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The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

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5. Outlook

Throughout the past studies, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate how films achieve effects of complexity by means of a story or storytelling that challenges viewers' embodied-cognitive faculties, demands increased cognitive efforts, and obstructs, prolongs or intensifies viewers' formation and application of interpretive hypotheses. However, over the course of these studies, this dissertation has also touched on a number of aspects of cinematic narrative complexity that could not be developed fully, yet seem to call for further exploration. As a result, rather than repeating here the findings from these earlier studies, I would like to take this final chapter to highlight some unexplored, promising or alternative perspectives on cinematic narrative complexity that have not yet been comprehensively addressed by either this dissertation, or – to my knowledge – other work on the topic. The aim of this chapter is not to thoroughly discuss or address these remaining aspects, but rather, to point out how and why they appear as interesting directions for further study and, in the process, to offer some hypotheses or hunches that might help to guide such future inquiries.

So what about...

5.1 The attractions of complex films?

Although this study has sought to address in what ways complex film narratives engage their viewers, it must also be acknowledged that the question of what sort of *viewing pleasure* or *appreciation* viewers derive from these experiences still resists systematic and univocal explanation. Naturally, the attraction to complex narratives will vary strongly from viewer to viewer. Moreover, different films seek to offer different viewing pleasures: as we have seen, some of the popular puzzle films restrict their complexity to moderate and motivated forms, encouraging and ultimately rewarding viewers' *intensified narrativization efforts* with an attainable solution or comprehension (Willemsen and Kiss 2017: 5); other films, like the ones that we have called *impossible puzzle films*, offer a more excessive complexity that frustrates viewers' narrativizing efforts more strongly, and are thus likely to offer different viewing pleasures.¹ Cognitive film scholars generally assume that the enjoyment of popular narrative films lies, to use Nitzan Ben Shaul's words, in

the challenging of the viewers' cognitive faculties in a manner that satisfyingly lets them construct out of the movies' compelling audiovisual flow a coherent story that leads to closure, along with the attendant arousal, regulation, and control of tension, mostly through suspense strategies (Ben Shaul 2012: 25).

It is reasonable to assume that the more complex and confusing a film's narrative is, the less its enjoyment will correspond to the qualities usually associated with conventionally realist

¹ For a variety of explorative hypotheses about what might make 'impossible' narrative puzzles engaging, see Kiss and Willemsen 2017, Chapter 6 (pp. 183-207). Many of the reflections on the attractions of complex films presented in this section of the Outlook are extensions of ideas developed in this chapter.

and canonical ‘classical narratives’ (e.g., immersion, identification, empathy, the arousal of emotions, the satisfaction of closure, and so on). It seems clear then that complexity can also entail a distinct appeal of its own. However, comprehensively addressing the question of the aesthetic attraction to complex stories demands more extensive research, not least because the issue allows for a multiplicity of explanatory paths: there are anthropological and psychophysical constants that can be considered, examining for instance how complex stories may stimulate our *perceptual and cognitive* faculties in ways that prove engaging. But we can also seek to understand the popularity of these films as a result of their self-conscious play with cinematic and narrative *conventions*, examining their specific appeal to a generation of viewers who may seek novel or more challenging narrative forms, or who have gotten used to the more (inter-)active participation of new media, for instance. The success of complex stories could also lie in their *expressive* potential - i.e. their capacity to express, capture, or make us reflect on the everyday complexities of our present-day lives, world, experiences, or technologies. And perhaps complex narratives also import some of the *self-reflexive* functions of modernist and postmodern experimentations into mainstream fiction. Or it may be that the enjoyment of complex fictions is part of a more general anthropological appreciation of *complex form* per se, comparable to the ways in which we may enjoy the overwhelming effects of, say, the polyphonic and dynamic surges of a romantic symphony, or the intricate play of lines and colours in a Kandinsky painting.

In sum, determining the various reasons why audiences are drawn to such films will require closer research – most likely of a more empirical and qualitative nature, as such approaches could serve to survey and test (diverse) viewers’ experiences and responses to various (degrees of) complex narratives. Nonetheless, from this study, some ideas regarding the appeal of complex narrative experiences can be surmised, and I will briefly offer some here as tentative hypotheses that could provide indications for further elaboration.

Firstly, with regards to the cognitive and hermeneutic dynamics described in this study, a key gratifying effect could lie in the distinct *hermeneutic play* that many complex stories afford. By hermeneutic play, I refer to the intensified meaning making activities that many complex narratives evoke in their viewers – i.e., the repeated seeking, trying out, and switching between different interpretive frames and hypotheses. Particularly the films that we identified as most pervasively narratively complex (such as impossible puzzle films, or modernist art films) are often characterised by an *interpretive multi-stability*: they afford multiple interpretive options, and tempt viewers to form and weigh various options. This gives rise to a prolonged and intensified interpretive quest that may be appreciated by spectators for a variety of reasons.

For one, this intensified interpretive process may be inherently creative and enjoyable, as spectators synthesise knowledge from their experiential background into new interpretive hypotheses, and try to match these hypotheses to the narrative at hand. The process can also have a *reflective* effect, as the active recombination and deliberation of our knowledge and perspectives, in dialogue with the artwork, can be revealing about ourselves, our stances, or our relations to the world. Such a view was proposed by Czech literary theorist Jan Mukařovský (1979) in his 1936 essay on the ‘aesthetic function.’ Mukařovský argued that the value of artworks resides in that they offer us opportunities to reflect on the value systems and

reference frames that we bring to them. A work's complexity and contradictions, he notes, enhance this function, for if we consider

the inner composition of the artistic artefact, it is certainly not difficult to conclude that works having great internal contradictions offer – depending on the degree of divergence and the diversity in significance which results – a much less convenient basis for the mechanical application of an entire system of values with practical validity than do works without internal differences or with only weak differences. Here too, therefore, multiplicity, variety, and complexity of the material artifact are potential aesthetic assets. Independent aesthetic value of an artistic artifact resides, therefore, to all intents and purposes, in the tension, the overcoming of which is the task of the viewer. (Mukařovský 1979: 93)

As Mukařovský himself also notes, this notion represents a view of aesthetic value that is 'entirely different from that harmoniousness which is often suggested as the highest form of perfection and the highest perfection of form in art' (ibid.).

