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

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PART 2: EMERGENCE

The second part of this dissertation, like Part 1, will begin with a plot-oriented analysis of an individual film, *Burn After Reading* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2008, US/UK/France). Although individual characters and their trajectories will be separately introduced, what will gradually become apparent is that three levels of agency—the individuals, their aggregates and relations (the ‘network’ that their interactions create), and the film narration itself—are in this film constituted through a mutual causal mechanism, characteristic of complex systems. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the characteristics of the diegetic causality of complex films that contain multiple characters, like *Burn After Reading*, and show how it deviates from the causality of classical narrative films. Chapter 6 will suggest that, when films of the complex narrative tendency are analyzed as complex systems, their loose diegetic causality can be considered at the same time an effect and a prerequisite for their emergent self-organization.

4. Are networks narratable? The case of *Burn After Reading*

Joel and Ethan Coen mention in an interview that *Burn After Reading* brings together two worlds, the one of the State employees in Washington DC and the other of a fitness center situated in the same city. In the beginning of the film, along with the opening credits, we see the US state of Virginia from a satellite camera, which gradually zooms in to ‘land’ on the headquarters of the CIA. There, an analyst responsible for the Balkan desk, Osborne Cox (John Malkovich), is called to the office of his senior, who will announce to Cox that he is being demoted. The reason for his demotion is his “drinking problem”, which seems to be known among his colleagues, although Osborne furiously denies it, blaming instead political reasons and calling the demotion “a crucifixion”. Disappointed and insulted, he decides to quit his job altogether and goes home to make himself (another) drink. This is the first in a series of many small ironic twists that *Burn After Reading* contains. In a game of continuous deception that the film prepares for the viewer, the latter learns to anticipate twists and turns, infiltrated both by paranoia and by the farcical and black comedic elements characteristic of Coens’ work.

**Paranoia and farce**

*Burn After Reading* is a mix of paranoia and farce that gradually feels more and more ‘real’. Towards the ending, the film accelerates its tempo and culminates into a crescendo of
brutal physical violence. While in the first half of the film we are continuously reminded, often in a comic way, that “appearances can be deceptive”, as one of the characters says, and we get prepared for surprises and twists, in the second half we are nonetheless caught by surprise as we watch the farce leading to a real “storm of consequences”.

Ozzie Cox seems to live a delusion regarding his work status, his self-conception and his personal life. He appears unaware of what all his colleagues seem to know (his drinking problem), and on top of that, he does not seem to realize that he is “no biggie” in the CIA, according to a senior agent’s expression. Indicative of his arrogance is his belief that writing a “pretty explosive memoir” about his experiences in the intelligence service can be a possible way to make his living after quitting his job. Ozzie’s marriage is not excluded from his delusions. His wife, Katie (Tilda Swinton), who has been cheating on him with a US Marshal officer, Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney), secretly prepares to take divorce action. When she hears from Ozzie that he quit his post, she decides to move faster, as the last thing she wants is to become the sponsor of her husband’s nascent career as an unsuccessful writer, as she rushes to predict. But, as her lawyer advises her, she should not forewarn Ozzie about her intention to divorce him, since he is a man professionally trained in deceit. Instead, she “can be a spy too” and steal from him information about his finances, in order to leave him the least possible space for maneuvering.

After the scene of Katie at the office of the divorce lawyer, a cut makes the transfer to the Coxes’ house, where a high-angle shot shows Ozzie lying on the couch with his eyes wide open and an empty expression on his face. But, contrary to what we might assume, Ozzie is not dead. He is actually in the process of recording his memoir, but he falls short in inspiration. He tries out many phrases about the “glorious past” of the service, all of which sound ridiculous, until he jumps up and runs down the stairs when he hears the phone at the basement ringing. It is a phone call for Dr. Cox, his wife. The phone call perhaps raises Ozzie’s suspicions that his wife might have a lover. This hypothesis that the viewer might make is enforced in the next scene, where Ozzie watches a game show on TV, hearing the audience cheering “she’s married!; has a boyfriend!; she’s pregnant!”, and later on, when Ozzie, after apparently waiting for Katie for hours, leaves her a note which appears threatening—mostly because of the bombastic music score that accompanies the shot. The note that Ozzie leaves to Katie is encircled by slices of lemon from the drinks he has consumed. In it, Ozzie mentions that he will be at Princeton’s reunion dinner, but the film postpones giving us a chance to verify his statement, as we only see him at this dinner later on. So, in the meantime the viewer might infer that Ozzie is the one surveilling his wife and her lover, whom we see out together and probably being watched by a mysterious gaze, whose POV we share. In the course of the film, not only the husband of Mrs. Cox but also her lover,
Harry, appears secretive, occupied with some mysterious construction at the basement of the house where he lives with his wife Sandy. His secretiveness is accompanied by a paranoid feeling that he is being followed and that a mysterious car tails him everywhere he goes. *Burn After Reading* plays with the viewer using many “surface POVs”, through which the viewer can only speculate by external indications what the characters might be thinking. At the same time, the viewer often shares POVs that are not focalized (their source remains unknown, although they seem to be subjective) and have an ambiguous status, as I will further discuss later in this chapter.

