretation. *Enemy*, then, we claim, both dramatizes and emblemizes in content and form the post-structural paradox that the hole at the centre of the 'self-text' is one that requires and demands a 'completion' by interpretative (self-) narration that is ultimately impossible, being endless in scope, multitudinous in pathway, and devoid of foundational ground.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that baffled critics are angry critics. Small wonder, then, that reactions to Denis Villeneuve's surreal drama, *Enemy* upon its 2013 release, bordered on vehemence with famous movie reviewers lining up to accuse it of disjointedness and self-indulgence. For the *Philadelphia Enquirer*'s Steven Rea, the film was "a spooky enigma, more ponderous than provocative, more silly

than suspenseful,” Peter Debruge of the *Toronto Film Review* claimed that neither audience nor director appeared to know what was going on, *Time*’s Richard Corliss described Villeneuve’s cinematic endeavors not only as “unfulfilling”, but also accused the director of “lacking the aptitude” for creating “a modern sick-soul film,” while David Ehrlich of *mtv.com* seemed least impressed of all, excoriating *Enemy* for its “borderline ridiculous portent,” concluding that it was nothing but a “seedy wank.” Yet, perhaps stung by the criticism, the director soon counter-attacked, implying that critics were treating his film superficially. In an interview with Mike Ryan in the *Huffington Post*, he defended the film forcefully, insisting, “If you look at *Enemy* again, you can see that everything has an answer.” This was intended as a rebuke to his critics no doubt, but it is also a challenge that deserves consideration, for *Enemy*, on the surface, *does* seem incoherent and self-indulgent, an elaborate cinematic riddle; and, yet, riddles are not riddles, after all, unless they can be solved.

*Enemy*’s riddling involves its posing of a series of questions about its ambiguities, conflicts and paradoxes. How is the viewer to connect its fragments and parallels that suggest the operation of different diegetic levels? What is the viewer to make of the foregrounding of spiders and webs? How is the viewer to understand the bizarre ending? What is the meaning of the film’s title? Readers of José Saramago’s novel, *The Double* (2002), upon which *Enemy* is based, cannot doubt why the novel is entitled so, but why is a film that revels in doubling, masquerading and play-acting called ‘Enemy’ precisely?

*Enemy* demands the imposition of order upon this disarray. Insistently eliciting interpretation, it solicits connection of fragments and parallels, sign-reading of symbols, resolution of uncertainty, paradoxes and conflicts and disentangling of its games. In part one, ‘Enemies Without and Within’, then, we supply *Enemy* with an answer to the riddle that both film and director demand and elicit. Connecting fragments, reading symbols and resolving conflicts, we unite interpretative strands to weave a web of meaning that construes the film as part psychodrama and part *bildungsroman*. Relating two of the title’s associations, ‘enemy without’ and ‘enemy within’, to the content of the film, we read *Enemy* as a dramatization of the protagonist’s attempt to negotiate the contradictory demands of his ‘enemies without’ (linked to the reality principle, his social life) and his ‘enemies within’ (linked to the pleasure principle, his fantasy life) in order to ‘find himself’ and ‘grow up’.

The portrayal of *Enemy*’s protagonist implicitly demands that the viewer attempt to locate his *authentic* self and judge his success or otherwise at self-authentication. Beset by adversaries as he tries both to narrate himself and escape his own desires and to escape the narration and desires of others, the protagonist appears to be attempting to parse his ‘real’ (authentic) self away from his ‘fictional’ (inauthentic) one and away from the ‘fictions’ that seek to entrap him in narratives not his own.

In supplying an interpretation, then, this paper accepts Villeneuve’s challenge. By way of reservation, however, it must also be said that we feel unable to accept it entirely on its own terms. In part two, ‘Web, Text’, we ponder Villeneuve’s sincerity in suggesting that *Enemy* offers definitive, *satisfying* answers to its riddles. The film’s refusal to allow the viewer the role of passive consumer requires, after all, that she construct its meaning in ways that repudiate any possibility of there ever being a ‘right’ meaning to construct. *Enemy* works so energetically to avoid any sense of final closure and manoeuvres so cunningly to insinuate that any simple separation of ‘real’ and ‘fantasy,’ ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ is problematic that we

cannot help but wonder why Villeneuve should claim that to watch his film again is to see that everything has an answer.

If, in 'Enemies Without and Within', we cast ourselves in the role of Oedipus duelling with the Sphinx, in 'Web, Text' we become another famous (cinematic) riddle-solver, King Arthur, who takes on the Bridgekeeper in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, in the sense that we consider the best response to the particular riddle set by *Enemy* is to misunderstand the premise upon which its question is based. To *Enemy*'s question, 'What do I mean?' (*What is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?*), we retort, 'Don't you mean, "How do you mean?"' (*Do you mean an African or European swallow?*). Our misunderstanding, Arthur-like, of the premise of the film's question leads the way for us to conclude that the film's method of defying meaning by the setting of riddles, its soliciting of the attempt to interpret its content while, contradictorily, resisting any attempts at interpretation in its form, is, inevitably, part of its meaning. Yet, it also allows us to elucidate that the paradox encapsulated in *Enemy*'s structure, or, to be precise, the paradox dramatized by its *surface-level structural collapse*, is, in point of fact, its profoundest means of communicating. For it is in the folding in of the diegetic levels of the film in its denouement that *Enemy* communicates the analogy between the riddle in the film, the riddle of the protagonist's self, and the riddle of it, the riddle, that is, of the art-text, both of which, as we shall see, the film constructs as webs of meaning.