Yet the appeal of interpretive multi-stability can also be explained in other ways: alternatively, some viewers may appreciate such effects for a *liberating* quality. Complex stories may be seen as a welcome alternative to the closed, teleological cause-and-effect logic that characterises canonical narratives. Nitzan Ben Shaul (2012) has argued that much of classical narrative cinema is about closing down cognitive options in order to provide a sense of teleological necessity and closure to a narrative's progression. According to Ben Shaul, classical narration hereby tends to be conducive to a 'close-mindedness' in viewers that works counter to the possibility of what he calls *optional thinking* – the possibility or capability of entertaining, imagining, or weighing different paths or outcomes (whether in narrative or in real life). Part of the appeal of complex films seems to be that they encourage us to try out various interpretive options during the viewing experience. The quality of open-endedness in interpretation is generally also something appreciated in our cultural apprehension of artworks. After all, artworks that cannot be contained or exhausted in a single reading are generally held in high esteem (in many forms of art criticism, or in the canons) where such interpretive multi-stability is often considered an artistic asset that bespeaks of a work's depth or permanence. A sense of *novelty* may also be a source of appreciation. Complex narratives may be thrilling simply because they are different from the canonical narratives and story patterns that make up much of our fiction and culture. After all, classical film narration has remained a rather stable and unchanged mode of presentation over time; the vast majority of narrative films relies on familiar stylistic and narrative principles, which in turn imply a particular teleological, epistemological and objective logic. Complex narratives that break with this familiar logic may be appreciated for that very reason. Moreover, a film's incomppliance to being contained rationally may also be valued for a certain subversive potential, for instance undermining culturally dominant Western Enlightenment values such as objectivity, logic, purposefulness, predictability and reason, while emancipating alternative qualities such as subjectivity, contingency, irregularity, mutability, uncertainty and ambiguity. Other viewers may simply enjoy the sensation of *perplexity* that such stories evoke, finding pleasure in the dazed states of not-understanding, in being overwhelmed by a story, or in

feeling the affective, non-conceptual sensations afforded by a narrative that eludes cerebral comprehension.²

Related to the above is another kind of aesthetic enjoyment that viewers may find in such interpretive multi-stability and hermeneutic play, namely that they deem it to be *mimetically expressive*. Spectators may feel that a story's lack of a singular logic, or the experience of switching between different possible interpretations, has the capacity *to capture or express something about the world or our lived experience of it*. We may read a story's confusing effects as an expression of, for instance, the human search for order in a chaotic, unstable or ambiguous world; or of the complexities of the human mind; as capturing the fragmented or decentralised state of a postmodern culture, or the 'condition humaine.' Such interpretive moves (re-)connect the abstract experimentations of narrative form with the realm of human lived experience, and thus work to find a certain meaningfulness in the experience.

This mimetic quality also points to another way of thinking about the possible gratifications of engaging with cinematic complexity. Due to their capacity to give narrative shape to experiences of complexity and interpretive multi-stability, complex narratives may also offer viewers *cognitive playgrounds* on which to exercise the engagement with complexity and ambiguities in *real life*. Complexity has arguably become an increasingly pervasive quality of the human lifeworld, and many of today's (inter-)cultural, economic, or moral issues (e.g., climate change, global trade, cultural migration) are characterised by increasing degrees of complexity. Such issues ask for new sensitivities beyond familiar linear-causal thinking, centralisation, singular perspectives, homogeneous categorisation, and predictable order. Complex films may have a potential to motivate viewers to playfully engage with complexity, allowing for aesthetic experiences in which puzzlement and not-understanding may be considered enjoyable or stimulating rather than threatening or frustrating (as high amounts of complexity in real world situations might be). The question then is whether engaging with formal-structural complexity in artworks can also impact abilities involved in coping with complexity in real life – i.e., whether engaging with the one can have *transfer effects* on the other. It could be that complex film narratives help to exercise our minds in processing and ordering complex flows of information, or in juggling multiple, simultaneously reasonable perspectives. They could also enhance the skill that Reuven Tsur (borrowing the words of John Keats) called *negative capability*: the competence of 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Tsur 1975: 776). This is opposite to what Tsur calls the 'quest for certitude', an urge to settle on a singular, unambiguous interpretation. Hermeneutic play with interpretively multi-stable films (that do not allow immediate interpretive closure, and may even reward prolonged perspective taking) may train viewers in such negative capability, altering the shortcuts in their meaning making routines to suppress the urge to reach for immediate cognitive closure. And lastly, given that narratives are one of the main cognitive and cultural tools that we have to give shape to our experiences and the world around us, it may also be that complex narrative forms allow more complex forms of conceptualising ourselves and our relations to the actual world

² This experience may also touch of what some theorists have described under the (rather heterogeneously employed) header of 'the sublime', as excessive complexity arguably has a potential to make the spectator experience a degree of (over-)stimulation that 'would in all likelihood be disturbing, or even terrifying in nonaesthetic contexts' (Berlyne 1971: 94).

around us, where, as noted, qualities such as non-linearity, contingency, dissensus, and contradiction are increasingly a part of grappling with socio-cultural and economic challenges.

