Before or beyond narrative? Towards a complex systems theory of contemporary films

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PART 1: REFLEXIVITY

An individual film, *The Final Cut* (Omar Naim, 2004, US/Canada/Germany), will be used as starting point for the study of particular processes of complexity in films of the “complex narrative” tendency. This film, although it has attracted scant attention from theorists of complex narrative films, shares common characteristics with other films of this tendency, and particularly stands out due to its intense self-reflexivity. While the issue of self-reflexivity in the context of complex films will be extensively discussed in Chapter 2, *The Final Cut* will be a useful point of reference throughout Part 1. In my plot-oriented analysis of the film in this first chapter, I will illustrate particular motivations, techniques and functions of self-reflexivity, so as to prepare the reader for the discussion of this concept in the next two chapters of Part 1. The self-reflexivity of *The Final Cut* is intertwined with the non-sequential temporal structure of the plot, and raises question about the fundamental characteristics of narrative cinema, related to issues of time and the ‘cut’ of editing. The fact that *The Final Cut* does so from the perspective of mainstream Hollywood cinema is symptomatic, as I see it, of a shift in cinematic institutional practices, which strive to accommodate more and more complex forms of narration.

1. Implanted time: *The Final Cut* and the reflexive loops of complex narratives

   “Your life wasn’t what you thought it was… Would you live it differently?” The taglines of *The Final Cut* prepare the viewer that the future and the past are mutually dependent in this film.\(^{17}\) The story of *The Final Cut* is set in the near future of a developed Western city,\(^{18}\) where nanotechnologies and their applications in biomedicine have made it possible to record all human audiovisual perception with the surgical installment of a biochip, called the “zoe-implant”, in the brain of unborn foetuses. As the person is born and grows up, this biochip, entirely organic, becomes fully integrated in the brain tissue to the point that it becomes a functional part of it, “virtually undetectable”. According to the plot, most of the time the bearers of the implant are unaware of this “miraculous gift” that their parents gave them before birth until they reach adulthood. But by the time they turn 21, EYE-tech, the company that produces and distributes the zoe-implants, advises parents to reveal to their children that all their memories so far have been, and will continue being recorded, until the end of their lives. The implant cannot be extracted while the carrier is alive without risking severe brain damage. After death though, this biochip can be surgically extracted and used as a peculiar memory stick. As soon as the chip is inserted into a specifically designed computer, it
makes possible to retrieve footage from all recorded memories and to make movies out of them.

These exclusively biographical movies, called “rememories”, are publicly projected in special ceremonies dedicated to deceased implant carriers. The projection takes place in church chambers that have been turned into cinema theatres for this purpose, while friends and relatives of the deceased constitute the audience. Made out of personal perceptual archives, the rememories not only produce a flattering postmortem portrait of the deceased, gracings them with an honored memory, but they also promise to keep their memory literally ‘alive’, as the rememories will remain available for projection and viewing. However, we soon realize that it is EYE-tech that owns the footage and controls the rememories. Through them, it is not really the memory of the deceased that stays alive; rememories are rather constructed from personal memories re-experienced by a stranger: a “cutter”.

According to the plot, professional cutters edit the footage retrieved from the extracted implants and decide whether something is worth being included in the rememory or not. The main character of The Final Cut, Alan Hakman¹⁹ (played by Robin Williams), is such a cutter, a specialized editor of rememories. Socially alienated, he lives through the lives of others, being totally attached to his editing equipment—the “guillotine”, as it is ironically called in the cutters’ jargon—with the help of which he cuts and edits the bits and pieces of other fragmentary life-times. A “sin-eater” as he calls himself after an ancient tradition,²⁰ he has to carry all the ethical burden of his ‘cutting decisions’ about the traces that a human life leaves behind.

Placed in a science fiction context, The Final Cut appears as an Orwellian cinematic tale about the integration of technology and biology. The appropriation of biodigital technologies by sinister corporations is pictured as enabling the omnipresence of surveillance to expand from public spaces to the most intimate space, that of the interior of the human body, and particularly to the center of human agency and self-control: the brain. Human agency thus seems to be in peril—as we are constantly reminded in the course of the film—but strangely, in the near-future society where the story is set, the unprecedented violation of private life that EYE-tech performs is not imposed by some authoritarian regime, as it often happens in dystopian science fiction, and especially in works such as 1984. Rather, at first it appears as socially acceptable and even desirable, since this miraculous technology is supposed to have the seemingly innocent purpose of making rememories. From this perspective, The Final Cut’s futuristic speculation updates the centralized model of control of the Orwellian tradition into the current actual conditions of the contemporary globalized societies, where human lifetimes are recorded, uploaded and distributed (in platforms such as Youtube and Facebook) through what seems to be a ‘bottom-up’ process, starting from the
users’ full complicity and desire. At the same time, *The Final Cut* points at the connections between this tendency towards increased commodification and control of ‘self-broadcasting’ and the cinematic apparatus. Modernity prescribed the merging of machine-time with human-time as an economic necessity. At the other side of Taylorism’s mechanization of the worker in the line of production, cinema also played its crucial role in the commodification of lifetimes, as it has been the pioneer technology of the modern shift to the capitalization of leisure, to this merging of the machine-time with the human time (Cubitt 2004: 51). From this perspective, the idea behind *The Final Cut*’s story, that of a quasi-cinematic camera being implanted into the human brain and becoming an undetectable part of it, rendering life-time into commodity, seems like the extreme consequence of a development that started more than a century ago.