The second world that *Burn After Reading* encloses and is left to ‘clash’ with the one of the state officials such as Ozzie and Harry, is the one of a fitness center called Hardbodies. Intelligence, if not exactly the strong point of intelligence agents such as Osborne Cox, is certainly the weakest link in Hardbodies. However, a piece of “raw intelligence” is found “lying on the floor” of the gym. It is the CD that Katie managed to ‘burn’ from the hard drive of Ozzie’s computer, stealing his files, which included not only his finances, but also, without her knowing, the memoir that he had been writing. Chad (Brad Pitt), a personal trainer working at Hardbodies, is the first and perhaps the only person who appreciates Ozzie’s memoir, not because of its content but due to its author’s affiliation to the CIA. Chad actually has no idea what the “numbers and dates and numbers and shit” that the CD contains stand for, but with his obviously limited cognitive capacities he assumes that they must be very important. His colleague Linda (Frances McDormand) seems distrustful at first, but when Chad refers to the reward that they might get by delivering the CD to its owner, she immediately gets hooked in. From that point on, her mind does not cease plotting and arranging the strategic details that will help them make profit out of this “once in a lifetime” coincidence. But also Linda is not clever enough to be evil. Her actions are guided by her desire to “reinvent herself” by correcting her bodily flaws with the help of cosmetic surgery, and the strategy she follows seems to be derived from the spy movies she had probably watched as a kid.

However, Chad’s and Linda’s ambitions are not so easily fulfilled. A midnight call by Chad to Ozzie from Linda’s house does not bring the desired outcome (the reward that they hope to get as “good Samaritans”) because Ozzie perceives the call as blackmail and gets furious. Of course, the mere idea of blackmailing someone for an unprotected CD sounds groundless, since copies of the original can so easily be made, but this does not seem to have crossed the minds of Chad and Linda. They arrange a meeting with Ozzie to exchange his memoir for money, and when he does not give anything to them, Linda decides to proceed to “plan B”. Thus she and Chad end up at the Russian embassy, where they attempt to sell the ‘classified’ information that fell into their hands to the surprised diplomatic officials, who

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nonetheless, perhaps due to lingering Cold War-reflexes, agree to have a look at the memoir before asserting that, if that is all, then it is worthless. But Linda is determined to find the money for her surgeries at any cost, so she continues playing the spook, this time sending Chad to break into the Coxes’ house to try and get more information.

**Productive surveillance**

*Burn After Reading*, just like its music score, proliferates in bombastic deception and paranoia. Some critics attribute this paranoia to the genre conventions of the spy film. Thus, in this “goofy spy comedy” (Doom 2009: 174), or “absurdist spy spoof” (Rowell 2009: 74), as critics have characterized *Burn After Reading*, the Coens intentionally use elements of the spy genre in a plot that nonetheless does not include “actual espionage”, as Ryan Doom observes (2009: 164). Many of the spy movie conventions are certainly present in *Burn After Reading*: film critic Erica Rowell points at the suspense-building soundtrack and the tailing of Harry’s moves by the mysterious car, and also at the choice of Linda to go to the Russians, which is “what characters in Cold War spy movies do”. However, even if the Coens set up to do a contemporary spy film, or to ‘revisit’ the spy genre, the outcome, as they themselves realize, is something more than this: “I guess we sort of wanted to do a spy movie. It didn’t exactly turn out that way. I don’t really think it is a spy movie. That’s how the original idea was structured” (J. Coen 2008).

Doom sees deception as an intrinsic part of the Coens’ oeuvre. In the chapter devoted to *Burn After Reading* (entitled “Burning Paranoia”) in his book *The Brothers Coen*, he draws attention to Chad’s line “appearances can be deceptive” to make a link between *Burn After Reading* and other Coen films: “Throughout Joel and Ethan Coen’s twelve feature films, the brothers continually toy with deceiving audiences by altering stereotypes, clichéd plots, stock characters, and genres.” From the point of view of their characters, as it happens in *Burn After Reading*, paranoia is “a reaction to the unknown, to the fear of possibility” (2009: 163). This paranoid feeling is also transmitted to the viewer, who, throughout the movie, is left to oscillate between many lingering possibilities of what is real and what only appears to be so, before some of these possibilities are finally picked up. As already discussed, we are forewarned very early about the play of deception that *Burn After Reading* sets up, so we tend to make inferences that are not always verified; for example, when we expect that Ozzie might be following the whereabouts of his wife while this proves to be wrong. Moreover, traditional film-noir techniques of building suspense proliferate: strange camera angles, looks that seem to come from hidden corners, “discovered” POVs (shots of objects before being matched to a specific character’s POV, according to Branigan), etc. For example, we see shots of the rear-view mirrors of cars before knowing who is looking: in one occasion, it is Ozzie waiting for
Chad, in another it is Harry realizing that he is being followed. A zoom on the smashed trunk of Ozzie’s car takes us by surprise before realizing that it comes from the point of view of Mrs. Cox, who now finds out about the damage that her husband caused.

