Before or beyond narrative? Towards a complex systems theory of contemporary films
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The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
2. Framing the revival of (self-)reflexivity in complex films

The notion of self-reflexivity, broached in the previous chapter through the analysis of *The Final Cut*, will now be put into focus, as one of the most characteristic features of contemporary complex films. The current return of self-reflexivity in cinema in my view entails important continuities but also breaks with the traditional theorization of the term in film theory and in narratology. In this chapter I will attempt to disentangle the complicated notion of self-reflexivity, and distinguish between different levels, functions and theoretical backgrounds. I find this endeavor necessary in order to understand what is complex in complex films, and how self-reflexivity is one of the fundamental processes in which the complexity of these films resides. But before getting to the particulars of self-reflexivity in complex films, I will first examine its role in the narratological and the film-theoretical traditions.

In grammar, a “reflexive” verb is one whose direct object is identical to its subject (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*). Reflexive statements are “propositions or texts that in some way take into account their own manufacturing conditions” (Pels 2003: 164). In mathematics and logics, “reflexive” is called the relation between an element and itself. A common denominator of all these different aspects of reflexivity might be the “self-referential or ‘iterative’ aspects of any kind of thinking” (Sandywell and Beer 2005). Taking into account the long and divergent genealogy of reflexivity—in disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and art theory—confusion might arise when one does not distinguish between two different levels of self-reflexivity: the one of first-degree self-reference, and the other of the iterative and dynamic process that self-reference of a second degree, or reflexivity, triggers. In this chapter it is mainly the first level of reflexivity that will be addressed, through the theorization of the concept in the traditions of narratology and film theory. However, reflexive paradoxes or ‘loops’ have also emerged therein, and the workings of this ‘systemic’ kind of reflexivity will be particularly addressed in Chapter 3.

**Self-reflexive discourse and the borders of narrative**

Within the context of a multi-disciplinary interest in reflexivity, especially in the second half of the 20th century, narrative theory has primarily addressed the textual modes of self-reference. In Gérard Genette’s tripartite model of narrative, self-reflexivity would correspond to the analytical category of “narrating instance”, the manifestation of which, in the form of “discourse”, disrupts the “récit” (narrative). In his article “Frontières du récit” (1966) Genette refers to discourse (*discours*), in other words, to the voice of the author and his
or her self-referential accounts, as ‘intruding’ the text and suggesting a threat to the purity of narrative.40

The distinction between narrative and discourse was initiated by Aristotle, who considered separately certain types of poetry, “lyric, satiric and didactic poetry” (Genette 1976), that were not representational, that is, they did not reflect external actions (real or fictional), but rather expressed the poet’s own thoughts. In the 1960s the French linguist and semiotician Emile Benveniste reintroduced the distinction between narrative as story (what he called histoire) and discourse. Benveniste defined the pure form of narrative as one that remains uncontaminated by the subjectivity of discourse:

[...] the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator. “Truly there is no longer a ‘narrator.’ The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. Here no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves”. (Genette 1976: 9, quoting Benveniste 1966, Problèmes de linguistique générale, pp. 237-250)

Chronological sequentiality here also appears as a feature of “pure narrative”. Genette stresses that such instances of “pure” narrative,41 such as the ones that Benveniste finds in some passages of Balzac, are isolated, and that almost every text comprises of both narrative and discursive passages (1976: 10). This hybridization notwithstanding, a tension still lies within the discursive, and in this sense, self-referential passages of stories: “any intrusion of discursive elements into the interior of a narrative is perceived as a disruption of the discipline of the narrative portion” (10). This is not the case when narrative is embedded in discursive modes of expression. “Narrative inserted into discourse transforms itself into an element of discourse, but discourse inserted into narrative remains discourse and forms a sort of cyst, easily recognized and localized. One might say that the purity of narrative is more obvious than that of discourse.” (10-11) Continues Genette:

[...] discourse has no purity to preserve since it is the natural mode of language, the broadest and most universal mode, by definition open to all forms. On the contrary, narrative is a particular mode, marked and defined by a certain number of exclusions and restrictive conditions (no present tense, no first person, etc.) Discourse can “narrate” without ceasing to be discourse. Narrative can’t “discourse” without betraying itself. (11)

In the literary ‘experiments’ of the 20th century, from Hemingway to Robbe-Grillet, Genette sees the need of writers to deal with these incompatible modes of utterance (discourse and narrative), either eliminating the one or the other; and in the novels of his contemporaries Philippe Sollers or Jean Thibaudeau, where narrative seems getting absorbed in the act of
writing, Genette finds indications of narrative’s prospective obsolescence:

Perhaps the novel, after poetry, will definitively leave the age of representation. Perhaps narrative, in the negative singularity that we have attributed to it, is, like art for Hegel, already for us a thing of the past which we must hasten to consider as it passes away, before it has completely deserted our horizon. (12)

The ideal, pure and isolated narrative, narrative by definition, is, already in the 1960s, considered—by one of the most prominent narratologists—dead. And one of the factors that contributed to the realization that this ideal form is no longer possible has been the self-referential mode of utterance that discourse stands for. In the narrative model that Genette later developed, he analyzed the complex forms of “narrative discourse” (here, narrative is meant as a particular form of discourse in the sense of speech and ekphrasis, and not in that of self-reflexive discourse) in the dynamic interplay between narrated text (récit or narrative), story and narration.

**Metanarrational and metafictional reflexivity**

Recent writings in narratology treat self-reflexivity through the categories of “metafiction” and “metanarration”. Metanarration takes place at the level of discourse (both diegetic and extra-diegetic) and involves “comments […] concerned with the act and/or process of narration”.42 While metafiction concerns instances of self-reflexivity particularly in narrative fictions, and has an anti-mimetic character, metanarration just “thematizes” the act of narration, and, when used in non-fictional narratives, can also serve the credibility of the narrated events (Neumann and Nünning 2010). Forms of metafiction can be self-reflexive without involving self-reflexive discourse. For example, according to Werner Wolf, *mise-en-abyme* is a type of “implicit metafiction”, because it is a non-narrational instance of self-reflexivity (see Fludernik 2003). Although here metafiction does not occur with the intervention of the narrator’s or author’s comments upon the act of narration (by discourse), it still is self-reflexive, because, through the unreal effect that it creates, fiction demonstrates itself as such. The reflexivity of metafiction is thus, according to Peter Stoicheff,

[…] the product of its desire to expose the covert structures that allow fiction to masquerade as reality; it is always involved in the simultaneous process of manufacturing illusion and revealing its artifice. It thus becomes an eternal system of creating and deconstructing, whose self-interpreting pattern is realized in the *mise-en-abyme* that eternally defers the revelation of truth or knowledge […].

(Stoicheff 1991: 89-90)
Both metafiction and metanarration have an anti-mimetic and in this sense anti-narrative character, as long as the criterion of subjectivity is used. According to Genette, the anti-narrative function of discourse lies in the insertion of subjectivity to the otherwise seemingly ‘objective’ sequence of events (récit). The subjective factor intervenes through everything that undermines objectivity, either at the level of fiction (metafiction) or at that of the act of narration (metanarration).

When it comes to film, the boundaries between the two types of self-reflexivity that contemporary narratology distinguishes (metanarrational and metafictional), become blurred. The absence of direct instances of (extra-diegetic) discourse in film, makes it hard to distinguish self-reflexivity in the first place, let alone the difference between fictional and narrational self-reflexivity. Yet, there are ways in which film theory (and film narratology) has identified the particularities of filmic self-reference, and these will be later discussed in the context of contemporary complex films. The recent proliferation of these traditionally anti-narrative instances in films points at modes of textual and cognitive organization that thrive on self-reference, and perhaps transcend narrative in the strict, ‘pure’ definition of the term, against which narratology has always been struggling, without however, in my view, having achieved a radical emancipation from it.

Self-reflexivity in cinema

In cinema, the interruptions of the ‘purity’ of narrative by the narrating voice is not as common as it is in literature, because the cinematic narrator has less means available to address the viewer directly. Voice-over is of course one of these means. Despite the long presence of this technique throughout cinema history, voice-over has been faced with suspicion and occasionally with scorn by film critics because of its “hybrid” nature that brings film close to literature (Kozloff 1988). But, when speech, taking the form of self-referential comments of the narrator (who can be a protagonist at the diegetic level or the creator/author at the extra-diegetic level), and/or of direct address to the audience, is not employed, then by what means is self-reflexivity expressed in cinema?

Taking a step away from the self-reference of the author, and in this sense, following the art-theoretical tradition more than the literary one, film theory still had to account for the self-reflexivity of films themselves. This suggests an ontological rather than an epistemological stance, and in this respect Stanley Cavell offers a good starting point to approach cinematic self-reflexivity. Thus, for him self-referential are the ways that “movies question and acknowledge themselves” (Cavell 1979: 123). Cavell traces in Hollywood films of the interwar period the forerunners of the reflexive practices that later flourished in cinema.
Especially in comedies such as those of Buster Keaton and Groucho Marx, he detects the early self-referential capacities of films, usually taking two forms: “alluding to other movies” and/or “calling attention to the camera at hand” (124). Cavell sees continuity between these early Hollywood techniques and the subsequent flourishing of self-reflexivity via the modernist filmmakers of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Thus, the “sudden storms of flash insets and freeze frames and slow-motions and telescopic-lens shots and fast cuts and negative printing and blurred focusing” (122), proliferating in modernist films of the 1960s, are expressions of self-reference. Everything that calls attention to the technique and process of filmmaking, and thus to the agency behind it—if not necessarily to the particular ‘auteur’ handling this technique—is a form of cinematic self-reference. The mediation of speech is not necessary for films to be self-reflexive, and that is why film theorists often derive their examples from early silent films, belonging to the so-called “cinema of attractions”.44

David Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film* has used the term “self-conscious” narration, instead of that of “self-referential” or “self-reflexive” narration. Borrowing the term from Meir Sternberg, he states that the self-consciousness of a film’s narration (which may appear in different degrees) depends “on how much it acknowledges the fact that it is presenting information to an audience.” A film’s hetero-reference (its reference to the audience) is intertwined with self-reference, as long as the acknowledgement of the audience also implies the acknowledgement of the film itself as a medium of communication. Bordwell finds that every typical fiction film shows a higher degree of self-consciousness in the opening and closing sequences than in its main part where the narrative unfolds (1985: 25). Here a tension between narrative and self-conscious narration is also being drawn, this time in the medium of film.

Although the way in which a film communicates is different from that of a printed text, it was especially literary and semiotic models of self-reference, which became influential in the decades of 1960s and 1970s, that determined the conceptualization of self-reflexivity in film theory. Moreover, the (post-)Marxist and structuralist tradition of film theory stepped on self-reflexivity’s anti-mimetic character, to associate the term with an ideologically loaded ‘break with the illusionism of the spectacle’.

Roland Barthes had a significant contribution, as narratologist David Herman notes, in making reflexivity a “structuralist desideratum” (Herman 2000). According to Barthes, the narrational level implies a degree of self-reflexivity because its role is not to transmit narrative but “to make it conspicuous” (1975: 264). Barthes pointed at the dangers inherent in the tendency of bourgeois society to “naturalize narratives” by de-emphasizing the codes of the narrative situation, its self-reflexive markers, as I would add. In his *S/Z* (1970) Barthes introduced a qualitative distinction between “readerly” (*lisibles*) texts, which create a sense of
transparency and prime passive reception, and “writerly” (scriptibles) texts, which, through self-reflexive methods, call for the viewer’s self-conscious participation in the production of meaning (1974: 4). Seen through an anti-illusionistic perspective, self-reflexivity became a rather popular notion in film criticism of the 1970s, which was significantly influenced by structuralism. Apparatus theory, drawing not only on Barthes but also on Althusser and Lacan, considered cinema a medium intrinsically ideological, and pointed at the necessity to find ways to resist the imposition of the apparatus over the spectator’s consciousness. One of these ways has been found in self-reflexivity.

Self-reflexivity seems to have been a “desideratum” not only of structuralist film theorists but also of filmmakers during and after the 1960s. As Robert Stam points out, every work of art contains some degree of self-reflexivity, since there is no such thing as complete illusionism even during the reign of mimetic culture and the models of perception that it favored. Yet, there are certain periods in which self-reflexivity acquires significant dimensions or visibility and becomes embodied “in novels, plays, and films which break with art as enchantment and point to their own factitiousness as textual constructs” (1985: xi). In the case of film, one of these “peaks” of self-reflexivity was, according to Stam, the period from the late 1950s until the 1970s. It was then that the textual and intertextual nature of self-reflexivity, as discourse and écriture, came to the fore, under the influence of the French “textuality turn”. Nouvelle Vague is a characteristic example of the proliferation of self-reflexivity in films of that period and geocultural area. This peak of self-reflexivity in cinema has not been triggered only by the influence of structuralist thought, though. Rather, Stam points out the influence of artists and specifically that of Bertolt Brecht, who had already been a pioneer of self-reflexive techniques in theatre. Through the work of Brecht, self-reflexivity, which for Stam does not have an a priori politically progressive value, may be seen as a “politicized esthetic” (1985: 7). Brecht’s use of self-reflexive techniques aimed at a realism beyond mimetic representation, one that would “lay bare society’s causal network” (Stam 1985: 17, quoting Brecht from “The popular and the realistic”, 1938, p. 109). By transforming the audience’s expectations, Brecht sought to prepare a new audience able to adjust to “new modes of social life” (Stam: ibid). Hence, Brecht’s use of self-reflexivity had a significant impact on “cinematic theory and practice, and especially on the films of Godard, [Alain] Tanner, and others” (10). In the self-reflexive turn of cinema in the 1960s and 1970s Stam sees the influence of a politicized and ‘activist’ conception of self-reflexivity, one which “breaks the charm of spectacle in order to awaken the spectator’s critical intelligence” (9).