In short, investigating potential *transfer effects* between coping with complexity in fiction on the one hand, and the increasing complexity of the contemporary human lifeworld on the other, could offer a particularly interesting path for follow-up research, and calls for interdisciplinary co-operation with the social sciences. Likewise, research could also be directed at individual's viewers' varying enjoyment of complex fiction in relation to individual differences in psychological traits or across cultures, on the basis of known scales such as the *need for cognitive closure* (see Webster and Kruglanski 1994) or the *tolerance for uncertainty* (e.g., Buhr and Dugas 2002; Berenbaum, Bredemeier and Thompson 2008) and *ambiguity* (e.g., Furnham and Ribchester 1995). While writing this chapter, preliminary attempts at such a collaborative approach are in development.³

Furthermore, whether or not complex narratives have positive transfer effects that impact real-world coping with complexity, their pleasures may also lie in that they simply allow viewers to exercise skills they already possess. Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014: 131) has suggested that complexity in narrative art may be related to a certain '*Funktionslust*.' Like actual puzzles, puzzle films can encourage viewers to use and apply analytic and interpretive competences simply for their own sake. As Korthals Altes notes, such enjoyment seems to be the result of

the pleasure and interest our minds seem to take in complexity itself, admittedly in different degrees. This pleasure seems akin to what the German psychologist Karl Bühler called *Funktionslust*. This eloquent term refers to the pleasure taken in exercising a mental or bodily function (Bühler 1965: 157). Such function-oriented pleasure can be observed in repetitive movements in animal and child play but also in adult behaviour, from a good physical workout to riddles or crosswords that engage the pleasure of puzzling and pattern-seeking minds. (Korthals Altes 2014: 23)

As Korthals Altes also notes, 'the pleasure we may take in our skillfulness in understanding intricate form may also appear like the *Funktionslust* of puzzling and pattern-seeking minds' (2014: 131). The idea that emerges here is akin to a more general Kantian view of aesthetic enjoyment, which assumes that part of the gratification of art lies in that it affords a free play of our cognitive-perceptual and imaginative abilities in the absence of direct purposefulness. The idea of 'disinterested', 'detached' or 'distanced' engagement recurs in many accounts of

³ One of these attempts has resulted in a research proposal for a project built around a collaboration of film scholars (Miklós Kiss and myself from the University of Groningen) and media psychologists experienced in qualitative empirical approaches to the arts (Frank Hakemulder of Utrecht University; Elly Konijn of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Katalin Bálint of Tilburg University). This project aims for a comprehensive theoretical and empirical validation of the notion of complex narratives as cognitive playgrounds in relation to dealing with real world complexity. Besides a theoretical substantiation, it aims to include a series of studies examining, among others, the potential transfer effects of exposure to cinematic narrative complexity on viewers' tolerance towards ambiguity and uncertainty – abilities that we identify as instrumental to coping with complexity in general.

aesthetic experience,⁴ and is also popular among cognitive theorists of art. David Bordwell for example writes:

In our culture, aesthetic activity deploys such [everyday cognitive] skills for nonpractical ends. In experiencing art, instead of focusing on the pragmatic results of perception, we turn our attention to the very process itself. What is nonconscious in everyday mental life becomes consciously attended to. Our schemata get shaped, stretched, and transgressed; a delay in hypothesis-confirmation can be prolonged for its own sake. And like all psychological activities, aesthetic activity has long-range effects. Art may reinforce, or modify, or even assault our normal perceptual-cognitive repertoire. (Bordwell 1985: 32)

Considered in this light, complexity in narrative can be understood as an intensification of this play of our perceptual, cognitive, and interpretive abilities, afforded by aesthetic forms that demand heightened (perceptual, cognitive, or interpretive) efforts from the spectator. This is achieved by the balance that such narratives usually strike between what D.E. Berlyne described as the dual aesthetic function of ‘arousing’ and ‘arousal moderating’ factors⁵ – or, more simply, between elements of ‘disorientation’ and ‘orientation’ (Berlyne 1971: 129-30): ‘the first factor’, Berlyne notes, ‘provides grist for the processes of perceptual and intellectual analysis, gives them something to work on, challenges them. The other factor gives them some prospect of success; it provides a basis for efforts at organization and interrelation’ (ibid. 129).

Complex narration may in this sense allow for a twofold pleasure: the enjoyment of being engaged in the story’s referential and mimetic content on the one hand (the characters, actions, emotions experiences, storyworlds, and so on), and the cognitive, perceptual and interpretive engagement with the work’s form and construction on the other. This twofold perspective is also akin to what philosopher Richard Wollheim (1980), building on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work on pictorial representation, called ‘*seeing in*’: the perceptual recognition of a representation that involves a simultaneous attending to the thing represented (what is ‘in’ the picture) and the actual representing physical object (the picture itself as a physical medium, arranged in a certain way). In some cases, the aesthetic enjoyment of complex narratives might relate to an appreciation of the play of pure ‘form’ – an attraction pertaining to the work as a composed whole. But most often, the appreciation of complex narratives seems driven by both forms of apprehension simultaneously, or even their interplay: after all, our aesthetic appreciation for the work arguably tends to be heightened when we recognise how complexity of narrative form gives expression to particular mimetic content. Moreover, some complex narratives also work by providing an overt clash between both apprehensions: they provide ‘inhabitable’ and immersive storyworlds that are also clearly logically conflicting, paradoxical, or impossible. Such stories offer what we have called a *narrative double perspectivation* (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 89), allowing the narrative experience to be accessible and immersive, while simultaneously proving overtly impossible or self-

⁴ See Collinson 1992, pp. 157-66.

⁵ Berlyne argued that ‘arousal’ in aesthetic experiences ‘can be raised by such properties of stimulus patterns as novelty, surprisingness, complexity, ambiguity, and puzzlingness’ (1971: 69).

contradictory. Such storyworlds can provide a distinct Escher-like pleasure of encountering seemingly logical yet obviously impossible worlds – an experience described by Umberto Eco as ‘the pleasure of our logical and perceptual defeat’ (Eco 1990: 77).

Lastly, there may also be so-called *eudaimonic motivations* to viewers’ engagement with complex narratives and hermeneutic play. The concept was introduced by media psychologists in an attempt to resolve the apparent paradox of people’s attraction to art and entertainment that induces in them negative emotional states, such as sadness or fear. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the enjoyment of complex films poses a somewhat similar paradox. After all, if confusion is something we generally prefer to avoid in everyday life, then why would we seek it in fiction?

