

University of Groningen

## The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

Willemsen, Steven Petrus Martinus

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Willemsen, S. P. M. (2018). *The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives*. University of Groningen.

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

*The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of  
Complex Film Narratives*

Steven Willemsen

Financial support for the printing of this thesis was kindly provided by  
The University of Groningen & the Faculty of Arts's Graduate School for the Humanities.

The studies in this thesis were supported by  
The Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG).

Cover image: Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII* (1923).

ISBN: 978-94-034-0360-1

Copyright © 2018 Steven Willemsen.

All rights reserved. Save exceptions stated by the law, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system of any nature, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, included a complete or partial transcription, without the prior written permission of the authors, application for which should be addressed to author.

Printed by  
Drukkerij Haveka bv  
van Hennaertweg 23  
2952 CA Alblasterdam



university of  
 groningen

# **The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives**

**PhD thesis**

To obtain the degree of PhD  
at the University of Groningen  
on the authority of the  
Rector Magnificus Prof. E. Sterken  
and in accordance with  
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on  
Thursday 1 February 2018 at 16.15 hours

by

**Steven Petrus Martinus Willemsen**

born on 8 August 1989  
in Eindhoven

**Supervisor**

Prof. E.J. Korthals Altes

**Co-supervisor**

Dr. M. Kiss

**Assessment committee**

Prof. A.B. Kovács

Prof. P.P.R.W. Pisters

Prof. B.P. van Heusden

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
I.1 Narrative complexity and contemporary cinema	3
I.2 Mapping the field: film studies and complexity	5
I.3 Aims	7
I.4 The structure of this thesis	8
<b>II. Conceptual &amp; Methodological Discussion</b>	<b>11</b>
II.1 The element(s) of complexity	13
II.2 Analysing the constituents of complexity	19
II.3 Overview: The studies in this thesis	30
<b>Study 1:</b>	
<b>A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema</b>	<b>33</b>
1.1 Why an (embodied-)cognitive approach?	36
1.2 Various forms of complexity and their effects on sense-making	43
1.3 A cognitive approach to classifying complexity	54
<b>Study 2:</b>	
<b>Taming Dissonance: Cognitive Operations and Interpretive Strategies</b>	<b>65</b>
2.1 Dissonant cognitions versus narrative coherence	67
2.2 Reducing dissonance: interpretation and naturalisation	70
2.3 Coping with dissonance: frame-switches and poetic and aesthetic readings	84
2.4 Frame-switching as hermeneutic play in impossible puzzle films	86
<b>Study 3:</b>	
<b>Impossible Puzzle Films: Between Art Cinema and (Post-)Classical Narration</b>	<b>95</b>
3.1 From art cinema to puzzle films	97
3.2 Impossible puzzle films and (post-)classical narration	113

## **Study 4:**

### **Last Year at Mulholland Drive: Ambiguous Framings and Framing Ambiguities 131**

4.1 Introduction	131
4.2 The narrative complexity of <i>Mulholland Drive</i>	133
4.3 The variety of responses to the complexity of <i>Mulholland Drive</i>	134
4.4 Frame theory and <i>Mulholland Drive</i> : a hypothesis	137
4.5 Conclusion	147

## **5. Outlook**

### **So what about... 151**

5.1 The attractions of complex films?	151
5.2 Narrative complexity and contemporary audio-visual culture?	158
5.3 Narrative complexity and ideology?	162
5.4 Narrative complexity and affect?	163
5.5 Medium specificity in eliciting complexity?	165

## References

Bibliography	169
Videography & Filmography	188

## Appendices

Samenvatting	193
CV	196

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

First of all, I am indebted to my supervisors, Prof. Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Dr. Miklós Kiss, for providing me with a consistently instructive, pleasurable, and confidence-inspiring yet constructively critical base for working on this project. I would like to thank Prof. Korthals Altes for her openness, her words of advice, and the wide and critical scope by which she has always kept the bar high throughout my development as a scholar. To Dr. Kiss, I remain grateful for his ongoing advice and support, which has shaped my academic trajectory, and for the exceptionally inspiring and cordial co-operation that grew out of this.

My gratitude also goes out to all the colleagues and teachers who have contributed to the ideas and discussions that went into this study. In particular, I want to extend my sincere gratitude to Marco Caracciolo, Jan Alber, Gábor Kiss, Krina Huisman and the members of the assessment committee – Prof. András Bálint Kovács, Prof. Patricia Pisters, and Prof. Barend van Heusden – all of whom have so generously invested time and energy in reviewing parts of this dissertation, and provided me with insightful comments and suggestions. My thanks also go out to the colleagues, teachers, staff, students, and friends at the Arts, Culture, and Media Department, The Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG) and the Research Centre for Arts in Society at the University of Groningen, for their encouragement and contributions throughout the research process – in particular Annie van den Oever, Julian Hanich, Annelies van Noortwijk, Melanie Schiller, Thijs Lijster, Jan-Wouter Zwart, Rosa Visser, Albert Meijer, Tom Slootweg, Vincent Ros, Ari Purnama, Martin Rossouw, Gert Jan Harkema, and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar. I also want to thank here my officemates in room 113, Krina Huisman, Hanka Otte, Annemarie Kok, Graham Lea, Suzette van Haaren, Jennifer Meyer, and Sieger Vreeling, who have so graciously put up with me over these four years, and have provided wonderful company in the process.

My work has also benefited from many lectures, public talks and discussion that allowed me to put my ideas about complex narrative experiences to the test. I would like to thank Markus Kuhn and Jan Horstmann of the University of Hamburg, and Patricia Pisters of the University of Amsterdam for their kind invitations, and the colleagues of the Society for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image (SCSMI), the Network for European Cinema Studies (NECS) and the European Narratology Network (ENN) for their always erudite comments. I also want to say thanks to the colleagues and friends with whom I have had the additional pleasure of discussing the research and ideas personally, such as Maarten Coëgnarts, Steffen Hven, Maria Poulaki, Jelena Rosic, Edward Branigan, Katalin Bálint, Frank Hakemulder, Elly Konijn, Charles Forceville, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Marina Grishakova, Hilary Duffield, Sebastian Armbrust, Ana Carolina Bento Ribeiro, Noël Carroll, Marshall Deutelbaum, and Radomír D. Kokeš. I am also grateful to the team at Edinburgh Univeristy Press, and to Gillian Leslie in particular, for the constructive co-operation, and their kind permission to reprint some previously published parts here. Lastly, my special thanks go out to the friends and colleagues at the Research Centre for Literature and the Mind at the



## Acknowledgements

University of California, Santa Barbara, and to prof. Kay Young in particular, for generously hosting me as a visiting scholar at their institute, and for providing such a wonderfully welcoming and inspiring context to work and stay in for five months.

Lastly, on a personal note, I have been very lucky to be surrounded by friends and family who have repeatedly proven helpful, insightful, and wonderful people over the last four years. Their importance to this whole trajectory cannot be overstated. I am especially grateful to Corijn van Mazijk, Willem de Witte, Lars Adams, Tycho Barnard, Thomas van den Berg, Derek van Zoonen, Caroline Dijkema, Ruud Wassink, Alexandra Casavant, Jelle Spijkstra, and Stefanie Liebreks, for the reflections on research, art, movies, and other matters of life and death. To my family – Hans, Henny, Dennis – I remain thankful for countless moments of support. And I want to say thanks here to the many friends I made on the bike, for what seemed like hours of welcome distraction at first, but which were also lessons (in perseverance, and coping with prolonged states of discomfort) that occasionally prove surprisingly useful in research as well. It is thanks to all of these people that I have continuously found joy in working on this project, which has been a privilege.

# I. Introduction

---

## I.1 Narrative complexity and contemporary cinema

From *Adaptation* to *Arrival*, *Primer* to *Inception*, and *A Beautiful Mind* to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, one of the most striking developments in recent film history has been the popularisation of complex stories and storytelling. The trend appears to have started from the mid-1990s onwards, when cult successes like *Pulp Fiction*, *Donnie Darko* and *Memento* began to playfully challenge, surprise, or perplex audiences through experiments with narrative non-linearity, fragmentation, ambiguity, unreliability, or contradictions. The success of these films was soon followed by larger-budget mainstream cinema (think of popular and acclaimed productions like *Inception*, *Looper*, or *Interstellar*), as well as comparable experimentations in television (e.g., *Lost*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*), where the growing complexity of serial narratives even seems to have played a key role in the recent re-appreciation of the medium.<sup>1</sup> Many of the storytelling techniques that these complex narratives rely on were previously associated with ‘highbrow’ traditions of fiction, such as art-cinema or (post)modernist literature; today, such complex narration has been firmly established as a common mode of fiction in the present media landscape. More people than ever, it seems, are enjoying stories that confuse and perplex them.<sup>2</sup>

Although a cinematic experience can be called ‘complex’ for a great deal of reasons (e.g., emotional, perceptual, ethical, socio-political, philosophical), the focus of this study will be on the particular complexity that pertains to the effect of *stories* and *storytelling* in films.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, this thesis seeks to systematically examine the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of such ‘narrative complexity’: What exactly is this experience of complexity? What gives rise to it? How does it work? How do viewers engage with it? And why would anyone be interested in a story that is confusing?

To address these questions, this study proposes an understanding of complexity as a *psychological and aesthetic viewing effect* resulting from a specific dynamic between film and viewer. It is this specific dynamic that I aim to understand. In everyday life, stories often function as cultural and cognitive tools that reduce the potential ‘sense of complexity’ as it

---

<sup>1</sup> For an exploration of narrative complexity in the context of serial television and its reception, see Jason Mittell (2006, 2015). Although the purview of this thesis will be restricted to cinema, simply as a matter of scope, I hope that television scholars might find some of the ideas presented here transposable to current narrative trends and developments in serial television.

<sup>2</sup> This trend is also clearly reflected in the profusion of scholarly reflections on it - see among others Staiger 2006; Panek 2006; Cameron 2008; Simons 2008; Buckland 2009a, 2014a; Kiss 2010, 2012, 2013; Poulaki 2011, 2014; Klecker 2011, 2013; Campora 2014; or Hven 2017. Although complex narratives have not eclipsed more traditional forms of cinematic narration (being only one among many parallel trends in today’s audio-visual culture), it is likely that this period of film and television history ‘will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the[se] medium[s] can do’ (Mittell 2015: 31).