The accounts in art and film criticism show that there has been a growing tendency after the 1960s to consider (self-)reflexivity as “a crack in the mirror”, according to anthropologist’s Jay Ruby’s expression. “To be reflexive is to reveal that films—all films,
whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art—are created, structured articulations of the film-maker and not authentic, truthful, objective records” (Ruby 1988: 44). Ruby also points at the need to distinguish between self-reflexivity and the self-referential accounts of the author. Traces of the makers’ self-reference can be found in almost every film, according to Ruby, but self-reflexivity goes beyond the self-referential, self-conscious or autobiographic accounts: it instructs the viewer about the process of world production, which is involved in every artistic or scientific creation (1988: 45). In my discussion of The Final Cut in Chapter 1 I emphasized the continuity but also the distinction between the self-referential accounts of the filmmaker and the self-reflexivity of the film itself, through its complex structure.

As Monika Fludernik notes (2003), until recently the metafictional and metanarrational aspects of self-reflexivity have been used interchangeably, and as it becomes apparent, this has not only been the case in literary theory and narratology but also in semiotics and film theory. The metanarrational capacity of self-reflexivity, pointing at the way a narrative or a film is constructed, has evoked an allure of anti-illusionism that addresses every cultural text as a factitious, even when fictional, construction. Particularly in film, self-reflexivity, even when detached from the actual narrating ‘voice’ and Genette’s literary discourse, it is also found in tension with the supposed objectivity of ‘pure’ narrative, as well as with that of the filmic mode of representation, which has been considered inherently mimetic. Indicative of this view is the comment of Scott Lash, who notes that cinema is closer to mimesis than to semiosis, which is more tied to language: “If nineteenth-century realist narrative as cultural object is reflexive through highly mediated semiosis, then ideal-typically organized capitalist cinema—in its diachronic, tonal visuality—is a cultural object which is reflexive through less mediated iconic representation” (1994: 138).

The theoretical background of self-reflexivity sketched above determined the way it is until today conceived in film theory, and also in the cognitive strands of film narratology. As representative of the latter, Edward Branigan places (self-)reflexivity among other “anti-narrative devices”, as he calls them, such as ‘irony, paradox, contradiction, novelty, or alienation” (1992: 84). The reflexive device is for him “prescribed to provide a critical and intellectual distance (‘opacity’) that frees the viewer from delusion.”

**Film complexity and self-reflexivity**

In the 1970s film theoretical discussions about self-reflexivity, the latter was quite normatively expected to be ‘authentic’, that is, to go beyond the borders of the medium’s formalism. This is because many theorists have argued that self-reflexivity might indeed attract the attention to the process of mediation, but does not always suggest an (ideologically
progressive) exit from the factitious world of fiction or spectacle; on the contrary, it often creates a closed loop that blocks rather than enables the distanced critique of this world. As Dana Polan contends (1974), even when an artwork becomes highly self-reflexive, it is not necessarily politically progressive. Rather, its effect lies in the heightening of “interplay between credulity and skepticism” or “confirmation and contradiction”, which is an inherent quality of art. But every skepticism and contradiction can very well serve the intrinsic need of art for self-innovation rather than for social innovation. In this respect, self-reflexivity—and its role in modernist avant-garde techniques—is for Polan a form of “emphasized formal complexity” with no specific political nuances.

Contributing to the same Jump Cut issue with Polan (1974, no. 4), Chuck Kleinhans defines a film’s complexity based on the notion of self-reflexivity. Complexity for him stands for the “sophistication” of a film, defined against the simplicity of form and content. Kleinhans distinguishes between two types of self-reflexivity and consequently two types of “complex” films: those that are merely “self-reflective”, perhaps formally experimental but still within the confines of bourgeois ideology (as an example of which he mentions Jean-Marie Straub’s Othon, 1969), and the others that are (also) self-critical and “didactic” (as exemplary of which he regards the films made by Godard and Gorin). Thus a complex film for Kleinhans may have two possible functions: it “either forces self-reflection on itself as film […], or in a more Brechtian vein the film can be not merely self-reflective but self-critical in a larger context…making explicit its ideological basis to the audience”. Through its complexity, a film demands equally complex responses from its viewers. However, the self-reflexivity (or self-reflectivity, as Kleinhans calls it) of films is seen merely as a play with the genre codes and the conventions of form, to which the viewers get easily accustomed—as it happened for instance with the popularization of self-reflective techniques in television commercials after the mid-1960s—so that, after a certain point, as Kleinhans maintains, the same reflexive techniques can no longer evoke complex audience responses. Moreover, even when complex responses are produced, they do not necessarily have a political—or socially critical—character.