## Enemies Without and Within

*Enemy*'s primary demand is that the viewer should separate the protagonist's real and fantasy lives and interpret their (seemingly contradictory) interrelation. *What is real and what is occurring in his head? Is the viewer seeing, at any given moment in the film, the real protagonist or his fantasy self? What influence does his fantasy life have exactly upon his real existence?* Given that the protagonist's life is marked (to say the least) by struggle, *Enemy* also solicits interpretation as to precisely against whom he is struggling and a judgement on his success or otherwise at resolving these struggles (demands that can be paraphrased into the question: *Who are his 'enemies' and does he defeat them?*).

Since *Enemy* deliberately obfuscates the line between the protagonist as real and the protagonist as fantasy, the first demand is formidable. Progress can be made, however, if one accepts the premise for the explication that we offer here, which is that, while a real protagonist, a man who lives and breathes in physical (that is, diegetic) space, must exist, he is, in *Enemy*, but a shadowy, occasionally-glimpsed presence secondary to Adam and Anthony (both played by Jake Gyllenhaal) that dominate the screen as parallel strands of this subject's *fantasy-in-the-diegesis*.

Confusing though it is that the real protagonist is also apparently called 'Adam', clarity can be gained by separating them into, first, the flesh-and-blood man who lives in Toronto with his pregnant wife (played by Sarah Gadon), has an interfering mother (played by Isabella Rossellini) and who dreams, fantasizes and suffers, and, second, the *character* who appears as one of this man's fantasies. We refer to the former throughout as 'P' (the protagonist) and the latter as 'Adam'.

Adam is P's imaginative recapitulation of himself into fantasy sexual circumstances with the

kind of girlfriend (played by Mélanie Laurent), that he (perhaps) would like in reality to *have*. Anthony, on the other hand, in our reading, is P's second fantasy character; or, rather, to be precise, not simply P's fantasy but also *Adam's*. He is the kind of person that perhaps both P / Adam would like in reality to *be*. If Adam is (almost) the *real* P (diffident and unsatisfied) recapitulated into *fantasy* sexual circumstances, then Anthony is the reverse: a *fantasy* P recapitulated into P's (almost) *real* sexual circumstances (with a controlling, pregnant wife). Taken together, Adam and Anthony represent two sides of P's psychic reality: the 'AdamAnt' (his masochistic and sadistic sides).

The keynote of P's interrelating reality and fantasies is, of course, *conflict*. It is not, however, so much that his reality is at war with his fantasy as that his reality and his fantasy *combine to wage war on and through him*. P's 'enemies', those opposing his equanimity, are both outside (real) and inside (fantasy) him. His real external 'enemies', his mother (M) and his spider wife (SW), try to ensnare him in the realities of a life with which he is intensely dissatisfied (pounding him with the exhortation to *accept real life!*), while his fantasy internal 'enemies', his fantasy imaginary girlfriend (FIG) and his fantasy doppelgänger (DG) (Anthony, that is) assail him with contradictory injunctions (*do what you want and be true to your desire!*) that cause him an equal, if opposite, anguish. Rebelling against those who would attempt to ensnare him in reality (his 'enemies without'), P becomes trapped in his own fantasies (his 'enemies within'). It is a complex situation that can best be understood through diagrammatic representation (Figure 1):

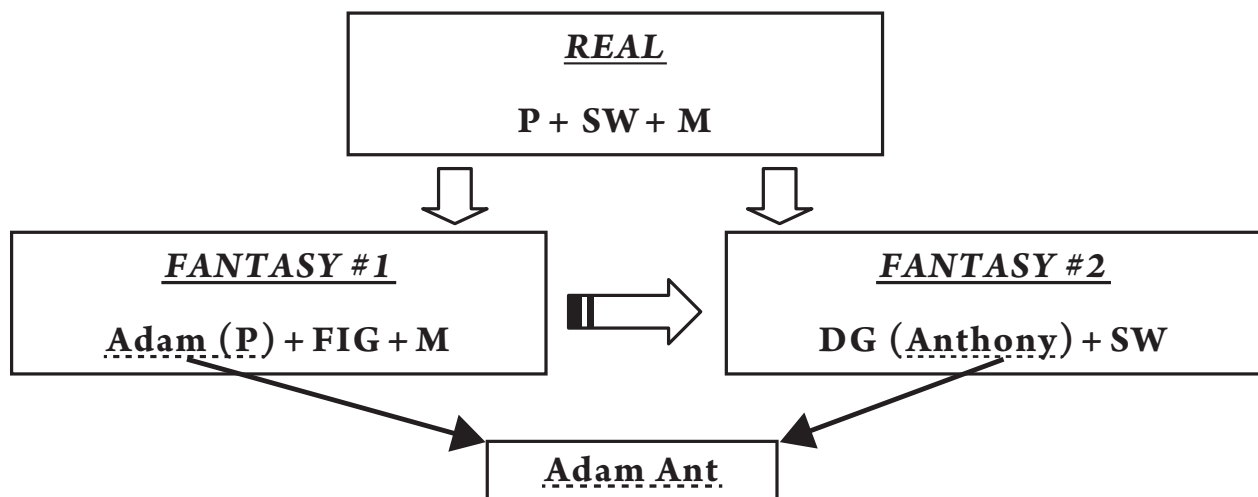


Figure 1: P's Relationship to Reality / Fantasy

Is, though, P *hopelessly* trapped? Since this question can only be answered by detailed examination of P's universe, this is how we proceed below. Examining the disparate threads, both real and fantastic, of his life-web, the characters populating his universe and his relationships with them, his circumstances (his lifestyle in Toronto; his work as a lecturer), and taking account of Villeneuve's superbly suggestive use of setting, we weave the strands of the cinematic web-text into our own narrative-text of how P attempts to follow the strands of his life-web in search of coherence and satisfaction against the ever-present dangers

of entrapment by one of the ‘spiders’ (M, SW, FIG) who, lurking at its centre, symbolize the conflicting injunctions that he seeks to reconcile, and ask whether he succeeds in reaching what might be thought of as an ‘authentic’ position, one that equates, that is, to his ‘true’ self.