<sup>3</sup> Hence, whenever this dissertation makes reference to ‘complex cinema’, this is shorthand for films featuring some kind of *narrative* complexity. It should be noted, however, that I thereby do not intend to argue for a privileged position of narration as the sole or primary constituent of complexity in viewing experiences.

might emerge from the abundance of available information that surrounds us. They help us to filter and connect relevant information (about people, events, and places – fictional or real), capture experiences, establish coherence, or to reduce ambiguity, by moulding ‘reality’ into an intelligible and communicable form. In the art of narrative fiction, however, some stories and storytelling modes seem designed to achieve the opposite: they strategically confuse, perplex, mislead, or destabilise us. The ensuing sensation of complexity, I will argue, can be defined as a momentary or prevalent ‘cognitive puzzlement’ – the brief or lasting moment when a spectator’s construction of a cinematic narrative is problematised, or, at least, when significantly more cognitive and interpretive effort is needed to organise the narrative cues, events, and patterns into a causal, chronological, and more or less coherent and meaningful chain of events. But what could be pleasurable about feeling confused, or being unable to form a coherent story? How to understand this hunger for complex stories that we currently see across (at least Western) film and television audiences worldwide? Narratologists and psychologists commonly think about (fictional) narratives as ‘mimetic conductors’ – things that we engage with for their content, such as the characters, experiences, actions, emotions, or immersive storyworlds they provide access to. Yet a highly confusing story seems to *block* our access to these mimetic dimensions, at least to some degree. Apparently then, there is something about complexity in a story that can make it particularly engaging in itself. This thesis seeks to understand this engaging potential of narrative complexity by proposing a systematic examination of the dynamic between films and spectators that engenders it.

In theories of aesthetics, the relation between complexity and aesthetic experience has often been hypothesised as an inverted ‘U-shaped curve’ (Berlyne 1971: 124): it is assumed that while some degree of complexity will render an artwork stimulating, too much of it hinders aesthetic enjoyment, marking out a ‘sweet spot’ of aesthetic enjoyment where some complexity is balanced by clarity. In his 1653 treatise on music, René Descartes argued that

Among the sense objects most agreeable to the soul is neither that which is perceived most easily nor that which is perceived with the greatest difficulty; it is that which does not quite gratify the natural desire by which the senses are carried to the objects, yet is not so complicated that it tires the senses. (Descartes 1961: 13)

Likewise, art theorist and Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim famously noted how in works of art, ‘[o]rder and confusion (...) cannot exist without each other. Complexity without order produces confusion; order without complexity produces boredom’ (Arnheim 1966: 124). The notion that aesthetic experience requires a balance between some element of complexity (or variety, multiplicity) on the one hand, and a structure of order (or familiarity, clarity) on the other can be found in a range of aesthetic theories, from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten to John Dewey, or from Roger Fry to George David Birkhoff.<sup>4</sup>

To this general observation, the particular case of contemporary complex cinema poses an interesting question: should we surmise that these films *retain* this balance, but shift the entire curve (and thereby the ‘sweet spot’), offering stories capable of stimulating a new (more media-literate) audience able to handle higher degrees of complexity? Or could we say

---

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel E. Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (1971), pp. 124-9.

that there are also distinct aesthetics effects to narratives that tip the scale towards the more complex, and that push a viewing experience *beyond* the curve's sweet spot, into the bewildering and confusing?

In this thesis, I will contend that both elements are at play. Although the popularity of these films indicates that there is indeed a general shift in what viewers experience as 'complex' and stimulating, I will also argue that a share of today's popular complex films appears to strive for viewing experiences characterised by higher degrees of complexity for its own sake, thus making a larger section of the curve accessible for a share of viewers willing or eager to engage with such 'exceedingly' complex films. However, to substantiate claims like these, it is vital that we first have a clear conception of what we talk about when we are talking about 'narrative complexity', and what exactly the experience involves.

## **I.2 Mapping the field: film studies and complexity**

The consistent popularisation of complex narration already gathered considerable attention in film studies. In recent years, a range of academic works appeared that have attempted to get a grip on complex films and the emerging trend (see, among others, Bordwell 2002a; Branigan 2002; Young 2002; Eig 2003; Everett 2005; Mittell 2006, 2015; Staiger 2006; Lavik 2006; Berg 2006; Panek 2006; Diffrient 2006; Cameron 2008; Simons 2008; Elsaesser 2009; Buckland 2009a, 2014a; Kiss 2010, 2012, 2013; Ben Shaul 2012; Poulaki 2011, 2014; Klecker 2011, 2013; Campora 2014; Ghosal 2015; Coëgnarts, Kiss, Kravanja, and Willemsen 2016; Kiss and Willemsen 2017; Willemsen and Kiss 2017; Hven 2017). This stream of publications has also spawned a proliferation of labels and categories by which to discern this new type of cinema. Besides *complex narratives* (Staiger 2006; Simons 2008) scholars have used terms like *puzzle films* (Buckland 2009a, 2014a), *mind-game films* (Elsaesser 2009), *mind-tricking narratives* (Klecker 2013), *modular narratives* (Cameron 2008) or *multiform narratives* (Campora 2014), to name just a few.

But what unifies the (sometimes very different) films discussed and categorised under headers such as 'complex cinema' or 'puzzle' films? Although terms like 'complex' are used widely by film scholars and critics alike, the notion often seems to be employed rather loosely; frequently, it is simply used to refer to a film's narrative structure or narration as being in some way out of the ordinary. Yet the question *what* this complexity is, or *why* certain qualities of a story make us experience a film as 'complex' often remains unanswered. In other words, although many insightful analyses of various complex films have been provided, the multitude of critical and scholarly categories and inventories has not exactly enhanced the understanding of what 'narrative complexity' comprises, either as a quality of a film or of a viewing experience. Rather, as Matthew Campora has noted, 'gaps in the conceptual work as well as a lack of specificity in some of the analysis (...) [have] led to a profusion of labels and categories' (Campora 2014: 5). The problem with the many of the coined terms is that they frequently appear to remain somewhat under-defined, both on a *conceptual* and *formal-analytical* level.

Firstly, on the *conceptual* level, the various terminologies often lack strict conditions or definitions. For instance, in his seminal anthology on *Puzzle Films*, film theorist Warren Buckland (2009a) revisits the Aristotelean definition of the complex plot to define the contemporary 'puzzle plot' as a new type of more excessively complex plot. For Buckland,

the definition of the puzzle plot is that it is ‘intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled’ (Buckland 2009b: 3). Such a characterisation does not offer a thorough definition, nor a clear demarcation of a set of films. Rather, the criteria are kept intentionally stretchable to include and account for a wide range of films. In his second volume on the topic, Buckland (2014a) acknowledges the looseness of his definition, arguing that he is ‘not attempting to develop a monothetic or essentialist definition of Hollywood puzzle films, which would involve identifying all their necessary and sufficient conditions’ (Buckland 2014b: 13). Rather, referring to Anjan Chakravarty’s classification theory, Buckland indicates that he strives for a ‘polythetic definition’ (ibid.) – a sort of Wittgensteinian family resemblance. Although this argumentation is defensible, the result is that, as Cornelia Klecker has noted, a term such as ‘*puzzle film*’ does little more than replace the vague concept of complex storytelling’ (Klecker 2013, 128). In Miklós Kiss’s words, most categorisations of contemporary complex film narratives ‘avoid the difficulty and trouble of delivering a clear-cut explanation for their argument, treating their subject safely by explaining the trend’s media archaeological, that is industrial and technical, context, or by simply providing extensive taxonomies of complex storytelling techniques’ (Kiss 2013: 241).

Secondly, another definitional strategy often adopted in scholarly analyses is a *formal-analytical* approach – i.e. identifying a set of formal features and traits common to (subsets of) ‘complex’ or ‘puzzle’ films. Thorough examples are provided, for instance, by David Bordwell on ‘forking-path narratives’ (2002a), Elliott Panek on the ‘psychological puzzle film’ (2006), or Cornelia Klecker on ‘mind-tricking narratives’ (2013). On the whole, however, such approaches also make it clear that the corpus of films commonly labelled ‘complex’ resists uniform formal definition. After all, from a narratological perspective, it is easy to see that the films lumped together make use of a rather wide variety of storytelling techniques and strategies, often leading to very dissimilar viewing experiences. Some feature narrators who are not to be trusted (e.g., *The Usual Suspects*), narration that misleads viewers (*The Sixth Sense*), or the presentation of outright logical contradictions and incongruities (*La Moustache*), while others make use of metaleptic devices such as authors who appear in their stories (*Adaptation*) or characters who appear to their authors (*Stranger Than Fiction*). Another significant share of these films works through *temporal* manipulations, be this a seemingly random re-shuffling of chronological order (*Pulp Fiction*), inverted temporal order in narration (*Memento*), convoluted time travel paths (*Primer*), time loops (*Triangle*), or stories that otherwise turn non-linearity into a feature of their storyworld (*Inception* or *Arrival*). Yet other films achieve their complexity through matters of space and storyworlds, presenting worlds that push the boundaries of the logically possible (*Réalité*) or comprehensible (such as the multi-dimensional structure of *Interstellar*, or the virtual reality logic of *eXistenZ*), while others experiment with characters by splitting, duplicating, or fusing agents (e.g., *Fight Club*, *The Double*, *Enemy*). Next to this wide array of storytelling *techniques* (the above list is far from exhaustive), there seems to be an almost equally wide range in terms of the *degree* to which such techniques are implemented and combined. This varies from films that feature one complexifying manipulation in an otherwise fairly classical narrative context (e.g., *A Beautiful Mind*) to films that cumulate several of these techniques simultaneously, to more radically disconcerting effects (cf. *Lost Highway*). In sum,

contemporary complex cinema is not easily defined or identified by a set of formal features only.

Defining the specificity of today's complex films becomes even more problematic if we also take into account that complex storytelling strategies are not unique to these contemporary 'puzzle' films. Rather, many of the storytelling strategies used by these films were pioneered in earlier traditions, most notably in art-cinema (particularly modernist art films of the 1950s and 1960s; see Kovács 2007), or to some degree even already in storytelling innovations in 1940s American film noirs (see Bordwell 2017). It has been a topic of debate among film scholars whether the current generation of complex films belongs to a novel, *post-classical* mode of film narration (e.g., Thanouli 2006, 2009a), or if they rather just form 'intensifications' of familiar storytelling strategies from the classical narrative tradition (e.g., Bordwell 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Bordwell and Thompson 2013). I will not engage in such discussions here. My concern is that although unifying concepts like 'puzzle films' can be helpful to engage in film-historical observations or debates, such categorisations have not necessarily sharpened our understanding of what exactly narrative complexity *is*, or what sorts of viewing experiences these films provide. If we are looking to define and discuss complex films (whether film-historically or contemporarily), what is needed first is a stable and specific definition of narrative complexity, which can then provide a basis for systematic analytic work.