Except for the Brechtian techniques of self-reflexivity, some of the more ‘implicit’ self-reflexive expressions and techniques have been considered to be postmodern tropes (or better, tropes compatible with postmodernism) of emphasized formal complexity. Thus, with the passage of time self-reflexivity got associated with postmodernism, and not only with modernism and its avant-garde movements. An inevitable consequence has been that self-reflexivity, especially since the 1980s, received criticism similar to the one that postmodernism itself received. As Stam notes, “the reflexivity of a certain avant-garde is eminently co-optable and easily reappropriated by the hegemonic culture. Even the
deconstructed texts defended by *Tel Quel* or *Cinétique* end up, at times, by playing innocuously with purely formal categories such as representation, closure, or the illusion of presence” (16). From an anti-postmodern stance, self-reflexivity and its more implicit techniques is not considered a counterpart for thought’s emancipation but an agent of affirmation, less critical and more cynical, even a mode of participation in the flows of late capitalism (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010: 74-75). As literary critic Patrick O’Donnell notes (1996), “reflexivity, parody, mimicry, […] are the last encrypted refuges of an imperialism that converts everything into simulacra, images constructed upon images”.

Following this thread of criticism towards self-reflexivity, a second contrast is being formed: from the one between self-reflexivity and illusionism, to that between self-reflexivity and critical thought. These seem to be diametrically opposite conceptions of the term, however, they are both based on the assumption that there is an inherent mimeticism both in fiction and film (and their combination). Self-reflexivity might correct this ‘flaw’—and at times it has been used for this purpose—either explicitly and normatively or implicitly, by making the filmic or narrative text more complex than it is supposed to be.

There have also been narratological and film-theoretical approaches that value the formal complexity that self-reflexivity—even in its textually implicit expressions—effectuates and the more complicated relationship it establishes with the beholder. The blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality that reflexivity effectuates may be *meta*-fictional/narrational but not necessarily *anti*-fictional/narrational. The creation of illusions and the exposition of factitiousness make the texts richer and inherently dynamic. Here self-reflexivity also tends to transgress the reality-illusion dilemma, and with it, the normative mission it undertook through the apparatus theory tradition. According to what Jeffrey Williams, referring to post-modernist (literary) fictions, calls the “reflexive paradigm of narrativity” (1999: 145), self-reflexivity—both metafictional and metanarrational—expressed through features “such as narrator’s comments, so-called narrative intrusions, frames, embedded stories, etc.” (50), dissolves the distinction between interior and exterior, and “complicates the layering of the narrative text” (46). It also goes beyond “the simple exposure of the ‘illusion’ of fiction” (90). Reflexivity does not have an anti-illusionistic mission, neither leads to a ‘truth’ outside the text. A story’s origins are always deferred by reflexivity, thus it is not adequate to describe the latter “in illusionist terms, […] as self-consciously exposing fictionality” (102-103).

But also in film theory and *avant-garde* filmmaking tradition, the implicit workings of self-reflexivity have been emphasized. Elsaesser and Hagener connect the notion of reflexivity with a metaphor of cinema as “mirror”, which was also popular in the 1960s and 1970s film theory. The mirror-metaphor expressed the self-reflexive aesthetics of “doubling and
“mirroring” that characterized auteur cinema in the 1960s (for example, in films such as *Le Mépris, Blow Up, 8½*). Here the reference is not only to the French new wave but to a broader range of *avant-garde* filmmaking. Thus, according to Elsaesser and Hagener, through techniques such as “nested narration (a film within a film), […] pictorial framing which highlighted the constructedness of the *mise-en-scène*, or through an accentuated paraphrasing of traditional plot stereotypes, genre patterns and pastiche citations” (75), cinema developed its own “language of crisis” in order to express a self-critical stance towards itself as an illusion-generating technology (74-77); this language proved to be productive for cinema instead of dismantling. Similar to the “reflexive paradigm” of Williams described above, according to Elsaesser and Hagener “the metaphor of the cinema as mirror blocks this passage to any world clearly labeled either ‘outside’ or ‘inside’, rendering the relationship of spectator and screen considerably more complicated” (2010: 56). The reflexive *mise-en-abyme* constructions, doublings and layers that made filmic texts more complex, are here considered to increase the complexity of the “encounter” between the film and the viewer. The contemporary use of self-reflexivity by ‘complex’ films might be indicative of the development of another language of crisis, which however has very different sources from those that influenced the filmmaking of previous decades. Contemporary expressions of self-reflexivity thus need to be contextualized and analyzed with an eye to the past as well as to the current developments in the media sphere, and this might need a shift from the narratological to a different analytical perspective.