In *The Final Cut*’s world, human lifetimes are literally turned into commodities, implant footages that can be stored in hard disks and distributed by a corporation, for the time being serving relatively innocent rememories, but with unknown future implications. EYE-tech is pictured as exploiting the apparent people’s ‘need’ to achieve immortality by recording their ephemeral perception in lasting materials. At the same time, a web of omnipresent and distributed surveillance is being created by the implant carriers themselves, who, without intention, record all the people they encounter, along with their own personal thoughts and secrets, into their zoe-implants, which ultimately end up in the archives of EYE-tech. Human life becomes a commodity wrapped into an appealing high-tech package that seems to have already seduced the individuals populating the not-so-futuristic society of *The Final Cut*.

**Cyberpunk’s rememory**

According to *The Final Cut*’s plot, EYE-tech faces resistance by some rebellion groups of neo-punks or “anti-zoe hippies”, as they are called in the film, who organize a wide range of reactions, from protests against the corporation to “terrorist” attacks (arsons against EYE-tech’s factories). The anti-zoe hippies have also invented an “electrosynth tattoo”, made out of a particular kind of ink that interferes with the implants, “blocking them from recording audio or video”. Part of the more radical branches of the anti-implant resistance is Alan’s antagonist, Fletcher (Jim Caviezel), an ex-cutter who quit his job and decided to fight against the EYE-tech Corporation. Fletcher now exerts his bitter critique on Alan, trying to shake his devotion to his guillotine. But Alan faces his work on implants with cynicism: “I didn’t invent the technology”, he responds to Fletcher’s accusations. “If people didn’t want it, they wouldn’t buy it, Fletcher. It fulfills a human need”.

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However, we soon find out that what drives Alan’s devotion to the rememory industry is not cynicism but guilt. Alan carries his own sins that he would wish to erase, just as those of his clients. It is revealed that when he was a kid he caused the death of another boy (Louis); and the memory of this old ‘sin’ determined his life and his choices ever since. Now offering his clients a relief from the burden of their sins, which otherwise would taint their memory forever, Alan provides them with a decent commemoration, making out of their life-footage a coherent and taintless narrative, one which he would obviously desire for himself.

Beyond its sci-fi genre classification, *The Final Cut* seems to partake of a wider cinematic tendency, the one of complex films. The film’s connection with the “complex narrative” tendency is multifaceted. One way to approach the film’s complexity is through its “puzzle” or “mind-game” character. Mind-game films, according to Elsaesser, often involve a series of ‘tricks’ or “mind-games” that the films play with their characters but also with the viewer. They carefully prepare a twist that comes to fundamentally alter the story so far, and to make it demanding reinterpretation through a different lens; and IC technologies are often deployed to mediate these reflexive surprises. The narratives usually start with a hero who thinks that he has control over his life, a presupposition that soon turns out to be groundless. The heroes of mind-game films, like Alan, while observing (or manipulating) the lives of others get to realize that their own life is also being observed. They identify with the role of the ‘operator of the machine’ (in this case, the guillotine), but soon find out that in reverse, someone else operates upon them. They are neither the omnipotent rational agents, nor the masters of the mechanism, but ‘automata’ themselves. *The Final Cut*’s tagline “your life wasn't what you thought it was”, could thus be the motto of puzzle films.

The crucial twist in *The Final Cut* comes when Alan accidentally discovers that he himself carries a zoe-implant in his brain. This finding brings him face to face with his own cyborgization and potential exploitation by EYE-tech. He edits implants while his own implant (and, consequently, his lifetime) is meant to be edited. The revelation that he is an implant carrier—something prohibited to cutters by their professional code, as the film has already informed us since the very beginning—is for Alan a shocking self-reflexive experience. So we see him smashing the mirror in which he first faces his reflection, ‘disappearing’ into the city’s crowd encircled by echoing voices, leaning against a wall and collapsing helplessly on the pavement. He is found confronted with his own limits, as posed by his image, his voice and his body, respectively. Alan realizes that his placement in the system is not one of an autonomous observer of others’ life-times: EYE-tech’s project of life-commodification includes him in its raw products. After this realization, the definite boundaries that Alan perceived as separating and protecting him from the world get instantly blurred. And the secret of the machine’s (as well as of his own) existence is kept in the—
ironically—dusty paper archives of a corporation that renders every single moment of his lifetime into footage ready to be ‘cut’.