### **I.3 Aims**

This dissertation is an attempt to fill the outlined scholarly lacunae by providing a more consistent and substantiated conceptualisation of narrative complexity in film. One of the ways to sidestep many of the present issues, I will argue, is to focus not only on the films and their different storytelling *techniques*, but to also understand their complexity as an *effect*. By this, I mean that narrative complexity should not *only* be seen or described as a formal property intrinsic to a film's narrative structure, but is best understood in terms of a particular *viewing experience* – an effect that a film may evoke in a spectator. An adequate and thorough conceptualisation of narrative complexity, I will argue, needs to include an understanding of the processes by which viewers engage with such stories. Narrativity, after all, is not just a basic structural feature of certain films, texts, or other cultural artefacts; it is also something we *do* – a pervasive and perhaps even fundamental tool of the human mind that provides a basic mode of making sense of the world, events, and experiences (this insight has, as we will see, in recent decades become more widespread in fields as diverse as narratology, philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience). Therefore, *instead* of examining the possible meanings or thematic patterns of complex films, and *besides* refining existing taxonomies that are based on these movies' recurring formal-structural features, I will *primarily* examine complex films in terms of their psychological impact and viewing effect. Complexity, I will propose, is best understood as a reception effect that emerges from the dynamic between a film's narrative structure and narrating devices, and a viewer's activities of narrative comprehension and meaning making – a dynamic that I will analyse in terms of its *cognitive* and *hermeneutic* aspects.

To develop this approach, this thesis draws on ideas and insights from a variety of fields, bringing together three main branches of theorising in particular. These are, firstly, and perhaps most obviously, *Film Studies*, and the work that has been done on the topic of cinematic narrative complexity, as well as on film narratology in general. Secondly, many of the concepts I employ are borrowed from *Literary Theory* – particularly from the disciplines of *narrative theory* and *cognitive narratology* that developed out of literary studies. These fields have offered many fruitful insights on narrativity as a feature of the human mind, and on narrative comprehension and interpretation – the most recent findings of which have not often been brought into dialogue with the question of complexity in film studies. Thirdly, and lastly, this thesis connects to various work from the paradigm of *Cognitive Sciences* – an umbrella term for the diverse branches of psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, artificial intelligence and linguistics that theorise the workings of the human mind. Cognitive approaches have entered the fields of both film and literary studies from the mid 1980s, providing scholars of the humanities with new models and theories to describe the ways in which people interact with and make sense of both real-world and fictionally mediated situations. For this thesis, cognitive theory provides models and a vocabulary that offer a better grip on the (embodied-)cognitive activities implicated in making sense of complex stories, which in turn allow us to think further about the various ways in which complex films challenge or even obstruct these activities.

A cognitive reconceptualisation will help to re-think narrative complexity in film in several respects. Firstly, it helps to capture and examine the distinct mechanisms that underlie and give rise to complex narrative experiences. Following the definition of complexity as a *cognitive puzzlement*, this study will analyse how complex films achieve this experience by playing on or hindering viewers' cognitive and interpretive activities. This, in turn, will also allow me to create more workable distinctions in the large and varied *corpus*, by examining how different films seek to evoke various states of cognitive puzzlement in their viewers, rather than filing them all under a single label. This also brings a nuanced *historical* perspective to the understanding of the contemporary trend, showing that although the current mainstream wave of complex films may be a fairly novel phenomenon, the ways in which these films strategically confuse and engage their audiences are also in considerable overlap with earlier traditions. And lastly, this approach can help to further think about the possible reasons why viewers may find such complex viewing experiences *engaging* or *attractive*. A cognitive re-conceptualisation allows us to disclose what specific kinds of activity, input, and mental operations are involved in and evoked by the engagement with complex cinematic stories; this, in turn, can provide a basis for further considerations and speculation on what might be aesthetically appealing about this process. However, in order to form any informed hypotheses on such matters, it is paramount that we begin with a precise and pertinent understanding of what the experience 'narrative complexity' exactly involves.

### **I.4 The structure of this thesis.**

The current dissertation is for the most part a *compilation* of earlier published work in which this approach to cinematic narrative complexity has been explored and fleshed out. While the *Introduction*, *Conceptual & Methodological Discussion*, and most of the final *Outlook* chapter are new material that I wrote for this thesis, *Study 1*, *2* and *3* were previously

published as part of an academic monograph for Edinburgh University Press (*Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*, Kiss and Willemsen 2017). These appear here in slightly edited form. *Study 4* is an article (Willemsen and Kiss 2018) selected from the various work that I (co-)published on the topic (see also Willemsen and Kiss 2017; Coëgnarts, Kiss, Kravanja and Willemsen 2016). The aim of this dissertation is thus to bring together key elements from the work that I authored and co-authored, on the subject of experiences of narrative complexity in film.

This compilation format has some consequences for the form of the dissertation. First, *Studies 1, 2 and 3* are the result of an intensive co-operation, both in research and writing, with my supervisor Dr. Miklós Kiss. The co-operation involved many discussions and co-writing sessions, and as a result, we share the responsibility for the co-published contents. More specifically,

- *Study 1* is an excerpt from our joint monograph *Impossible Puzzle Films* (Kiss and Willemsen 2017) based on ideas which were first proposed in publications by Kiss (2013, 2015) but which were for the first time fully developed and integrated by Dr. Kiss and myself into a coherent framework in our book. For this thesis too, this chapter provides an indispensable theoretical backbone.
- For *Study 2* and *Study 3* I conducted the initial research and writing (most of the work for *Study 3* is based on a thesis I wrote as a research master student), but both were extensively re-written by the two of us to become chapters in our book – the final form in which they also appear here.
- *Study 4* is an article, also co-authored with Dr. Kiss (Willemsen and Kiss 2018) for which I took the lead in the research and writing process.
- The final *Outlook* chapter consists of new material, although some of its points include extensions of ideas that were previously discussed in *Impossible Puzzle Films*.

A second consequence of the compilation form is that this dissertation contains occasional discrepancies in tone, style and form. These are the result of the various parts' different moments and contexts of publication. *Study 4* in particular marks somewhat of a rupture, as it was originally a stand-alone article. Accordingly, this chapter will contain some overlaps with earlier parts, as it re-introduces some of the already discussed questions, approaches, and theories as part of its argument. I have nonetheless chosen to include it here, because I feel that the article's case study is relevant in its testing of the theory presented in this dissertation on a specific cinematic case. Under these caveats, I kindly ask my readers for their patience and lenience to look past the resulting repetitions and formal lapses.

Since the studies included in this thesis come from different contexts, the next chapter will begin by providing a ***Conceptual & Methodological Discussion*** that outlines the proposed theoretical framework, and explicates the interrelation of the different studies and their scopes. This first study will argue why and how narrative complexity can be understood as an emergent viewing effect that arises from a contextually situated *dynamic interaction* between viewer and artwork. The subsequent *Studies 1, 2 and 3* will then unpack the different relevant narrative, cognitive, and hermeneutic components of this dynamic, followed by a case study in *Study 4* that demonstrates these components' interaction. The dissertation will conclude



## Introduction

with an *Outlook* chapter that sketches some perspectives for future research.

## II. Conceptual & Methodological Discussion

---

*An alarm clock radio turns 7.45. The radio announces that it is a beautiful 22<sup>nd</sup> of September in Schenectady, New York – the first day of fall. As local theatre director Caden Cotard gets out of bed, a Union College professor in literature is interviewed on the radio about autumn in poetry - the season marking the beginning of the end. As she recites Rilke's "Autumn Day", Caden begins his morning routine. He collects the newspaper from the mail, while his wife, painter Adele, prepares breakfast for their 4 year old daughter Olive. The radio continues in the background, announcing it is October 15<sup>th</sup>. Caden reads a newspaper article dated October 17<sup>th</sup>. As Adele helps Olive to get ready for school, while on the phone with her close friend Maria, Caden notices that his milk has past the expiration date of October 20<sup>th</sup>. The radio announcer wishes everyone a happy Halloween. Caden reads another article, an obituary, dated November 2<sup>nd</sup>. All seems fine, apart from a shaving incident a few minutes later, when one of the sink's pipes bursts spontaneously and injures him. Going to the doctor for a stitching and a routine check-up is enough to distress Caden, who appears obsessively attuned to all signs of decay or illness.*

*Caden and Adele's marriage is at a dead end. Therapy can no longer resolve Adele's lack of affection for her husband. She is focused on her art, and prepares for an upcoming exhibition in Berlin. She finds little ambition or interest in Caden's work – 'yet another' adaptation of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" for an audience of white, middle-aged suburbanites. When Adele is set to leave for Berlin, she suggests to Caden that she and Olive should maybe just go by themselves; the time apart might do them good. Caden protests, but cannot prevent Adele and Olive leaving without him.*

*The ensuing loneliness worsens Caden's physical and mental state. It also seems to magnify the hypochondriac obsession over his mortality. While waiting for Adele and Olive to return, he cleans the house compulsively. His aging and health become an obsession, and he projects himself into television commercials for medical products. Meanwhile, Hazel, an alluring and kind woman working at his theatre's box office, shows a romantic interest in him. He responds ambivalently to her moves, telling her that Adele is only on vacation. 'She hasn't called since you left - it's been a year,' Hazel replies. Caden protests that 'it has only been a week.' 'I'm gonna buy you a calendar', Hazel mocks him. Their date ends disastrously, when Caden comes home with Hazel (who owns a house that is perpetually on fire), but bursts into tears the moment when they enter the bed.*

*Caden receives a letter notifying him that he is the recipient of a 'MacArthur genius grant' for his work in theatre. He decides that he must use his newfound financial independence to create 'something big and true' – something into which he will finally put his 'real self.' He rents a large abandoned warehouse in New York City, gathers a large ensemble of actors, and begins to direct them to act out a broad canvas of realistic situations from everyday life. The ultimate goal, Caden reasons, is to come closer to life's truths through the theatre. As rehearsals go on, he remarries one of the actresses, Claire, and they have a daughter, Ariel. He continues his attempts to get in touch with his first daughter Olive.*

*When Caden travels to Berlin, Adele's friend, Maria, prevents him from seeing Olive. Caden learns that his daughter's body has been fully tattooed as part of an art project by Maria. 'She's a four-year old!', he despairs. Maria replies that Olive 'is now almost over 11' and leaves.*

*Back home, Caden receives the news that his father has died. Returning to the ongoing theatrical piece, he decides he should aim 'only for the brutal truth.' Caden has been systematically re-creating the people and situations from his life as part of his play. One actor complains that they have been rehearsing for 17 years now, without any audience. But Caden persists. Gradually, the urge to model the play after (his) real life starts to get out of hand. To erase the theatrical setting's lack of truthfulness, he instructs his technicians to erect walls around the sets in the warehouse, re-creating an entire cityscape. He also reasons that to really delve into the depths of his own being, he will need someone in the piece to play himself directing the play. A man who has been following Caden around for years, and who claims to know everything about him, is given the part. Caden casts a double for every person in his life, including for all actors and assistants working on the play. As the theatre piece expands, the boundaries between his actual life and the represented version become increasingly fluid and indiscernible. An entire replica of New York City emerges in the warehouse, which itself includes a warehouse, in which a fictional Caden directs a fictional play about a fictional Caden directing a fictional play...*

The cinematic *mise en abyme*, of representations within representations of worlds embedded in worlds, forms a recurring device in the work of screenwriter and director Charlie Kaufman. Screenplays like *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) made Kaufman one of the most recognisable and celebrated exponents of today's complex cinema. *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), about a theatre director's obsessive and excessive attempts to come to terms with his life and suffering through his art, marked the acclaimed screenwriter's directorial debut.