P’s life is dominated by the routine of work or the work of dealing with family. Teaching history at university, he looks exhausted, punctuating his lectures with sighs. He talks (when we first see him lecturing) about dictatorships’ obsession with control. He explains how they control ideas, information and knowledge, saying that this is “A pattern that repeats itself throughout history” (4:57 – 6:17).<sup>1</sup> The second time we see him in the lecture hall, he is repeating the same lecture; this time it is intercut with other shots: P riding the tram; P as Adam grading essays at his apartment; P as Adam having sex with the FIG. His lecture plays out as he prepares the board for the next class, students leaving in the background. He talks to himself – nobody is listening (7:52 – 9:09). His job is not only monotonous and stale, but has become a comment upon his life: it is *P* who is controlled, repeating and alienated.

The sense of P’s alienation is echoed and reinforced by *Enemy*’s setting in a Toronto inhabited by long-legged, Louise Bourgeoisque spiders roaming across their ‘web’ (1:00:46 – 1:00:56). Criss-crossed with filaments of light and overhead wires, the cityscape of buildings is a metaphor for the internal and external webs that entangle P in his unhappy existence. Background shots of cranes and building-work are seen throughout, but particularly in the end credits, suggesting the web’s continuous re-establishment (1:26:37 – 1:30:07). Buildings are two-tone, utilitarian – there is no creativity here, just mechanical building and rebuilding.

If, though, P’s circumstances are nebulously shaped by alienation, repetition and control, then these forces crystallize most obviously through M and SW. Their voices are not only powerfully real for P, but also extend into his fantasies.

M harangues and reality-checks P / Adam throughout, disapproving of his life-choices. We hear M’s reproachful voice echoing in P’s head even before we see her, as her biting words cut over scenes of the city and P’s eyes reflected in a mirror, a traditional symbol, of course, of the double life (1:10 – 1:33). M apparently wishes P to revert to an impotent and childish state. “How can you live like that?” (‘that’ being Adam’s gloomy apartment-lair), she says at one point as if admonishing a child for his untidy bedroom (1:22). P’s infantilization is emphasised most powerfully, however, when (as Adam) he relates to M his freakish experience with DG (59:18 – 1:00:45). M dismisses him as she would a silly teenager, pointing to the impossibility of Adam having an identical double, but she also seeks to exert sexual control. “Did you take your clothes off in front of him?”, she asks (*Are you a pervert? A homosexual?*), because, “The last thing you need is to be meeting strange men in hotel rooms” (*The last thing you need is homosexual desire*). She belittles him, reminding him of his trouble remaining faithful to one woman (let alone having homosexual flings). The unhealthy mother-child relationship is also apparent, here, in the manner that M encourages her ‘boy’ to eat healthily, urging him like a recalcitrant teenager to eat up his blueberries. That this fruit is linked with improving memory suggests her hope that he will recall his childhood / past life, but, ironically, he cannot even remember liking them. Stumped by his stubborn refusal, M disregards



everything that Adam has just related about his DG experience: “You don’t want advice. I don’t want to hear any more about this,” she snaps (*You refuse your elders’ guidance*). Immediately contradicting everything he says and scornful of his childish fantasizing, M has a powerful infantilizing grip on P / Adam, yet, if anything, P finds an even more implacable ‘enemy’ in SW.

The pregnant SW is introduced at the very start of *Enemy*. A single shot of her sitting with her back to camera suggests vulnerability, but, simultaneously, power (as mother, giver of life) (1:33 – 1:36). SW holds the key to understanding *why* P fantasizes. While her pregnancy reduces her desirability, making her sexually vulnerable, compensation comes in the form of great psychological power because, of course, P is crushed by guilt.

SW’s goal is to eliminate P’s / DG’s (deviant) sexual fantasies and re-channel them back towards herself in more acceptable (that is, more *marital*) forms. To this end, she constantly pressurizes P (as Anthony), reminding him of past indiscretions, checking his stories and accusing him of infidelity and keeping secrets (“Are you seeing her?” (34:28); “What’s happening? [...] I think you know” (44:41 – 45:09)). The more desperately she attempts to quash P’s / DG’s desires, to ground him (grind him down) in reality, however, the more he / they wish to escape. This can be sensed in the scene when SW visits the university and sees Adam ‘for the first time’, in which P (as Adam) is shown fantasizing about not recognising or having any ties with her (39:05 – 42:00). If the fact that this is the only point in *Enemy* in which the curmudgeonly P / Adam is unequivocally happy is any indication, this is a thought that clearly *delights* him. Yet, this is but a fleeting clue: the sense of his resistance can most forcibly be detected in the recurring themes of P’s dreams.