In another characteristic scene, Ozzie talks to his father on his yacht as they sail somewhere not far from the city (as Washington DC is built on the bank of Potomac River). We see their profiles in a medium close up placed in parallel to each other, both staring at the water in front of them. The elder man listens to Ozzie with a straight face, as the latter discloses his inner thoughts about his forced resignation from his job at the CIA. From Ozzie’s words we learn that his father served the State too, in the Cold War period. But now the work at the intelligence service is “all bureaucracy and no mission”, as Ozzie says full of disappointment. His father remains silent and expressionless during Ozzie’s monologue, and the irony of the scene becomes apparent in the following scene, after the two have returned to the dock. There we see (sharing the POV of someone spying on the two men) Ozzie’s father being pushed in a wheelchair by his son, having the same empty expression as before. This makes us think that the father’s expressionless face may be the symptom of a deteriorated mental condition, which probably prevented him from hearing or understanding anything from what Ozzie had been earlier confessing. In this respect, the previous scene on the boat was again farcical and deceptive, as it did not reveal the father’s health condition.

In *Burn After Reading*, the viewer gets the impression—as well as shares the impressions—of a ubiquitous eye watching the action, although there are no transcendental nuances in such ubiquity. This eye is always a camera that can penetrate every level, from the macro level of the planetary village implied in the opening and closing sequences, to the micro level of the characters’ lives unfolding in different corners of Washington. All of the characters seem to be surveilled by a camera lens that hides everywhere: it watches Ozzie pushing the wheelchair of his disabled father, zooms in on Harry as he jogs being tailed by a car, but also observes the characters spying on each other.

A surveillance camera also seems to be following Mrs. Cox and her lover. Outside the yacht of the Coxes, which Mrs. Cox visits with Harry, a surveilling gaze waits for her, placed at the same spot of the dock from which it was earlier spying on Ozzie and his father. However, this and other similar shots in *Burn After Reading* do not ever allow us to be sure about whether the shot comes from a diegetic surveillance camera, as we do not see the camera or the person behind it. The shots themselves are dubious. In some of them the presence of diegetic surveillance becomes clear, for example, when as Harry jogs across a bridge by the highway, he stops when he suspects that he is being tailed by a car. In this scene, the car passes by and takes a right turn. This shot is succeeded by another one from the opposite side of the bridge, which explicitly offers a view through a (diegetic) camera, as we
see and hear the zoom of its lens focusing on Harry. However, this shot cannot be coming from the car that was tailing him, because it has just disappeared in the opposite direction.

*Burn After Reading* invites its viewer to a game of surveillance defined by the continuous interplay of different narratological levels, between which the transition is almost seamless. The movement of the—perhaps CIA—camera that follows Harry as he runs across a bridge smoothly dissolves into the movement of the film’s camera now approaching from behind Mrs. Cox as she sneaks into the computer files of her husband. A camera eye also hides behind some shelves in Harry’s basement, ‘spying’ on him at the time he is absorbed in the manufacturing of his mysterious machine. We are never sure who is spying on whom and who is each time the subject of surveillance. Later, when Harry kisses goodbye his wife Sandy, who leaves on a tour across the States advertising her latest children’s book, he notices again the car that has been tailing him outside their house. The next shot shows us the figure of Harry (who’s turning us his back) from a longer distance and from a direction opposite to the one of the car. Then Harry turns to look behind his shoulders, as if he sensed a (or our) gaze on him. The threat is not only the visible car but an invisible and seemingly ‘omnipresent’ eye that we are not sure if it is a product of Harry’s imagination or not. Therefore we imply that the diegetic surveillance is at least double, and when combined with the surveillant style of the shooting, triple. A ‘paranoid feeling’ is thus transmitted to the viewer too, who can never be sure whether the gaze that holds the image is part of the story, or part of its telling; if it is part of the narrative or the discourse. This way *Burn After Reading* creates an atmosphere of omnipresent surveillance, which becomes the way to approach the characters both from the extra-diegetic/narrational point of view and the intra-diegetic/narrative one.

According to Elsaesser, paranoia is “the appropriate—or even ‘productive’—pathology of our contemporary network society”, and he points at its proliferation in the movies that he calls “mind-game” (2009c: 26). *Burn After Reading* is a network film that stands closer to the communicative conditions of mind-game films than to the transcendental connectivity promoted by the “network narratives” of Bordwell’s theorization. And it ultimately proceeds towards the demystification (and perhaps rationalization) of the paranoid atmosphere created, placing its own (extra-diegetic) camera in a network of global surveillance.

In the course of *Burn After Reading*, it gradually becomes clear that the intelligence service has been following the movements of the majority of the characters, and this allows the viewers to hypothesize that some dubious shots that they previously witnessed belonged to CIA secret agents spying on the characters. But, as the camera’s—and the viewer’s—gaze get mingled with that of the CIA camera, due to the lack of specification of the narrative or
narrational surveillance, eventually we find ourselves not much less baffled than the CIA agents of the story—and at times, equally ridiculed. We realize, for instance, that the object of Harry’s secretive construction work proves to be just a sex chair he proudly presents to Linda, when he takes her to his house after randomly meeting her through the Internet. And the mysterious car that has been tailing him proves to be driven by a lawyer working for a law firm that Sandy (his wife) hired in order to mobilize the divorce action against him. One of the few persons that have remained ‘innocent’ in the course of the plot, Sandy is in the end also found a cheater (we see her meeting her lover in Seattle during her book tour) and a ‘spy’.78 In the context of a shift, observed by Elsaesser, from “detectives looking for clues” to “insurance agents assessing risk on behalf of their corporate employers in the neo-noir films of the 1990s” (2009c: 29), Burn After Reading’s ‘spying back’ aims, in most cases, at ‘insuring’ its agents against a social network that they perceive as threatening and unreliable, because it ‘spies’ on them in the same way they spy on each other. Identifying both with the characters and the camera gaze, we as viewers experience a feedback of surveillance coming from every node of the network that the film creates, and connecting its different diegetic levels.