Writing and directing the film allowed Kaufman to let his taste for offbeat and convoluted narrative forms reach new heights. Some reviewers were hesitant or outright dismissive of Kaufman's ambitious project. *Entertainment Weekly's* Owen Gleiberman wrote that he 'gave up making heads or tails of *Synecdoche, New York*, but (...) did get one message: The compulsion to stand outside of one's life and observe it to this degree isn't the mechanism of art - it's the structure of psychosis' (Gleiberman 2008). James Berardinelli deemed it a 'maddening, overstuffed, overambitious, self-indulgent motion picture (...) Just because a movie is ambitious and challenging doesn't mean it can't also be tedious and at times unbearable' (Berardinelli 2008). Meanwhile, others found the picture to be nothing short of a masterpiece. According to the *Austin Chronicle's* Marjorie Baumgarten, 'Kaufman's first venture as a director is audacious, ambitious, amazing (...) intricate, self-referencing, and all-encompassing' (Baumgarten 2008). Carina Chocano of the *L.A. Times* lauded the film as 'sprawling, awe-inspiring, heartbreaking, frustrating, hard-to-follow and achingly, achingly sad' (Chocano 2008). *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw remarked that a film like this must be 'either a masterpiece or a massively dysfunctional act of self-indulgence and self-laceration. It has brilliance, either way' (Bradshaw 2009), while for

## II.

Roger Ebert, the film ranked among the bests of the decade. Ebert counselled that audiences may have to see the film twice to appreciate it:

I watched it the first time and knew it was a great film and that I had not mastered it. The second time because I needed to. The third time because I will want to. It will open to confused audiences and live indefinitely (Ebert 2008).

It is apparent that for critics on either side, a sense of *complexity* was distinctive about the experience of watching *Synecdoche, New York*. For some, this amounted to a deep fascination, whereas for others, it evoked little more than sheer frustration. But what does it mean when we say or feel that a film like *Synecdoche* is ‘complex’? What gives rise to these (often contradictory) sensations? As I argued in the introduction, the label ‘complex’ is frequently applied to certain (types of) film narratives, but it is seldom defined what exactly this complexity comprises. This chapter offers a conceptual discussion substantiating the proposition that narrative complexity is best understood as a distinct *viewing experience*. This will involve, firstly, the question of what aspects make up such experiences of cinematic narrative complexity (II.1), followed by a methodological discussion of how these elements can be aptly addressed and studied (II.2). Hereby, the current chapter should lay the foundation for the consequent studies, arguing for their relevance in complementarily studying the various aspects of narrative complexity in film.

### II.1 The element(s) of complexity

What makes the experience of a narrative film like *Synecdoche* ‘complex’? An evident first step to address this question would be to start by studying the make-up of the film’s story – that is, by mapping the narrative structure and storytelling techniques that it employs. Using the analytical toolbox of traditional narratology, one can observe several techniques at work. We can for instance single out the occurrence of the *metaleptic* loop, resulting from the *mise-en-abyme*’s conflation of different levels that are usually ontologically separate (such as real people and fictional characters). One can also observe how the film’s narration plays with time, manipulating what Gérard Genette (1972) called *temporal duration*, through conflicting time markers and odd disparities between discourse time (the time of the telling) and story time (the time of the told). Or one may notice how the story contains different and competing generic elements, such as when its apparent realism is juxtaposed to striking moments of surrealism or symbolism.

Such formal analysis can help to give us a better grip on the storytelling strategies used in the film. It can also help to compare Kaufman’s film to other fiction films, placing it in a specific category of movies and genres on the basis of certain shared features. Many studies on contemporary complex cinema have taken such *formal-structural* approaches. However, revealing as these studies may be in their dissections of particular cases, these analyses and formal-structural typologies by themselves do not suffice to tell us *why* certain audiences experience a story as complex; nor do they specify what makes the evoked *experiential* quality of such films distinct. Formal-structural approaches and narrative typologies cover one (important) part of complexity, helping to see what these stories are made up of; but another part lies in *us* – their viewers, and the ways in which we interact with these narratives. A dynamic interaction between films and viewers determines why certain

audiences experience certain films as being complex. Moreover, an understanding of the viewer and her or his modes of engagement becomes particularly pertinent if the goal is to also understand the nature, specificity, and possible engaging or attractive qualities of complex film narratives.

So how do formal and structural narrative techniques impact viewers and viewing experiences?

Looking at the reviews of *Synecdoche, New York*, what is first and foremost obvious is that most reviewers report difficulties in simply *keeping track of what is going on in the story*. Almost all of the critics describe some kind of inability or struggle in comprehending and organising the film's basic events or sequentiality. A sense of confusion emerges from what Manohla Dargis calls the film's 'slippery way with time and space and narrative' (Dargis 2008). One major contributor to this is that we lose grip (along with protagonist Caden himself) on the boundaries between Caden's (real) life, his mind, and his play, indeed a result of the story's metaleptic *mise-en-abyme* structure. Or, as Andre Male writes, when the world of the play starts expanding, 'with Caden enlisting thousands of actors and building life-size New York sets' (Male 2009) the film too starts

spinning off into a looking-glass world of magical revelations and surreal dead ends, where characters buy burning houses, become doppelgängers of each other and start dating the fake versions of themselves. By the end, it's hard to tell whether we're in the maze of Caden's mind or observing real life (ibid.)

The same goes for the film's treacherous *temporal* play, which also contributes to the effect of disorientation. As Dana Stevens writes, the film's 'sense of temporal dislocation is profound and pervasive' (Stevens 2008); and in Marjorie Baumgarten's words, time appears 'both concentrated and elongated in the movie; continuity becomes confused; chronology goes haywire, caught between stasis and anti-stasis' (Baumgarten 2008).

*Synecdoche's* opening scene offers an illustration of this effect. What first appears an ordinary and realist depiction of a typical, suburban American household in their morning routine is gradually unsettled by small discrepancies. Although the portrayed events appear to form a continuous whole, shifting time markers dispersed throughout the scene provide conflicting information: when the alarm clock goes off, the radio announces it is the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September; an article in the newspaper collected by Caden is dated October 17<sup>th</sup>; yet the expiration date on his milk gone sour was the 20<sup>th</sup> of October; later, another article in what appears to be the same newspaper is dated November 2<sup>nd</sup>. Temporal incongruities like these pervade the film, both locally (within scenes) and globally (relating to the entire timespan of the story – some thirty to forty years probably). Time markers thus seem to be there to disorient us rather than to assist us in mapping the narrative timeline. Something similar occurs in the film's *spatial* indications: the location that Caden rents to stage and rehearse the play, an old warehouse, later turns out to be capable of expanding to dimensions that allow it to harbour an entire (imitated) city. Towards the end of the film, the warehouse contains complete parts of New York City, including a seemingly identical warehouse within the warehouse, and airplanes that can be seen flying in the background. These narrative and

## II.

representational techniques do not only function as striking or novel poetic devices; the key point here is that they also impact viewers' *inferences about* and *comprehension of* the story. The sudden time lapses, impossible spaces, confusing duplications, and strange ontological transgressions are experienced as complex because they *challenge our sense-making*. They make it difficult to get a grasp on what happens, or to determine a coherent version of the when, where, who or what. This is what I will refer to as the **(1) cognitive** aspect of narrative complexity: it relates to our abilities to apprehend and mentally (re-)construct a film's story and represented events – or rather, the obstruction of these abilities. The formation of narrative structures is an elementary cognitive skill of the human mind. Moreover, cognitive approaches to film have assumed that, generally speaking, most fiction films are constructed in accordance with a set of norms, conventions, as well as psychophysical principles that allow viewers to perceive and comprehend the presented narrative with relative ease.<sup>1</sup> But cinematic narration can also work to strategically disrupt our ability to readily grasp a film's story – for instance by challenging our comprehension, logical reasoning, information structuring, or (over-)taxing our working memory, perceptual capacities, affective responses, or ability to make inferences. Complex films can demand from their viewers serious cognitive efforts to organise and (re-)connect the elements of the story, to resolve dissonances in their storyworlds, or to determine the who, what, where, and when of the story. Such cognitive challenges, I will argue, are paramount to the evocation of sensations of complexity in cinematic stories.

Yet the experience of a narrative's complexity does not stop at our (in)ability to grasp the full referential dimensions of its events and plot. Confusing moments like the ones described above also ask from us that we *make something out of the experience*: i.e., that we speculate on the 'point', on 'what it all means', or on how the strange elements cohere or relate to the narrative as a whole. When an attentive viewer spots the contradictory time markers in *Synecdoche*'s opening scene, for instance, the evoked cognitive conflict requires that she or he takes a stance: what to make of this oddity? Is one of the characters delusional? Is there some kind of supernatural time-lapse taking place? Is this an inventive poetic device that the filmmaker is using to have narrative time pass within a single scene? Is it expressive of how time is slipping through the fingers of the aging Caden? Or does it perhaps symbolise how life in general is just passing us by while we are caught up in the mundanities of the everyday? Each of these choices entails a different apprehension and construction of the story, and each attributes a different function to the sensed complexity.

These choices are of an *interpretive* nature. Viewers must draw on their background of knowledge to create meaning out of the experience (by relating it to, for instance, previous experiences from one's own life, similar techniques and conventions in other films and other arts, or to knowledge about actualities, history, philosophical theory, and so on). Such responses make up what I will call the **(2) hermeneutic dimension of narrative complexity**: it

---

<sup>1</sup> For the latter, also see Joseph D. Anderson's idea of an 'ecological' approach to film theory (1998), according to which film style and technique have, through a process of trial and error, evolved to work optimally on basic, universally human parameters of perception and cognition, thus ensuring and enhancing films' perceptual-cognitive 'accessibility' in order to make them culturally and economically viable.

concerns the knowledge, attitudes, and evaluative strategies that a viewer brings in to make meaning of a complex narrative.