In an attempt to resolve the ‘sadness paradox,’ media psychologists Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur A. Raney argued that ‘people consume media entertainment in the pursuit of pleasure and amusement (hedonic motivations) and as a part of their general need to search for and ponder life’s meaning, truths, and purposes – motivations that we characterise as “eudaimonic”’ (Oliver and Raney 2011: 985). Eudaimonic pleasures thus concern a broader sense of ‘wellbeing’ beyond the more direct gratification of hedonic pleasures and thrills. The hermeneutic play afforded by complex narratives may tap into such eudaimonic concerns, through its mimetic and (self-)reflective potential. The dichotomy between hedonic and eudaimonic motivations, however, still implies a distinction between ‘fun’ and ‘meaningful’ that may be difficult to maintain under closer scrutiny; after all, the gratification of eudaimonic concerns need not exclude hedonic pleasure, and vice versa (some complex films are good examples of their possible co-operation). Other media psychologists have sought to do away with the distinction by proposing different solutions. Research by Ron Tamborini and colleagues (Tamborini et al. 2010) has for instance suggested that it may be more fruitful to think about eudaimonic motivations in terms of the fulfilment of people’s *intrinsic needs*, a notion borrowed from Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan’s influential ‘self-determination theory’ (1985). The model assumes three basic psychological needs: ‘Autonomy, a sense of volition or willingness when doing a task (...); competence, a need for challenge and feelings of effectance (...); and relatedness, a need to feel connected with others’ (Tamborini et al. 2010: 761). Tamborini’s study empirically confirmed the satisfaction of all three needs in the playing of videogames. But as the researchers proposed, the general idea of enjoyment as the satisfaction of needs is probably not limited to videogames only, and is likely to apply to other forms of media consumption as well (Tamborini et al. 2010: 771).

The attractions of complex film narratives too could be considered in light of viewers’ intrinsic needs. The viewing experience they offer may foster in viewers a sense of *autonomy* (by leaving more interpretive freedom and authority to them) and can, for some, work to enhance *relatedness*, for instance through the social rewards of the (online) sharing of interpretations and explanations, or the collective decoding of narrative mysteries. But most of all, complex films seem to play on the need for *competence*. The engagement with complex puzzles often serves to provide viewers feelings of effectance, testing, training, and sometimes rewarding viewers’ interpretive and analytic skills, sharpness, and media literacy. As Jason Mittell has noted, even though viewers of complex audio-visual narratives may ‘relish in the pleasures of being manipulated’, they ultimately also ‘want to be competent

enough to follow [the films'] narrative strategies' (Mittell 2006: 38). In this sense, the increase of complex stories in the current audio-visual landscape may be seen as the result of shifting degrees of competence: it could be that excessively complex popular films like impossible puzzle films serve as a new way of challenging the competences of a new generation of viewers used to high degrees of mediacy and complexity - both in art and in real life.

5.2 Narrative complexity and contemporary audio-visual culture?

Much of the above discussion may appear as if it is seeking to explain the attractiveness of complex narratives from a somewhat 'a-historical' perspective - as the result specific interpretive and cognitive dynamic that these narratives afford (even though I have tried to argue that this dynamic is fundamentally historically shaped and situated). Some readers might as a result still be left with the question of *why now?* Why is it that complex storytelling has again come to the fore in exactly this day and age, and is now more prominent or commonplace in audio-visual culture than ever before?

In this dissertation, I have not tried to answer this question directly, due to a number of reasons. The most important one is that the matter invites a broad variety of possible hypotheses and perspectives. Scrutinising and explaining the popularity of these films can be done various angles that will offer different (and possibly all valid) answers. The difficulty then lies in determining which explanatory perspective to privilege over others. After all, does the root of these film's popularity lie somewhere in the current state of our culture and our particular media landscape? Is it related to our technology, the digital age, or the new experiences we have in a mediatised world? Or to people's increasing media literacy, competences, or habitualisation to complex narratives? Or are these films the indirect product of experiences and ideologies that we are exposed to as postmodern subjects? Or the desires and fears we repress as a society? Or the consequence of more practical shifts in film production, marketing or target audiences? Interesting as many of the possible perspectives may be, it is hard to make a case for one as being of more significant or influential than others, and comparing all possible hypotheses in a single study would be close to impossible. As a result, I leave it to other film scholars to explore these various angles in depth, and to make a case for their possible impact on complex cinema as a popular cultural phenomenon.

Broadly speaking, however, in terms of our current media-landscape, some contextual background conditions can be identified that seem to have a connection to the resurgence of narrative complexity from the mid-1990s onwards. These involve some observable *technological* and *economical* factors, as well as shifts with regards to present day *viewership* (see also Kiss & Willemsen 2017: 10-18). Notable technological shifts, for instance, include the rise of audio-visual carriers that offered easy access to time-shifting interfaces (e.g., DVD's, digital media players) which allowed viewers to engage in close and controlled (re-)watching (rather than being bound to the fixed temporal flow of cinematic viewing or television broadcasting). Popular complex films also seem to have emerged striking parallel to the growing cultural impact of the internet – a correlation that invites a wide variety of possible explanations. Some would argue that complex narratives have tapped into a new realm of

experiences that digital media have exposed us to, in terms of non-linearity, interactivity, or a 'database logic' (Simons 2008). But also significant seem to be the ways in which the internet provided viewers with platforms for a more participatory engagement with complex narratives. Online message boards, communities and forums provided a playground for the collective decoding and discussing of enigmatic fiction, allowing viewers to share and compare their and others' interpretations and responses. Internet and digital media even allowed for a new kind of paratextual augmentation of complex narrative experiences, such as with *Donnie Darko*, where viewers could further explore clues to the film's enigmatic storyworld on its website, which offered an equally enigmatic and fragmented digital labyrinth. As such, the internet seems to have formed a driving force behind the 'forensic fandom' (Mittell 2006) that complex films inspire.