An anti-narrative device that ‘frees the viewer from delusion’, a formalistic experimentation that stays more or less indifferent towards its critical impact upon the viewers, or a *mise-en-abyme* that makes the border between inside and outside indistinguishable: against the backdrop of this broadly sketched genealogy of the theory of self-reflexivity, its function as a counterpart of complexity will be put under scrutiny in the following part of this chapter, in the context of contemporary complex films.

**Self-reflexivity in contemporary complex films**

There have been analogies drawn between the modes of narration that have characterized post-classical Hollywood after the 1970s and those of recent complex films, with self-reflexivity (or self-reference) being an important axon of this analogy. Self-reference is, according to Elsaesser, the characteristic that most evidently differentiates between classical and postclassical narration. Here self-reference and self-reflexivity is coupled with “knowingness” or “self-consciousness” of the narration, categories that have already been mentioned earlier in this chapter. Thus, post-classical films show an intensified self-
consciousness, which is combined with “a willingness to display this knowingness and make the audience share it, by letting it in on the game” (2002: 78). As Elsaesser points out: “It is this knowingness […] that gives, with its several reflexive turns, the label ‘post-classical’ its most defensible validity and, perhaps more problematically, its only stable application” (79).

Eleftheria Thanouli has extended the post-classical paradigm outside Hollywood, to the modes of contemporary world cinema narration, using examples of films that have also been discussed as cases of complex storytelling, such as Chunking Express (1994), Run Lola Run (Lola Rennt, 1998), Fight Club (1999) and Magnolia (1999). Thanouli finds in these films too, the characteristic self-reflexive ‘trademark’ of the post-classical paradigm. Post-classical self-reflexivity disrupts the continuous and linear style of classical narration, and Thanouli considers it a proliferation and intensification of past avant-garde techniques, through “disruptive visual effects” such as “fractured compositions, jump-cuts, different color schemes and jerky camera movements” (Thanouli 2008: 11). But also the techniques of “back projections, collages and optical tricks”, neglected in the past as “too artificial or self-reflexive”, in contemporary world cinema make an impressive comeback, as Thanouli maintains (2006: 189). The self-reflexivity at the level of cinematography and montage (the level of the film’s ‘craft’, which also determines the textual form of its narratives), is accompanied by self-reflexivity at the level of narration: post-classical films appear to be highly self-conscious, in the sense that, as Thanouli maintains, “the narrating act comes forward” throughout the whole film, acknowledging the audience, providing them with clues to comprehend the story and showing its knowableability and spatiotemporal omnipresence (2006: 192).

Bordwell notices a high degree of self-consciousness in the films that he calls “network narratives”, in which he includes, among others, Pulp Fiction, Chunking Express, Magnolia and Babel. He considers marks of this self-conscious stance, techniques such as direct glances to the camera (e.g. Les Passagers) and devices such as crosscutting, intertitles, montage according to a motif, time-juggling, and openly suppressive narration (Bordwell 2007: 210, 211). As it also happens in The Final Cut, the suppression of information by the film might become more overt at a later point, usually that of the plot’s twist: “a film might pretend that nothing is amiss and lead us to think that we have full information. Later, when we recognize that the narration has pulled a fast one, it becomes more overt” (210). But also the non-sequential ordering of events in a film is a form of overt, self-conscious—and self-referential—narration; a narration that also makes the viewer conscious of the presence of a narrative principle that manipulates the telling. The ‘knowingness’ of the narration is self-referential at the discursive, metanarrational level.
Genette was perhaps the first who indicated the self-reflexive function of time-juggling (cases of “anachrony”) in (literary) texts. Referring specifically to “prolepses”—the premature reference to future events, the equivalent of which in cinema would be the device of “flashforwards” (Chatman 1980: 64)—Genette states that the latter are “not only data of narrative temporality but also data of voice”, which “bring the narrating instance itself directly into play” (Genette 1986: 70). This type of self-reflexivity is strongly communicated by contemporary complex, or “modular”, films too.49

Their unwillingness to ‘suspend disbelief’—considered to be a precondition for narrative immersion—gives contemporary complex films an intensely self-reflexive character. In parallel, there is a constant attempt to orientate the viewers’ attention towards mediation (as opposed to transparency) that characterizes not only the film’s world but also the world that the viewers live in, permeated by informational networks (Bisonnette 2009). In this context of “hypermediated realism” (Bolter and Grusin 1999), self-reflexivity not only points at how reality is being transformed and ‘augmented’ through various media, but also, and especially, how only through these we can access reality (just like the protagonists often attempt). The same holds for our ‘enjoyment’ of the films. Pleasure and connection to the story world comes through an awareness of the medium and its manipulation.