The critics' accounts of their experiences with Kaufman's film are filled with such intensified meaning making activities. After all, what to make of the impossible events that pervade the film's otherwise seemingly realistic setting, such as the strange time-lapses, Hazel's perpetually burning house, or the impossibly expanding dimensions of Caden's play? In his review for *The Guardian* for instance, Peter Bradshaw writes that

Of course, the action of the film can't be taken literally: no "genius grant foundation" would have enough money to sustain such a crazy scheme. Yet neither is it supposed to be a fantasy: this is not merely what Caden is imagining he might do. It is Kaufman-reality, unreality, irreality, and the film won't have the same impact if you are not prepared to grant it some kind of "reality" status. It adjoins reality - and this, I think, is where "synecdoche" comes in, the part for the whole. Caden's huge, mad, pasteboard world stands for the real world, is part of it, is superimposed on to it, and finally melts into it. (Bradshaw 2009)

Several other critics (Dargis 2008; Stevens 2008; Strong 2008; Chocano 2008) draw on Jean Baudrillard's famous notion of the *simulacrum* – a representation that is only reflecting other representations, no longer referring to an underlying reality – to make sense of Caden's impossible theatre piece.<sup>2</sup> According to Carina Chocano of the *L.A. Times*,

"Synecdoche, New York," screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's wildly ambitious directorial debut, recalls the Jorge Luis Borges story in which the imperial cartographers make a map of the empire so detailed and true-to-life that it takes on the exact dimensions of the territory and ends up covering it entirely. Jean Baudrillard famously inverted the story to illustrate his idea about the "precession of simulacra," a postmodern condition in which the representation of something comes before the thing it represents, breaking down the distinction between representation and reality completely. (...) [The film] hints at the artistic and existential obsessions that come to stand in for the life of an unhappy artist who blankets his life with his work, struggles mightily to understand the first by way of the second, and loses an ability to distinguish between the two (Chocano 2008)

Such interpretive moves, like drawing on knowledge about a metonymical concept, literary tradition, or a postmodern theory, are not restricted to the work of the professional critic. Any viewer engaged with the film will have to make countless such interpretive decisions, on all levels, as to what knowledge the film is best related to create meaning out of this particular narrative experience. In this sense, interpretation is of course integral to any process of narrative comprehension. Complex narratives like *Synecdoche*, however, typically demand a high amount of such conscious and deliberative (as opposed to implicit or unreflected)

---

<sup>2</sup> A key clue for this reading is also provided at one point during the film, when Caden considers 'Simulacrum' as one of the possible titles for his play.

## II.

interpretive moves. These narratives often create effects of complexity by obstructing viewers' habitual narrative interpretation and inference-making, and therefore generally require or encourage an intensification of these processes to the point of drawing our conscious or even self-reflective attention to them. As such, such hermeneutic activity makes up a key part of the experience of narrative complexity in cinema.

So far we have established that the formal and structural make-up of a complex film narrative *does something to viewers*, posing certain *cognitive* challenges, and that viewers *respond to these challenges*, bringing in their own background of knowledge to make meaning out of the experience, a process we can characterise as *hermeneutic*. As literary scholar Marcus Nordlund (2002) has argued, any theoretical account that seeks to do justice to the 'unimaginably complexity' of the process of narrative interpretation will require the inclusion of three basic constituents: 'a *reader*, a *text*, and a *world* in which to do the reading, an interpretive triad that can be visualised as an equilateral triangle whose corners each represent one of the three factors' (Nordlund 2002: 317 – emphases added). Among these three components, the text (or film) is the relatively closed and finite one; the open-endedness that characterises interpretative acts follows from the film's myriad possible interactions with different readers (or viewers), who in turn relate the film to a variety of real-world knowledge. But as Nordlund's elegantly simple triad shows, the component of 'world' also plays a role in terms of another interpretive relation, namely that of 'text-world.' When we look at the responses to *Synecdoche*, we can note that the interpretive process in some ways also extends *beyond* a 'closed' interaction between film and viewer. In their interpretations and reviews of *Synecdoche*, one can see that the critics do not just draw on the clues directly drawn from the film itself, or the events represented (e.g., Caden's idea to name the play 'Simulacra', or the explicit presence of the notion of the 'synecdoche' in the title), but also take cues from the film's extradiegetic *context*. Questions like 'what kind of film is this?', 'who made it?', or 'what broader cultural tradition does this film come from?' can become instrumental to the way in which one engages with a complex story, and involve inferences about the film in relation to its broader worldly context.

In sum, to the interaction between film and viewer, a third component – enveloping the first two – must be added, comprising the (3) *shared contextual frames* that do not only *co-shape the film and its narrative strategies*, but which *also influence viewers in their apprehension and interpretation of the film*. Such contexts can include social conceptions of art, film-historical traditions and institutional or socio-historical embeddings, but also the interpretive discourses created by reviews such as the ones above. Inferences about a film's context can be formative to our cognitive and hermeneutic interactions with the narrative, as they provide essential cueings for choosing the appropriate interpretive and evaluative routines.<sup>3</sup> Context also often (co-)determines what viewers come to experience as confusing

---

<sup>3</sup> Contextual knowledge could of course be considered as being a part of the hermeneutic horizon of the individual viewers – after all, a viewer needs to have knowledge of a context to utilise it in interpreting a given film. But it is crucial to acknowledge the formative role of shared cultural contexts in interpretive processes and art experiences, as both creators and viewers of artworks negotiate all sorts of contextual frames in both the conception and reception of a work. As such, I will use the term context to refer to actual relations between the work and the world around it, as well as viewers' inferences about these, to consider them separately from more individual hermeneutic operations of meaning making.



in the first place; after all, a perpetually burning house will pose less of a pressing dissonance when it appears in, for instance, a fairy tale, fantasy story, or even in a work by an author known for her or his experimental tendencies than in, for example, a historical drama, a documentary, or an instructional video, as the contextual conventions of the latter genres do not provide the pathways to easily resolve such dissonances.

Take for example the role of authorship. In their reading of *Synecdoche*, many critics resort to director's Charlie Kaufman's prior body of work or author-persona to get a grip on the film at hand. According to the *New York Daily News*'s Joe Neumaier, *Synecdoche, New York* is 'typical of Kaufman', finding that 'whether this surrealist, time-skipping noodler is successful depends on what you want to see' (Neumaier 2008). Dana Stevens emphasises how Kaufman's earlier screenplays have

established him as the Kafka of Hollywood. He's the only major screenwriter with a distinctly literary voice. In fact, he may be the only "major screenwriter," period; how many movies do you go see because of who wrote them? The near-universal plaudits for *Eternal Sunshine* tended to treat it as a "Charlie Kaufman film," while only mentioning the actual director, Michel Gondry, as an afterthought (Stevens 2008)

Kaufman's 'distinctly literary voice' has in turn led many viewers to rely on a more literary frame of reference in their readings of the film, thus treating its complexity differently. This tendency has been noted by Benjamin Strong in his review of the film. He notes that

*Synecdoche, New York*, the directorial debut from screenwriter Charlie Kaufman about an endless and outsized theater production intended to represent the entire world, has been getting mixed reviews. What is curious is about these reviews is that so many of the more positive ones have relied on literary references to praise the film. The *Los Angeles Times*'s Carina Chocano mentions, for example, Jorge Luis Borges and Jean Baudrillard, as does the *New York Times*'s Manohla Dargis, who adds allusions to Freud, Kafka, and Dostoevsky. Roger Ebert, somewhat more idiosyncratically, compares Kaufman's film—which is set in contemporary Schecnectady and a futuristic DUMBO—to Suttree, Cormac McCarthy's 1979 novel about mid-century Knoxville. Something is wrong here. (Strong 2008)

The invocation of these author-oriented and 'literary' approaches connects to another contextual inference as well, namely that of '*art cinema*.' Despite being the work of a major American screenwriter, *Synecdoche* is commonly seen as an arthouse production, or at least, is considered as standing in, or drawing elements from, this tradition. The shared context of art cinema too entails different ways of apprehending the complexity, one of which is the foregrounding of authorship, or *auteurship* (e.g., Bordwell 1979; Neale 1981) attuning viewers to Kaufman's 'distinct literary voice'. *Synecdoche*'s affinities to the art cinema, and its tradition of narrative experimentation have also been used against the film. In his rather cynical and negative review of the film, *Entertainment Weekly*'s Owen Gleiberman mockingly writes that

## II.

It's a hallowed ritual of film culture. An artist makes a movie that is so labyrinthine and obscure, such a road map of blind alleys, such a turgid challenge to sit through that it sends most people skulking out of the theater — except, that is, for a cadre of eggheads who hail the work as a visionary achievement. It happened in 1961, with that high-society puzzle obscura *Last Year at Marienbad*, and in 2006, with David Lynch's through-the-looking-glass bore *Inland Empire*. Now Charlie Kaufman, the brain-tickling screenwriter of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, has directed his first movie, *Synecdoche, New York* (he also wrote it), and yes, it is one of those "visionary" what-the-hell doozies. Prepare to be told that it's a masterpiece. (Gleiberman 2008)

In each of the above readings, *context* plays an important part in that it supplements the film-viewer interaction with specific frames of meaning or knowledge. Hereby, context co-determines how viewers approach, interpret, and evaluate the complex narrative experience. The contextual frames around a film can become decisive factors in how we view a film's narrative, how we interact with it, evaluate it, and, ultimately, how we come to experience its complexity.

### II.2 Analysing the constituents of complexity

In sum, I have proposed that experiences of narrative complexity should be seen as emerging from dynamic interactions between *viewer* and *artwork*, which are *contextually situated*. These three constituents correspond to the corners of Nordlund's Reader-Text-World triangle. As Nordlund notes, to accurately account for the intricate process of narrative interpretation, the three different relations between the three corners of the triangle all need to be conceptualised: 'Between Reader and Text we get a theory of reading; between Text and World we get a theory of context; and between Reader and World we get a theory of reality' (Nordlund 2002: 320).

The three perspectives introduced above can account for each of these three relations. The *cognitive* perspective, firstly, provides a way of addressing the Reader-Text dynamics (in this study, Viewer-Film). As Carl Plantinga summarises, cognitive theories of film have generally 'approached certain elements of narrative comprehension and perception using models of rationality and practical problem-solving' in order to theorise 'a spectator engaging in goal-directed, primarily non-conscious procedures to make sense of film narratives' (Plantinga 2002: 21). This perspective thus addresses the cognitive means by which viewers approach narratives, as well as the ways in which narration and narrative structures impact viewers' comprehension. Secondly, the *hermeneutic* perspective will account not only for part of the Reader-Text relation (in terms of asking how Viewers come to interpretations of a given Film), but also the relevant dimensions of the Reader-World connection, addressing how a viewer draws on knowledge of the world in making sense of a film. Lastly, the inclusion of the third, *contextual* perspective introduces the relation Text-World, as it covers a film's connection to a broader background of (cultural) context, covering the ways in which, in Nordlund's words, 'one approximates and evaluates the relevance of specific conditions that attended the writing of the text' (2002: 321-22). For film, these conditions can

include, for instance, inferences about a film's context of production, its historical situatedness, its place in a cultural tradition, or knowledge about its author or director.