In what follows, I will focus on the inner workings of Burn After Reading’s network of surveillance and paranoia, and the degrees of agency it allows to the characters—as well as to the viewer. Human and unhuman ways of looking and acting are not only found in tension in Burn After Reading, but also in a process of dynamic interplay. This interplay cannot be approached through a notion of surveillance that separates the observer from the observed, because in the systemic approach that I adopt, the observer is found inside the system. In Luhmann’s version of systems theory, as already discussed, observation does not come from the outside but it is generated by the system itself, which, by observing its own workings, achieves internal differentiation and self-organization. In this respect, distributed surveillance (and the accompanying paranoia), expressed not only through the content but also through the form of contemporary complex films (their narrative structure, the style of shooting and the way they address the viewer), can indeed be considered a productive pathology.

Networked complexity in Burn After Reading

But let us see how the diegetic paranoia of Burn After Reading develops across different levels. This will reveal how, apart from a parody of the spy movie genre, Burn After Reading can be considered as a complex film. But how is Burn After Reading’s complexity enabled and enhanced by the complicatedness of its plot, which, according to Rowell (2009: 74), “depicts a chaotic world through a seemingly chaotic narrative”? As a comment in the user reviews of IMDb says, Burn After Reading is “intricately-plotted”.79 Burn After Reading
is certainly “complicated” and “fuzzy”, as the CIA agents who try to follow the actions of the various characters in the film assert. The two scenes involving a CIA official (Palmer) reporting to his senior about the events are hilarious because of his apparent inability to put into words and describe in a coherent way what is happening. The officials almost perform the role of the dance in ancient Greek tragedies, reflecting on what takes place but without being able to influence the action. These scenes, placed after the two most violent incidents of the film, are reminiscent of the stasima of ancient choruses, although here they have a satirizing effect with regard to narrative meaning making. The emotional distance that they offer from the atrocities taking place, as well as the summary of the action that has already developed, is supposed to be offering a grip on the complexity of the characters’ interactions and to direct the recipient’s attention to questions that are not yet answered. However, these scenes only have the opposite result, as the CIA ‘chorus’ can only leave us more baffled than we were by just following the action without trying to make a coherent narrative.

Of course, narrative hypotheses as the ones I made in this chapter when introducing the film and the characters are always plausible and in fact invited by the pseudo-mystery plot of *Burn after Reading*. At the same time, however, the film seems to be setting up a farce to this kind of causal-logical cognitive approach, not by just failing our hypotheses and surprising us, but by making us reflect on their overall futility. *Burn After Reading* complicates any attempt to cognitively approach it in a linear way; it is complex, on the one hand at the diegetic level, which interweaves narrative and discourse in a way similar with other complex films, as discussed in Part 1, and on the other hand at the textual level and its structure. Its plot develops by accelerating and augmenting the codependency of its separate elements—the characters and worlds that it brings together. As the same reviewer from IMDb puts it: “once the Coens start firing on all cylinders they never stop”. It is precisely the dynamic and ‘uncontrollable’ features of *Burn After Reading* that I will call ‘network’.

*Burn After Reading* can be read as a film about how networks of information are also networks of people. But it is also a network narrative, not in the strict sense of Bordwell’s classification (2006, 2009)—though it also partly meets his criteria, as far as the chance encounters between previously unconnected characters play a central role in the film—but in terms of the network that its mutual causal mechanisms create. These mechanisms make the film a complex system, the parts of which are not only forming an intricate maze but are also causally connected in a nonlinear, and arguably ‘network’, way.

As it happens in many complex films, and also the ones that Bordwell has characterized as network narratives, contingency plays a crucial role in *Burn After Reading*. To begin with, the CD with Ozzie’s memoir falls from the bag of the secretary of Mrs. Cox’s lawyer, while she is at the gym. We never witness this incident but we are asked to infer it
later, while we have already been wondering about the missing link: how did the CD that Mrs.
Cox burned end up “lying on the floor” of Hardbodies? Our first inference has been that it was
Mrs. Cox who must have lost it, as we are given the clue that it was found at the ladies’
lockers. But her surprise when she hears the phone call that Chad makes to Ozzie shows us
that she is not aware of the loss. The irony here lies in the striking difference in the way that
the incident of the lost and found CD is valued by the different parties involved. The reaction
of the old secretary absolutely contrasts the one of Chad when he found the CD: she duly
reports its loss to her boss and begins to ‘burn’ another copy out of the hard drive of her
computer.

The difference in the way the “two worlds” of Burn After Reading (the one of state
officials and the other of Hardbodies) respond to the same incident becomes even more ironic
in retrospect, when one considers the final results that a contingent—and totally unimportant
for some—incident brought about: a CD falls in the wrong hands and this has among its
consequences two persons getting killed (Chad and Ted, the manager of Hardbodies), another
ending up at the hospital with no brain function (Ozzie) and a fourth escaping the country in a
state of paranoia (Harry).