Wandering a corridor (symbol of his desire for transition between states), P dreams of naked women with spider heads, who walk upside-down on ceilings (45:08 – 45:38). In an underground S&M club with a group of (other) sleazy men, P also dreams of watching women perform sex acts (heard but unseen). The growing tension culminates in a tarantula being crushed (we assume, before the action cuts) by a stilettoed shoe. P, one of the watchers, is strongly, but ambiguously, affected. Bending forward in a state of agitation bordering on torment, his hands with their spider-like fingers cover his face. Peering through them, he is unable yet compelled to watch... (1:45 – 4:46).

The dreams do condense, of course, P’s (not-so-secret) wants and fears, his (perverse) sexual desires: his fear of the many-eyed watcher that jealously polices those desires; his (perverse) desire to crush SW who crushes *him*; his guilt, which is indexed by his anguish. Yet, they do more than this, for P’s presence in a Sado-Masochism club in the latter dream powerfully symbolizes his psychic split into the two sides of his character that we also find in his *daydreams*: sadistic (Anthony) and masochistic (Adam), who is in an unhappy relationship with his FIG.

Given the mundaneness of his existence and the normalizing pressures exerted upon him by M and SW, it is scarcely surprising that P seeks escape and solace in (sexual) fantasy. Yet, it is clear that his attempt to escape his alienating reality through fantasy runs into the contradictory force of his (sexual) fantasies being as alienating as the reality from which he wishes relief. If such self-estrangement is evident in his

dream-works, then it is even more to the fore in his *daydream*-work with FIG.

The repeated sighs of P's alienated real life become appended to those of his fantasy life as Adam when he is with FIG, whom the viewer first encounters at Adam's apartment. At a table, looking exhausted, Adam sighs. The door buzzer sounds (sigh). FIG arrives (sigh). They kiss, speak, have sex (sigh). She gets angry and suddenly leaves, slamming the door behind her (heavy sigh). This is detestable to Adam – the dingy and empty experience chiming with the dingy, lonely apartment (sigh). This fantasy sexual encounter is juxtaposed with P / Adam following his everyday routine, commuting to work and lecturing. There is contiguity in evidence as the film cuts back to Adam and FIG having unsatisfying sex again. Sound and image cross-fade; P's / Adam's (boring, routine) lectures invade the sexual encounter which is as ugly as the participants are not. When finished, he stares at her as if wishing her dead; she stands on the balcony, detached. They have sex yet again, but this time it is as horrible as the sight of their spider-like limbs entwined. The antithesis of pleasure, it culminates only in more slammed doors (deepest sigh) (6:55 – 9:09).

FIG stands for uncomplicated, meaningless sex without attachment. She leaves straight after sex, avoiding pillow talk. She makes no demands; there is no, "*When will we get married?*" Adam is apparently in control, but he is still dissatisfied (sigh). FIG is the nameless pure-object-of-desire, a 'FIGment' of his imagination, created by P's loss of desire for SW. Yet, she is not simply a fantasy as is, but also a fantasy as *was*, identified with the woman with whom P (presumably) had a real affair. He holds the memory, but the memory holds onto him, inducing a gnawing sense of guilt.

FIG, then, is a masochistic fantasy that P is trying to contradictorily retain and overcome. The fantasy *is* evidently ungratifying (indexed by sighs), but P's stubborn persistence with it suggests that he also perversely, masochistically *enjoys* the guilt it generates. Is his FIG fantasy, in fact, kept alive to keep his guilt alive? It seems that, through FIG, he can administer the punishment that he thinks he richly deserves (and perversely enjoys) for the failure of his desire for SW.

Given that P cannot derive joy from (his) everyday (fantasy of) pleasures with women, it is unsurprising that he begins fantasizing about men. The fantasy of being DG initially promises more escape, though this fantasy is as much an escape from the first fantasy as from real life. Anthony (sadistic, exciting, guilt-free) is the doppelgänger of *P as Adam* (masochistic, boring, guilt-ridden).

Finding him at his lowest ebb, a university colleague recommends that P / Adam watch the comedy movie, *Where There's a Will, There's a Way* – an ironic title given that P has clearly lost his way (9:10 – 10:42). Adam rents the DVD in a local shop (sigh). He watches it alone (sigh) and goes to bed once it finishes (deep sigh) (13:58 – 14:01). In his dreams, though, he has an epiphany in which *he realizes that he has seen 'himself' in the film*. Adam is transformed! He wakes and enters the living room (no sigh). In the dark of his living room, a reflection of light pulsates in Adam's (spider-like) eyes, matching the pulsating light emitting from his laptop screen (no sigh). Adam is communicating with his double, Anthony, his DG: *AdamAnt is born* (no deep sigh) (16:46 – 16:55)!

Incredulous, but curious, Adam determines to watch other films in which 'he' features. P / Adam is *animated* when he sees himself as DG in a movie, excited because DG is *exciting*: cool, different, confident,

an actor (who lives by ‘escaping from himself’). The more he watches, the more his growing curiosity tempts him to connect to ‘him’. Roads with web-like overhead wires lead him to DG’s agency, and here he begins another fantasy escape with his naughty twin, who is, of course, a domineering sadist.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet, it soon becomes apparent that this alternate fantasy strand offers no real escape either. Although DG is an actor, seemingly a measure of success, his career is marked by (to say the least) underachievement. He is a *laughably* minor actor: his playing of a wide-eyed bellhop in a ridiculous red uniform completely contrasts with his cool, black-jacket-wearing ‘real-world’ persona. The sense that he must be a third-rate actor is confirmed in the scene where DG is preparing before a mirror to confront Adam about “fucking his wife” (1:01:13 – 1:01:41); DG cannot even play himself convincingly. Even the fantasy bad-boy that Adam fantasizes about being is a bad act, a point foreshadowed in M’s comment that he (she means P / Adam) “should quit that fantasy about being a third-rate movie actor” (1:00:35 – 1:00:39).