Providing an encompassing understanding of experiences of narrative complexity, I argue, will require a focus on all three perspectives and their dynamic interrelations. After all, complex films make use of certain experimental narrative *forms*, which in turn work by having an *effect* on viewers, to which viewers in turn attribute *functions or meanings*. It is one of my main assumptions that the distinct experiences and effects of narrative complexity lie in the cognitive and interpretive dynamics evoked in this process. But before proceeding to the chapters that study these relations, all three perspectives will require some brief elaboration, to account for their *theoretical and methodological* underpinnings.

### **II.2.1 The role of cognition**

First of all, characterising the relation between the film and spectator as *cognitive* sheds light on both sides of the Film-Viewer interaction. Focusing on the viewer's side, a cognitive approach first of all entails a functional or 'natural' view of narrative that considers narrativity as an intrinsic part of the human mind. One of the reorientations that this affords is that narrative is not only examined in the realm of mediated exchanges and artefacts, but that such cultural practices are also placed on a continuum with everyday interactions and real world comprehension. In other words, narrative is not just considered as a trait found in a set of mediated – cultural and fictional – artefacts such as films, but also as a *real life, everyday human strategy* to, among others, organise and memorise data, assert coherence, track changes and continuity, detect or create meaningful patterns, recognise goals and obstacles, form hypothetical, fictional or alternative scenarios, represent or communicate experience, or to understand the actions and mental processes of others.

The case for understanding narrativity as a key psychological capacity – one that is instrumental to organising the whole of human experience, memory, problem-solving, learning, and hypothetical thinking – has in recent decades been made across a variety of fields and disciplines. Narrative's functions as a key cognitive capacity has not only been emphasised in literary theory and cognitive narratology (e.g., Turner 1996; Herman 2003), but also in cognitive psychology, as an elementary mode of constructing reality (e.g., Bruner 1987, 1991), in research to the sense of self and identity, whether in philosophy of mind (cf. Daniel Dennett's (1992) famous claims on the self as narrative construct) or in psychologists' discursive analyses of conversations and life stories (see for example Bamberg 2011, 2012; Freeman 2011; Schachter 2011), as well as in neuroscientific conceptions of the workings of memory, self, and coherent sense-making (e.g., Damasio 1999, 2010; Young & Saver 2001). Although I am not in a position to evaluate the 'harder' claims about narrativity's cognitive or neurological foundations, the human propensity towards forming stories and narrative apprehension can be observed transculturally, transhistorically, and introspectively. As such, I deem moderate claims on its centrality to human mental, cultural and social life to be grounded and tenable.

Yet the primary object of this study is not the functioning of the human mind per se. Although I do strive to make the findings of this research at least consistent with the

## II.

paradigm of the cognitive sciences, my main target of study is the role that embodied-cognitive operations play in the specific interactions that we have with complex narratives in film. As a result, for this research, a cognitive approach is not so much about making empirical or ontological claims about viewers' mental processes, but rather, its applied utilisation is primarily related to (1) *definitional* and (2) *analytical* benefits by which to study the effects of cinematic narratives.

(1) In *definitional* terms, in seeking to understand the phenomenon of 'narrative complexity,' a cognitive approach helps to address the nature of both components of this notion.

To begin with, as for defining *narrative*, in his pioneering study on film and narrative comprehension, Edward Branigan points out that, in order to avoid ongoing debate on the exact boundaries between the 'narrative' and the 'nonnarrative',

what is needed is a description of narrative which avoids a strictly 'logical' definition of minimal conditions even if supplemented by more expansive mechanisms (...). One way to accomplish this goal is to concentrate on the cognitive processes active in a perceiver during his or her comprehension of a narrative in an actual situation. The issue then focuses on how an overall narrative pattern may be discovered, or imposed, in the very act of perceiving (Branigan 1992: 12)

A cognitive approach accommodates this change in scope. It shifts the burden of definition from a focus on mere typologies of formal-structural features of narrative artefacts, and, rather, locates 'narrativity' partially in mental processes and active reception of the spectator. The relatively recent discipline of cognitive narratology has provided insights in the roles that key capacities of the human mind (such as perception, language, memory, embodiment, and metaphorical reasoning) play in narrative comprehension (see Herman 2013 for an overview). A cognitive approach to defining narrative also facilitates a *transmedial* view of narrative. As Edward Branigan has also noted,

One of the most important yet least appreciated facts about narrative is that perceivers tend to *remember* a story in terms of *categories of information stated as propositions, interpretations, and summaries* rather than remembering the way the story is actually presented or its surface features' (Branigan 1992: 14)

This is particularly relevant in studying an intrinsically multi-modal medium like film, in which relevant narrative cues may be gathered from images, sounds, text, music, or dialogue alike, but still ultimately seem to constitute a single coherent mental representation that we refer to as its 'story.'

So what could be a definition of narrative as a cognitive structure? Several characterisations have been proposed; for the sake of clarity, I will posit here one, formulated by narrative theorist Marie-Laure Ryan, to serve as a working definition. Ryan proposes to view narrative as 'a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations among these entities' (Ryan 2006a: 7). Narrative in this sense is 'the outcome of many different mental processes that operate both inside and outside stories. The purpose of a

definition will then be to delineate the set of cognitive operations whose convergence produces the type of mental representation that we regard as a story' (ibid. 28). Ryan's 'fuzzy-set definition' (ibid. 7) comprises eight components (relating to four general dimensions) which together work to constitute narrativity. It is through the co-presence of these conditions that spectators can detect in a given representation an intention or potential of narrativity, cueing them to make sense of the artefact or events by 'narrativizing' them (Fludernik 1996).

Let me recapitulate Ryan's (2006a: 8) definition of narrative as a cognitive structure here briefly, adding my emphases to the key components of her model:

***Spatial Dimension***

1. Narrative must be about a *world* populated by individuated *existents*.

***Temporal Dimension***

2. This world must be situated in *time* and undergo significant *transformations*.
3. The transformations must be *caused* by nonhabitual physical events.

***Mental Dimension***

4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent *agents* who have a *mental life* and react emotionally to the states of the world.
5. Some of the events must be purposeful *actions* by these agents, motivated by identifiable *goals* and plans.

***Formal and Pragmatic Dimension***

6. The sequence of events must form a unified *causal chain* and lead to *closure*.
7. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as *fact* for the story world.
8. The story must communicate something *meaningful* to the recipient.

Narratives, whether novels, films, or the stories we tell our friends, are typically made up of these basic cognitive elements. However, not all these constituents need to be present for something to qualify or be perceived as a narrative. The definition is scalar rather than fixed. This means that no fixed set of criteria is assumed to be able to define what is (non-)narrative in a simple binary manner; rather, an artefact or text may lack one or a few of these qualities, but may still be recognised or perceived as narrative. This allows for a view by which some prototypical cases (e.g., fairy tales, classical Hollywood cinema) may be 'more narrative' than others (e.g., postmodern fiction, modernist art cinema). The advantage of such a view is that it avoids the kind of exclusively canonical focus that one finds in some structural or object-based definitions of narrative (e.g., the necessity of a protagonist, goals, complications, resolution, and so on). Rather, Ryan's formulation helps to recognise the potential for narrative engagement even in highly complex narratives that may challenge canonical and prototypical forms. Nonetheless, almost all of the complex film narratives that I discuss throughout this dissertation can be said to respect at least 6 out of these 8 conditions, and can thus be characterised as 'narrative films.' At the same time, the above criteria will largely exclude many irrelevant or less relevant boundary cases that meet only

## II.

one or a few of these conditions (from weather reports to much of abstract experimental cinema, for instance).

From this definition of narrativity, a working definition of *narrative complexity* can also be derived. I already proposed to define complexity as an *effect* that emerges when a viewers' cognitive construction of narrative is problematised. Using Ryan's definition, we can specify this as occurring whenever the integration of its eight components and dimensions into a coherent cognitive structure is hampered, or at least demands significantly more (perceived) cognitive effort. Whereas most ordinary 'classical' narrative films use mimetic strategies that offer accessible, epistemologically clear, unambiguous but still stimulating stories, part of the enjoyment of many art- and complex narratives stems from a deliberate break with this mimetic clarity in favour of a *controlled sense of confusion and ambiguity*. This may be done by hampering any of the individual components of narrativity that Ryan discerns (e.g., problematising time and chronology, like in the opening scene of *Synecdoche, New York*), or by obstructing their collective integration into a coherently related, stable or meaningful representation. The confusion and (momentary or enduring) uncertainty that emerges from this hindering can in turn incite viewers to engage in more active sense-making and interpretation, by which they attempt to attribute or restore the story's logic or coherence (the cognitive-hermeneutic strategies by which they do so will be explored in Study 2) – at least as long their 'narrative interest' is not blocked altogether (a threshold that may of course be different for different spectators).

It must be noted here that although I define 'complexity' as an emergent reception effect, I will use the term somewhat heterogeneously throughout the dissertation, referring to the various parts of the process that evokes it: sometimes I will speak of complexity in reference to a film's formal and structural narrative make-up (e.g., calling a film 'complex' because it, for instance, breaks with familiar patterns of storytelling, or presents contradictory information), sometimes to discuss the more anthropological, embodied-cognitive effect this creates (complexity as an inability of the human cognitive and perceptual systems to accommodate overstimulating or convoluted formations of stimuli), and sometimes to the resulting interpretive process (e.g., a work's complexity in allowing viewers to have various co-existing and competing interpretations). I consider these to be different aspects of the same emergent dynamic, all of which may alternately become the focal point in different parts of this thesis, depending on the scope of the analysis.

(2) Besides providing useful working definitions by which to rethink narrativity and complexity, a cognitive approach also offers a new *analytic scope* and *explanatory framework* by which to approach the formal-structural dimensions of narrative films in terms of their effects. A cognitive perspective, I will argue, helps to map *how* cinematic storytelling can create complexity, focusing on how films obstruct narrative clarity, logic, congruency, or coherence. This analytic perspective thus targets the interplay between the formal make-up of films, and the narratively 'wired' and 'trained' minds of their spectators, by seeing how films can work to strategically problematise viewers' embodied-cognitive construction of their narrative worlds. The present study thus proposes that looking at complex films through the lens of cognitive theory allows for the formulation of explanatory hypotheses on how complexity comes about, or is strategically created, in narrative interactions.

The next chapter, Study 1, will be dedicated to developing this approach, which could be called a ‘*cognitive poetics*’ (Stockwell 2002; Tsur 2008) of narrative complexity, as it is concerned with explaining the effects of complex narratives by their cognitive impact. After all, different storytelling strategies may create complexity in a variety of ways: some challenge narrative conventions in such a way that they no longer resonate with the cognitive and interpretive frames that viewers rely on for their sense-making, while other stories simply challenge our cognition’s ‘accommodation range,’ testing the limits of our comprehensive abilities, cognitive faculties, or logical, schematic or metaphorical modes of reasoning. By applying insights from embodied-cognitive theory, cognitive psychology and (cognitive) narratology, part of this dissertation will map how different kinds of complex narratives test our minds’ accommodation range and sense-making routines. Hereby, this study aims to provide a grounded analytical tool to understand the various forms of complex film narratives, their aesthetic impact, and, possibly, their role as ‘cognitive playgrounds.’ Lastly, the cognitive analytical perspective on complex narrative films developed here can help to unravel some of the current debates on complex narrative films, and the often under-defined corpus, by re-categorising different types of complex cinema according to the various states of cognitive puzzlement that they seek to evoke. This too will be addressed in Study 1 of this dissertation.