If we consider the separate characters as the basic elements or ‘nodes’ of the textual
network of Burn After Reading, this network develops nonlinearly both in space and in time,
through the interactions between the elements. On the one hand, in space, a “small-world
effect”, as it is called in network theory, is in the making. In network science, a small number
of random links added to a regular network “can generate a very large effect”, turning it into a
“small-world network”. This happens because the “average path length” (which is defined as
the number of links between two nodes in a regular network) is reduced to half with the first
five random rewirings (connections) (Mitchell 2009: 238). Therefore, once a long-distance
link between two people is achieved, then more of their mutual connections/acquaintances
also get connected to each other. In simple terms, the fact that most people are “more likely to
be friends with the friends of [their] friends than with other, random, people” (ibid), is a result
of the small-world network property. In Burn After Reading, as soon as one random (long-
distance) link connects the two worlds, as the CD of one State official gets found in
Hardbodies, then the connections become more, they develop faster, and ultimately they have
disproportional effects as the system develops in time. In the course of the film, Harry comes
across Chad, and Ozzie meets not only Chad and Linda but also Ted—in the last case with
lethal consequences. Also, at another, global small-world level, while Linda and Harry are
unknown to each other in the beginning of the film, they eventually get to meet through
Internet dating. In all cases, the encounter of the two worlds, the one of the government
officials and the other of Hardbodies, is directly or indirectly mediated by information—
contained in a CD or in a dating site.

Every action of one element—narrative ‘actor’ or agent—of any of the two worlds of
*Burn After Reading*, has in most cases a disproportional impact on the other elements, no
matter which of the two worlds they inhabit. For example, we will see that, in the long run, the
demotion of Osborne Cox has as an indirect consequence the payment of Linda’s cosmetic
surgeries by the CIA. The initial actant (the CIA) gets affected—though indirectly and
nonlinearly—by the consequences of its decisions. The feedback it ultimately receives might
be negative (as the senior official concludes in the end “I guess we learn not to do it again”)
but it has passed through a chain of both positive and negative feedback among the various
elements, a chain similar to the one most complex systems involve, as the pioneer in the study
of feedback Magoroh Maruyama showed (1963). In mutual causal systems, that is, feedback
systems, the activity of each element of the system has an impact upon the other elements and,
in turn, upon themselves. Feedback can be negative (a communication that helps a system to
maintain a stable state called homeostasis) or positive (a communication that leads the system
to a continuous and cumulative deviation from its initial state, thus to a certain
disorganization). Self-organizing systems usually take the form of feedback networks, which
combine both negative and positive feedback. And this type of feedback increases the
complexity of systems, through co-dependency of the parts, mutual causality and
amplification of deviation. An illustration of such positive feedback in *Burn After Reading*
would be the paranoia that ultimately overwhelms Harry near the film’s closing.

A retrospective view of *Burn After Reading* could include the film in the group that
film theorist Wendy Everett identifies as “fractal films”, which are influenced by chaotics.
From the perspective of systems theory, accidents (even like the one created when a CD falls
in the wrong hands) can be considered as (external) bifurcations that may cause positive
feedback in a system. As Maruyama notes: “all processes of mutual causal relationships that
amplify an insignificant or accidental kick, build up deviation and diverge from the initial
conditions” (1963:164). Even though *Burn After Reading* is certainly not thematically
influenced by chaos theory like some other recent films (the 2004 film *The Butterfly Effect*
would be an obvious example), it seems nonetheless occupied with the specific nonlinear
workings of causality in complex networks, where a small event leads to disproportional
outcomes.

Contingency is a key-factor in complex networks, but also an element that fascinates
filmmakers. The Coen brothers’ interest in the contingent and unexpected is reflected on their
preference for idiotic characters. As Ethan Coen comments in an interview, “a lot of our
movies are about dolts. […] Maybe it’s just because it seems to go somewhere in terms of the
story. If everybody knows what they are doing in the movie, if they are capable, and everyone is on top of things then what is going to happen that is interesting or fun, or surprising?” (J. Coel 2008). To this ‘agency of coincidence’ comes to be added the agency of relations: the ‘accident’ of the loss of the CD containing Ozzie’s memoir would not have extreme consequences if the relations between the various characters did not start increasing in number and complexity. Contingency is here coupled with structure, as complex systems develop by contingency (random links) but also organize themselves through it.

Together with the complication of the relations and encounters, the editing of *Burn After Reading* also becomes more intricate. In the beginning of the film the tempo is slower, the scenes succeed each other allowing us enough time to get to know the individual characters and to construct various narrative hypotheses about their relations and motives. Towards the end, the rhythm accelerates and the scenes develop in quick crosscutting. Thus, Linda’s drive in the city, during which she gradually gets encircled by cars and even a helicopter of the CIA, develops shot by shot in parallel with the scene where Ozzie goes down the stairs to the basement of his house to find Ted sneaking into his archives—after the latter has been persuaded to do so by Linda. The “firing” that will bring the narrative to its ending also alters the temporal experience of the viewer, to engage him or her into its frenetic, out-of-control rhythm. Although the acceleration of the film’s pace towards its ending is a common suspense-building practice, especially in the scene where Harry encounters Chad or in the one where Ozzie approaches Ted, what is underlined is that this acceleration, while somehow connected to the characters’ actions, transgresses them at the same time. It is as if a collective causality operates upon the characters, transmitting its agency from one to the other, and ending up to the lethal clash between the two ‘worlds’.