It would be useful to take into account some special genre characteristics of *The Final Cut* that reveal a continuity between the current cultural tendency of complex films and a somewhat older cultural tendency, that of cyberpunk. Such continuity is especially illuminating when the issue of agency is raised in the context of complex narratives. The characterization of *The Final Cut* as “cyberpunk” not only by relevant specialized websites (like the cyberpunkreview.com), but also by commercial sites (like blockbuster.com) comes as no surprise when one takes into account its two core themes. Both themes have also been characteristic of cyberpunk, as a—mainly 1980s—genre and a cultural movement: the merging of technology with the human body (implants and other kinds of prostheses have thrived in cyberpunk science fiction) and the resistance against the appropriation of technologies by powerful corporations, especially with the use of technology by marginal individuals or subcultures in a rather creative way (for example, the “electro-synth tattoos” of *The Final Cut*). The narrative imbalance of *The Final Cut*, between the ‘active’ pole of the anti-zoe-implant resistance and the ‘passive’ pole of Alan’s own cyborgization, points at the same problem that was central in cyberpunk stories: it seems hard to fight against the EYE-tech’s exploitation of the implants when these devices have already been implanted in the brains of those who attempt to resist. Information technologies have been internalized and the traditional locus of resistance (the subject) has been displaced. So, how can one use technologies to fight against their control by corporate and state interests when one is being invaded by technologies? At the dawn of the expansion of information technologies and networks, cyberpunk brought to the fore a tension between technologically mediated self-reflexivity—what has been called cyberpunk’s “prosthetic consciousness”, “a reflexive awareness of supplementation”, according to Robert Rawdon Wilson’s formulation (1995: 242)—and agency, at least in the form of oppositional action. Being controlled at the same time one resists, one also has to doubt his or her own motives and means of resistance. Thus, not only in cyberpunk but also in contemporary meta-cyberpunk, complex stories, the twist-moment, which always involves a degree of self-reflexivity, is at the same time a moment of revelation and uncertainty about one’s own autonomous mind-body potency. Uncertainty and ambivalence, often exacerbated to the point of paranoia, have been characteristic features of both complex/puzzle films and cyberpunk stories.

Hybrid films such as *The Final Cut* appear concerned not just with the technological incarnations of information, but also, and perhaps more, with their own ability to communicate as potentially informational entities. Complex films are self-reflexive regarding their own cyborg nature—which has for long been underlying modern narratives—and “make explicit,
to varying degrees, the technological underpinnings of the narrative mechanism” (Cameron 2008: 25). As Allan Cameron puts it, complex films “reveal both the projection of subjectivity into the domain of technology and the projection of technology into the domain of narrative” (26). Having incorporated in their narrative form and the mode of their production the cyborgization of subjectivity, complex narratives make the play between human and nonhuman, real (actual) and virtual, internal and external, body and mind, even more fleeting than it already was in cyberpunk. Self-reflexivity is not only found inside their stories but also in their way of constructing the diegesis and the means they use to make the viewer’s experience similarly uncertain and fleeting.

Like cyberpunk works, The Final Cut also deals with the problem of agency and cyborgization at the diegetic level, but beyond that, it becomes, in a sense, an allegorical reflection upon the cyborgization of contemporary complex films. In the rest of this chapter, I will focus on the different levels of self-reflexivity that are involved in The Final Cut, both inside and outside the diegesis.23 I find self-reference in this film being interwoven with a kind of ‘cyborg’ temporality, a hybrid of the linear narrative temporality and of the spatialized, ‘modular’ construction of time that the “culture of the database” (see Manovich 2001) privileges.

**Self-reference and recomposable memory**

The twist of The Final Cut, which comes with the revelation that Alan is an implant carrier, gives a push to its main subplot to develop. Before knowing about his own implant (his ignorance is explained by the fact that his parents died before having the chance to inform him about its existence), Alan has just started to doubt how coherent the narrative of his own life is. The conception of himself as a sinner—apart from “sin-eater”—is disrupted, when in the footage of a zoe-implant he is currently working on, he comes across a man who looks familiar. His expressions and gestures remind him of Louis, the boy he always believed dead by his own fault. Alan’s memory and self-conception thus asks for reconfiguration, and this only gets possible with the discovery of his own implant, which has been storing all his experiences so far. Thus, unlike what would happen in more traditional cyberpunk stories, The Final Cut’s main character has to confront not the implant industry, but instead, himself and his past. The name of the implant suggests that Alan’s entire adult life (zoe in Greek) might be seen as an implanted prosthesis. As he admits in a moment of self-collapse: “One memory; one single incident has made me who I am”. But the validity of this memory now needs to be put under scrutiny.
A similarly self-reflexive contemplation of the validity of memory seems to have been the occasion that gave birth to the idea of *The Final Cut*. The film’s sci-fi trope was rather the ‘topping’ that the director and scriptwriter, Omar Naim, used in order to enrich the concerns that emerged during his first steps in film editing, about the gap between collective and personal memory, official and unofficial (lived) history. Naim was born in 1977 in Lebanon, and *The Final Cut* has been his first feature film, which he managed to develop after submitting his script proposal to the French project “Equinox”, right after finishing film school in Boston. Naim explains: “*The Final Cut* is about editing and memory. […] It’s the Lebanese notion of mass memory, and people’s very subjective memory and view of the world. […] This subsequently dictates how society functions. I extrapolated that into sci-fi theory” (Naim 2004a).