### II.2.2 (Meta-)Hermeneutics

Understanding a story is not merely a matter of automatic processing. As noted, making sense of stories is a fundamentally *interpretive* activity. Many of the activities paramount to our engagement with narrative artworks are better characterised as interpretive efforts than as procedural cognitive operations. Spectators need to bring in all sorts of knowledge, inferences, hypotheses and evaluations, to make a story ‘work’ and to render it in some way ‘meaningful.’ In Marcus Nordlund’s terms, any Viewer-Film dynamic will be shaped by frames of knowledge derived from Viewer-World interactions. Strictly cognitive-constructivist models run the risk of overlooking the role of hermeneutic elements involved in narrative meaning making, such as specific background knowledge, beliefs, competences, or culture-, medium- and genre-bound conventions.

Theorists of narrative have in recent years been calling attention to the under-acknowledged status of interpretation in (cognitive) narratology, from various angles (e.g., Nordlund 2002; Jackson 2003; Pettersson 2009; Ryan 2010b; Easterlin 2012: 20-27; Korthals Altes 2014: 36, 91-100; Caracciolo 2016; Willemsen, Kraglund & Troscianko 2018). To address the whole range of processes involved in the phenomenological concretisation of an intricate film text, this dissertation will seek to open up formal and cognitivist accounts of text-viewer interaction to the relevant contextual and dynamic interpretive aspects that impact narrative understanding and meaning making.

It should be emphasised that when referring to ‘hermeneutics’, I do *not* intend to mark out an interpretive *methodology*, but rather seek to work with a *theory of interpretation* in mind. In a strict sense, the term hermeneutics is often (particularly in the humanities) used to refer to interpretation as a *method* of study – i.e., applying specialised interpretation as a way of acquiring specific knowledge or understanding (academic or philological) of a text or

## II.

expression – for instance by uncovering enclosed meanings, themes, authorial intent, socio-cultural values, or historical or political contexts. Instead of this methodological conception of hermeneutics as a specialised practice (one that begins where ‘everyday’ understanding stops), I will use the term here to refer to the *general theory* of the process and practices of interpretation. Interpretation, in this broad sense, does not only cover the ‘higher,’ ‘post-hoc’ modes of interpretation that we perform in, for instance, critical and scholarly readings, but primarily the more elementary interpretive processes that underlie these activities, which are integral and fundamental to many processes of sense-making.

Highlighting the hermeneutic aspect serves two theoretical points: the first is a more general point, regarding the approach towards cognition tout court, while the second concerns the particular relevance of the interpretive dimension for complex narratives.

As for the more general approach towards cognition, although I am addressing here the ‘cognitive’ and ‘interpretive’ dimensions of (narrative) sense-making separately, this is only out of a methodological and conceptual convenience; the two must in many ways also be seen as fundamentally bound up. First of all, it is important to acknowledge that *many aspects of cognition are of a fundamentally interpretive nature*. Top-down frameworks of knowledge and background information provide interpretive dispositions that inform and shape our cognitive operations from the outset. Previous experiences and knowledge are instrumental to the perception, comprehension, apprehension and integration of events, cues and percepts – especially in heavily culturally mediated activities such as film viewing.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, our *cognitive and bodily make-up does not only deeply shape, but also forms a resource for interpretive activity*. Besides their role in *facilitating* the interpretive process, our familiarity with embodiment and cognition also provides us with knowledge, experiences, and skills that can be employed in the interpretation of stories. When making meaning of fictional stories, we can draw on our familiarity with certain thoughts or experiences, on knowledge of what it is like to feel certain emotions or bodily sensations, as well as on basic real world skills, such as the ability to orient oneself around spaces for instance.<sup>5</sup> Any comprehension of even the most basic of stories already requires that we have recourse to all sorts of knowledge (of both narrative conventions as well as real life and embodied-cognitive experience) in order to obtain an understanding of what is being (re)presented. And like in the example of *Synecdoche, New York*, our interpretive frameworks already shape and influence the way in which we approach and apprehend a story, and hence determine what we come to expect as complex or striking as opposed to unproblematic or obvious in the first place, as well as what we decide to do with the experience.

These claims are of course far from novel. In part, they were already central to the development of earlier philosophical, phenomenological conceptions of hermeneutics, where

---

<sup>4</sup> Important differences must of course be made between the various sub-personal (and often pre-conscious) strata of cognition that facilitate and shape the interpretive process, and the more conscious, ‘higher order’ cognitions that result from these. Whereas the former generally concern universal features of the elementary architecture of the human mind and body, the latter are more prone to individual and cultural variations. Both, however, can play a role in eliciting of complex narrative experiences. For a clear conceptual mapping, see Caracciolo 2014b: 390-8.

<sup>5</sup> The relevance of elementary embodied and deictic skills such as orientation to the comprehension of plot will be discussed in section 1.1. For further discussion, see Kiss and Willemsen 2017: pp. 91-103, 189-94; or Coëgnarts, Kiss, Kravanja, and Willemsen 2016.



the notion travelled from initially covering primarily *methodological* and *epistemological* matters on the (pre-)conditions for interpretation (cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutic methodology, which sought to optimise and refine historical and transcultural philological interpretation, without overlooking its subjective nature; or Wilhelm Dilthey's famous grounding of the Geisteswissenschaften as a hermeneutic discipline) to the acknowledgement that all understanding is historically situated, perspectival, and circular by nature (cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer's work on notions like the 'Horizon' and the 'Wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein'), all the way to recognising this circular hermeneutic disposition as a fundamental *ontological* property of any being-in-the-world (cf. Martin Heidegger's understanding of 'Dasein' as a fundamentally hermeneutic mode of being, as it always already finds itself embedded in a world imbued with meaning, while relying on a certain pre-understanding of that world for its perception of it).<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, these ideas have in recent years gained prominence in cognitive sciences again. The resurgence of such thinking is closely related to the so-called *second-generation* of cognitive science. These second-generation approaches to cognition have gradually emerged in response to the original (now 'first-generation') paradigm of cognitive sciences. Original cognitivism treated the human mind as a self-contained entity dealing with abstract, propositional, and representational information structures, through linear 'input-output' models. As a result, it was characterised by a tendency to model the human mind on the metaphor of a computer. In recent decades, however, a range of findings, hypotheses, and approaches across various branches of cognitive sciences have suggested more dynamic, situated, and embedded models of mind. Scholars across a diversity of fields have explored what have been collectively summarised as 'E-approaches' to cognition (Hutto and McGivern 2014). These comprise a variety of related concepts and approaches that propose views of cognition as, among others, *Embodied* (emerging from a physiological organism, and relying on simulations, patterns and knowledge provided by this embodiment), informed by *Emotion* (rather than dealing in merely abstract and propositional knowledge), *Embedded* in an environment (which co-shapes and constitutes cognition through constant affordances and constraints), *Enacted* (shaped by actions in and engagements with the world) and *Ecological* (developed through evolutionary adaptations to natural contexts). Ultimately, cognition is then seen as the *Emergent* result of these dynamic and mutual relations between brain, body, and environment.

Such thinking has in some ways brought cognitive sciences back in touch with insights developed in philosophical hermeneutics as well as phenomenology (cf. the role of notions such as intentionality, embodiment, and enactivism 'avant la lettre' as developed originally in the work of Edmund Husserl or Maurice Merleau-Ponty for instance). In terms of interpretation, these shifts also seem to emphasise how, as Shaun Gallagher (2004) argued, hermeneutics and cognitive sciences share more common ground and concepts than has traditionally been assumed; and that the same can be argued with regards to hermeneutics and cognitive narratology (see Korthals Altes 2014: 48-50). While film studies, ideas about embodiment and emotion have become increasingly influential in re-thinking many aspects

---

<sup>6</sup> An elegant overview of this development has been sketched by Paul Ricoeur (1991). For a broad but comprehensive selection of essays representing this tradition, see Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (1985).

## II.

of cinema and the way in which it involves spectators (whether from cognitive, phenomenological, or film-philosophical angles), a ‘second-generation’ cognitive narratology has been on the rise in literary studies, promoting a renewed interest in the role of the embedded, embodied, perspectival, and emotional aspects of narrative sense making (see Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014 for an overview). The topic of narrative interpretation specifically too has been approached from such a second-generation perspective, most extensively in the work of Marco Caracciolo (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016). Caracciolo’s work proposes a view of narrative interpretation as a constantly modifying feedback loop between a given subject’s *experiential background* and the affordances, perspectives, and possible interactions offered by the narrative (Caracciolo 2014a: 5). This notion of the experiential background covers a wide range of knowledge, experiences, and sensations – from basic embodied resonations to highly individualised competences and beliefs. By teasing out the affinities between enactivist cognitive theory, phenomenological approaches, and literary and hermeneutic theory, this second-generation approach offer a view of interpretation as closely and inextricably linked with the diverse phenomenological resources and conceptual knowledge on which interpreters can draw, and which narratives, in turn, may tap into.

What is the relevance of such hermeneutic theory to the study of complex narrative experience? My interest here primarily relates to getting a grip on the *process of interpretation*, i.e., grasping the patterns that underlie the intricacy and diversity of viewers’ actual interpretations of films. This is relevant because complex stories often foreground their spectators’ interpretive activities and dispositions. They frequently break with the more straightforward, often non-reflected sense-making procedures that characterise our engagement with conventionalised and unproblematically mimetic and accessible narratives, thereby making the interpretive process consciously attended to. Moreover, when the cognitive integration of the eight components of narrativity discerned by Ryan fails, spectators, as we will see, still have many options to, in Monika Fludernik’s words, ‘recuperate’ meaning (Fludernik 1996: 34) or ‘re-cognize’ narrativity (ibid. 269-274) by devising and ascribing functions (whether thematic, mimetic, expressive, generic, or meta-fictional ones) to a film’s oddities. The interpretive input that we bring into such activities (previous knowledge, experiences, viewing strategies) may become central to the experience and meaning we find in a complex work. This input can be synthesised from all strata of a viewers’ experiential background, comprising all previous Reader-World interaction – from elementary understandings of embodied sensations, perceptions, or emotions, to sophisticated artistic or philosophical concepts. This whole range of recuperating meaning through (intensified) interpretation should be seen as paramount to the engaging quality of narrative complexity. As such, a sharp understanding of these processes is particularly pertinent to this study.