**Micro and macro-causality merged**

Apart from a probably unintentional illustration of the workings of complex networks, *Burn After Reading* also offers the chance to study causality in complex films through the complex network framework. The exploration of agency and causality in *Burn After Reading* would demand from us to question how from an initial state (no relations or just beginning of relations between characters), and through the intensification of these relations, the film as a complex system develops. How does causality work in a complex structure? Is it attributable to the initial state and the isolated elements or not?

We can distinguish two interwoven levels of causality present in the plot of *Burn After Reading*. The first is the micro-causality of the characters deriving from their individual motives. The second level is the macro-causality of the network that their interrelationships
make. If the two levels were kept separated, then the first would appear individualistic, anthropomorphic and perhaps cynical, while the second transcendental and omnipresent, surpassing the individualism of the characters and connecting them in unexpected and catastrophic ways. In other words, the first would be the level of farce while the second, the level of paranoia. In what follows, however, I will argue that just like paranoia and farce, the micro and macro-causality form an inseparable mix in *Burn After Reading*.

At the level of micro-causality, the ‘internal organization’ of each character, his or her expectations and motives, will certainly influence but not—as it ultimately becomes obvious—decisively determine the output of their interactions. In the course of the film we get to infer these motives: Chad is just fascinated with the “raw intelligence” he discovered and seems to be simply enjoying the probability that—perhaps for once in his life—he and intelligence can meet. Linda desperately wants to reinvent herself and her body as well as to find a boyfriend with a sense of humor. Ted is secretly in love with Linda and gets convinced to help her in her groundless plot. Harry is a hedonistic character who enjoys casual sex, remaining nevertheless dependent on his wife, immature and incapable as he is of undertaking any kind of responsibility. Sandy wants to get a divorce and get rid of her untrustworthy husband. Ozzie is full of rage and bitterness against the “morons” that seem to be chasing him his whole life, unable to acknowledge his mental superiority. Katie wants to maintain her finances intact and stay in control, away from her ‘loser’ husband.

In all cases, women in *Burn After Reading* seem to be plotting and maintaining some kind of control of the circumstances, while men appear to be victims, first and foremost of their own idiocy or lack of self-awareness. Women gather information: financial data (Katie), evidence about daily movements (Sandy), ‘highly classified’ computer files or just information about the marital status of their lovers (Linda), while men seem trapped in their web, killing each other without even knowing why (Harry ends up killing Chad, and Ozzie killing Ted, while they have never met before and they lack any direct motive). Their unreasonable violence appears to be an expression of the complications that the narration—exploiting the influence of its female actors—created. It is worth noting that paranoia, a defining characteristic of *Burn After Reading*, as already mentioned, was a *sui generis* male pathology for Freud, as Patrick O’Donnell notes: “The universe of the Freudian paranoid is an all-encompassing mirror for the narcissistic ego, whose imperialism is only matched by the repressed anxiety that it has been invaded by the woman, the other; but this alterity is, in fact, merely a displacement of the self same identity who both dreads and desires this invasion” (2000: 78).

Linda’s character is the one most extensively developed and in her ‘thread’ of the story the two different levels of micro and macro causality seem to be in complicity. In two scenes
of *Burn After Reading*, we see Linda making a phone call to her insurance company, in order to ask if it covers the expenses of the four distinct cosmetic surgeries she wishes to make. The answering machine works with automatic voice recognition and asks her to pronounce the word “agent”, in case she wishes to speak with one of the company’s agents. Linda has to spell out the word many times because the machine does not understand her. Except for the failure of every communication of her with many different kinds of interfaces—from that of the “BewithmeDC.com” (the dating site she surfs hoping to find the man of her life) to that of the CD with Ozzie’s files which she distortedly ‘reads’—the way she repeatedly and impatiently shouts “agent” underlines in a comic way her stubborn mission to exert her agency against all the ‘intelligence agents’ who surround her.

Linda thus tries to be an ‘agent’—even a ‘secret’ one—and to use the power of information to achieve her own goals (manipulating Chad too), but she soon realizes that it is not her agency that guides the events, as the latter seem to develop beyond her control. However, she manages to get ‘on top’ of the mesh created. The consequences temporarily challenge her belief in the power of “positive thinking”, but in the end, Linda triumphs. She manages to convince the CIA to pay for her cosmetic surgeries, in order to “play ball”, and give to those intelligence agents the information they are missing. As she earlier says to Ted, who does not seem to share her insights, “…information is power, Ted. Hello?” But it is not the information that she had been trying to steal—the one contained in Ozzie’s memoir—that is more valuable, but the one created out of the poor probability of the characters’ actions, which the CIA cannot foresee. According to the mathematical definition of information, the lower the possibility of a selection indicated, the higher the number of informational bits contained in a message (see Crosson and Sayre 1967: 5). *Burn After Reading*’s plot is in my view high in informational value because of its proceeding through improbable selections and the—seemingly—nonsensical actions of the characters it involves. And Linda, as the prototype of improbable reason, which is emotional (guided by the power of positive thinking) rather than analytical, is the one who manages to handle this information in the best possible way.