Being still a student in film school and working on his documentary thesis *Grand Theater: A Tale of Beirut* (1999), Naim came up with the idea that gave birth to *The Final Cut* when the confrontation between realism and editing became hard to handle:

I think the idea came in several different stages. First of all I was editing my documentary film at school. I was the only person in the editing room. The school had just got the first Avid so I spent nine months there and I sort of became the school’s editing guy. So I was editing everyone else’s movies because I had access to it. While editing my documentary it really became clear that this sort of myth of objectivity in documentaries is just myth. It’s all the style and manipulating, it’s drama. So that was one part of it. The second part was that I was away from my family who were on the other side of the world and I started thinking that if my life goes on like this, I’m going to start seeing them less and less. So I thought what I should do is shoot these really long interviews with my parents, like twenty-hour interviews that way I could get all their little antidotes [sic] and stories out of them and I could always watch that and enjoy their company. But I never did that because that it’s [sic] not them. That would be replacing my actual memories. Fading as my memories are already. We all take pictures of each other and we all have home movies and there is a need we all have to visually preserve our lives. That combined with this realization about editing is how this idea came about. (Naim 2004b)

*The Final Cut*’s narrative self-consciousness, which Garrett Stewart finds exceptional, characterizing the *The Final Cut* as the “most narratologically self-conscious of films” (Stewart 2006: 184), seems to be springing from its maker’s self-reflection as film editor on this unavoidable condition of filmmaking that editing is, and on his own personal relation—
interwoven with his cultural background—to cinema’s treatment of time and memory. In *The Final Cut*, this finite character of editing is coupled with an ethical questioning of the ‘validity’ and truthfulness of the cut. As Fletcher asserts in the film (perhaps playing the role of Naim’s mouthpiece), the rememories “distort personal history, therefore all history” and rewrite the past “for the sake of pleasant memories”. With the fictional invention of rememories, and because of their claim to ‘truth’, the distortion of cutting is pushed to the extreme. The life-accounts that these commemorations produce are not only supposed to be ‘real’, but also final—thus unchangeable.

The nostalgia for the pre-cut acquisition, also evident in Naim’s interview, is acted out in *The Final Cut*, both diegetically (by the function of the guillotine) and formally (by the structure of the plot). The latter is enabled by *The Final Cut’s* own carefully implanted fallacy, the false memory presented to the spectator at the beginning of the film. This “one single” memory that made Alan “who he is”, the memory of Louis’s lethal accident, has already been revealed to us in—what only much later proves to be— a flashback (and a false memory) placed at the beginning of the film, before the opening titles.27 During a family visit in the countryside a summer long ago, Alan, at the age of ten, meets Louis, who asks him to join him in his play. The two kids soon get involved in an adventurous and playful exploration of the nearby area. They enter an abandoned construction in the middle of a field, and start exploring the unknown territory. Bold and adventurous, Alan is the first who steps on a wooden plank that bridges two floors of the old construction and successfully crosses the gap, without putting much effort. On the opposite, Louis, who appears as a rather passive and hesitant follower, is scared to cross, but Alan insists pushing him to make it. So Louis attempts to cross over, but, half way to the other side, the plank starts shaking and he loses his balance. Grabbing the edge of the opposite floor where Alan already stands, the rest of his body hanging in midair, he calls for help. But Alan stands frozen and does not reach out to catch the boy. So Louis falls down to the cement floor. Alan runs downstairs to find Louis’s body lying on the floor, with a red pool of blood spreading under it. Terrified, he steps back and runs to the exit, passing in front of a wall where a few moments earlier, while he was still playing with Louis, he had engraved his name: ALAN. This scene from his childhood, the memory of this lethal accident that he unintentionally caused, haunts Alan for the rest of his life. It is the moment around which the pattern of his life unfolds in a web of guilt.

In this initial scene there is already a loop structure: a moment where the scene folds back upon itself—with the emphasis put on the name of Alan written on the wall of the warehouse, in the beginning and in the end of this interior scene. The closing of this sequence with Alan’s name engraved on the wall suggests that this inscription is permanent, and will stay on the wall proving Alan’s guilt. However, at this point the film deceives us—it is the
inscription of the whole scene’s memory that will be challenged afterwards. This is not the only case of such implanted circularity.\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Final Cut} is a film that constitutes its organization through a similar loop—and through a layering of ‘implants’.