If P’s lack of fulfilment in his real work segues into his lack of talent in his fantasy work, then this is doubly so (quite literally) in terms of his fantasy sex life. DG is as dissatisfied with SW as Adam is with FIG, but DG, naturally, does not sigh or feel self-pity. Exhibiting an enviable directness impossible for P / Adam, he simply decides to fuck someone else, FIG, not caring in the slightest that he is proposing to rape her.

Both strands of P’s fantasy, Adam / FIG on the one hand, and DG / SW on the other, are characterised by flights from the self. Adam (identified with the real P and, partly, his real life) is so dissatisfied with his (sex) life that he fantasizes about being a diametrically different man (DG). DG, by contrast, (‘living’ in this fantasy with SW, identified partly with P’s real wife) is so dissatisfied with his (sex) life that he fantasizes about fucking FIG in the guise of being Adam.

To put it another way, P’s flight from himself entails him fantasizing about being one man (Adam) who fantasizes about being another (DG), who, in turn, fantasizes about pretending to be that man (Adam) in order to have a woman (FIG) who is the product of P’s fantasy (about being Adam) in the first place! Such is the excess in P’s attempt to circumvent his (self in) reality, however, that circumvention becomes *circumnavigation*: P escapes so far into his fantasies that he emerges as what would appear, at first glance at least, to be his ‘real’ self on the other side.

The scenes that lead towards the denouement, where all strands of *Enemy* seem to converge, suggest that P is finally giving up his fantasies and ‘returning to the real’. In these scenes, the parallel fantasies intersect and ‘swap’ as the ‘real’ element of fantasy 1, Adam, unites with the ‘real’ element of fantasy 2, SW, and the ‘fantasy’ element of fantasy 1, FIG, unites with the ‘fantasy’ element of fantasy 2, DG. Once again, this is best understood in diagrammatic form (Figure 2):



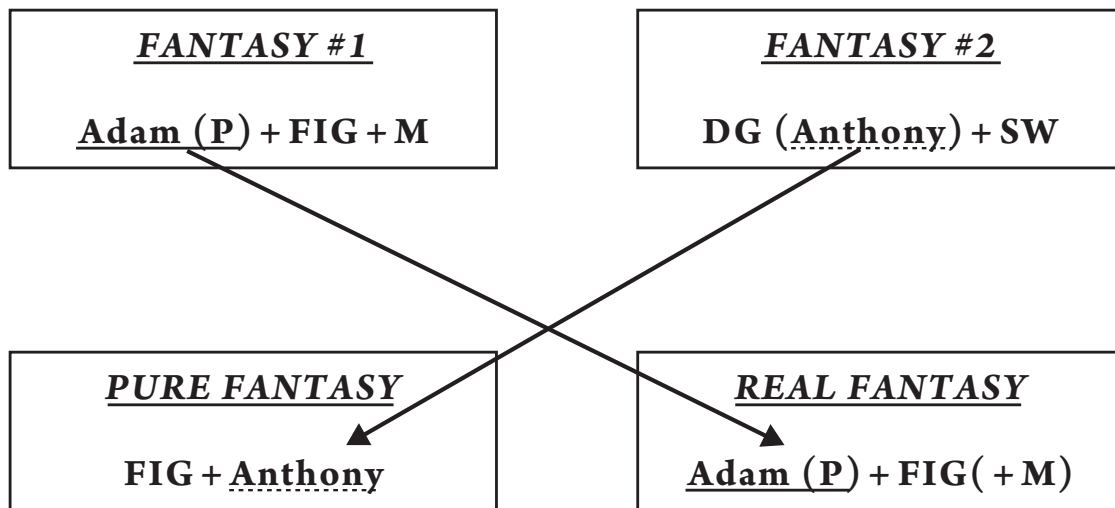


Figure 2: The (Wife-) 'Swapping' of P's Fantasies

*Enemy*'s end sequence begins with the 'romantic' trip that is the culmination of DG's stalking of FIG. Scenes of DG and FIG arriving at the same hotel where Adam met Anthony for the first time are cross-cut with SW being joined in bed by a disconcerted-looking P (nervously pretending to be Adam pretending to be DG). She asks about his day at school. Cut back to FIG, who, realizing that she has been tricked, hysterically demands to leave the hotel room she has gone into with DG.<sup>iii</sup> P, meanwhile, is crying and apologising to SW. They have (tender) sex, while, in the contrasting parallel scene, FIG and DG are seen arguing fiercely in the car. It crashes with great force and the two fantasy figures 'die' (1:14:59 – 1:23:06). The cutting, of course, suggests that the actions of one scene directly produce the events in the other, in which P's fantasies are eliminated. P's reconnection with SW is apparently a re-assertion of reality that leads to his (pure) fantasy dilemmas being (dis)solved in the form of DG's and FIG's 'deaths'. *Enemy*'s suggestion on the surface is that P is giving up his fantasies and 'coming home' to the real, a capitulation that appears to be a victory for the 'enemies without' (SW / M).

It is at this point, however, that we must pause and ask: is this victory *really* as clear cut as it superficially seems? For, given what it presents as P's *reasons* for returning to SW, *Enemy* seems also to be signalling something altogether more ambiguous.