In close connection to such technological shifts, complex narratives also seem to have catered to certain *economical* demands. One of the benefits of heightened complexity in narratives was that it could heighten the 'rewatchability' value of a film. Complex films encourage repeated viewings, as their viewers may want to return to the experience to get a better grip on the story, discover new clues, or find out how they were tricked. This can result in more sustained income beyond the box office, as DVD and Blu-ray sales and (online) rentals may outweigh complex films' theatrical revenues. Moreover, around the turn of the century, complex and twist narratives also offered the industry a welcome means to market the new home viewing carrier of the DVD. From the perspective of producers and filmmakers, narrative complexity offered an alternative, more economical mode of creating cinematic spectacle. The novelty of experiments in narration proved an effective way of making smart or striking films without having to compete with the costly visual spectacles of the blockbuster. As Matthew Campora (2014) also notes, narrative complexity became one of the tools by which a new generation of American filmmakers could carve out their position next to big budget mainstream films, producing what Jeffrey Sconce (2002) has labelled 'smart cinema'. Sconce coined the term to refer to the work of (predominantly young) American filmmakers of the late 1990s, whose films were generally

placed by marketers, critics and audiences in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema (...). Not quite 'art' films in the sober Bergmanesque art-house tradition, nor 'Hollywood' films in the sense of 1200-screen saturation bombing campaigns, nor 'independent' films according to the DIY outsider credo, 'smart' films nevertheless share an aura of 'intelligence' that distinguishes them (and their audiences) from the perceived 'dross' (and 'rabble') of the mainstream multiplex (Sconce 2002: 351).

Especially for younger directors on a tighter budget, an intriguingly complex or cleverly constructed story proved a successful method of distinguishing oneself in the commercial media landscape; looking back, it is interesting to observe that many directors of early complex puzzle hits of the 1990s and early 2000s (such as Christopher Nolan, David Fincher, Darren Aronofsky, M. Night Shyamalan, Spike Jonze, Paul Thomas Anderson, or Denis Villeneuve) have gone on to become notable and established names in (American) cinema in the 21st century.

Lastly, both these technological and economical conditions are related to shifts in reception that bespeak of a new kind of *viewership*. Technological means like digital time-shifting devices and online platforms and communities seem to have contributed to upgrading the traditional ‘passive’ role of the viewer (as a spectator submitted to the fixed flow and conventions of the cinematic screening) towards more (inter-)active potential. Complex films may have played on, or contributed to, audiences increased tendency towards more active and participatory modes of film viewing. In other words, as Miklós Kiss and I noted elsewhere:

The recent trend of puzzle films seems to support arguments that highlight a transition from the *naive* and *informed* passivity (Carroll 1982) that characterised traditional film viewing, to more *empowered* positions (Elsaesser 2011: 260) of interactive, actively devoted, *pensive* (Bellour 1987 [1984]) and *possessive* (Mulvey 2006: 161–80), even *forensic* (Mittell 2009) viewership. Laura Mulvey astutely sketches this shift as a transformation of a voyeuristic spectator (Mulvey 1975) to a curiosity-driven viewer, whose needs to decipher ‘respond to the human mind’s long-standing interest and pleasure in solving puzzles and riddles’ (Mulvey 2006: 191) (Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 16)

Thomas Elsaesser has argued that contemporary complex films play on these shifts by offering viewers a new kind of fictional contract – one that is no longer based on ‘identification, voyeuristic perspectivism and “spectatorship”’ (Elsaesser 2009: 37), but rather sets out to elaborate and test known textual forms, narrative tropes and story motifs to provide ‘brain-candy’ to the viewer (ibid.: 38). These shifts appear even more clearly in television, where the broad shift from predominantly accessible forms of fiction towards more complex and sometimes confusing narrative forms did not only contribute to a popular and critical acclaim of serial (‘quality’) television, but also significantly changed the viewership associated with it. As Jason Mittell (2006, 2015) has demonstrated, in television too, shifts in technology, industry adaptations, and narrative experiments seem to have amounted to changes in viewership. While producers and television networks were discovering the new marketplace of on-demand viewing, as well as the option to capitalise on transmedial storytelling and multiple platform engagement (through accompanying websites or games for instance), viewers turned to binge-watching (watching episodes back to back, or even ploughing through entire seasons of serial fiction in a matter of days) and discovered message boards, blogs, and online communities to share their interpretations and puzzle-solving activities (such as with the active collective engagement with the mysteries posed by the tv-show *Lost*). Television writers found out that narrative mysteries and complexity encouraged such intensified participation, and that such narrative forms could bind viewers more strongly to their ongoing narrative; at the same time, online fan platforms provided writers the opportunity to monitor viewers’ responses to the ongoing story, which could help them to plot their next bold narrative move.

In light of these changes, one could also hypothesise that narrative complexity might work as an invitational tool to upgrade the traditionally ‘passive’ engagement with ‘offline’ media like film and television to keep up with the new standards and possibilities of (*inter*)activity

promoted by new media. Some film scholars have even likened the workings of puzzle films to those of video games. As Elliot Panek for instance writes:

An element of non-filmic interactive storytelling exists in these [puzzle] films. Younger audiences that are increasingly comfortable with the burgeoning interactive medium of video games may find puzzle narratives appealing for this reason. It is not enough say that these characters are mentally unstable and that when the narration diverges from the classical mode, it is merely reflecting their fractured look on life. We seem to seek the nature of the instability even when we realize we are watching a psychological puzzle film, and take pleasure in trying to figure out the rules of the narration that presents the story to us. (Panek 2006: 87)

Warren Buckland (2014c: 185–97) has argued how the narrative design of contemporary puzzle films is influenced by new media and a certain *game logic*. Like video games, puzzle films promise a set of ‘reliable rules’ (Gottschalk 1995) for viewers to master. As Buckland writes,

These rules, which are reliable in that they are systematic and unambiguous (. . .) constitute the video game’s environment, or location, which is not restrained by the laws of the physical world. The game user can experience video pleasure primarily by attempting to master these rules – that is, decipher the game’s logic. Moreover, the desire to attain mastery makes video games addictive, which at times can lead to the user’s total absorption into the game’s rules and environment. (Buckland 2014c: 187)

This perspective also highlights how the (initial) *inability* to master these rules (or in film, the confusion we may feel as spectators) is an integral and essential part of the experience. After all, as video game theorist Jesper Juul points in his book *The Art of Failure* (2013), feelings of inadequacy are a key part of gameplay, since a game in which we never fail is unlikely to offer much enjoyment or gratification. Something similar could be said of today’s popular complex film narratives: comparable to how a video game ‘promises us that we can remedy the problem if we keep playing’ (Juul 2013.: 7), the attraction of these films may lie in that they similarly trigger us to overcome the ‘inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place’ (ibid.: 7) by allowing us to gradually master the rules of the game and gratify our sense of competence.