The main loop structure of \textit{The Final Cut} is the one that makes the plot proceed towards the revisiting of this starting sequence. The memory of the lethal event that he accidentally caused is supposed to have made Alan “who he is”, and the biochip that he discovers in his brain will give him—at a later point in the story—a unique opportunity to navigate through his own memory archive and revisit the incident that produced this memory. Even though according to the plot Alan attempts to join the resistance of anti-zoe hippies in order to block his implant’s recording, his will to ‘fight’ his implant and resist his life-time’s exploitation by EYE-tech has to rival with a personal realization: the one that the implant has the power to help him solve the mystery of his own past. Thus, blocking the implant’s function with the electro-synth tattoo is not enough for him; Alan will soon attempt to access his own footage.

Managing to convince some colleagues to help him, Alan gets connected to his implant through electrodes, ‘pirating’ the data that the implant’s camera sends to its microprocessor. Now he can really see through the camera-eye placed inside his brain. As his human eyes watch the camera’s live inscription, Alan gets a view of the world through a lower-definition digital eye. The signal is directly transmitted to a guillotine placed in front of him running its editing software, and Alan has to use it in a careful and timesaving mode. He has only five minutes at his disposal, or else he risks dying. He uses the touchpad to navigate back in time, trying to arrive at the age of ten, when the crucial incident happened. He sees himself again as a boy in the mirror, he witnesses his parents’ funeral, his first kiss, and, while time is running out, he finally arrives at the scene at the old warehouse, where we already saw him playing with Louis, in the beginning of the film. Here the spectator, primed with a memory of this scene since the opening of \textit{The Final Cut}, participates on equal terms in the recognition of the correct scene. Alan watches again himself and the other boy sword-playing and eventually arriving at the dangerous spot, the wooden plank that bridges the opposite levels of the construction. But this time things seem slightly different: Louis appears now much more dynamic. Playing with the swords, he shouts to Alan: “come and get me!” When Alan crosses the gap on the plank, he asks Louis to meet on the ground floor, but Louis insists to cross too. Alan once more tries to stop him: “No. Wait. Wait. It isn’t steady anymore”. But Louis does not listen; he has already started walking on the plank, which now begins to shake. Standing in the middle of the plank, Louis screams: “I can’t move!” Then Alan tries to give him directions: “Ok Louis, you can make it. Just a few more steps”. But Louis loses his balance.
“Grab my hand!” he shouts. Alan reaches out to grab him but it is too late; Louis falls in the void. Alan only manages to grab an amulet that Louis was wearing around his neck.

Only seven seconds are left for Alan to discover what finally happened that day. He watches himself running down the stairs and arriving wheezy at the ground floor. Time is running out and his colleagues shout at him to unplug the electrodes. But Alan does not listen; he has come to the point where he as a boy faces the body of his friend lying on the floor. Then something unexpected happens. Alan accidentally steps over a can full of paint, the can is overturned and the red paint spreads all over the floor around Louis’s body. Alan sees himself stepping back, so much absorbed under his shock and watching his shoes leaving traces on the thick red liquid that spreads underneath them, that he does hear the quiet coughing of Louis.

Time has run out and an electric shock throws Alan off his chair. His friends run to help him. When he finds his senses a few minutes later, he is not anymore the sin-carrier that he used to be: “I saw him. I tried to help. I told him to turn around. But he wouldn’t listen. He fell but, he was breathing…!” says full of relief. “It wasn’t blood. It was paint. Now I remember”.

The ‘final’ cut made by Alan’s memory, the scene that he ‘chose’ to remember, might have been distorting but not definite. Assisted by his zoe-implant, Alan manages to revisit and alter this one single memory that configured his subjectivity. Thus, the huge gap at the core of his life so far gets finally bridged, not with a wooden plank but with electrodes connecting him to a biodigital implant in his brain. Here The Final Cut seems to be fulfilling not only the desire of Alan for a taintless past but also, in a way, the fantasy of Naim to recuperate through recordings the living presence of his beloved ones.

Due to their decomposable and recomposable form that mimics the structure of the database, Cameron characterizes complex narratives as “modular”. The process of accessing individual units in a synthesis and modifying, removing or using them to make a different construction, gives the overall synthesis a modular character. The recomposability of “modular narratives” extends, according to Cameron, to the ethical plane, especially in films with reverse temporal structure, as it creates the possibility of redemption for their characters (2008: 35). One could argue that such a tendency towards redemption is also apparent in The Final Cut’s modularity. The main hero of the film edits others’ lives and finally, assisted by his implant, manages to do the same with his own life. Thus, he gets the chance to weave a life-story relieved from guilt, purified like the rememories he makes for other people. But the possibility for this ‘new’ life does not take place intentionally, or following some kind of plan. It is rather discovered, as if it had always been lying before his eyes, even though a distorting,
subjective gap between the actual world and the mnemonic trace of its imprint, prevented him from seeing it. Rather than consciously driving his destiny, Alan attunes his agency to the one of the plot’s “mind-game”, which finally offers him the reassurance that this gap can be closed; that his technological prosthesis (the implant) can access and ‘correct’ his mnemonic imprints, and thus restore the feedback between his existence and the world that embeds it.