No doubt he does feel guilty, and the fact of his fantasies being so unsatisfying must also be factored in, yet the immediate reason that *Enemy* presents for P's return to SW is that *he has somehow rekindled his desire for her by giving up his fantasies*. But exactly how has *this* miracle occurred given that it contradicts P's character as we have come to know it? The answer, of course, lies in the fact that P's *rediscovered desire for SW depends on his having turned her into a fantasy of her being 'somebody else's wife'*, the 'wife', that is, of his very own fantasy creation, DG. The lesson on this level would seem to be that he can only desire her when he pretends that both he and she are someone else. Or, to put it slightly differently, it is a dramatization of the fact that P's means of escape from his lack of desire is to turn his wife into what she has been trying at all costs to prevent: *a forbidden fantasy object of his forbidden*

*desire.*

Is the denouement, then, actually a victory for the ‘enemies within’, P’s fantasies? No, again, for P’s mechanism of escape from SW’s ‘reality prison’ incarcerates him in (another) ‘fantasy prison’ from which, in fact, he is shown to immediately seek to fly. *Enemy* demonstrates throughout that P’s fantasies are always short-lived, and this one is no exception. The very next morning, in fact, surfacing from what we can only assume to have been a night of intimacy with SW, P finds (once again) the key to the S&M club. Appearing uncertain at first, his face suddenly shines with curiosity and, there can be no mistake: his double fantasy of being AdamAnt is suddenly re-born!

*Enemy* indicates, then, at a more subtle level, both that P cannot ‘return to the real’ without the aid of fantasy and that his unsatisfying fantasies always drive him into a cycle of other fantasies which will, presumably, continue until he ultimately arrives back at the point he has reached at the end of the film: *the fantasy of the return to the real that is the starting point for new fantasies...*

The final shot of *Enemy* reminds us explicitly why P is locked in an endless journey to find his ‘true’ desiring self. After finding the key, P (now as AdamAnt) turns the corner and is confronted by, of all things, SW metamorphosed into a giant tarantula (1:24:28 – 1:26:35). Somehow aware that P has begun the cycle of fantasizing again, SW’s immediate response is to have transformed herself into the biggest of the many spiders in *Enemy* that represent ‘barrier-to-desire’.

Basic psychology, however, indicates that this stronger prohibition will only result in stronger *resistance* so that P’s response, in turn, will inevitably be to indulge in ever-more powerful fantasies. He will dream of *even more* bizarre sex shows, have *even more* beautiful FIGs, become an *even more* violent DG; *and have an even more powerful guilt that will drive him back to her*. He will thus trap himself again in an endlessly re-cycling web of fantasies that funnel back ultimately to SW at the centre as their originator and end. She, on the other hand, can only respond by growing *even larger*, which will only intensify P’s fantasizing again. No stable point, that is, seems possible for P: only an eternal, spiralling escalation of re-occurring fantasy.

## Web, Text

Does our above explication, then, finally ‘solve’ *Enemy*’s riddle? Is Villeneuve’s sincerity confirmed in our description of how the film does, indeed, offer the satisfying answer that he claims? Outwardly, we no doubt *have* put the puzzle of P (to change analogy slightly) together in a way that apparently ‘fits’ (just like the photograph of P and SW that reforms perfectly after previously having been seen ripped in two).<sup>iv</sup> Yet, the fact that the final piece of the puzzle which ‘completes’ the meaning of the film is not so much a poor fit as seeming to come from a different puzzle entirely should discourage any premature celebration.

*The final shot reminds us explicitly why P is locked in an endless journey to find his ‘true’ desiring self. After finding the key, P (as AdamAnt) turns the corner and is confronted by SW metamorphosed into a giant tarantula.* According to our explanation, *Enemy*’s final scene reveals SW in her ‘true’ form as P sees her, the giant spider who is the crusher of his desire both for herself (her unattractive globulosity)

mirrors pregnancy) and other women (her huge body blocks him), and yet who is simultaneously the instigator and destination of his fantasies (he has to escape her webs; her countless eyes watch him, inducing guilt); an interpretation that echoes with preceding claims. Saying (as we do), however, that the scene graphically, brilliantly illustrates the short-circuit of P's desire should not cause us to overlook that the particularly striking way in which the scene does so actually represents a *change* in the film's prior forms of coding.

When the fantasy element, the giant tarantula, drops into this scene before P's eyes, it is easy to be stunned<sup>v</sup> into missing that the spider represents a *foreign* component in the sense that it is a fantasy object that would seem to break *Enemy*'s own previously established signifying rules. The tarantula scene is, in point of fact, coded in a way that heretofore in *Enemy* has always indicated P's *diegetic reality*, so that, when that piece of fantasy penetrates here, it is formally *anomalous*. It manifests 'fantasy' so differently, in fact, from prior examples of it in the film that it would appear to retrospectively *exclude* rather than *echo* our previous understanding of *Enemy*'s representation of (P's) 'fantasy'. This is no minor point, for the fantasy spider is an element that causes the frames, the *framework*, that had supported our understanding of the fundamental contrast between P's (conscious) reality and daydreaming and his (unconscious) dreaming to collapse.

The effect of this inconsistency is not only to make the viewer sigh, perhaps, at the anti-climax of this non-closure, but also to compel *backtracking*, since the violation of the principle of non-contradiction that it enacts demands *reassessment* of all previous interpretations (deep sigh). To put it alternatively, *Enemy*'s signalling in its final scene that the textual mystery cannot be solved on the terms that it has formerly presented *short-circuits* the viewer's interpretation at the very instant she would expect to be able to square the circle as it were (deepest sigh).