In sum, multiple perspectives can be further explored regarding the interrelation between narrative complexity and today’s broader audio-visual culture. At the same time, given the complex network of cultural, technological, economic, social, and psychological factors involved, it remains difficult to separate causation and contingency from coincidence or simple simultaneity. The above factors form some suggestions of what appear to be relevant influences that warrant further exploration, but I will leave it to others more specialised in these fields to determine whether the technological and economical shifts reflected (Everett 2005), encouraged (Johnson 2006), were answered by (Buckland 2014b), extended in (Cameron 2008), feedbacked (Hayles and Gessler 2004), set the stage for, impacted or simply

coincided with (Mittell 2015) changing modes of narration.

5.3 Narrative complexity and ideology?

For some scholars, answering the question of why puzzle films resonate with audiences today will involve uncovering what these films say about us – i.e., how they express or reflect our times, our minds, our cultural obsessions, or societal structures, our collective fears and desires, and so forth. Such analyses are generally the territory of *cultural studies*, the various fields of the humanities that theoretically engage in the analysis of cultural practices in connection to their socio-cultural (e.g., political, social, historical) backgrounds. Cultural studies' readings of artworks often target societal constructs and power structures that shape, underlie, or are negotiated in cultural practices and expressions (such as ideology, class, gender, or cultural identity).

This dissertation has not engaged with complex films' implicit or explicit ideological or socio-political concerns – an absence that may, for a study rooted in the humanities, appear striking to some. This dissertation's lack of engagement with these matters reflects a choice in scope: I have sought to gain an understanding of the *pathways by which* spectators interpret and engage with complex stories in film, rather than to *practice* interpretation in the ways necessary to expose these narratives' socio-cultural meanings or ideological underpinnings. I am aware that to some branches of the humanities, not dealing with matters of ideology is itself considered ideologically suspect (e.g., as equalling a naïve compliance with dominant ideologies), and such assumptions have sometimes been voiced as objections to cognitive approaches to the humanities in particular. As Carl Plantinga writes, some film scholars 'assume that claims for human nature are politically dangerous, since they establish normative behavior against which alternatives may be found to be perverse or inferior' (Plantinga 2002: 29). Critics have used such arguments to criticise cognitive approaches for an apparent lack of concern for cultural, social, or political issues, or for an alleged blind trust in notions of 'science,' 'objectivity' or 'universality.' Yet, as Plantinga also highlights, focusing on the cognition of viewers need not contradict, exclude, marginalise aspects of 'difference', whether socio-cultural, political, or gendered. Nor is cognitivism's appropriation of concepts from the sciences in itself reductive or naïve (although some precaution is certainly legitimate in these matters). A well-executed cognitive approach will select its theories and methods on a rationally founded basis, arguing for its significance (*and* limits) with regards to the answers and knowledge it seeks to pursue. As far as this process is reliant on adopting theories from other disciplines or neighbouring fields, this importing of models and theories is usually of a heuristic nature, and does not (necessarily) imply any blind faith in a higher authority of science (at least not more than in the way in which cultural studies scholars appropriate and re-utilise theoretical frameworks from, for instance, Lacanian psychoanalysis or Marxist critical theory). I do not subscribe to the idea that because the humanities' object of study is culture, all its research must necessarily be ideologically loaded; rather, in my view, cultural studies and cognitive approaches can co-exist as two potent and complementary tools for the humanities in studying the ways in which culture and the arts shape our experience of the world and vice versa.

Without entering the broader disciplinary discussion, I hope that the absence of ideology as an explicit concern in this study will not be held against it. More importantly, I would suggest that a cultural studies approach to complex film narratives would offer an interesting alternative take on to the topic – one that, to my knowledge, still remains relatively unexplored. Does complexity in narratives function as a site or tool for ideological critique? Does the popularity of such stories today expose underlying cultural or ideological patterns? And is the popularity of these films primarily a ‘first world’ phenomenon, or can they also function as a vehicle of expression for marginalised groups or conflicts? It seems to me that one of the most striking things about complex narrative forms in cinema lies the *diversity* of the set of films in which they have occurred. On the one hand, some films have used complex storytelling in ways that indeed invite readings of their formal play as ideological resistance – from the cinematic modernism that emerged in post-war Europe, to the radical Marxism of Jean-Luc Godard and the early Bernardo Bertolucci, to more recent uses of comparable technique of narrative defamiliarisation in various national cinemas (cf. Abbas Kiarostami’s *Certified Copy*, or Carlos Reygadas’ *Post Tenebras Lux*). At the same time, there are also many more commercially oriented examples that seem unconcerned with matters of ideology (think of blockbusters like *Inception*, or *Edge of Tomorrow*), but which may still be implicitly imbued or complaint with dominant ideological patterns. A future research program could be aimed at unravelling the manifold cultural and ideological intersections of the ways in which different cinemas have adopted complex narrative techniques, or the ways in which complex narratives in film can reflect aspects of our various social, economic, or political climates.

5.4 Narrative complexity and affect?

Another connection that seems to warrant detailed exploration is that between complex film narratives and matters of *emotion*. In this dissertation, we have touched on some of the ways in which narrative complexity and affect seem to intersect. I discussed the role of affective qualities (such as our identification or empathy with characters, and our emotional involvement in their actions and goals) in stimulating our engagement with a story’s more cerebrally puzzling elements; or, conversely, the way in which the ‘cognitively overwhelming’ effects of a highly complex narrative may evoke or create room for certain affective responses in viewers. These observations are however only the tip of the iceberg. We can arguably detect connections between complexity and affect in many of our viewing experiences. When watching David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* for instance, the unsettling music and sound design, evoked feelings of horror and suspense, and our visceral responses to the film’s grotesque imagery can all be equally contributive to the complexity of the overall viewing experience as the confusion exerted strictly by its narrative makeup. In Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*, the formal-structural play seems to facilitate an intellectual, but also very affective game of empathy and identification (for the characters as well as the viewer). And even in more mainstream cinematic puzzles like Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* or Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*, our engagement with the films’ spatio-temporal paradoxes does not only concern their logical or cosmic implications, but ultimately focuses on the dramatic ways in which these storyworld laws affect the protagonists in their personal and emotional choices about their family lives – choices that we as viewers may relate to.