Even though it has perhaps exhausted the ‘radical’ potential it once contained, self-reflexivity is all but absent from the stage of contemporary complex films, and many analysts broach this issue, with some of them emphasizing its ‘metanarrational’ and others its ‘metafictional’ aspects, without however using these categories. Some also point at the articulation of self-reflexivity with complexity in these films, even though what does this complexity stand for is not precisely defined. As Erlend Lavik notes, the way that recent complex narratives in film and television attract the attention not only to their diegesis but also to the way their narratives are constructed, develops hand-in-hand with their complex structure: “those films that are cited in pretty much every account – 21 Grams, Adaptation, Fight Club, Memento, and Pulp Fiction, for example – are both unmistakably complex and reflexive; moreover, their complexity and their reflexivity are intertwined” (2007: 37). It has also been suggested that in complex films such as Pulp Fiction reflexivity becomes a game in which the viewer finds pleasure, and goes hand in hand with the films’ complex structure: “the way one’s understanding of the story develops along with one’s understanding of the structure of the film” (Plantinga 1994).

Such entwinement of self-reflexivity with film complexity raises questions regarding its traditional theorization as an ‘anti-narrative’ device. In the 2006 special issue of The Velvet Light Trap on narrative and storytelling, Jason Mittell considers the kind of “operational reflexivity”, as he calls it, that complex narratives show as a “narrative special effect” (35) that
differentiates contemporary complex narratives from modernist reflexivity whose effect was the distance from the spectacle. Mittell notes:

This is not the reflexive self-awareness of Tex Avery cartoons acknowledging their own construction or the technique of some modernist art films asking us to view their constructedness from an emotional distance; operational reflexivity invites us to care about the storyworld while simultaneously appreciating its construction. (2006: 35)

Mittell’s “functional” self-reflexivity stands closer to metanarration than metafiction. In his view, complex narratives are not so much criticizing the factitiousness of fiction but demonstrating the power of discourse and of narration itself.

This operational aesthetic is on display within online fan forum dissections of the techniques that complex comedies and dramas use to guide, manipulate, deceive, and misdirect viewers, suggesting the key pleasure of unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics. We watch these shows not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world (although that certainly can happen) but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics. (35; emphasis mine)

At this point a paradox is raised. Taking into account that, as Genette has demonstrated, discourse and its markers have an anti-narrative role, then the paradox can be put like this: How can narration be empowered by the same means that narrative (the récit) is dismantled? In this line of thinking, the proliferation of discours in contemporary films could be seen as indicative of the end of narrative, as Genette had already predicted in his commenting upon the (post)modernist experimentations of nouveau roman. The problem for me lies, as I have already pointed out, in the definition of the word narrative itself, and its connotations of a certain objective and ‘realistic’, in the sense of mimetic realism, representation, which would imitate the causal-logical and spatio-temporal sequence of events in an idealized version of the real world. By adding many layers and dimensions of analysis, Genette and other prominent narratologists demonstrated that narrative involves a complex textual and cognitive weaving. However, it is the laws of causality and spatiotemporal sequentiality, presupposed or expected in narrative, that introduce an internal tension with all the ‘anti-narrative’ characteristics of texts, such as the one of self-reflexivity.

One possible solution to the problem of how an anti-narrative device makes narration more interesting and engaging would be to omit the word narrative and replace it with the notion of diegesis, which indeed, may well be enforced by the discursive, anti-narrative techniques. Particularly the notion of the cinematic diegesis that Elsaesser has suggested
proves useful: according to him, the diegesis, traditionally conceived as the world that a story/narrative creates, has to include, in the case of cinema, not only the space inside the screen (the depicted world and its temporal, spatial and agential markers) but also the subject and body of the viewer, in the actual (theatrical) situation, and the way s/he relates to the screen (2006). In this model of diegesis, the deictic markers that establish this relation, i.e. the film’s discourse, become also part of the diegesis, of the constitution of a filmic world. Therefore, according to this view, the anti-narrative self-reflexive devices, part of a film’s discourse, are actually enforcing the diegesis. In contemporary complex films self-reflexivity involves the viewer more actively into the construction of the diegesis, which includes the story world (another term that has been used by Herman as an analytical category that combines story and discourse—see Herman 2002—and is, according to my opinion, more functional than that of narrative) and the spectator’s world. Reflexivity triggers the complex constitution of this expanded diegetic world, rather than its decomposition; it becomes an organizing principle, as soon as it engages the viewer in the construction of the diegesis.