Does the tarantula scene reveal, then, that *Enemy*'s demand for interpretation has all along been an unsolvable charade, a cynical move to ensure the film will be gossiped about among the chattering film classes? Could its endless prolonging of incompleteness even be construed as a *betrayal*? After all, this seeming act of sabotage conceivably indicates that *Enemy*'s would-be (interpretative) game *for* the viewer is actually making a game *of* her. Or is it simply that Villeneuve has lost the plot? Despite many of *Enemy*'s critics reaching some, or all, of these conclusions, we feel that they are incorrect, or, if not totally incorrect, then not quite fully correct either.

One of *Enemy*'s most noticeable features is that the arachnophilia strikingly present in its content may be said to be doubled in its form. For not only is the motif of the web a constant visual presence in the film, but also the complicated, interwoven filaments of its structure present themselves as a 'web of meaning' that must be safely crossed, avoiding entanglement, if the viewer is to find the path to its hidden centre (in other words, the 'correct' route of interpretation to the 'final meaning' of the film). In consideration of *Enemy*'s web-like structuring, it should be noted that the film thereby explicitly evokes Walter Benjamin's reminder of the close semantic relationship between the words 'web' and 'text' (202),<sup>vi</sup> but it is evident, too, that it also recalls Umberto Eco's conceptualization of codes and systems of meanings as *spatial networks*.<sup>vii</sup> It is to the latter of these fine intellects that we turn in an attempt to show that *Enemy*, perhaps, does not deserve

such vilification as it has received as we re-conceptualise Eco's 'critic as an explorer' of labyrinths (with endless passageways) or woods (with endlessly criss-crossing trails) (see Caesar 118; 169) as the 'critic as an explorer' of *webs*.

Writing of the 'hierarchy' of textual consumers (see Caesar 152), Eco contrasts those who are 'naïve' (those who simply desire to know 'what happens at the end' on one viewing) with those who are 'critical' (those who desire to know *what kind of consumer that a text requires*).<sup>viii</sup> Considered through this distinction, *Enemy*'s final contradiction might be considered a cue for the former to *abandon* (attempts to interpret) a film that apparently declines to communicate with, and, perhaps, even mocks her. The 'critical' viewer, on the other hand, may respond very differently, seeing in the collapse of *Enemy*'s "self-focusing features" (Caesar 97) not the denial of communication that on one level it would seem to be but, rather, an intimation that the structural, that is, *formal* arrangements of the film ought to be considered as part of the content it conveys. This viewer may, that is, read in the metaleptic collapse of *Enemy*'s 'internal laws', highly unusual, of course, in a big-budget film intended for popular consumption, not a breakdown of meaning but an isolation and, thus, *communication* of the film's requirement for *a certain kind of consumption*, one aware that at stake is not simply an understanding of *what Enemy* means, but also an understanding of *how* it does so.

*Enemy*'s fundamental demand, the 'key' to unlocking its meaning on a diegetic level is bound up with P's attempt to locate the precise co-ordinates of his 'authentic' self in order that he can 'ground' his meaning. *Enemy* depicts the divided P struggling to 'find himself' (to find what his 'real' desire is) and invites the viewer to join him in attempting to search for the identity coinciding with his prior 'true self' that seems somehow to have been misplaced or lost amidst or beyond the conflicting, ever-shifting narratives, the 'enemies within and without', that pull him apart. Yet, of course, *Enemy*'s final scene, in which we are expecting a *resolution* to his search, suggests, instead, through emphasizing his cyclical return to fantasy, that P's 'authentic self' cannot ever be 'worked out' precisely because it *is* nothing but this irresolvable conflict. Being the locus at which his 'enemies within and without' compete, P, *Enemy* indicates, is merely the depthless site of an unresolved textual vortex with no 'true self' before or below this to have lost; he is doomed, that is, to *endlessly* try to 'read' his 'true self' through the narratives and fantasies of which he is actually a product.

On a diegetic level, then, the search for 'the (final) "true" P', the answer to the 'riddle of P's self' is proved futile at exactly the moment in the film that apparently unlocks his mystery. *What Enemy*'s denouement ultimately suggests is that P's subjectivity is a void of meaning 'written over' by fiction, the giant spider finally drawing his attention to how the 'final' meaning to the riddle of his self will always be denied. Yet, what is crucial to note is that the very same device of the spider also, simultaneously, suggests that what the film reveals diegetically is also repeated *formally*. *How Enemy* means, here, to recapitulate the distinction made above, is that the fantastic tarantula's triggering of a metaleptic collapse in the form of the film signals that *the viewer's search for the 'true' (final) meaning of the 'riddle of the film' will also be in vain*. In a direct echo of how P is baffled (in both senses of the word), the viewer's desire to find a satisfying solution to the film is also short-circuited at exactly the moment she is expecting the narrative

strands to connect to make the film 'work' coherently.

The effect of *Enemy*'s structural collapse, then, is to isolate and so *communicate* the manner in which the film operates as a double allegory of itself in its offering of both an analogy between both *P in the film* and *the film itself* (as riddles demanding solutions) and between *P in the film* and *the viewer herself* (as riddle-solvers who desire solutions). In this 'double-decker' structure of *Enemy*'s web of riddling in which the diegetic 'sheet' of the 'riddle of the self' in *Enemy*'s content is laid laterally across the formal one of the 'riddle of the film',<sup>ix</sup> P's circular, unresolved, *failed* search for meaning in his life is an exact analogue of the viewer's similarly futile search for meaning in *Enemy-the-film*. If *Enemy* signals in its final scene that P is ready to 'try again', that is, to start his (never-ending, doomed) cycle of (unfulfilling) fantasizing in order to find his 'true self', then so too must the viewer be ready to 'try again', that is, to start her (never-ending) cycle of (*unfulfillable*, doomed) interpretation in order to find the film's 'true meaning', something, it is implied, that can only ever be but a kind of *fantasy*. If the giant spider (in the diegetic content) is a barrier to P's desire and, ultimately, to his 'knowing himself', then the spider is also, in a sense, a barrier to *the viewer's* desire to 'know the text', to interpret it in a satisfying way, for its anomalous appearance (in both senses) in the closing scene *formally* prohibits 'naïve' interpretation.