The individual behavior of *Burn After Reading*’s plotting women, that somehow makes an interesting match between them, or similarly the conspiracy paranoia that drives the way of thinking of many of its male characters (Harry, Ozzie) creates patterns of motives and individual reasons that contribute to the causality of the film’s network. However, this pattern-like form of causality cannot be attributed and reduced (once the matching has already been made) to any single agency in particular. Even though it is the motivation of the singular characters that seems to be triggering some of the ‘acting outs’ taking place in the film, no
single character, not even the most intelligent or manipulative of them, is in a position to predict the range of the consequences of their actions’ co-resonance.

Recent dynamical (and not graph-theoretical) approaches of networks as complex systems suggest that emergence of unpredictable properties in them happens at moments of “phase transition” (Barrat, Barthelemy and Vespigniani 2008: 97-98), which takes place when different systems and different components of their own resonate together (Marion 2006: 247). In a similar fashion, the action in *Burn After Reading* seems to be passing through thresholds of co-resonance, having augmented effects on the individuals composing its network. Such instances of co-resonance are found when the two worlds apart, and their different conception and handling of information, meet and interact, but also when from the level of individual characters and their isolated actions we pass to the collective patterns that their linked behavior creates. The human—interpersonal—agency of the characters is met in *Burn After Reading* with the one of informational networks that move in a different—accelerated—speed, and on a higher—global—level. The augmented consequences of their actions, which turn back upon the characters, seem to be a result of their attempt to accommodate to the flow of information.

Although the individual heroes seem still driven by a Cold War order that is supposed to have ended, as well as by the spy-genre conventions that this order reproduced, the spectator realizes, perhaps together with the Coens, that this order collapsed partly because the monopoly of the intelligence services on high-security information was no longer sustainable. Information in *Burn After Reading* escapes in a CD, and this escape immediately marks a scattering of the pre-existing hierarchy. “Burn after reading” refers to the order given to spooks to destroy confidential documents before they fall into the hands of a third party. In the 2000s, ‘burn’ does not anymore mean to destroy; it also means ‘to create a copy’. It is not the origin of information but its transmission that adds to its power; and the model of causality and agency that the transmission implies involves in-between nodes that support and maintain the network of distribution.

Information becomes power through the network it creates in and through *Burn After Reading*. His wife might be laughing at Ozzie because of his memoir, wondering “why in God’s name would anyone think that’s worth anything”, but the latter becomes significant—at least in the world of Hardbodies—after being burnt to a CD and turned into ‘information’. Not only Katie but also both the representatives of the historically rivaling power centers, the US intelligence service and the Russian embassy, find this information useless “dribble”. However, an advantage is given to the ‘small’ agents that decide to “play ball” and use the information without understanding or even trying to understand its content. In the end, the whole picture of the action triggered by the protagonists—so frequently characterized as
“morons” in the film—elapses from the CIA. The intelligence service is obliged to restrict itself to the position of a passive, remote observer, unable to make sense of what is happening. The heroes of Burn After Reading may be unable to understand too, as they cannot get the whole picture of the network of their interactions. But neither the external spectators of the CIA can make any sense, because they miss the micro-details of the relationships between the heroes as well as information about their psychological needs. “Spare me”, the senior agent interrupts Palmer who starts going into detail about how the characters (and especially Harry, Linda, and the Coxes, whom they seem to have under surveillance) “all seem to be sleeping with each other”. The CIA’s surveillance follows the network created by the characters but cannot really foresee and control action before it is finished; thus the CIA ends up dumping the bodies that the murders leave behind, but not solving the mystery behind them. Of course, for the CIA there is no mystery to be solved: the service wants to do away with what happened and erase the traces of a series of absurd incidents in which its former analyst seems to be involved. Thus the senior agent sounds more than relieved when he hears that Ozzie ended up in hospital in a comatose state. Reducing the network to its nodes and tracking them, or following a “building block” strategy—one that complex systems also use, according to some strands of complex systems theory—is the most successful way to control complexity (see Ed. Smith 2006: 75-78).

However, the complex interactions between the characters make the work of tracking harder. The way information is ‘passed on’ and acted out, rather than being cognitively processed, makes the characters looking more like informational vessels than psychologically fulfilled entities. As Evan Smith observes using the example of Pulp Fiction, “psychological transitions might be the greatest weakness” of “thread structure” films (2000: 90). Each character in Burn After Reading is given some sort of ‘internal’ motive but the events that follow cannot be seen as linear and logical consequences of any of the particular motives, or, even less, traced back to any one of them. The prevalence of nonlinear causality in Burn After Reading makes it a dynamic system, a system found in a “transient process”:

strictly speaking, all real systems are dynamic systems. However, when the duration of the transient process is negligibly small compared to the duration of the investigated phenomenon, and where the nature of the transient process does not have an important influence on the behaviour of a system, it is not necessary to take into consideration the dynamic properties of the system under consideration; it can be assumed that the changes in state follow instantaneously the causes which produce them. (Lerner 1972: 39)
In *Burn After Reading* though, the interactions between characters and the network they create do have an important influence upon the way their individual trajectories develop. But this influence is nonlinear and not easily attributed to any of the separate actors. Thus, if the film is seen as a diegetic network/system, the dynamics of this system make a cause-effect matching implausible. Thus it is important to “take into consideration the dynamic properties of the system”, and see what transformations they bring about.