In short, in our experiences of complexity in narrative, matters of cognition and emotion often appear inseparable. But although the acknowledgement of this interrelation is easy, it also continues to pose theoretical and conceptual difficulties. This is not least due to the elusive nature of affective responses in general – both in terms of their strong individual variability, as well as in the diverse and sometimes elusive roles that affective responses may play in cognition (even pre-, sub- or non-consciously). These questions readily entail larger general issues on how cognition is informed by emotion, and vice versa – matters that remain at the heart of debates in cognitive psychology, neuroscience and philosophy of mind (where, generally speaking, many recent arguments too have been increasingly critical of traditional Cartesian conceptual dichotomies like emotion and reason, or mind and body – e.g., Varela, Rosch & Thompson 1991; Damasio 2006; Thompson 2010).

In the study of film, separating ‘cognitive’ from ‘affective’ effects often forms a helpful conceptual and heuristic tool to formulate specific research questions about how films work on spectators. Focusing on one of the two, however, often entails the risk of overlooking or downplaying the role of the other. This has been a prominent critique against cognitivism – particularly its original, ‘first generation’ incarnations, which tended to treat the mind in terms of computational processes dealing in abstractions and representations. Emotions could be approached in terms of intentional states, such as judgements and appraisals, but integrating the role of felt bodily states into models of cognition proved more problematic. Cognitive film theory increasingly acknowledged and addressed the roles of affect and empathy from the mid-1990s onwards (e.g., Smith 1995; Tan 1996; Grodal 1997; or Plantinga and Smith 1999), but approaches to film narration often remained rooted in fairly ‘cognitivist’ models (e.g., Bordwell 1985; Branigan 1992). According to film theorist Steffen Hven (2017), one result of this is that some of the work on cinematic narrative complexity today still falls prey to what he calls a ‘cognitive reductionism’:

In this cognitive reductionism, the spectator’s affective experience of the narrative is assumed to be of no relevance to the question of narrative complexity. Affect is simply the result of a lack of information that temporarily blocks the emergence of a complete representation of the narrative. According to this view, the apparent complexity of the *syuzhet* exercises little, if any, influence on the complexity of the *fabula*, since from the analytical perspective, this is predestined to transform into a causal-linear series of events. Consequently, according to this approach, ‘linearization’ is perceived to be the condition of narrative comprehension as such, rather than an analytical tool or a mode of organizing experience (Hven 2017: 145)

Hven pleads for the recognition of the bodily and affective effects of complex film narratives, and seeks to challenge the thinking about narrative complexity in terms of the cognitive restoration of order and linearity. For Hven, complex films ‘force us to think about the interrelation of what has traditionally been kept isolated, such as the linear and non-linear; the affective, emotional, and cognitive investment of the audiences; the contingent from the causally determined; the body from the mind; etc.’ (Hven 2017: 14). He also argues that moving towards more embodied, direct and enactivist approaches will require the reconceptualisation of many of film studies’ traditional analytical and narratological concepts.

To these ends, his work proposes a blend of ideas from cognitive sciences, complexity theory, neuroscience, and Deleuzian film-philosophy (ibid.: 9).

Whereas my approach has sought to understand the cognitive and interpretive aspects of our engagement with complex narratives, Hven seeks to understand how complex narratives work in terms of altering sensations⁶ – or what he calls the ‘embodied fabula.’ Although Hven’s critique of the overly ‘cognitivist’, ‘disembodied’ or ‘representationalist’ nature of film narratology touches on some vital points for future theorising, it is equally important that we do not throw out the baby with the bath water by readily discarding or wholly inverting all cognitive models in order to prioritise embodied and affective impacts. Rather, the challenge for future research will lie in integrating both perspectives (the cognitive-interpretive as well as the embodied-affective) into more unified models, to conceptualise the relations between them, and to explore the ways in which narrative cues, interpretation, perceptual affordances, emotional arousal, and bodily experiences co-shape experiences of complexity. The theoretical underpinnings of the ‘second-generation’ cognitive sciences seem more suited to doing so than earlier cognitive approaches to the arts, and as such, these approaches may in the future offer more refined tools and vocabularies to think about the interrelatedness of perception, emotion, cognition, action, embodiment, and environment.

5.5 Medium specificity in eliciting complexity?

Lastly, another question that seems to warrant deeper exploration, and that is also closely related to the affective impact of complex films, pertains to the *specificity of the cinematic medium* in offering experiences of complexity. In other words, is narrative complexity *in film* qualitatively different from complicated storytelling in other narrative media, such as literature?

On the one hand, many of this dissertation’s claims about the cognitive and interpretive dynamics of complexity could theoretically also hold for other forms of narrative art. This is in part a consequence of the chosen approach: cognitive narratology tends to emphasise a ‘medium-independent’ view, focusing on narrative in terms of the mental structure that results from mediated experiences, rather than on medial representation itself. On the other hand, however, it is also reasonable to assume that complicating storytelling techniques like metalepses, temporal disruptions, or logical impossibilities exert different effects across different media, at least on a phenomenological level. Deeper investigation of these possible qualitative differences could support a more comparative perspective on different media’s affordances for narrative complexity. Furthermore, such work might also shed new light on the question of why narrative complexity has gained such relatively widespread popularity in audio-visual media like film and television in particular. In literature

⁶ An illustration of this idea is offered in Miklós Kiss’s (2010) discussion of the famous ‘escape’ sequence from Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 *Pierrot Le Fou* – a scene that presents its narrative events radically out of order. Kiss argues that the point of this scene is *not* that spectators (chrono)logically re-order the pieces; rather, he finds that the scene’s non-linearity has a ‘realistic’ effect that works ‘viscerally’ rather than on an ‘inferential’ level (2010: 171-2), expressively re-creating the characters’ sense of panic and sudden distress. According to Kiss, Godard may indeed undermine the realism of classical film style, but the director substitutes this for another, more cognitive-affective realism in which the most important effect is not ‘to understand what is represented, but what matters is the alteration of sensation’ (ibid. 171).