If the giant spider is prohibitory, then it is also *cautionary*; for if P is the potential prey of the 'spider', then this is no less true of the viewer. How easy it is, fuelled by curiosity, to be tempted into trying to find the 'true meaning' of the *Enemy* web-text; yet, how easy it is to become entangled in the (fantasy) web of what one spins oneself (see Caesar 146) or to follow threads to 'the centre', only to find not the 'final meaning' one expects but, rather, a 'tarantula' waiting to devour one at the end of the interpretation thread that one has followed, as it were. *Enemy* is a web-text that presents itself initially as prey to the viewer's interpretations only to reveal itself at the last as one that could potentially make of the viewer, in Eco's matchless phrase, "*the prey of the text*" (Eco, *Reflections* 53).

What *Enemy*, then, conveys in its final act of collapsing the frames that divide its content and form is both the 'truth' of the radical *compatibility* of 'self' and 'text' and the radical *incompatibility* of either 'self' or 'text' with the closure of final (self-)interpretation. Just as P's 'truth' is the endless criss-crossing and mapping of the territorial text of his self-web, so, too, is the 'truth' of *Enemy* the irresolvable struggle for 'correct' interpretation in the 'critical' viewer's endless traversing of the textual web. *Enemy* thereby dramatizes and emblemises the post-structural paradox that the hole at the centre of the 'self-text' is one that requires and demands a 'completion' by interpretative (self-) narration that is ultimately impossible. It is a cinematic staging in content and form, to put it in more theoretical terms, of both Jacques Lacan's radical confrontation with the fiction that lies at the heart of the symbolic order<sup>x</sup> and Umberto Eco's "limits of textual interpretation"<sup>xi</sup> extended to *self-interpretation* that is endless in scope, multitudinous in pathway, and devoid of foundational ground.

Given *Enemy*'s embodying and pointing to such limits, how sincere, then, can Villeneuve's suggestion have been that to watch his film again is to see that everything has an answer? Our answer is: 'very' and 'not very at all', for the film's riddle-questions *are* answerable, if not quite on the terms that Villeneuve suggests. The double-decker web of the film requires a double-decker response, the two interpretations offered in this article are laid laterally across content and form both as analogues of one



another and as an analogue of how *Enemy* lays out its meanings. Playing Oedipus to Villeneuve's Sphinx in 'Enemies Without and Within', and King Arthur to his Bridgekeeper in 'Web, Text', we understand and *misunderstand* the path the director wishes to lead the viewer across his web-text, offering 'naïve' and 'critical' readings as we explore the intricate strands of *Enemy*'s webs of meaning.

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## Endnotes

- i All times provided refer to the Rhombus Media (Enemy) Inc., Roxbury Pictures S.L., 2013 DVD version of the film.
- ii While Adam seems 'scared' of his aggression, we sense that, ever the masochist, he (not so) secretly enjoys his subjugation.
- iii Not content with having stalked her as his prey, DG, once in the hotel room, now *stalks up on* FIG and jumps upon her as if he is a (bearded) spider.
- iv At 21:01 – 21:15, P as Adam matches a ripped photograph of himself with DG's face on his laptop screen, while at 1:12:32 – 1:13:08, P is examining the very same photograph again, but in an undamaged form. It is, of course, a photograph of him with his SW. It is only in his fantasy that he would dare damage such an item.
- v As one reviewer put it, "I can't get [...] the memory of that wackadoo last image out of my head" (Stevens).
- vi "The Latin word *textum* means 'web.'"
- vii As first pointed out by Jonathan Culler (199-202).
- viii Although it is a nice distinction, we should remember that the 'naïve' and 'critical' viewer can not only be one and the same person at different times, but one and the same person at the same time.
- ix À la the double-decker webs of *Frontinella communis*, it could be added: the wonderfully named 'Bowl and doily spider'.
- x In the Lacanian account of subjectivity, the subject is unable to articulate and not conscious of how her subjectivity is dependent on the symbolic order, the realm of language, narrative and law. While subjectivity itself is formed through participation in this order (the subject's speech, interactions, gestures, her very desires, are governed by its all-pervading agency), the symbolic order nevertheless (through the agency of what Lacan calls 'the big Other') offers itself as the very medium for attaining a unitary subjectivity outside it. This is the illusion that not only hides from the subject that her independent subjectivity is a fiction, but also works to prevent her from ever confronting the unpleasant idea that the centre of her being is but a void (see Kul-Want and Piero 61-65).
- xi We make reference to the title of (perhaps) Eco's finest book, *The Limits of Interpretation* (1994). Eco's essential argument is that, while texts organize signs so that relationships can be established between them, it is impossible when interpreting a text to ever make a claim as to the *best*, that is, *most satisfying*, interpretation. And, yet, at the same time, Eco argues, texts do not offer infinite connections whereby the text can mean anything – it is always possible to say which interpretations are *not acceptable*.