Even though the individual motives of actors in *Burn After Reading* are recognizable and anthropomorphic, the co-resonance of a number of agencies in the network of the diegesis is not foreseeable. The network’s ‘macro-agency’ is the contribution of every single micro-agent to the network that connects it to all other agents, making their ensemble evolve in nonlinear and unpredictable ways. Through the emergent movement from the micro and singular to the macro and global, and, from the units of agency to aggregates, the anthropomorphism of *Burn After Reading*’s narrative meets the “elemental”—as Galloway and Thacker characterize it (2007: 155-157)—nature of complex networks and their dynamics, suggesting a shift from human to nonhuman (or systemic) ways of conceiving agency and causality in complex films.

In *Burn After Reading*, the system created by the agents’ interactions may not be driven back to its initial conditions in the end of the film, but its change is not radical or subversive. Through surveillance—which becomes tighter the more the characters link to each other and interact—the CIA manages, perhaps not to understand, but certainly to conceal the links that connect the characters’ action to the intelligence service. The CIA stays unaffected by their “messy” behavior. Thus, when it comes to the ‘politics’ of the film’s network, this appears to be ambivalent at best, and certainly preventing the viewer from being excessively optimistic. After all, the network ends up serving the vain (and all-too-human) goal of Linda, to get the money for her cosmetic surgeries. Networks might have their own unpredictable dynamics, but their individual nodes, either big, like the State officials, or small, like the employees of Hardbodies, resemble a lot, as they use the same tactics as their ‘opponents’. They spy as much as they are being spied, and are distinguished only by their ‘positionality’, while the networked system they all serve continues its smooth function.

An anthropomorphic reading of *Burn After Reading*’s causality, based on the motives of the individual characters and their resulting action, would miss out the dynamics of its network form, but this does not mean that a move away from such reading, and the adoption of a systemic model, would dismantle the attempts of tracing and surveilling the network’s individual nodes—even though they would not be considered anthropomorphic anymore. This is a mode of surveillance towards which contemporary state powers, and not only in the fictional world of *Burn After Reading*, are oriented. As Dimitris Papadopoulos writes,
referring especially to neoliberal state models, “the neoliberal state needs, more than self-regulating individuals, networked actors who actively forge the structures necessary for the transformation from centralized state powers to disseminated modes of neoliberal regulation” (2008: 153). Such disseminated modes of regulation are still possible in non-anthropomorphific and complex networks.

A shift from the narrative to the complex systemic approach would make it easier to ‘track’ the network of *Burn After Reading*. The film, although hard to be described in a linear sequence, especially from the point when its multiple causal threads converge, would in my view be more easily described as a multi-agent system, adopting an adequate methodological approach. Agent-based models are used in computation in order to simulate the various actors in a system and make it easier to understand how a complex system develops from the micro to the macro level (see Bonabeau 2002). Hence, an adequate approach to this multi-character film would not be anthropomorphic and even less characterological, but agent-based.

*Burn After Reading* opens and closes with a moving satellite view resembling the ones we can get using the Google Earth software. The initial zoom-in places us at the micro level of the particular area of the world where the narrative will set off, while the concluding zoom-out adds a macroscopic distance to the events that just took place. During the end credits, the camera takes off from the same point where it first landed in the beginning of the film, at the heart of the CIA’s headquarters, and the dynamic network that so far has been shaped by the diegetic interactions, gradually gives its place to a global view.

Panning or bird’s-eye-view shots have been used to close a great number of classical Hollywood narratives, offering a safety distance to the viewer in order to reflect upon the events that have just taken place. One could argue that the same effect is achieved by the concluding zoom-out of *Burn After Reading*. Metaphorically, this safety distance is also what narrative meaning making, at the point of ‘equilibrium’, is supposed to achieve. However, one wonders if perceiving narrative cinema in the context of such meaning making from a ‘safety distance’ (kept and reproduced by the supposed closure of meaning when the story is completed) does not itself belong to a pre-network, Cold War era, that film theorists, just like Ozzie, hesitate to abandon. A closer look into narrative’s complex dynamics could make us see the benefits of “operating off the map”, according to Linda’s spook-inspired expression.

In the closing of *Burn After Reading*, the view from above is not more comprehensive than the partial view from below, nor does it offer a feeling of safety distance. It rather creates a sense of vertigo as the viewer finds him or herself inside this global paranoia. The final fast and dizzying zoom-out extends Washington’s irrationality from the local to the global level, suggesting that making perfect sense is a helpless endeavor, even when distance is taken;
contemporary forms of world order are impossible to understand following logical and sequential reasoning, and contemporary films cannot do else but demand new skills from their audience in order for it to achieve some level of understanding—which has to retreat from constituting a coherent and logical sequence of action. *Burn After Reading*’s network of human and unhuman agencies develops as a system through ‘infinitesimal perturbations’, which make the story’s progression nonlinear—impossible to go back to its initial state due to the constant increase of complexity—and also impossible to infer with precise logical steps, or deduce from one single perspective.