Because of its crucial role in the film’s modular function, the zoe-implant technology is treated in *The Final Cut* with an underlying but profound ambivalence: despite all the moral critique that the plot communicates against the zoe-implant and its terrifying consequences regarding issues of privacy and truth distortion, in the end the implant proves to be exactly the only way left for Alan to find the truth about his own past and to feel relief in escaping from it. Although the criticism against it intensifies, making the anti-zoe protesters demand their right to “remember for themselves”, as we read on their placards, *The Final Cut* does not seem to doubt the value of the implant’s “miraculous gift”, but only the human—immoral—treatment of it, in other worlds, the plausibility of the cut.

The protagonist of *The Final Cut* sees through the implant that his whole life so far has been founded on a mistake, a trick of his memory. At the same time, the implant provides him with a vision of himself before the moment of his subjectification in guilt. This new vision fundamentally alters his perception of himself, and the pieces of his life’s puzzle are finally brought together. The pre-cut footage of the zoe implant’s biocamera is not falsified; on the contrary, it may set the carriers free from their own ‘human’ distortions. The implant provides the ability to store, retrieve, and ultimately circumvent the distortions of the unconscious. It offers Alan an almost transparent experience, mediated by the objectivity of the biodigital eye of the camera, and liberated from the subjective factors of guilt, trauma, or repression.

Stewart regards *The Final Cut* as the culmination but also the “dead end” of a cycle of films of “psychotemporal transport”, or “recuperative time travel films”, to which he includes films such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Minority Report* (2002), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2004). Stewart’s analysis of *The Final Cut* illuminates the allegories of the zoe-implant technology, with its ability to violate “the passing present by a perversely redoubled self-presence” (2006: 177), effectuated by the biocamera’s recording. But the recuperative function of the film also lies in the potential offered by the zoe-implant’s digital ‘backup’ memory to revisit and ‘correct’ history, an option that in *The Final Cut* does not appear to be something more than a fulfillment of a mind-game. “In the end, he sees everything”, promises another tagline of the film (IMDb); when Alan is finally able to “see everything” by combining his human limited memory with the ‘objective’ machine-memory of the implant, he comes to his own life’s “final cut”. The cracking of the film’s code, the solution of its mind-game, seems to have a similar totalizing effect: the
solution was part of the game all along. It looks as if The Final Cut has fulfilled its plot’s purpose; it extracted its own implant.

**Between the cut and the ‘paste’**

Modularity does not only characterize the story of The Final Cut (in the sense of the ‘recomposable’ destiny of the main hero), but also the plot and its structure. The opening scene—the memory of the play with Louis—is the film’s own implant; it functions as a memory trace implanted by the film with the single purpose to be extracted later. In The Final Cut’s narrative puzzle, a problematic piece creates a distorted picture, and its replacement allows a different picture to appear. Thus, multiple (mind-)games are being played between the film and the viewer: not only Alan has to alter the perception/interpretation of his own life-story, but also the viewers are prompted to reinterpret the film’s story. Both the self-identity of the character and the story become modifiable and modular, while the medium of such modularity appears to be digital.

The implant’s footage bears the marks of real-time recording, and keeps track of the date, time and seconds of the inscription. It also displays the name of the carrier. The guillotine’s software classifies the footage into distinct scenes and tags them with categories (for instance: “childhood”, “puberty”, “sleep”, “career”, “fears”, “marriage” etc.). The categorization that the guillotine performs—which The Final Cut visualizes spatially through an impressive split-screen scene—makes it easy to navigate memory, access isolated scenes and, potentially, replace them. The function of the guillotine is imitated by The Final Cut’s plot structure. The film ‘implants’ an object (the false memory in the beginning), and structures its narrative so that it will retrieve and revisit the implanted clue (like Alan will do with the help of the guillotine) that will falsify not only the character’s but also the viewer’s mnemonic inscription of the event. Like Alan, the viewer will have to retrieve from his or her own memory the initial scene and compare it with the one presented towards the end of the film. The Final Cut thus imitates the modularity associated with digitization and nonlinear editing: informational inscription (as binary code) of sensory input makes it spatially accessible and modifiable, and alters the procedure of cinematic post-production. The Final Cut’s “guillotine” seems to be functioning in a similar way with contemporary nonlinear editing systems (NLE), enabling the instantaneous accessing of any frame or part of the film without the need to re-edit the rest (Evans 2005: 14). Although nonlinear editing systems do not delete (‘final cut’) footage and keep archive of multiple editing versions (EDLs or edit decision lists), the narrative of The Final Cut appears as much reluctant to abandon the idea of editing’s permanent distortion as it is tempted to challenge the same idea through its diegetic
and formal modularity. This oscillation resonates with *The Final Cut*'s own technical production, as the movie was shot both in film (35 mm) and in digital video (the scenes of the zoe footage) (Naim 2004c). Moreover, *The Final Cut* was an experiment in digital projection for the production company Lions Gate and the theater chain AMC. The announcement on the website of AMC reads as follows: “AMC will present the film digitally, using AMC’s proprietary Digital Theatre Distribution System (DTDS). The digital file of the movie will be distributed to AMC theatre locations via satellite”. The selection of a film that thematically (but also in terms of production) treats—and blurs—the borders between analogue and digital memory seems ideal for such an experiment.