Parts of this dissertation (particularly Study 2) will focus on how viewers generally rely on different frames of knowledge and experience to produce coherent meanings out of complex narrative experiences. These I will refer to as viewers’ *coping strategies*: the interpretive strategies that serve to reduce or deal with narrative ambiguity, incoherency, uncertainty or other effects that are cognitively ‘unsettling.’ I will argue that for many viewers, the pleasure

of complex narratives lies in resolving the evoked dissonances, ambiguities, and incoherencies through this intensified ‘recuperative’ play of interpretation. This study therefore also aims to systematically take in account how different interpretive strategies function in the understanding (and possible enjoyment) of different (types of) complex stories, since, as I will argue, these interpretive dynamics can entail very different meaning attributions, or even different aesthetic experiences, for the same narrative techniques – a claim for which I hope Study 3 and 4 will present convincing cases.

### II.2.3 Contexts and framings

Lastly, it must be noted that viewers do not apply such interpretive strategies as standard procedures, nor do they choose them entirely at their own accord. Viewers’ interpretive stances will vary according to what is deemed valid for a particular film’s type, genre, or context – in short, by the *context* or Text-World relations that viewers detect or infer around a film. Such contextual framings shape and constrain interpretive strategies. For instance, when a viewer ‘frames’ a movie as an ‘art film,’ she or he will generally be prone to attribute other (for instance, more authorial, artistic or philosophical) motivations to story elements than when they view a story as a ‘classical’ mimetic film narrative. Following Liesbeth Korthals Altes, we can speak, in a ‘meta-hermeneutic’ manner (2014: 95-9), of socially distributed ‘pathways’ of meaning making that are available to spectators. Such interpretive stances are cued by formal properties of the film text, but are also exerted through *contextual* and *paratextual* clues and embeddings (think about generically coded film posters or DVD-sleeves, film reviews, exhibition contexts, institutions, awards, and so on).

As Korthals Altes (2014: 32-4) proposes, one way of theorising the interaction between individual cognitive-interpretive operations and these contextual and conventionalised pathways is provided by *frame theory*. Frame theory can be seen as poised *in-between the cognitive and hermeneutic* dimensions outlined above, and the notion of ‘framing’ has in fact been used in both cognitive and sociological studies. Although this dissertation will use the term primarily in the cognitive sense, it will draw on insights from both approaches.

In cognitive sciences, the notion of ‘frames’ emerged in the 1970s from artificial intelligence research (e.g., Minsky 1975). It was used to refer to the idea that in response to new situations, we dynamically apply organised, prototypical structures of knowledge. When one encounters a new situation, Minsky theorised, the typical cognitive response is to resort to a bundle of knowledge stored in memory from earlier encounters with comparable situations. This knowledge frame comprises the associated expectations, routines, possible actions, and evaluative routines memorised and learned from earlier encounters. The interpretation of the current situation is thereby significantly shaped by the selection of the *frame* deemed most appropriate for it – i.e. the cognitive act of *framing*. The chosen frame then entails a set of memorised or habitualised knowledge and expectations that govern the apprehension of new, incoming information by guiding perception, attention, or pattern recognition, and determining salience as well as different ways of interpreting and evaluating the new, incoming information. Frame theory thus offers a model for an elementary top-down cognitive act. The theory will recur throughout this dissertation, as it offers a useful heuristic tool to conceptualise key aspects of narrative reception and the interpretive process.

## II.

At the same time, the notion of framing also emerged in social sciences in the 1970s. In his influential work, Erving Goffman (1974) posited ‘frame analysis’ as a way of detecting socially shared schemas for interpretation. According to Goffman, societies socially transmit ‘frames’ that guide and filter the perception and representation of reality. Frames and specific ‘keyings’ (such as ‘a game,’ ‘a ritual,’ or ‘fiction’, for instance) subject a given situation to specific interpretive and evaluative practices for those involved in the frame. Goffman’s analyses focused on how frames are negotiated, transferred and adopted in communicative interactions. In this sense, frames can be understood as social constructs that guide the production of meaning for the individuals involved in it.

I will propose that key cinematic traditions or modes of storytelling – such as the ‘*classical narrative film*’ and ‘*art-cinema*’ – can be approached as such cognitive and contextual frames. Viewers cognitively ‘frame’ films based on formal features and contextual cues, thereby selecting specific sets of cognitive and interpretive routines to be applied. As Study 3 will argue more extensively, a concept like ‘art cinema’ should thus not merely be seen as a film-historical label or an abstract scholarly category; it also forms a conventional and contextual frame that relates (especially for media-socialised viewers) to a significant set of relevant background knowledge and interpretive strategies. Such *historical poetic traditions* offer relevant contextual frames that guide our interaction with (complex) film narratives. As institutional and cultural contexts, they can cue and adjust viewers’ cognitive-interpretive stances. As we will see, some films that remain ambiguous in their narrative and stylistic framing cues foreground this effect. In such cases, framing decisions may become decisive for the viewing experience, leading different viewers to very different interpretations, responses, and aesthetic experiences of the same narrative. The case of David Lynch’s 2001 film *Mulholland Drive* discussed in Study 4 will offer a demonstration of this effect.

By including this contextual perspective, this thesis thus also seeks to include and account for the role of (shifting) conventions and artistic traditions throughout film history. Storytelling and cinema, are, after all, historically and contextually situated practices. Different traditions afford different kinds of complexity and different styles of interpretation. My readers trained in film studies may detect the influence of neo-formalism, and the work of film scholars such as David Bordwell or Kristin Thompson. Their writings have indeed formed an important source of inspiration for my approach. There is a slight difference, however, in that whereas the neo-formalist approach often takes a production-oriented perspective to historical poetics (e.g., what options and constraints did a filmmaker have and face in the film’s production?), my angle here will be more oriented towards spectatorship (e.g., what options do viewers have to make sense of different complex films, for instance by relating them to various traditions?).<sup>7</sup> But both sides do of course conflate, as filmmakers work with some (implied) audience in the back of their minds, while spectators often make inferences about the intentions of the (implied) authors of a work of art.

---

<sup>7</sup> This viewer-oriented perspective can arguably be found in a share of Bordwell’s work as well (e.g., Bordwell 1985). His approach, however, still relates viewer responses primarily to formal features that are intrinsic to films as narrative systems, whereas it will be the aim of my approach to dynamise these models, and characterise them as less fixed and procedural, and also emergent and contextual.

### **II.3 Overview: The studies in this thesis**

To sum things up, and conclude this conceptual and methodological discussion, it is by combining the above cognitive, hermeneutic and contextual perspectives that this thesis seeks to explain the dynamic interaction between viewers and complex cinematic narratives. To understand this in terms of the *text-viewer-world* interactions that shape this dynamic, this thesis does not just seek to study the films and their formal make-up, *nor* just the psychology of its viewers, *nor* will it map actual audience responses or (historically situated) interpretive activities; rather, this dissertation seeks to explain and define the ways in which these are implicated in each other, and together shape experiences of narrative complexity.

Over the coming pages, the body chapters of this dissertation will complementarily try to tackle these different dimensions of cinematic narrative complexity. The four studies represent researches on the three key aspects of the proposed approach (i.e., the cognitive, the hermeneutic, and the formal-historical conventions) from different angles, plus a case study demonstrating their interrelation. The chapters will be the following:

#### **Study 1: A Cognitive Approach to Narrative Complexity**

This chapter is dedicated to developing a cognitive approach to complex film narratives. It argues for the cognitive approach as a suitable method for addressing complex narrative viewing experiences, and begins with a brief outline of the general assumptions that underlie this approach. The chapter consequently connects the *formal* and *cognitive* dimensions of narrative complexity, theorising how various cinematic *storytelling techniques* are able to evoke various *cognitive effects* of complexity in viewers. This will be followed by a reconsideration of some of the existing taxonomies of ‘complex’ or ‘puzzle films,’ aiming for a more accurate differentiation of movies on the basis of their relative complexity in cognitive terms – that is, their ability to cause various states of cognitive puzzlement and trigger diverse mental responses in their viewers.

#### **Study 2: Taming Dissonances: Cognitive Operations and Interpretive Strategies**

Whereas the previous study addressed the effects that film narratives have on viewers, this second study focuses on the *interpretive activities* that *viewers* generally employ when faced with confusing stories. It discusses how cognitively confusing narratives incite in viewers an urge to *make meaning*, and asks how viewers generally cope with dissonant experiences in narrative fiction. The chapter offers an overview of the different *interpretive strategies* and *hermeneutic manoeuvres* that viewers may utilise to ‘tame’ troubling or puzzling dissonances in narrative artworks. Moreover, the chapter will also highlight how different interpretive strategies can shape different complex viewing experiences. It concludes with a discussion of the distinct roles that hesitations and ambiguities in these interpretive processes can garner in complex narrative experiences.

#### **Study 3: Impossible Puzzle Films: Between Art Cinema and (Post-)Classical Narration**

The third study will provide a more *film-historical* stance on narrative complexity, turning the scope back to the formal features and historical poetics of complex films. More specifically, this chapter looks at how many contemporary complex films carefully balance

## II.

complexifying elements derived from earlier ‘art-cinematic’ traditions on the one hand, with an appeal to familiar elements from the tradition of ‘classical narrative film’ on the other. The chapter is, however, not a strictly historical chapter or formal study; rather, it theorises how different traditions of filmmaking have foregrounded different modes of complexity, thus including the roles of key *contextual* traditions into the theorising. The chapter also offers an attempt to systematically address how an interpretive and evaluative frame such as ‘art-cinema’ has not only given rise to a distinct kind of complex films, but also promotes distinct interpretive stances in viewers, which in turn facilitate different viewing experiences. As such, it should demonstrate the *interrelatedness* of the (historical) *formal-structural* composition of films, in different *textual* and *contextual* traditions, the *cognitive effects* these have on viewers, and the specific *interpretive strategies* that these textual and contextual determinants cue in viewers

### **Study 4: *Last Year at Mulholland Drive: Ambiguous Framings and Framing Ambiguities***

This final study focuses on David Lynch’s 2001 film *Mulholland Drive* - one of the most enigmatic, influential and widely discussed cases of contemporary complex cinema. Rather than offering an(other) interpretation of the film, this article takes a meta-position, aiming to expose some of the *reasons why* Lynch’s highly complex and avant-gardistic narrative has spawned an abundance of interpretations and continues to fascinate a large audience. The case study will highlight the dynamic interrelation between cognitive effects of complexity, historical traditions of film narration, and viewers’ interpretive stances.

Lastly, this thesis will conclude with a final ***Outlook*** chapter. Rather than recapitulating the conclusions from the earlier chapters, this epilogue will serve to take a more prospective viewpoint, sketching some potential future perspectives for further research on the topic of narrative complexity in film.