for instance, similar confusing or paradoxical forms of narration can be found throughout 20th century fiction, yet their impact seems to have primarily consisted of the acclaim from a more intellectualist audience – from early literary modernism’s attempt to express subjectivity or epistemological relativity in narrative form, through the self-reflexivity of ‘high modernist’ and ‘nouveaux romans’ such as Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*, 1957), or Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963), all the way to the loops, fragmentations, and enigmas that pervade postmodern literature (cf. the expansive enigmas of Thomas Pynchon, or Italo Calvino’s intricately intertwined fiction and meta-fiction). Although the cultural impact of these works is undeniable, their experiments with narrative form do not seem to have spread into popular novels the way they have in contemporary film and television (although more substantial research on the formal-narrative experimentations in contemporary popular literature might disprove this hunch). Part of this may have to do with the different roles, contexts and audiences of both media in our cultures; however, medium-specific affordances could play a role as well. It is not unlikely that constructing complexity in a verbal, symbolical medium like literature offers a different kind of stimulation than in audio-visual media, where part of the appeal of such narratives might lie in cinema’s ability to make such paradoxical, impossible or enigmatic worlds perceptually available (rather than a purely intellectual puzzle). Cinema’s more ‘direct’ embodied simulation, as well as its alluring effect of ‘seeing is believing’, may enhance the possibility for spectators to immerse themselves in ‘impossible possible worlds’, which could make film particularly suited to the fictional experience of, in Marie-Laure Ryan’s words, ‘making oneself at home on a Moebius strip’ (2013: 142).

At the same time, the emphasis in this study on contemporary audio-visual culture should also not eclipse the fact that complex forms of narration can be found throughout the history of modern culture and the arts. Regardless of popularity, there has been a consistent thread of experimentation with storytelling and its boundaries throughout 20th and 21st century literature, film and theatre alike.⁷ Moreover, reflections on the aesthetic fascination with complexity can already be found in the work of some innovative 20th century authors. In conclusion to this thesis, I would like to turn briefly to one illustrative case that reflects and reflects *on* this artistic drive to use complexity as a means to challenge narrative conventions, expand the expressive arsenal of stories, or to reap the strange or perplexing effects such fiction may produce – a case, moreover, that even though it stems from a very different medial and historical context than today’s complex films, is interestingly also not all too dissimilar from them. *A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain* (*Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain*) is a 1941 short story by Jorge Luis Borges, disguised as a piece of *faux* literary criticism. Borges’s short stories are often discussed and praised for their fantastical, philosophical, and meta-fictional qualities; yet what they frequently also display and thematise is the sheer fascination that we may take in complexity itself, and the intellectual and sensational pleasures it can provide. *A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain* presents a

⁷ A historical connection of course also exists between mid-20th century experimental literature and some pioneering cases of complex storytelling in the art cinema, with several influential art films adapting source material from experimental and modernist authors (e.g., Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*, based on Julio Cortázar’s short story of the same name) or even directly involving these authors as screenplay writers (e.g., the co-operation between Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet on *L’Année Dernière à Marienbad*).

eulogy commemorating the work of a recently deceased, somewhat obscure, yet entirely fictional Irish author Herbert Quain. Borges discusses several of the author's works, noting how they are remarkable in their attempts at astonishing the reader through formal experimentation. For example, in one of the discussed 'novels', a detective story, titled *The God of the Labyrinth*, the reader can discover that the detective's ultimate solution to the murder is in fact erroneous, and has to revisit previous chapters to discover an alternative, correct solution to the story. Another, titled *April March*, is described by Borges as a work of 'regressive, ramifying fiction' (Borges 2002: 61) consisting of a collection of forking-path stories in reverse: the reader starts with a single scene, to which nine alternative paths can be read as leading up to it – all forming different stories, and all placing their same final, inherently ambiguous, scene in a different light. And then there is *The Secret Mirror*, a play in two acts. The first, longer act supposedly presents the reader with a rather conventional drama, set in a general's country home, and revolving around the general's daughter, a duke to whom she is engaged, and a playwright who admires and courts her. This first act is riddled with small but strange dissonances. In the second, shorter act, the same characters re-appear, in a parallel plot, but under different names: the playwright is a traveling salesman, and is the author of the first act; the large country house is now the rooming house where he is staying, and the lady whom he admires is indeed of nobility, but only known to him through pictures that he cuts out of magazine articles.

It is not hard to find in 'Quain's' stories reflections of some of Borges's own literary obsessions. Like Borges's stories, Quain's fictions do not only present the world itself as a labyrinth, but also seek to expand the limits of narrative form – through fractured and radically non-linear structures, by highlighting the mutable nature of meaning, or by opening up metaleptic connections between layers of fictions and realities. Yet, although for Borges they may have primarily been fantastical literary thought experiments, for a modern reader like myself, the stories of Herbert Quain appear to have acquired an almost prophetic quality. Borges's imaginary novels appear to prefigure much of the narrative play actually found in midcult and mainstream cinema today. It is now acceptable for a film like *Memento* to expect that its viewers, like the reader of *The God of the Labyrinth*, are more perceptive than the story's detective, question the presented outcome, and puzzle the pieces together independently. Likewise, plenty of films in the last decades have explored the possibilities of branching or alternating forking-paths (from *Run Lola Run* to *Mr. Nobody*) or have used a retrogressive presentation of events to shed a different light on their final or first scenes (e.g., *Irréversible* or, again, *Memento*). And the radical two-act structure that Borges devised for *The Secret Mirror*, with a second act re-framing the first as a fiction within the fiction, and exposing its events as fantasised renditions of a more grim and mundane reality, could have been a blueprint for the structure of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. These films do not only resemble Quain's stories in that they playfully explore the boundaries and mimetic potential of narratives, but also in that they too make us, spectators, reflect on the processes by which we are implicated in their stories. By tempting us into trying to discover the narrative's coherence, order, and meaning, what these films ultimately foreground – just like Quain's stories – is our role in determining, conjuring up, and altering these meanings, indeed ultimately revealing us, the viewers, as the true 'gods of the labyrinth.'