*The Final Cut*'s oscillation between the ‘cut’ (permanent distortion) and the ‘paste’ (modularity) is enhanced by its ambivalent stance towards technology. The trust to the zoe-implant’s memory does not necessarily suggest a blind faith to its inscription: the latter can also be falsified, as there are, according to the story, also ‘defect’ implants, which “cannot distinguish what the mind sees from what the eye sees”, and thus record hallucinations and dreams, instead of the input from the external environment. The film’s ambivalent stance towards the technology of the implant is more an expression of disbelief towards the human inscription, because of its vulnerability to the ‘cut’. *The Final Cut* undermines the trust to both the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’. It thus displays characteristics of a new version of realism in which, as Elsaesser suggests, an “impersonal ‘thing’ or apparatus taking my picture, or capturing an event, is a better guarantee of my existence […] than the unmediated face-to-face, likely to give rise to misunderstandings” (2009d: 4).

Distortion, according to *The Final Cut*, happens already at the initial point of mnemonic inscription. The film’s own implant, the false memory in the beginning, has been distorting too. In this respect, narrative (as a coherent causal-logical whole on which Alan’s self-conception was based, starting from the incident in his childhood, as well as the logical sequence of events that the viewers gradually construct after the beginning of the film with the same incident), along with human perception and consciousness, is sensitive to subjective factors such as motives, traumata, purposes, distortions. If narrative always presupposes the intervention of the human factor (Bal 1985: 26), *The Final Cut* equates this intervention with distortion and loss. Where the narrative starts, both for the film (initial scene) and for the character (the memory of himself) there is always already a selection, a cut; and in the plot’s ‘time travel’ finds expression an agency that wants to reach out to what remains unstructured and change the existing inscriptions.

As we might notice in *The Final Cut*, the paint’s overturning is not the only revelation of the zoe-implant: when Alan managed to access its footage, the implant showed him that he had lived his life being enslaved not by machines (guillotines or implants) but by his own
persisting fantasy of omnipotence. The implant’s footage suggests that he is not the final cause of his own life and misery, that he has no control over the others’ death (Louis’s) or life (the projects that he undertakes in his job as a cutter, attempting to grace the dead with immortality). Other factors, from the most significant to the most trivial, like that of an overturned can of paint, may change the outcome of situations.

In The Final Cut, “what the eye sees”—to use Alan’s own words—is highly dependent on “what the mind sees”. What Alan ‘cut’ out of his mnemonic trace has been the powerlessness of his body (which proved unable to help Louis), the time that slipped without him managing to catch up and react, the sounds (that revealed that Louis was still alive), all in all the markers of an affective experience that would shatter his fantasy of omnipotence; a fantasy which later Alan had to retain and base his self-conception on it, in order to justify his (distorted) mnemonic inscription, according to which he had instigated the death of another person. What Alan’s memory retained was just the sight of a red liquid spreading under his feet, which he explained as blood, deleting all the other input he had received and adequately modifying his self-conception by weaving a narrative of guilt and victimization to fit into. Alan’s going back to ‘the scene of the crime’ highlights what is no longer recoverable (his life so far) rather than what can be miraculously recuperated. The two modes of temporality at play in The Final Cut, the one found in the plot’s reversal of time, and the other in the narrative’s irreversibility (demonstrated by Alan’s determination by the chance events and accidents of his early life, where the ‘cut’ first took place) do not contrast each other, but are rather interwoven, since the film resists both linear recuperation and permanent distortion.

**Self-reflexivity and time**

The Final Cut certainly does—though somewhat implicitly—prompt the viewer to become aware of the conditions of the film’s making. The narrative is implicitly self-referential about issues such as the reality that films conceal, the selections that they make, the ‘cuts’ through which they proceed. As already discussed, the film is a product of the conscious attempt of Naim to reflect on the procedure of filmmaking as ‘cutting’ of recorded footage that used to be live, and making out of it coherent—but inevitably distorted—stories. A text’s ‘self-reflexivity’ has been associated with such a (more or less explicit) self-conscious/self-expository move on behalf of the maker, that has a distancing effect upon the reader/decoder, suspending his or her immersion into the story and adding multiple layers of signification. Self-referential methods in art, literature and film have been considered tools that trigger critical reflection on behalf of the recipient. But this effect is not necessarily created through straightforward means but also through loops and infinite regress within the text (such as the
one of *mise-en-abyme*) that set in motion internal dynamics, which undermine the coherence and wholeness of the work. *The Final Cut* employs self-reflexive techniques that highlight its oscillation between modularity and distortion, recuperation and obsolescence, which at once complete and exceed the self-referential accounts of its maker(s).