From here the metanarrational and the metafictional aspects of self-reflexivity can be placed in a continuum, as metafiction is also present in contemporary complex films, especially those characterized as “puzzle” or “mind-game”. In the contemporary ‘mirrors’ of complex films, self-reflexivity’s effects of “distancing and estranging” are duplicated inside the story worlds, where, as if our avatars, the protagonists also experience the effect of an agency that manipulates their experience—in the same way that the narration manipulates our own as viewers. Thus reflexivity creates self-similar fractal architectures through which the story world constitutes itself by reproducing the self-reflexive character of the viewer’s own experience of the film. Thus, every self-reflexive turn of the plot at once refers to the inside and the outside of the screen, and connects them in a loop of mutual constitution, which, in the last analysis, is diegetic, even though “anti-narrative”.

**Reflexivity as the textual form of self-reference**

The paradox of the anti-narrative nature of complex films also lies in their ability to achieve coherency, both as textual and as cognitive ‘wholes’, despite the multiple disruptions of discourse. Self-reflexivity plays an important, constructive role, in the constitution of these wholes. As I would argue, using structuralist vocabulary, even though self-reflexivity has mainly been approached through a film’s enunciation (the context of the narrative act, including the speaker, the listener and their relation), in contemporary complex films it is also a feature of the uttered, which, in this case, is the *syuzhet*/plot, or indeed, the narrative (*récit*).
The function of self-reflexivity in the textual organization has been missing from both its metanarrational and metafictional theorizations, but as I felt through the analysis of *The Final Cut*, it plays an important role. This function has to do with (self-)reflexivity’s serving what Williams calls (in the context of literature) an internal “self-circulating tropological economy”, which exists “for its own sake and its own reproduction” (Williams 145). But here I do not speak about first-degree self-reference anymore (the first level of self-reflexivity that I indicated in the beginning of this chapter), but about reflexivity as an operation that internally shapes the text’s form, when itself seems to be constituted, like *The Final Cut*, through loops, resonances and folds that create connections between different segments of the film, units through which the film’s organization is recomposed. Generating the textual form, these loops make also possible the feedback between film and viewer, by means of “a ‘lowering’ of self-consciousness and a different form of recursiveness”, as Elsaesser describes in the context of complex, “mind-game” films (2009c: 24). It is textual reflexivity that makes this different form of recursiveness possible.

As already broached, a conception of self-reflexivity compatible with a film’s ‘closing’ onto itself has been faced with suspicion by a certain critical tradition in film theory, and considered as an expression of elitist formalism. It is more in poetry and its spatial textual organization, and not in literary texts, that such a conception of reflexivity can be traced. In the 1940s the literary theorist Joseph Frank drew the attention to the “spatial form” of literary narration, referring to the novels and poetry of modernism (Frank 1945; 1978). Referring to modern poetry and its spatial form Frank stressed its “principle of reflexive reference”: “The primary reference of any word-group [in a modernist poem], is to something inside the poem itself” (1945: 229). Drawing on Saussure’s theory of language, which maintains that the text is constituted by “a system of self-reflexive signs”, Frank refers to reflexive reference as formal organization rather than signification: “[external] referentiality is relegated to a secondary position, or disregarded entirely, and the internal relations of words to each other play a predominant role” (1978: 280). Objecting the traditional distinction—drawn by Lessing in *Laocoon*—between spatial and temporal arts (painting and poetry), Frank argues that modernist poetry as well as literature (especially through works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but also to Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* and Robbe-Grillet’s novels) are primarily spatial, because of their reflexive self-reference.51

 Reflexive self-reference in films also points at their spatial attributes. Frank refers to the early 20th century Russian formalists as pioneers in the study of the spatial aspects of literature, which are to some extent inherent in every literary text. The Russian formalists emphasized the (often non-sequential) form of the *syuzhet* (plot) as opposed to that of the *fabula* (story). This emphasis upon the *syuzhet* and its spatial form returns in the discussions of
complex films. A model of reflexivity such as that of the text’s “spatial form” is suggestive of how complex plots achieve a level of organization and coherence despite being fractured and disordered.

In my view, the model of reflexivity that Frank suggested before the Second World War is a systemic model. In the next chapter I will develop a systemic framework for the spatial workings of reflexivity in contemporary complex films, drawing on systems theory, which flourished in the years after the World War II. According to this framework, reflexivity, although internally operating, makes possible the viewer’s engagement into the self-referential movement of the textual form, and thus points at an emergent constitution of the diegesis.