As viewers of *The Final Cut*, we do not only realize the reverse temporal movement of the narration when this becomes diegetically enabled by the machine, the guillotine. Rather, the function of the guillotine can be considered a self-referential device of the film, which, through a diegetic *mise-en-abyme*, communicates its own structure: It is not only the implant that within the diegesis navigates through time, but the plot itself is used as a time-juggling but also time-generating machine. So, even if the function of the implant in the narrative with its direct recording of lived experience might be one that leaves no “time of affective deferral within which to maneuver original impression into psychic trace, event into memory, no time for the willful construction of mental temporality per se” (Stewart 2006:189), the recruitment of the implant as a structuring device does not redeem time but observes it, creating a temporalized experience. Thus *The Final Cut* turns the medium of the guillotine into a counterpart of its own complex organization.

But let us have a closer look at the film’s nonlinear temporality at the micro-level of scene constitution. Towards the end of *The Final Cut*, a succession of reflexive framings disorients us just before the film’s own ‘final cut’: As Alan runs to save his life from Fletcher who wants to use his implant against EYE-tech, a quick montage crosscuts two different kinds of POV shots: shots representing Alan’s visual inscription, stylistically assimilated into the visual style of the rest of the film, and shots reproducing the—visual and auditory—inscription of his implant (the recording not only appears as having the colder colors of video but it has actually been shot by a digital videocamera). A temporal layering is created, culminating at the point of Alan’s death (which we see through the footage of his zoe-implant when the recorded image dissolves into pixels), through this kind of juxtaposition of subjective, ‘filmic’ POVs from the character’s present, and ‘digital’ POVs that have already become past and are being watched by someone else, at a later point in the narrative’s temporal progression. Previous scenes of the film using the latter kind of POVs have primed us to consider them as images from zoe-implant footage, when it has already been ‘read’ by the guillotine. Not only the temporal but also the subjective indexicality of this crosscut scene is dubious, as we cannot be certain about who is looking either: it could be Alan, but then his vision could not have these marking signs (texture of image but also track of time and name), so it is likely that someone else looks through Alan’s eyes; and this look could only come from a later point in time. A cut to the next scene makes explicit the temporal layering of the previous chasing sequence. Now, obviously after Alan’s death, we see Fletcher watching the footage of Alan’s implant. As
Fletcher looks absorbed in editing, the camera moves behind him to include, him too, in a *mise-en-abyme* of gazes. In these two succeeding scenes, *The Final Cut* makes use of traditional cinematic reflexive techniques constituted from “various *mise-en-abyme*-constructions [that] resemble looks into the mirror” (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010: 74). But this technical reflexivity, the creative possibilities of which have perhaps been exhausted by the modernist cinema of the past—and especially the European *avant-garde* filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s—is here intertwined with a time-juggling that juxtaposes past, present and future. It is not just the reflexive framing of gazes but also the temporal constitution of the scene that produces this vertigo.

The reflexivity of *The Final Cut*, multiplied by the insertion of a third ‘observer’ (besides the camera and the characters), i.e. the implant, facilitates the creation of backward and forward time-loops, distinguished both at the level of the story/ *fabula* and at that of the plot/ *syuzhet*. These loops create alternative views on what has already taken or will take place, deceive and play with the viewer and his or her cine-literacy (which has been based on well-established narrative conventions), and present in a tacit way a narration that is self-conscious (as the ‘voice’ of the author and his self-reflexivity merges with the self-reflexive means of the filmic discourse) and demands an equally alert viewer.

In the last scene of *The Final Cut*, as Fletcher edits the footage of Alan’s implant, he watches on the screen of his computer the reflection of Alan in the mirror. Fletcher promises to the reflection of an already dead Alan that the latter’s life will finally “mean something” (as Fletcher intends to use Alan’s implant to trap a ‘big head’ of EYE-tech in a moral scandal, and thus harm the company’s profile). The film’s ending (or ‘final cut’) comes with an additional mind-game right before the closing credits. To what appears to be a point-of-view shot through Fletcher’s eyes on Alan’s face in the mirror (and now on the screen of Fletcher’s computer), the reflection of Alan leaves the frame, suggesting that it is neither Alan looking at his reflection, nor Fletcher looking through Alan’s eyes. At the point that the film ends, the mirror/screen waits for us, the viewers, to fill it, not with our reflection in it but with our own mnemonic records (as we just now remember that we can only see through the eyes of the implant carrier when watching POVs from an implant). However, these records are at once put in doubt: as soon as Alan leaves the frame, then who is looking at the mirror? This ‘mind game’ is of course not convincing as closure; it has rather been *The Final Cut*’s communicative condition all along, if we consider the false memories of the character. Only now it is the viewer who is more directly invited to this game. Self-reflexivity thus takes us into the loop, where (narrative) closure is no longer possible. As the German DVD title of the film suggests, “*Dein Tod ist erst der Anfang*” (the end is only the beginning).